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| |  | | --- | | **Interview with Ashleigh Bryant [1/14/2012]**  [[excerpt]]  Tracy Dunlap:  So what do you recall as your first days after you joined the Marine Corps and they shipped you off to Parris Island? What was that like, getting off the bus at Parris Island?  Ashleigh Bryant:  Getting off the bus at Parris Island -- before that I realized I had actually made an incredibly large mistake. And this was my first recollection of the Marine Corps, was that we got to the airport -- I believe it was in South Carolina. I had left my ID, my Social Security card, everything I was supposed to bring with me, I had left it in the ladies' bathroom. I remember just being panic stricken the entire time, not knowing who I could say this to or who I could tell this to. And there were incredibly mean people all around me, like, just very intimidating. I'm walking through this line, and as I get closer and closer to the front of the line, like, I can feel my heart dropping further and further down. They really let me have it when I got up there. I can't even remember the slew of obscenities that came out of these people's mouths. But they really let me have it. It turned out somebody sent it to my platoon in boot camp. And it wasn't a big deal, but that was definitely my first recollection of what the Marine Corps was going to be like for the next few months.  Tracy Dunlap:  Okay. So when you stepped off the bus and you stepped in those footprints --  Ashleigh Bryant:  Oh, yeah.  Tracy Dunlap:  How did that make you feel?  Ashleigh Bryant:  I guess in some ways proud. I know I hadn't made it yet, but I had made it this far. I guess I knew at that point there was no coming back from that. I wasn't going to fail at this.  Tracy Dunlap:  Some big shoes to fill in joining the Marine Corps.  Ashleigh Bryant:  Mm-hmm.  Tracy Dunlap:  Okay. And as you say, when -- you began your basic training and the -- well, tell us about your boot camp experiences after -- when you first started.  Ashleigh Bryant:  The whole thing is such a mind game. And if you can -- not everybody's cut out for it. But if you're tough enough to endure the mind game, the physical is not that difficult. I mean, they challenge you, but. I was surprised, actually, at the attrition rate of the number of girls that were sent out of my platoon here and there. We whittled down and got some more people in, and then whittled back down. I remember the girl who bunked next to me, she looked like Winnie from "The Wonder Years." I remember taking one look at her when I got there and, like, she's not going to make it, there's no way this girl's sticking it out. She ended up, I think, getting sent home for -- I think her mom contacted her Congressman or something like that and she ended up going home. The girls that stuck it out, they were -- you could tell. You could tell the ones that were going to make it and the ones that weren't from the very beginning. They all know that. They know who's going to leave.  Tracy Dunlap:  They like to say they want to tear you down and build you back up into that perfect Marine. So is that your experience? Did you feel like they tore you down and then started to build you back up?  Ashleigh Bryant:  I think it tears down people in different ways. For me it was -- I talk to my mother every single day of my life, now, before that, every single day. And I didn't talk to her for three months. And that was the hardest thing for me about boot camp, was just not being able to talk to my mom.  Ashleigh Bryant:  Right, because they limit your contact. With your family?  Ashleigh Bryant:  You can write letters, but you're not allowed any phone call or anything like that. So I didn't talk to her, see her, until we graduated.  Tracy Dunlap:  So what about the instructors you had? Do you remember any instructors that stick out in your mind? Good, bad?  Ashleigh Bryant:  They were all good. They all did their job well. I can't say that any of them were anything but solid Marines. Staff Sergeant Lecia Tienda was our heavy hat. She was -- she looked like drill instructor Barbie. She was just as perfectly put together as you can possibly -- just a lovely woman, but she was the meanest person I've ever met in my life. I suspect that she probably just is that way in general. I don't think she has -- I don't think it comes off. She strikes me as that kind of person. But, yeah, she's the one that really sticks out in my mind. She was there with us the whole time. We had a shift in there at some point, but she was definitely there.  Tracy Dunlap:  So I would gather that she had been deployed probably before. Was she able to give you any idea of what you could anticipate?  Ashleigh Bryant:  You know, at that point, I don't know if she had. I don't know what her background was. I think she was an MP.  Tracy Dunlap:  What year did join the Marines?  Ashleigh Bryant:  I joined in 2004. So it was a little close to the start of, you know, Afghanistan, I guess. I don't know if she had been deployed or not.  Tracy Dunlap:  But she was able to, besides the training, she was able to -- do you feel like she gave you some idea of what to expect, being a woman in the Marine Corps?  Ashleigh Bryant:  Actually, I think she did. And that was something that she had always expressed to me was that, you know, you remain a lady. It seems so strange coming out of her mouth. But she was. She was always very put together. You could -- you could see that she wasn't -- she wasn't like the one who was going to go out and chew tobacco with the guys in the back. She was actually -- she was a very lady-like person but also a Marine. I think that's something I tried to carry through.  Tracy Dunlap:  Any other words of wisdom she gave you as far as how to conduct yourself in or out of uniform?  Ashleigh Bryant:  All I remember her was telling us not to chew gum. That's the only thing I can remember her saying, "don't chew gum while you're in uniform."  Tracy Dunlap:  So you're obviously mentally tough to get through the training. Had you ever fired a weapon before?  Ashleigh Bryant:  Yeah. You know, certainly not an M-16, but my family grew up around guns and weapons, so that was not anything unusual to me. I wasn't put off by that at all. I didn't shoot as well as I had hoped, but I think -- there's a lot of pressure on Marines when you're down there. You know, if you fail, you know, you only have so many tries before you get booted out, so.  Tracy Dunlap:  Will they work with you on the side?  Ashleigh Bryant:  They do.  Tracy Dunlap:  To help you?  Ashleigh Bryant:  They do. They have really good marksmanship instructors down there. They really help you out. Actually, the drill instructors are kind of kept back from you. They're kept a distance away from you at that point because they know that it can be a little problematic. You got somebody breathing down your neck, you can't really, you know, do it as well as you should.  **10 MINUTES**  Tracy Dunlap:  Right. Focusing on it. Okay. So you were deployed to Afghanistan?  Ashleigh Bryant:  Mm-hmm.  Tracy Dunlap:  When were you deployed?  Ashleigh Bryant:  May 2009 to November 2009.  Tracy Dunlap:  And where were you sent? What was the name of the camp?  Ashleigh Bryant:  In Bagram. I think maybe a month later they gave me a camera and said you're going down to Kandahar to start a bureau. That was where I ended up. And from there, we really didn't have a lot. We had to beg, borrow, and steal for everything we had down there and then kind of make our way throughout the rest of southern Afghanistan to try and get stories, shoot video.  Tracy Dunlap:  Okay. So what was your function then, with the camera?  Ashleigh Bryant:  Well, at that point I was the News Bureau Chief for AFN Kandahar.  Tracy Dunlap:  AFN?  Ashleigh Bryant:  American Forces Network Kandahar. Basically we were kind of internal embedded reporters. We would go out and embed with whatever platoon was going out and doing whatever. You know, basically followed them around for a while.  Tracy Dunlap:  You were on the front lines just the same with your rifles slung over your shoulder and your camera in your hand?  Ashleigh Bryant:  Mm-hmm.  Tracy Dunlap:  And do you remember where you -- were -- where you went? Any names of some of the forward operating bases?  Ashleigh Bryant:  Yeah. I mean, there was -- I mean it was really all throughout -- mostly through Kandahar and Helmand Province. And, you know, the one that -- the big one that I was actually involved with, they did an operation, Eastern Resolve, that I was a part of. They actually went -- it was a clearing operation. They went out on foot patrols. It was -- actually I got my combat action from that.  Tracy Dunlap:  Clearing minefields?  Ashleigh Bryant:  No, no, no. The city. The city.  Tracy Dunlap:  Door-to-door, urban warfare I think they call it?  Ashleigh Bryant:  Mm-hmm. Yeah. I remember the first time we went to the stepoff, that morning we got there, they went in earlier, early morning. We had kind of just pulled in. We had a group of, like, scout snipers with us. They all left the back of the 7-Ton. So we were just sitting there, and we started to get -- we started to get shot at. And it was -- that was the first time I had ever actually come under fire. And it was just that -- kind of a sound I'll never really forget. I mean, it was so close. It was just -- you could see it -- you know, pinging off the dirt. You could see the dirt flying up. It was really too close for comfort. We -- I'm in the back of a 7-Ton, so there's, like, this much, I don't know, lucite, whatever it is, protecting you, and then the top is open. So really you just keep your head down.  Tracy Dunlap:  Just a couple of feet of lucite on the bottom?  Ashleigh Bryant:  Whatever that is. Protective encasement. But it really was just kind of keeping your head down. We didn't have anywhere to go. It's different than being on a base where you're like, okay, yeah, we're safe, there's people around. We were out in the middle of nowhere.  Tracy Dunlap:  So you were in the back of this truck, you come under fire.  Ashleigh Bryant:  Yeah.  Tracy Dunlap:  Was it -- was it a platoon? How many people were in this --  Ashleigh Bryant:  I'm trying to think how many people a 7-Ton holds?  Tracy Dunlap:  No, but I mean all together -- was it -- the grouping that went out that day, do you remember how many people were involved?  Ashleigh Bryant:  I think it was a company.  Tracy Dunlap:  A company? Okay.  Ashleigh Bryant:  I think it was. I don't know how many people they had actually sent and how many stayed behind. Yeah. They -- they sent the guys up the mountain. I mean, it was kind of cool to watch them go up and literally just disappear into the side of the mountain.  Tracy Dunlap:  Special forces guys?  Ashleigh Bryant:  Yeah.  Tracy Dunlap:  Was it all Marines or Army and Marines?  Ashleigh Bryant:  All Marines. All Marines out there.  Tracy Dunlap:  Was this a joint operation or was it 100% American forces?  Ashleigh Bryant:  No. There were actually -- there were some Afghan soldiers. I don't remember how many. I don't remember seeing that many of them. But when we actually got further into the city, you know, we got off the trucks and went into the city, the village -- I don't know if it was a city, but. You know, we had -- there was one lieutenant and this guy looked at me and he's like, "you know this is no place for a woman, right?" I was like, you've got to be kidding me.  Tracy Dunlap:  Must not have been very many females there that day.  Ashleigh Bryant:  No. I think -- Yeah, I was the only one. Yeah, the only one.  Tracy Dunlap:  Typically females don't go into combat situations. But as we all know, in a situation like this, you know where you're sent into combat, basically, and you've got your camera. But did you have any idea of, okay, I need to drop my camera and pick up my gun?  Ashleigh Bryant:  There was a point at which, you know, it got a little -- it got a little dodgy. I remember we were -- I was filming. And I was watching these Marines go from one side of this clearing to the other. The videographer in me I'm like, this is great footage, this so awesome, I can't wait to see what this looks like. And then stop, and I'm like, I have to do this. I have to go and run across this here clearing, and there's a guy with a machine gun up there firing down at us, and I have to make it. And that was -- that's a little unnerving. Actually -- it's not to say that I wasn't prepared for it physically, but I remember I did -- as I was running, there was a Marine with us. His name escapes me right now, really good guy. But he was running next to me. And my ankle, my left ankle, just twisted. I guess I hit a rock or whatever, and I fell on my knee, my right knee. I mean, there was -- I don't want to say I'm a baby, but I do baby myself a little bit when I get -- I'm like, oh, man, that sucks, that hurts. But there was not a split second that I was not back up on my feet and running again. And when I got to a point where I could actually sit down and look, and my knee was, like, twice the size that it should be, and it was all black. It's just that adrenaline to get you through. It's something I don't think you can really replicate. There's something about that, knowing that you're kind of in somebody's sights that is a little bit different than --  Tracy Dunlap:  But that would go back to your training. Because didn't you have some sort of live ammo training?  Ashleigh Bryant:  We never really did that. We had simulated things like that.  Tracy Dunlap:  But they would play -- at least they would have the sound so that you wouldn't be spooked when you landed in these situations, right?  Ashleigh Bryant:  I'm not going to say that that's not helpful, but that is not what came into my head. In no way, shape, or form was that something that I thought of when that happened. It was just get your ass up and go.  Tracy Dunlap:  You reacted. You reacted, and your training came into play. You just didn't realize it was coming into play.  Ashleigh Bryant:  Yeah.  Tracy Dunlap:  What about -- when you fell down -- I mean, you're wearing body armor.  Ashleigh Bryant:  Yeah. That stuff weighs as much as I do. Plus I got my rifle, my ammo, my camera. There's a lot to --  Tracy Dunlap:  The way you jumped up from that after being weighted down with all of that ceramic -- is it ceramic?  Ashleigh Bryant:  Yeah. The plates are all ceramic.  Tracy Dunlap:  Okay. And so, so how long were you there in this village?  Ashleigh Bryant:  We were there for I think something like four days, I think. I actually -- I left right after -- And I don't know if this is something that anyone will remember, but there was actually an AP reporter with us. And we were there when -- a kid named Bernard, Lance Corporal Bernard. He got hit with an RPG and got his leg blown off. And he -- he bled out before he even got back to the medics. But that was something she had actually gotten a picture of. And -- I mean it's -- to see that -- I understand, as a journalist, why she would take a picture of that. But to come back and -- you know, she was asked -- AP was asked not to publish that photo. I believe Secretary Gates actually asked for that photograph not to be published, and they did it. And the family had requested that it not be published, and they did it anyway. And that, you know, to -- I guess to steal someone's last moments like that, that's -- it kind of -- I don't want to say it's like Vietnam, but, you know, I mean it's just a little too much. It's a little too much. And I don't think a large percentage of people here can appreciate what that's like.  Tracy Dunlap:  Do you think that that played a part as far as rallying the American people behind the troops to say, look, this is what's happening to our young men and women?  Ashleigh Bryant:  In some ways I do, but I think it's such a flash in the pan. It goes by so quickly that I might -- I don't know how many people remember his name. I don't.  Tracy Dunlap:  But the image may stick out.  Ashleigh Bryant:  I hope -- I guess if anything, if that works for anything, I would hope that -- that people can remember that. But I think people -- I don't know. That's my one hang-up with it, is just that it goes by so quickly. I don't know if people will even remember it. So it's kind of -- it's almost like too personal of a thing to be shared with everyone in the world.  Tracy Dunlap:  Well, let me put this spin on it. Because we hear some of the names -- like Pat Tillman is a name or Jessica Lynch. There are some names that are just associated with the Afghanistan conflict, I don't know, war, however you want to term it. There's so many different ways to term it. And so, knowing this Lance Corporal Bernard and realizing what price he paid, the ultimate sacrifice he made -- you know him -- you knew him personally, right?  Ashleigh Bryant:  Yeah.  Tracy Dunlap:  So that's a connection you have. And this AP reporter was trying to make a connection, maybe, with the rest of the world, with the public. And that's what -- a lot of these images can't all be the good things, with American soldiers and the villagers and giving candy to the kids. You got to bring home the other side, the prices that are paid, the sacrifices that are made.  Ashleigh Bryant:  I understand that and appreciate it. I think it's just hard.  Tracy Dunlap:  It's hard for you because you were there.  Ashleigh Bryant:  The face that you had seen. | |
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