

Maggs Vibo (MV) talks to Niall Munro (NM)

Niall Munro Well, thank you very much indeed Maggs for talking to me about your experiences and it's great to have you here.

Maggs Vibo It's been a great workshop.

NM I'm glad. Could you say begin by saying a little bit about your military background and experience?

MV Sure. I'm an OIF or a GWOT Veteran which just means Global War on Terrorism, so I was in the army as a supply sergeant when we decided we were going to deploy and support the operation so HHB 108th Defense Artillery Brigade attached to 18th Airborne Corps at the time, go overseas, and then in Kuwait for a while. I was a purchase card holder which just meant I went into Kuwait City and purchased supplies and that became kind of challenging just for different reasons. And then we went past the DMZ and we were at the ruins of Ur. So that was fantastic for me just because I really enjoy old things and old stories. So I'm looking out past our supply areas and I'm looking out past things I often do for duty and then there's this amazing cradle of civilisation, ziggurat, so that was probably a privilege. That's putting it mildly. To be able to be that close and then to go and visit it. Yes, there were other parts of the job that were also very challenging too.

NM And what was it like being a woman in those situations?

MV Yeah. At times, certainly when it comes to physical appearance. I had my hair a certain length which followed regulation but as you are deployed you're in close proximity to people who you normally would see from like a nine to five situation. You go home or you go about your day, and now you're in a living environment together. So you're just super close and so a lot of teasing goes on, a little bit of light hazing whatever. And so I just really got tired of hearing about my hair. I got tired of... and it caused some inspiration for me as far as poetry but I got tired of it so I just let's shave this off. So I talked to the cook and the cook shaved it off. And yeah. And so it became kind of a powerful thing for me in a way. I just felt like I got back some of the narrative there. I didn't want other people to guide me a certain way. So for me there was just a lot of what other women experience in the military, the everyday kind of sexism, and then just things that would go on. And you know I'm trying to do my job here so that's the most important thing is to be taken seriously because I have a job to do.

NM So when you shaved your hair, what was the reaction amongst...?

MV Well it's still being talked about this many years later. So I have some friends that follow me on facebook and we're all talking to one another whenever there's an anniversary or something goes on that makes us think of our deployment. The comments I've received are "mic drop", things like that. That was kind of a mic drop moment so to go from like a lob or a bob type of haircut to completely Demi Moore GI Jane or whatever. Yeah, it was funny. And it was comical at the time for me but I think like they said it was a mic drop for them so.

NM That's interesting because it was actually very influential for other people?

MV Yeah, memorable. Yeah, very memorable. I had a very... I felt that I was always a tomboy but I don't think that that came across, but with that one act especially, so very memorable.

NM How did your kind of superior officers respond to that? Did they have any issue with it?

MV No. No. I didn't receive any negative feedback. I think that I didn't so much have a problem in certain circles with the job I was doing. It was more of a teasing camaraderie type thing that kind of you just go "well, I can fix this". They're still going to find a way to tease you. There's no way to get away from that. But I just felt like a very power play in a way I guess. And I enjoyed it and it was funny and it was also cooler and easier. It cut my time to get ready in the morning down to like five minutes flat. It was the most liberating or exciting time in my life in terms of I didn't wear any makeup at that point. I had my hair really nicely... I was cool. I didn't worry about vermin or things like that at least in terms of crawling around in my hair. And then as far as hygiene, you know, it was obviously a little more challenging to stay clean and everything. So I felt like OK, this is really going to be helpful and it was. It wasn't so fun growing it back out.

NM Yeah, I'm sure.

MV But yeah I did it. My husband has asked me politely never to do that hairstyle again.

NM So how were you in the military for?

MV So I was there from 2000 to 2004 so I actually was married in 2001 August 31st so if you look at the date right before we got married on a four day weekend pass and then couldn't even celebrate our honeymoon because we were put on lockdown. Yeah, so that was memorable as well but for a different reason. So everything kind of goes along with dates so 2003 we went over with the main. My husband was further north than I was so yeah.

NM How has that changed your perception of the military--having your husband in it as well?

MV I told the women from our workshop the other night. I said I would rather be deployed anytime because I know what he's going through. I know what that feels like to pack a rucksack, to get anthrax shots, to say goodbye, and to fill out a last will and testament. I know what that feels like because I've experienced it now so I can deal with that. What I can't deal with and what's a lot more challenging is the worry and the dread. You've seen how I react to clocks during the workshop. The tick tock. Tick tock.

NM Not enthusiastically.

MV Yeah, not enthusiastically at all and I think it goes back to you're constantly looking at the clock wondering "Is everything OK?". And the media constantly hypes everything up so you learn to shut it off or you shut off so it just becomes compounded. And I've often told people each deployment for us was cumulative meaning he would leave for fifteen months and then he would come back and I had that time with him for maybe two years. And then it was get everything ready to go again, kind of ramp these things up to get ready to go. And

that whole process of saying goodbye and then, the whole homecoming again. The next time he goes I'm still feeling those feelings that I felt from the other deployment. And so I already know what's going to happen and it's that anticipation where you go OK, this feels even more hyper. Yeah.

NM Or so does it get worse each time or ...?

MV Oh it definitely gets worse and it feels like you become a little bit--well "you" being "me"--become a little bit more manic in that way. And so for me, writing was obviously a very good tool.

NM And we'll get onto that in a second. And when you came back, did you see yourself as a veteran immediately when you came back? Or was it something you kind of gradually thought about some more?

MV Immediately when I came back it was a sense of "wow". I'm going to go on some sort of shopping spree and buy a bunch of toys and feel...

NM Hair products?

MV Yeah, just kind of an amazement and almost a recklessness in a way but luckily we were able to kind of harness that so I didn't go off the rails or something. But I have had friends where that happened so you have to really pay attention to it because you do get back from these extreme circumstances and you just have to be really careful. So, and "you" being "me" again. This version of me, right? So yeah, you have to kind of go off of dates and everything revolves around that deployment. So now I don't think of 2003 as 2003. That's the year we deployed. I don't think of 2006 or 2005 as that date. I think of it as OK, he left again. And then again 2008 and then 2010. They all kind of revolve around where was he during deployment? Where was I? What was happening? The calendar is now part of that encapsulated military expense. So life kind of changes and revolves around that.

NM How do you think people in the US perceive women veterans? They don't perceive them in the way as male veterans?

MV No. No, they don't. I think they're grappling with it maybe as much as women are grappling with how do I explain this incredible thing that just happened to me? So all of us are kind of trying to find our way. And I feel like we're on the cusp, right here on the edge, leaning in and going "Jeronimo!" Let's give them what has been really hard for us to talk about for at least the better part of a decade, and now we've had another decade to kind of think about it and come up with something and let's talk about it. And each experience to me, there is some kind of common thread but I do feel like it is your story and it's important because we haven't heard it enough. And we haven't seen it and visualised it enough. I feel like it's important for us to tell it and I like to call it a renaissance of women veterans. I think we're going to be there really soon if we're not already.

NM Some of that will come through the writing as you've also intimated. So what is it about poetry, maybe about writing more generally, but also specifically poetry that helps you maybe express some of those experiences you had?

MV For me, poetry started at a really young age. It helped with some trauma and I feel like it's a really nice coded way to kind of work through some things. So somebody might say something to you like... for me, it was somebody in behavioural health that said "If you're not able to talk about it, why don't you go ahead and write about it? You like to write. I've heard you talk about that. So write about your experience". I don't necessarily have to go through and worry about commas. I don't have to worry about exclamation points or grammar, anything. I can just freeflow and allow this conversation that's been happening in this vessel that I have come out on the page. So with poetry specifically it's very freeing and it's also healing because then you look back on what you wrote and you go "Huh. Wow. OK. That's really powerful stuff". And now I feel like I've admitted it to somebody besides just rattling around inside my head kind of going bonkers. Now I can look back on it, now I've admitted it at least for myself how I'm feeling in that moment. So then, the next process for me was to take that piece and go "OK, here is a part of this vessel and I've shared it with myself, let's see if I can share it with somebody else". That's where for me the Veterans Writing Project came in but initially it was actually school. So in 2004, I had written an article about somebody who hadn't made it home. He was about a hundred miles away from my hometown. I wrote an article saying Daniel Bader, this is what I've gone through since we came back home and this is what your family knows you missed out on. And I'm not going to forget you. Daniel Bader's family actually called up the college in Fort Bliss, El Paso, Texas, where I was going to school. And they said thank that person, that student, for writing that. It was moving for us. And then it was moving for me because it was like he's remembered. I'm remembering him. And I made a promise to the family and they've recognised that. From there, it was OK I did this article. Now I kind of want to share this freeing poem. It would give it a space and maybe somebody will read it but either way I'll have shared it. So I shared it. The school published it. And that is one of those poems I've never been able to speak about. But the school did publish it and I felt really proud of that. From there it moved on to the Veterans Writing Project. I did more poetry but they kind of settled around my experiences more as a spouse, a military spouse, and some parts of my military experience. But then they shared that with the world too online. And I felt like that was really powerful as well. And then they said "why don't you come and speak about these poems?". So now it's gone from inside here to out on the page to share it to oh by the way translate what you have written. So all these different processes and with that all these different parts of healing have gone on and I just feel like it's not only helping me, it's got to be helping somebody else because I feel like there's a lot of stigma out in the world, especially with the veteran space, and with female veterans.

NM And why is that?

MV A lot of times we hid things. And I'm not just talking about women but specifically women. We did hide things. We hid those traumas. We said OK something happened to me at age four and it involves somebody and I could never say that out loud, I'll write it in poetry. But I was telling one of the people at the workshop, it's sometimes it's after somebody dies, or something changes, or some metamorphosis happens and you go "OK, now I feel free enough to share that" and that's part of the healing that goes on. But the new generation that we're in I don't feel like they're the same as my generation or any generation before them because they're not willing to keep that silence which is fantastic. #Metoo happened and I feel like that was a remarkable moment in history. I don't know that all men recognise just

how very powerful that was to just go “Woah. Wait a second. I had a feeling but now I have people backing this up”. For me, there’s always a poem line that was ‘silence, it’s a plunging elevator, single cable about to snap’. And I feel like that is how silence can be at times. It’s a deafening silence where if you’re keeping everything locked inside, it’s really unhealthy and it can lead into that cable snapping.

NM Do you think that your... You’ve talked a little bit about this already... I wonder if you can explore it just slightly more. Do you think your writing or poetry can sort of bridge an understanding between this kind of civilian and military?

MV In a perfect world I would hope so. But maybe that’s not the point sometimes. Maybe sometimes like I said, it’s just important that I understand it. But if I can help it make a little more sense. To me the military is something of a cult. That’s kind of how I consider it. Because I even remember as a little girl, National Guard would come out to our land and they would drill out there and it just seemed so very foreign and they’re American soldiers. So you wonder, OK there’s that part and then there’s beyond even America and there has to be something where we can talk about it and go “What is it? Why do you do that? What does the acronym mean? What did that feel like?” And for me, a lot of the conversations that are always frustrating revolve around very feminine things that happen out in the field. And I always wonder, well, this is happening to astronauts, why aren’t you asking the female astronauts? You deal with things. You take care of things. And I did exactly the same thing. And for me, I feel like it made me stronger so if you think it makes me weaker, let me challenge you on that and let’s have a conversation. So in this way, writing has been able to open up this idea where I can talk to them and go “I don’t know if I see things the way you do”, you know.

NM And just to continue on this point, you made a really interesting point when we were talking in the workshop about continuity between time periods. So you’ve obviously written or certainly thought a lot about the civil war in America and you’ve guided people around parts where--certain battlefields.

MV That’s right. That’s right.

NM That’s really fascinating. And I wonder if you think there are these continuities between somebody who has been out in Iraq, Afghanistan, for example, and somebody who fought at Antietam, Battle of the Crater... Is there some kind of connection there that you can...?

MV Definitely. I honestly feel like the best interpreters for a battlefield are people who have gone to war. That’s really tooting my own horn or the horn of veterans. I think it’s really cool when veterans do those kind of jobs where they get to explain what the loneliness is like, what it’s like to have rations, what it’s like to bind someone with a zip tie, what it’s like to pull guard duty, be cold, be hot, go through all these feelings and these emotions, worry and stress, and then boredom. There’s just a whole lot that goes on with it that I don’t know that you can interpret it and there are books that explain it, but I would hope that because you have lived it and you have walked in those boots and you have shuffled your feet and you have fallen down because you’re so tired and stumbled and gone through that feeling of am I going to be infertile because they just gave me this shot? Is dealing with this mound of trash that’s burning--is that going to ruin my chance for having a family later on? Those kind of

worries that maybe necessarily somebody who hasn't gone through it, maybe they're not going to be able to interpret it as well. Whereas I look at somebody who's been through, say the Overland Campaign and they've gone through the wilderness and they're talking about the smell of things and I'm very in tune with that. I go "I know a way to interpret this". I know what that feeling of dread or despair really is like and I want to make sure that when somebody is with me and I'm giving them a tour, they feel that. And they walk away going "I learned something and I can take that with me and now a hundred-and-fifty-five years ago doesn't feel that long ago. It feels like it was just yesterday because this person who is able to transport..." Pretty much on the drop of the dime I can be back in a certain scenario, and I think all of us can. A certain scent happens, a season changes, we are right back there. The same thing with the veteran and they go "Oh OK. And although it was a hundred and fifty five years ago, although the uniforms were different, the technology is different, there are still some very common things going on: motifs and archetypes and all of these things are happening and she explained it in a way that drew in some poetry from Walt Whitman. She explained a battlefield and a situation with some soldiers that made a lot of sense to me by using art and poetry and her own life experiences and I really love that she did that". That's what I hope. But I will tell you the truth. There are times too where that can be a burden because you go "Oh, I just transported there, where am I at right now? And this moment right now is so familiar to what they went through at the Battle of the Crater and now I'm choking up" and I feel this sense of stress and dread and "Oh boy, are they seeing me choke up?". And now I've got to work through that. What I always did to work through those processes, that's what I call it, is to explain to the audience or if it's even just one person who I'm giving a tour to "I am a veteran myself. I'm going through something deeply profound right now. I hope that you understand". And a lot of times people... it's a story and it's also real. And everybody's been through conflict. Everybody understands that feeling. So I feel like in that sense, I have become real. The battlefield has become real. We've shared a connection and I'm so proud to have worn that hat.

NM Such a beautiful way of explaining it. I bet your battlefield tours are quite amazing. Thank you very much Maggs for talking to me about it.

MV Thank you.