

MILITARY WOMEN AVIATORS ORAL HISTORY INITIATIVE

Interview No. 4

Participant Edited Transcript

Interviewee: Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL)

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By: Monica Smith

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SMITH: My name is Monica Smith. I'm a consultant at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Today is July 17, 2019. I'm on Capitol Hill in the Senate Recording Studio, and I have the pleasure of speaking with Illinois Senator Tammy Duckworth. This interview is being taped as part of the Military Women Aviators Oral History Initiative. The recording will be archived at the Smithsonian Institution. Welcome, Sen. Duckworth.

DUCKWORTH: It's good to be here. Thank you.

SMITH: Thank you. Senator, would you please state your full name and your occupation?

DUCKWORTH: Sure. Ladda Tammy Duckworth. I'm the United States Senator representing Illinois.

SMITH: Fantastic. And Senator, where were you born?

DUCKWORTH: I was born in Bangkok, Thailand.

SMITH: What were you like growing up as a child? Just, what were some of the things you liked?

DUCKWORTH: You know, I love sports. I was a really sporty child, but I also love – I mean, I had a giant Barbie Dream House. [laughs] So I was sort of a little bit of both. I was a real tomboy. I played all the sports, I climbed the trees and stuff, but I also had my dolls and all of that. So I just tried a little of everything.

SMITH: Did you have any siblings?

DUCKWORTH: I have one younger brother, two years younger than myself.

SMITH: And can you tell me about your parents?

DUCKWORTH: So, my father was an Army veteran much older than my mother. My mother is a war bride. She met my dad during his first tour of duty in Vietnam, and she's from Thailand. And they fell in love, and he decided to live the next 20-something years in Southeast Asia with my mom. And he did a second tour. And they're great. My mom is still alive. My dad passed a while back. And he retired from the Army in 1973, so he – so he's quite a bit older than what most people expect my dad to have been. But they were great, and we moved and lived all over Southeast Asia.

SMITH: So I read or heard that your father was not immediately excited about your decision to join the Army. Is that –

DUCKWORTH: It's not that he wasn't – my father was very much a man who withheld his opinions and approvals of you, I guess. So the first time I told him that I thought I wanted to go to Basic Training and try ROTC, all he said to me was, "Do you think you're going to make it?" And then I never heard anything

more from him. But he's that World War II generation, that generation that was very quiet and reticent to show emotions. And it wasn't until just not long before he passed that he finally told me he was proud of me. But I had been, you know, serving in the military for 14 years at that point.

SMITH: What about your mother? What did she think of your service?

DUCKWORTH: My mother was absolutely against it. My mother was absolutely against it. She cried when I said I wanted to join ROTC. She said, "I raised a girl. I didn't raise a boy. I don't want you to go." Very traditional Thai, and you know, she'd pin her hopes on me being the one who would, I don't know, become a doctor or get a Ph.D. or do something like that. And you know, it was always my brother who was expected to join the family tradition of serving in the military. So I was never the one that either one of my parents had thought would join, and at least – or even make a career out of it. But now she loves it. She tells everybody. [laughs]

SMITH: So let's talk about your education. You mentioned your mom's desires for you. You received your undergrad at University of Hawaii.

DUCKWORTH: Mm hmm.

SMITH: What year was that?

DUCKWORTH: 1989 was when I graduated with my bachelor's, yes.

SMITH: Then you came to D.C., went to George Washington University...

DUCKWORTH: Uh huh.

SMITH: ...for international relations.

DUCKWORTH: Yes. So I wanted – my childhood dream, from the time I was about 8 years old, was I wanted to become an ambassador. I wanted to join the foreign service. I wanted to become an ambassador someday, because of what I saw the American ambassador do during my childhood. You know, we were always bringing humanitarian aid to refugees. We opened schools in underprivileged areas – and what America stood for. And so that's what I wanted to do when I grew up, and I was pursuing that path when I decided to go off to Basic Training and take some ROTC classes.

SMITH: How did you – how did you join ROTC as a grad student? That was a different route.

DUCKWORTH: It is a very different route. So I was in my first year of my master's program. I found myself drawn to classmates – who became my friends – who were all military. They're either former military, and they were veterans, or they were currently serving military. And that's just what I naturally gravitated towards, and that's who my friends were. And I happened – after my first year of my master's program, was laid off from my job. And so I had my summer off. I was looking for a new job. And they said, "Why don't you

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take some ROTC classes, just so that you learn more about the military. You wanted to become an ambassador someday. You want to represent the United States diplomatically. You should at least

understand what our military does and what it consists of. At least know the difference between a platoon and a brigade.” And so I had the summer off anyway, so I went off to Cadet Basic Training. And as miserable and awful as it was, I fell in love with the Army.

SMITH: What year was that?

DUCKWORTH: That was 1990. The summer of 1990 was when I went off to Fort Knox, Kentucky. [laughs]

SMITH: So after Basic Training – or was that part of your ROTC?

DUCKWORTH: So because I only wanted – because I was a graduate student, I couldn’t do four years of ROTC. I could only do two years, and in order to qualify for that, I had to go to Basic Training.

SMITH: Okay.

DUCKWORTH: If I had completed that satisfactory, then I could do the two-year program and enter ROTC classes when I got back. So when I got back from Basic, I did my first year of ROTC as a master’s student, and then my second year of ROTC I did as a Ph.D. candidate.

SMITH: Fantastic.

DUCKWORTH: Mm hmm.

SMITH: Now, how did you join the Illinois National Guard unit?

DUCKWORTH: So I was in the Army Reserves, and I flew Hueys in the Army Reserves, coming out of flight school. And then the Army migrated aircraft. They migrated combat arms jobs from the Army Reserve into the Army National Guard, so that only combat support and combat service support units were going to remain in the Army Reserve. So the combat units, like Artillery, Armor, Infantry, Aviation, were moved into the National Guard. And so I followed the aircraft, and I moved over from the Reserve forces into the National Guard.

SMITH: Tell me about how you got your flight slot. Was that associated with the ROTC, or was that separate?

DUCKWORTH: So I knew I wanted to go into Aviation, and I tried taking the aptitude test and done very well on it – a very high score. And so when it was getting close to commissioning time, they said, “Well, you have an option. You can either attempt to go on active duty – but you won’t necessarily be guaranteed a flying slot – or you can go into the Army Reserves, and sign a Reserve Forces contract, and then you would definitely go into the Army Reserves, because with your aptitude and everything, you would get that slot.” So that’s how I ended up in the Army Reserves, was to sign that contract.

SMITH: Okay.

DUCKWORTH: Mm hmm.

SMITH: So tell me about finding out you had a flight slot and then transitioning to your first day of training at Fort Rucker.

DUCKWORTH: So usually you waited about a year from when you graduated ROTC and received your commission before you actually got to go off to flight school, because there's not that many slots. And it's a long wait. So I was just working on my Ph.D., taking classes at Northern Illinois University when – but I knew I had to call the Accessions¹ person on a regular basis to say, “Hey, any shortfalls? You know, I'm still here. I still want to go. Can you send me soon, or anything happening?” And one week when – I called on every week. And she was this woman who was infamous among aviators. And then it was like, you call her every week, and then when you get your slot, you have to send her a bouquet of roses. Everybody does it. That's just the way it's done. And so I was calling her and bugging her, and I called her. And one week I called her, and she goes, “Yup. Somebody dropped out of a slot. Can you be in Fort Rucker in 72 hours?”

SMITH: So what were you doing in the interim?

DUCKWORTH: I was taking classes. I was finishing – I was working on my Ph.D. I was doing my coursework. So I – on a Monday, I think, or maybe it was a Friday – I don't remember what day of the week it was – I think it was a Friday I got the call. I talked to her, and she goes, “Well, you have to be there by Monday morning.” And so Friday I'm running around Northern Illinois University, telling my professors I'm withdrawing from all of my classwork. I have to get permission to withdraw for a year so I can come back. And that's what I did.

SMITH: How did your dad and your mom react to flight school?

DUCKWORTH: Very much no reaction. They just held their thoughts, and they didn't – no reaction whatsoever. I just went off to flight school and did it, and no positive or negative reaction. I think they just, you know, were holding their breath to see if I was going to do okay. And my dad wasn't one to congratulate you for doing what he thought was something that you should be able to do anyway.

SMITH: And it was pretty quick, so they probably didn't have much time to think about it. [laughs]

DUCKWORTH: They didn't have much time, yeah.

SMITH: Yeah. So tell me about your first day at Fort Rucker.

DUCKWORTH: You know, I checked in, and it was funny, because it snowed. And I had just left. So it's March. I had just left Illinois where there'd been a lot of snow. I'm from northern Illinois. And I moved into my quarters, and I needed some food, and I got in my car to go to the grocery store. And they said, “Oh, you can't go out.” I got stopped, pulled over by the State Police. “You can't go to the grocery store.” I said, “Why not?” “Because it snowed.” I said, “There's a dusting on the ground.”

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They're like, “Yes. It's snowing.” I said, “I have snow caked under my car. [laughs] I have more snow caked under my car from my drive from Illinois than there's snow on the road right now. What do you mean?” And that was my – that was my introduction to being in lower Alabama and being at Fort

¹ The Accession office manages the initial appointment of Army Reserve officers. “Army Reserve Careers Division,” n.d. Accessed Sept 25, 2019, <https://www.usar.army.mil/Commands/Functional/ARCD/About-Us>.

Rucker. And then the first days of school, it's just, you know – it's a lot of administrative things and coursework starting.

SMITH: What year was this?

DUCKWORTH: 1992.

SMITH: Okay.

DUCKWORTH: Oh, 1993. I'm sorry.

SMITH: '93. Were there any other women in your class?

DUCKWORTH: So in my initial – so when you first get there, the first six weeks is your Officers Basic Course, and there was one other woman there. She actually became a bridesmaid at my wedding.

SMITH: Ah, great.

DUCKWORTH: And when you finished that, then you went off and you – then you had to wait again for slots in the flight training program itself. And then she and I ended up in different flight training classes. And so when I went through flight training, I was the only woman in my flight training classes.

SMITH: So describe the demographics of the class: the size, obviously you're the only woman.

DUCKWORTH: Right.

SMITH: But –

DUCKWORTH: So the class is about 80 students: 40 commissioned officers, 40 warrant officers. And in that class of 80, I was the only woman. And so the classes are split up so the commissioned go to class in the morning and then fly in the afternoon, and the warrants go to class – they fly in the morning, and they go to classes in the afternoon. And then a few weeks on, we swap places. So – but we were still technically the same class.

SMITH: What was your class designation? Did you have an –

DUCKWORTH: We were – everybody wore a hat, so we were the light blue hats. Every class had a different color hat. We were the Light Blue Wrecking Crew. [laughs]

SMITH: [laughs] Did you have a patch or anything, too? [inaudible].

DUCKWORTH: Oh yeah, and T-shirts and stuff.

SMITH: Yeah.

DUCKWORTH: It was – it's all very hokey. [laughs]

SMITH: So tell me about the aircraft that you flew during training.

DUCKWORTH: So you start out in Initial Entry Rotary Wing. At the time, the Army had what's called multi-track, which is you start off in Hueys, and then when you got done with your Initial—Basic Entry

Rotary Wing training, and you're getting ready to go into tactical flying, that's when you get selected for other aircraft. So you start out in Hueys –

SMITH: How much time – I'm sorry – did you spend in UH-1s?

DUCKWORTH: Yeah, in UH-1s, H-model Hueys. That was probably, I want to say, three months or so of that. And you're, you know – you're just learning to hover, take off, land, your basic avionics. You're learning the aircraft systems, you're learning instruments, flight rules. You get your instruments training in the Huey, and so the last – you get a couple of major check – major tests and check rides. The first test is systems, to show that you know how the engineering of the aircraft works. There's no flying in that. And then there is Initial Entry – the just – the basic flight training to get qualified in the aircraft, and then there is instrument training, to learn to fly under instrument flight rules.

SMITH: And then you said tactical aircraft next? So, what's next?

DUCKWORTH: Well, so when you get through that, depending on where you are ranked in your class, you are then selected for the different types of aircraft that you want to fly.

SMITH: How does that selection process work? How did they let – notify you of which aircraft you –

DUCKWORTH: So you put in what your first, second, and third choices are. And the choices were: Blackhawks; or Hueys, which is sort of the standard that everybody goes into; or you go into a Scout aircraft, and that is when you find – fly the Kiowa Warrior, the smaller aircraft. And so those are your three options. And depending on how well you did in your class, you may get one of those – you get a slot. So the vast majority of everybody will get Hueys, and then those who want to fly attack – and then those who want to fly a Scout aircraft will go into the smaller Kiowa Warriors, because that's different tactical flying skills.

SMITH: Okay. So graduation comes. Any celebration from parents, or was it –

DUCKWORTH: No.

SMITH: No?

DUCKWORTH: No.

SMITH: Okay.

DUCKWORTH: No. No.

SMITH: When was your graduation?

DUCKWORTH: So April Fool's Day of 1994.

SMITH: And what happens next? You come back to the unit?

DUCKWORTH: I go back to my unit, and I was very fortunate. I got – there were only three Blackhawk slots out of my entire class of 80, and I got one of the three.

SMITH: So you did very well.

DUCKWORTH: I did very well, yeah...

SMITH: Good. So can you say –

DUCKWORTH: ...Well, I did very – in the beginning, because I knew I had to get Blackhawks. I knew that the future in Army aviation was in Blackhawks, and I'd had a great company commander before I went to flight school who said, "You do whatever it takes to get a Blackhawk slot. You put every bit of your energy into getting that Blackhawk slot."

[15:00]

And he was a good mentor. And he said, "The future of the Army is not Hueys. The future is Blackhawks. And if you don't have Blackhawks, then you may get dropped, and you may not be able to continue with your career." And he was right, because about – I got back in 1994. In 1996 was when the migration happened from the Reserves to the Guard, and the Guard did not take anybody who was not Blackhawk qualified. And so I was able to make that switch, and I had that. And I – because I had been trained on 'Hawks at flight school. So I had a good mentor right from the very beginning.

SMITH: So I want to point out that you were in flight school shortly after the Combat Exclusion Policy changed for women.

DUCKWORTH: It happened while I was in flight school.

SMITH: Right.

DUCKWORTH: It happened – while I was the first woman to get to – that went into selections, where the combat exclusion did not apply. So I was the first – it was my class, and there was two other women in that class, so there were three of us. And one of us ended up flying Cobras.²

SMITH: So groundbreaking in every way. And you made a point of saying that you wanted to have combat – a combat aircraft, or that it wasn't quite fair that women...

DUCKWORTH: Right.

SMITH: ...used to not – used to be excluded from Combat Arms.³ So can you talk a little bit about that?

DUCKWORTH: Sure. So that happened in ROTC. So the Army devised the different jobs. They call – in the Army, they're also called branches. Civilians think a military branch is Army, Air Force, whatever. But in the Army, the Army itself is subdivided into different branches. So your Infantry Branch, Armor Branch, Artillery Branch, Aviation Branch. And at the time, when we were getting ready to be commissioned – when our ROTC training was completed, you sat down and you wrote down of your top 10 – you rank-ordered all of the branches of the Army and what job you wanted, in rank order from first to last. And then the Army would decide – needs of the Army, what job you got. So you could have been an accounting major, and you wanted to become a finance officer. And they could decide, "Nope. We need chemical officers. So you're going to go off chemical officer training. And that actually is what happened

² The AH-1 Cobra is an attack helicopter with a two-person, tandem-seated crew.

³ Combat Arms is a functional branch within the U.S. Army.

in my year. A lot of people ended up as chemical officers, because they didn't have enough NBC⁴ – chemical officers, Chemical Branch. So that's where people ended up. But at the time we were sitting down, I was the only woman in my ROTC class, and it was a small class. And the instructor said, okay, time to rank-order. Men – it doesn't matter what you want to do, but of your top – I think it was your top five, or maybe it was your top 10 – seven had to be combat arms. Even if you were an accounting major, and you wanted to be Finance, you still had to put in your top five, you know, Armor, Infantry, Artillery, whatever it is. You could put Finance in there, but the other had to be Combat Arms. And because – except for Duckworth. She's female. Females are barred from combat. You don't have to put any down that you don't – you don't put – well, you don't qualify for combat. And I said, "Are there no combat branches?" And he said, well, there's two. Armor – I mean, Air Defense Artillery, and Aviation. And so I put down Signal, because I thought I was going to become a linguist. I put down Aviation, and I put down Air Defense Artillery. So I put down the only two combat branches that women could be in, even though we were still barred from combat positions. And I put down Signal, which is my dad's old branch. And then I took the aptitude tests, and scored so well on the aptitude tests for Aviation that I – that made it my first choice, and signed a contract, and got it.

SMITH: Did you notice any difference in the way you were treated at your unit after you were winged?

DUCKWORTH: No, because I had been a cadet in the unit, so they knew me. And I had gone through a lot of the initial stuff already in that I had been a cadet platoon leader. I had been to the Simultaneous Membership Program for a year, which meant that while I was a cadet taking ROTC classes, I was also doing my one weekend a month with the unit. And I wore the rank of cadet, but I was a platoon leader. So they had gotten to know me and my quirks, and you know, I was the first Asian. I was the first woman in the unit. And so getting to know the guys and stuff – and it was funny, because I got along really well with the Vietnam vets. They kind of, like, took me under their – they thought it was the greatest thing since sliced bread that there was this Asian girl that wanted to fly helicopters. And they just – they took me up and gave me stick time when they shouldn't have been giving me stick time, when I was a cadet, and I shouldn't have been behind – on the controls in the cockpit, but I was. And so when I showed up at flight school, I had actually been out practicing with them, with the Vietnam vets, who loved to break all the rules before I showed up. [laughs]

SMITH: Oh, my gosh.

DUCKWORTH: Yeah.

SMITH: So I wanted – I'm curious if at Fort Rucker,

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how you were treated there by your instructors and –

DUCKWORTH: My instructors were fine.

SMITH: Peers?

⁴ NBC stands for nuclear, biological, chemical, and refers to the training, operational procedures, and equipment used to survive and operate in each of the three named threat environments.

DUCKWORTH: My peers were different, and my peers – it was really interesting. My peers who had actually served were different than the ones who had never served, who had only been cadets. So when I got through – the reason I got my Blackhawk track was because I scored really high on the instrument flying phase. And that shows your ability to fly a complex aircraft. And what I had been doing was I would – we were taking all the classroom work, and then we were doing the flying work. And at the end of the day, these flight simulators were always open. And you always were able to go on your own time at the end of the day to go fly the flight simulators if you wanted to. And it was a lot of extra work, because when your days are already long, you're exhausted, you've done a whole five – you know, four, five – first you've got to – you've got to be able to do physical training, so you've got to go do the Army stuff there. Then you've got to go to classroom. Then you've got to fly the aircraft, and you're done, and you're exhausted at the end of the day. But I went every day and flew that simulator for an additional three hours. So I didn't get done with my day until 8, 9 o'clock at night every day, whereas the other guys got done around 5, because I wanted that Blackhawk. I wanted that Blackhawk slot. There were only three of them, and I wanted one of them. So I flew every instrument route in and around Fort Rucker. There was a program in those simulators that I could possibly – I knew that airspace around that backwards and forwards. I flew – and I made friends with the cockpit operators who ran the simulators. I said, "Just throw everything you can at me." You know, "Give me malfunctions while I'm flying. Make me react to it." And I did that for all that time we were in the instrument phase. And so when the time came, I ended up, I think, with the highest score in my class on the instrument check rides. And a couple of the guys in my class were like, "Oh, you must have had a Santa Claus flight examiner," you know? And it was funny, because those were – they said – I called them – they're sort of "young punks" who were my peers—who were fellow cadets. But we had a couple of guys in the unit who were former – former either enlisted or had been in some other branch of the military. And our class leader was a tanker who had served in Desert Storm. And he'd been in the fight in a tank as a platoon leader, as a tank commander, in Desert Storm. And he's this big, burly guy. And he grabbed this kid—this punk who said, "Well, you must have had a Santa Claus," you know, "who just liked you because you were a girl, and you probably fluttered your eyes at him or something." And he grabbed that guy, and he threw him against the wall and said, "You fucking don't know what you're talking about. I've seen her in the simulator. I've seen the log. She's been in the simulator every night for three fucking hours every single night for the last two months while you've been at the O' Club.⁵ You need to back off."

SMITH: Right.

DUCKWORTH: And it was funny, because you would have thought that the grizzled old war vet would have been the one who was prejudiced against women, and the one who was closer to me in age, and a fellow – former, you know, new college student, would have been my peer – would have been defensive – would be the one to – but it wasn't. It was the guy who had been out there who knew that it only mattered which – how you performed, who came to my rescue. And you know what? He still – he still sends me emails today. We've stayed in touch.

SMITH: [laughs] That's great.

⁵ Officers' Club.

DUCKWORTH: Yeah.

SMITH: So you're back at your unit. You're a Blackhawk pilot, and the first Blackhawk pilot – for the Reserves, or for the Army?

DUCKWORTH: Oh, no, no, no, no.

SMITH: One – one of the first. You had to have been one of the first.

DUCKWORTH: Well, when we went to – no, no. When we got out to – no, there'd been women flying Blackhawks for a long time. When we went to Iraq, I was in the second rotation, so there was only a handful of women flying...

SMITH: Okay.

DUCKWORTH: ...in combat in Iraq when I showed up. Maybe there was probably a half dozen of us at that – until that point, because this was in the first 18 months of the war.

SMITH: So did you – did you deploy before Iraq?

DUCKWORTH: Not for combat.

SMITH: Did you –

DUCKWORTH: But for humanitarian...

SMITH: Okay.

DUCKWORTH: ...and other training exercises. So I had done missions in Egypt, in Guyana and South America. So in Egypt, there were training exercises, NATO training exercises. I had done a Guyana, South America training, which was a humanitarian mission, and I was actually the operations officer for that. And then I had done an Iceland tour as well...

SMITH: Right.

DUCKWORTH: ...which was another NATO training exercise.

SMITH: So I knew about Bright Star. That was '95.

DUCKWORTH: Mm hmm. Then Guyana, which was New Horizon.⁶

SMITH: New Horizon.

DUCKWORTH: And then I also did Northern Neighbor, which is Iceland.⁷

⁶ New Horizons is a U.S. Southern Command training exercise held in Central and South America and the Caribbean. "New Horizons / Beyond the Horizon 2019," n.d., Accessed Sept 24, 2019, <https://www.southcom.mil/Media/Special-Coverage/New-Horizons-Beyond-the-Horizon-2019/>.

⁷ 106th AVN participated in Northern Viking, an annual NATO exercise held in Iceland, in June 2001. ILARNG Sept 25, 2019 email from Adriana Schroeder to SI-NASM.

SMITH: Okay. So let's move to Operation Iraqi Freedom, and tell me about your deployment, how you were – when you were notified, and –

DUCKWORTH: So I had been in command on 9/11 of my Blackhawk unit, and when 9/11 happened, I knew we would go to war soon. And I thought we were going to go to Afghanistan. And so I really

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adjusted my training of my flight crew to – on the severity of what, you know, we likely would be facing. And in the beginning of 2003 – so we invaded – the U.S. forces invaded Iraq in March of 2003. In May of 2003, we were alerted that we were going to be mobilized. And so we stood up and did two weeks of training and get – and two weeks of just getting everyone evaluated for their medical readiness. You'd write your wills, you do all of that. And then they stood us down, and said: nope, we're not going to need you after all. And November of 2003, I left command. So I had been in command for three years, which is longer than normal. Usually, it's 18 to 24 months, and my battalion commander had asked me to stay for an extra year. So I had been in command for three years now, which is longer than a normal tour. And so in November, I left command, and I was being moved to the State Headquarters. And at that point, my – one of my platoon leaders took over as the new unit commander. And in December, just less than a month later, the unit was mobilized. And I called my battalion commander, and I was like, "You can't leave me. I've got to go with my guys. You can't leave me. Put me back in command." Because you can't – they can't put you back in flank. You just gave up command. So I said, "I'll go in any capacity. Whatever you need, I'll go." You know, what do – and so I ended up – they ended up needing me anyway, and I went as an Assistant S-3, Assistant Operations Officer, and I flew missions as well.

SMITH: So when you flew missions, were they hard crew, same crew all the time, or did you inter— change?

DUCKWORTH: Generally the same unit. They're not hard crew.

SMITH: Okay.

DUCKWORTH: They're not the same crew all the time, but I flew with Charlie-Company, which is Missouri National Guard guys. I – it's funny. They did not – they didn't let me fly with my own B-Company, my Mad Dogs, my own guys. I think that was partially on purpose, because, you know, there was a young lieutenant who just took over as a young captain, and he needed to – he didn't need the old commander hanging around. So I flew with a different company than I normally would, and I got to know them there. The Charlie-Company guys were great.

SMITH: So you were eight months into the tour when in November, you – November 12...

DUCKWORTH: Yeah.

SMITH: ...mission that ended in your double amputation. Can you tell me about the mission?

DUCKWORTH: Sure. So not eight months into the tour, eight months to our time in Iraq.

SMITH: Yeah, time in Iraq.

DUCKWORTH: Yeah.

SMITH: In-country.

DUCKWORTH: Eight months in-country to the day, actually. It was just a regular day of flying a whole bunch of different missions. We moved troops, we moved supplies, we moved – you know – and supplies, it was everything from equipment to medical supplies to ammunition to whatever needed to be moved around. And we were done with our day, and I had a chance to get a really good lunch in the Green Zone, which I rarely ever have, and even do a little Christmas shopping. This was the middle of November. I got some souvenirs from Babylon. So there were all these historical sites, and I got some souvenirs I wanted to send home to my family. And we were headed back to base when we got a detour mission, and we picked up a new mission. And on that detour I was returning back to base when I was hit.

SMITH: Which seat were you in?

DUCKWORTH: Right seat.

SMITH: Right seat.

DUCKWORTH: I was the co-pilot.

SMITH: Co-pilot. What do you remember before the explosion? What were you all doing?

DUCKWORTH: Just chatting. And in fact, the pilot in command, Chief Warrant Officer Dan Millberg, had just taken the controls. I'd been on the controls the entire day, because I didn't get to fly that much. I didn't get to fly every day. I flew about twice a week, and so when I was out there, I wanted to be on the controls. And so he'd called me a "stick pig," and said, "Give up the controls," you know. "It's my turn to fly for a chance. Let me fly these last five minutes of today." And I gave him the controls, and I had just gone off the radio, getting released from the air traffic control over Baghdad and was just starting to go through the handoff to talk to the air traffic control over Bilad, which is where we were based, when you know, I felt the – I heard the small-arms fire hit my side of the aircraft, and then the blast happened.

SMITH: So blast [clears throat] tell me what you remember after that.

DUCKWORTH: Just trying to fly the bird.

SMITH: Right.

DUCKWORTH: Just doing my function analysis, being really frustrated that things didn't – were not computing. The aircraft wasn't responding. Every single one of my gauges went black. The impossible happened. You know, you're told this aircraft is triple redundancy. You'll never lose – for example, you'll never lose your cockpit indicator for engine temperature, because that's a hardwire to a thermometer in the engine. And I lost that.

[30:00]

And just trying to figure out what was going on and trying to get the aircraft on the ground.

SMITH: And you were able to land it, between you and Dan –

DUCKWORTH: Well, Dan – Dan Milberg landed the aircraft.

SMITH: Yeah.

DUCKWORTH: I was doing everything I can. But at this point, I don't have – I mean, my right leg has been vaporized. My left leg is hanging by some skin. My right arm is essentially severed. I'm holding on to the cyclic, because when I woke up in the ICU, 11 days later, I still had an imprint of the controls – of the control head in my hand. I still had the bruising...

SMITH: Because you were squeezing it so hard.

DUCKWORTH: ...because I was – yeah, I was. So I don't think the cyclic was still connected at the bottom.

SMITH: I read the rudder pedals, everything, was – there were no pedals there at that point, so –

DUCKWORTH: Yeah.

SMITH: Not that you –

DUCKWORTH: There's just a hole under my feet. I thought I was pressing onto rudder controls, but obviously, I wasn't.

SMITH: Right.

DUCKWORTH: Yeah.

SMITH: But reflexes. Your training.

DUCKWORTH: Reflexes.

SMITH: Right.

DUCKWORTH: Every single flight instructor I'd ever had was sitting on my shoulder, smacking me in the back of my helmet, like they used to do with that stick, saying: you'd better fly the aircraft. You'd better aviate.

SMITH: Months of recovery, surgeries. You decide to stay in. What were those conversations like with your unit, your...

DUCKWORTH: Yeah.

SMITH: ...family?

DUCKWORTH: I just wasn't ready to take off the uniform, and my husband got it. He understood, because he was in uniform, too. And I just wasn't – I wanted the decision to quit to be my decision, not the insurgents' decision. And I just wasn't ready. And the first thing I wanted to do was go back to my unit to fly. And I demonstrated that I could fly the aircraft. We actually went out on fly – I flew the simulator just fine. But you know, I wasn't deployable anymore. I we'd been shot down, I couldn't have carried a buddy out to safety the way they carried me out, and I realized that I was no longer deployable. I could fly the aircraft, but being an aviator is about more than just wiggling the stick and controlling the bird.

SMITH: Right. I wanted to give you an opportunity to share the names of the crew that saved you, so –

DUCKWORTH: Sure. So, Chief Warrant Officer Dan Milberg was the pilot-in-command of my aircraft; Sergeant Chris Fierce was my crew chief, who sat right immediately behind me; and Specialist Kurt Hannemann was my door gunner.

SMITH: Thank you.

DUCKWORTH: Thank you.

SMITH: So you make the decision to stay, and what opportunities, or what positions, were open to you in your unit?

DUCKWORTH: So when I decided to stay, the first thing they did was I was moved into the State Army Aviation Safety Office, where I did safety issues for the State. I did mostly ground safety, not aviation safety. But then I also worked on special projects for the State Army Aviation Officer who – you know, there's always special – so for example, I was deconflicting airspace with the FAA in order for us to fly drones. This was the early days of drones, and we were not allowed to fly, you know – these drones above civilian areas. But Illinois doesn't have a lot of military bases with restricted military airspace that we could fly in. So I was working out the SOP⁸ with FAA on how we would do that. I did a lot of public speaking and outreach, and then I eventually found a home doing tactical – you know, TOC operations, Tactical Control Operations Centers. That's, you know, a big part of where my love of the military is. I love being in a TOC, running operations and doing the S-3's job. And so I did that for most of the rest of my time in.

SMITH: So you've said that you owe your life to your fellow veterans, and you've dedicated your service in the Senate to that. Can you just – we'll close with that...

DUCKWORTH: Sure.

SMITH: ...with your –

DUCKWORTH: Well, I asked Dan, you know. What was it like? Because I don't remember anything after we landed the aircraft...

SMITH: Right.

DUCKWORTH: ...and I passed out during the emergency engine shutdown. They said I woke up later, but I don't remember that. Dan carried me to safety. Dan wouldn't – Dan thought I was dead, and he thought he was recovering a body for my family to bury. He didn't want to leave me where the insurgents could get my body and drag it through the streets of Baghdad, like had happened to so many other American servicemen who had been killed. And so after he got everybody evacuated to safety, he came back, and the crew chief of the second aircraft—of Chalk Two⁹--helped carry me to safety. And every one of them did everything they did to – we all did our job as part of the team, and everyone is

⁸ Standard Operating Procedure.

⁹ A chalk is a numbered group of soldiers designated to fly on and/or deploy from an aircraft.

doing their job is what got all four of us out of there. And Dan said it was – it was, you know – he said it was –

[35:00]

he would have the worst post-traumatic stress if it were not for the fact that I was doing well now. And I don't ever want them to regret the effort they put into saving me. And so every day, I wake up and I think: what can I do today to honor that?

SMITH: Senator Duckworth, it's been my honor to interview you. Thank you so much for your service to the nation, continuing to serve here in the Senate.

DUCKWORTH: Thank you. Thank you.

[35:33]

[END]