

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

GRACE MEZZLES

An interview conducted on

February 20, 2017

Interviewer: Kendall Fougerat

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

“War Stories: West Texans and the Experience of War, World War I to the Present”

LEGAL STATUS: The oral memoirs of Grace Mezzles are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on February 20, 2017

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FOUGERAT: OK. So, my name is Kendall Fougerat and the date is February 20th 2017 and we are in the Porter Henderson Library, room 216.

MEZZLES: And I am Grace Mezzles. It is February 20th 2017 and we are in the library, room 216.

FOUGERAT: OK. So, I already asked you this but what is your name?

MEZZLES: My name is Grace.

FOUGERAT: OK, and when and where were you born, and where did you grow up?

MEZZLES: I was born July 22nd 1990 in McMinnville, Oregon. I grew up there, majorly in McMinnville in the date and area.

FOUGERAT: Mhmm, cool. And so the next questions are only for native West Texans. So, I don't need to ask you those. Um, when are where did you enter the armed forces?

MEZZLES: Well I entered . . . What was the question?

FOUGERAT: Actually I brought an extra copy of the questions so that you can look at it . . . Here you go. We are on question 4.

MEZZLES: OK, perfect, um. I entered the armed forces in McMinnville, Oregon, and I served in the army . . . and my years of service were from 2008 to 2012.

FOUGERAT: OK, and during your years of service were you primarily in the enlisted ranks, a non-commissioned officer, an officer, a warrant officer?

MEZZLES: I wasn't enlisted and I exited the military as a noncommissioned officer, an E5 Sergeant.

FOUGERAT: M'kay, and then OK, you already said that. In which military conflict did you take part?

MEZZLES: I was in Operation Enduring Freedom.

FOUGERAT: OK, and then, why did you enlist in the armed forces, and what motivated you to do so?

MEZZLES: So, college is expensive and, after I pretty much used all of my savings for college, I talked to my parents about what my next steps were . . . And I brought up maybe joining the military since they had really great incentive programs and after just talking with them and my grandparents we decided that would be a good route. I looked into it and then I just decided to join. My dad is also prior military, my grandfather is, whole long running in my family. So, my

dad only had girls up until that point so. I just kind of followed suite and took the leap of faith and went in.

FOUGERAT: Ok . . . What was your training like?

MEZZLES: Basic was a lot of fun but very scary at the same time. Um, at that point I hadn't really left home for too terribly long, just like maybe a month or two at a time. Um, but this was like I'm standing on my own two feet now and whatever. Wherever they send me is what I'm going to do. Um, so when I first got to basic, all I had in mind was I'm just going to stick to myself and be true to myself but, like I'll be honest, like I found who I truly was in basic training. I realized I was a lot stronger than I thought I was and could preserve through a lot more than I really thought I could do and it was really great. Um, and then my training for my job here in San Angelo was a lot of fun because it got to test me in a different way. More intellectually, um, I learned that I'm really, really good at puzzles, which is really fun. Um . . . But my job was really helpful in making me realize like, I am a truly analytical person. That's me to the full extent and it makes sense like from high school, like transitioning into military that that's how I always was but I didn't really know it until I came here.

FOUGERAT: Cool, and what were race relations like when you were enlisted?

MEZZLES: We see no color.

FOUGERAT: Really?

MEZZLES: No color.

FOUGERAT: That's awesome.

MEZZLES: Military is completely . . . Well, for me, is completely colorblind. The person next to me means more to me than anything because they're protecting me. I'm protecting them. If you don't have their back because they're black, Asian, Muslim, you know you name it, it's . . . It's crazy. So, I mean, growing up where I lived, there weren't a lot of black people and there was a high population of Asian and Russian but not African American. So... being able to go into the military and my best friend was black. You know, and it was pretty cool.

FOUGERAT: Yeah.

MEZZLES: Just because you wouldn't see it. Like I'm extremely white and they're extremely black, and we're just best friends. Battle buddy till the end. I still talk to her.

FOUGERAT: Awesome, Umm, did you find your service challenging?

MEZZLES: Uhh, I think . . . On my deployment, I hit a barrier where it was really hard just because, at that point, being away from home, you know, was fine. But being so far away from home where you were limited on how you can talk and how often you can talk. Um, that's where

. . . It really hit home that I really missed home. This was really hard but you just kind of make it work. Um, but that's really the only part I saw as being challenging.

FOUGERAT: Mhmm.

MEZZLES: Actually serving the country was not. I enjoyed it. I knew what I was getting myself into, um, so in that aspect no, it was fine.

FOUGERAT: OK, what conception did you have of the United States at the time of your enlistment?

MEZZLES: Um . . . I really felt that . . . We needed to be more on a level playing field as far as the rest of the world. At the time I wasn't extremely educated in what was really going on and now, looking back, my reasoning's weren't really the best. Um, I really felt like the United States was really weak and they needed better troops . . . And really like, going into it, we had a lot of awesome troops and we weren't a weak force. We were just injured. And I was only in 6th grade when 9/11 happened. So, at that time I wasn't really interested in the news or learning at history or anything that was going on and . . . So, my conception was just we are hurting. Might as well do my part in trying to help. But, being an individual, you can't really help. It's a team.

FOUGERAT: That's true. And the second part says, what did America symbolize to you and what do you think it stood for?

Mezzles: America, for me, symbolizes hope. Because a lot of immigrants, they come here for something better. And . . . for me it was the same way. I mean, my dad's a farmer. We didn't always grow up with a lot of money but I always had that hope that I could make a difference and I could make a change. For me, part of that service was the military. And to me, it still symbolizes hope for a lot of people. Um, what did I think it stood for?

FOUGERAT: Mhmm.

MEZZLES: Um, hope.

FOUGERAT: Were you deployed overseas? And if so what did you understand about the mission you were being asked to complete?

MEZZLES: I was deployed from, uh, when we started in 2009. Train up going back and fourth and then my full deployment was 2010 through 2011. Um, I was there for a little over a year and the mission that we were going to support was Task Force Odin. Um, observe, detect, identify, neutralize which was mostly an aerial reconnaissance mission where we would fly out depending on where the target area was and hopefully observe people. Um, the enemy, um, plant like IEDs, explosive devices, um, finding weapons cache, pretty much route detection and neutralizing the enemy, super tough.

FOUGERAT: You said the name of the task force was what? I'm going to make a note of it.

MEZZLES: Task Force Odin, O-d-i-n. And it's out of Fort Hood, Texas.

FOUGERAT: OK, thank you.

MEZZLES: No problem.

FOUGERAT: Um, what units did you serve during your deployment?

MEZZLES: Task Force Odin.

FOUGERAT: Ok, Did you serve in direct combat during your deployment?

MEZZLES: Um, like actual hand-to-hand combat, no. But the mission that I flew on, um, we did have combat, just because we did drop bombs. Um, it's pretty tough to talk about so I'm not going to do into depth on that.

FOUGERAT: OK.

MEZZLES: Um, but, yeah, we did have direct combat with that. Um, a lot of times we did support for troops in contact, which is called a TIC. Where we would have to, you know, visualize finding the enemy, give them direct orders to where they were, and they shoot. And so it was kind of indirect, but direct.

FOUGERAT: And were you wounded in action?

MEZZLES: Um, mentally and emotionally, yes. Um, I am one of the soldiers that has PTSD. I deal with it everyday. It'll never go away. Um . . . But physically, no.

FOUGERAT: OK, umm, did you become a prisoner of war?

MEZZLES: No.

FOUGERAT: What did you think of the local inhabitants you encountered?

MEZZLES: So, um, being on Bagram, um, which was the air base that we were mostly stationed at, I got a lot of interaction with Afghanistan citizens. Um, they are actually really pleasant. Um, you know, there are always the few that aren't. But the people that we interacted with on base were great. They were really kind. Um, that could've played into the part that I was a blond female, um, but, overall they were respectful. They had like . . . There was a little place, uh, in the little market square where they actually served like, um, their like traditional food. And they were always very gracious in giving us some for free even.

FOUGERAT: Wow.

MEZZLES: It was really great. Yeah, on base was great. Outside of base were . . . I did get to go out of the compound. Um, on like ground patrol a couple of times and there you meet some, you

know, resistance, and it was very tough. Most of that is language barrier when you only have one translator and then, when they see a female on patrol, they don't have respect for you. So, um, outside of the compound was hard but inside, good to go.

FOUGERAT: And you said the name of the base was, what was it?

MEZZLES: Bagram, B-a-g-r-a-m.

FOUGERAT: OK, and I guess if I have that on recording I don't necessarily need to write it down.

MEZZLES: Haha, you're OK.

FOUGERAT: Um, when you interacted with local inhabitants, what did you think their conceptions of the United States were?

MEZZLES: Um . . . Some of them welcomed our help. Some of them did not. Um . . . A lot of the times you see doors closed, windows closed. Um . . . People grabbing their children in, out of fear. Um, but then sometimes you go in to places and they're welcoming you with open arms you know and they know that you're there to help them or to bring them beans and rice and, um, just to be pleasant and make sure everything is going OK with them. It's not always about just like going out and interrogating people. You build a rapport with them in hopes that they'll tell you if things are going wrong in their community. But, most of the time, it was pleasant, other than sometimes, you know, the disrespect. But overall, decent.

FOUGERAT: And did you ever engage them in a conversation about what America meant to you?

MEZZLES: No I did not.

FOUGERAT: OK, how did your service influence or affect your family at home?

MEZZLES: Um, so when I first was finishing my advanced training here, um . . . I wasn't on orders to deploy. I was going to Colorado and then, two weeks before graduation, I came up on orders to deploy.

FOUGERAT: Wow.

MEZZLES: Because they want the best. I'm not trying to be boastful or proudful, um, but . . . I was in the top of my class and I got hand selected for the deployment and when I told my parents, of course, it was "Well, where are you going"? At first it was Iraq and they were OK with that because the conflict wasn't as extreme there at the time, um. But then when I went to Fort Hood, I got my second set of orders, which actually changed it to Afghanistan. Um, I remember sitting at home and worrying about telling my parents just because I knew they wouldn't be OK with it. They didn't have a choice in that. It was my decision to join. Um, I remember writing them letters like just in case I didn't come back. My dad still has his. My

mom, she read it when I first got over there and she couldn't keep it. Because she . . . She felt that if she kept it, it meant that I wasn't coming home.

FOUGERAT: Exactly, I feel like that too.

MEZZLES: So, um, so she burned it. [Laughing.] Um . . . But over . . . I guess over the course of my deployment my parents gained . . . I guess more respect to me for being able to cope with it and deal with it the way that I did. Um, I was also married at the time and my husband was in basic training and then his advanced training, so we didn't have a lot of contact for about 9 months of the deployment. Um, we didn't come back being married but that's a different story. But overall, um, you know, my parents became affected because they worried . . . They worried that I wouldn't come home. They worried. My dad mostly worried about how I would come home and what I would struggle with when I came home. Um . . . If I would be the same person because when you see death, when you're a part of it, it changes you. And you don't know how much so until you have time to sit on it. And it didn't really hit me or my family so much until say maybe just a few years ago when everything kind of just started to set in. I think mostly because I educated myself on all of it and it all just hit home. So, my husband that I have now is also affected with PTSD. He's 100% disabled and, you know, it affects everybody differently but it definitely affects everybody.

FOUGERAT: Um . . . What are your most vivid memories of your time in service?

MEZZLES: Um, definitely graduation from basic training. Um . . . I flew my mom and my adopted parents to Missouri for my graduation and I remember sitting down at the position of attention, my mom coming up and being just so proud of me she was like flashing pictures right in my face. Um . . . And then, after that, I would definitely say graduation AIT because it was so hard. Um, you push yourself in a lot of different levels in your advanced training. There's a lot of pressure to finish it and it's one of the hardest courses in the military to get through. Um, and to be able to say that you did it is pretty cool. And then also my favorite . . . Favorite all time memory is, um, my last flight on deployment. Um . . . When we came down from mission, my . . . The rest of my crew chiefs, they all like hoisted me up in the air and we took a picture and, um, that's just like my favorite memory. Just like I made it. I made it through the whole time.

FOUGERAT: Right.

MEZZLES: I'm coming home and home's going to be different but I'm coming home and it's definitely great to set foot back on American soil and have a different feeling of being safe in a completely different mindset. It's pretty cool.

FOUGERAT: Um, what sorts of technology did you use in the service?

MEZZLES: That I can't really talk to you much about. Um, just because the systems that we used are confidential. Um, very, very much so top secret. Um, but mostly like computer based software . . . um. We used a lot of different cool weapons [laughing] but the actual technology aspect I can't really talk about.

FOUGERAT: OK, um, did you expect to face any challenges when you returned to civilian life? If yes, what challenges?

MEZZLES: One hundred percent, yes. Um . . . In the military you're engrained with a set of values that a lot of civilians don't possess. Um, I am definitely still military-minded. I still believe in, "If you're not 15 minutes early you're late." Um, it frustrates me when I am not on time. Um, the level of respect that I feel that us soldiers have compared to civilians, not all civilians, but the majority is completely different. It's always "sir" or "ma'am," um, "please," and "thank you." Um. Open the doors. I don't care if you're a man, I'm still going to open the door for you. Um, it's still there. What worried me the most was like trying to learn how to make friends in a different level. Just because, when you are in the military, it just comes so easy, you're all brothers and sisters, there's no give or take. They just see your name on your uniform and it's almost instant. There are still like personality quirks but making friends on the civilian side is so different because there is so much more that other people care about that I don't. I don't care where you grew up, what kind of car you drive, how much money you make, I don't care about any of that. If you're a nice person, you mean good, cool, I'll be your friend. I don't care.

Um, that worried me and then I came out of the military expecting a child. So that was completely new as well. And then also starting college. Um, completely different animal. I have no idea what I was getting myself into setting foot in the classroom again. Mostly because I was trying to learn who I could be transitioning from the military into civilian life. I'm still the same person. Um, I still have a lot of the same values. Um, but it was definitely hard trying to figure out where you belong. Especially when you're in a room with like 18 and 19-year-old kids and you're an older person and you're like the "old" person in the class [laughing]. But, uh, yeah it was definitely challenging. Workwise, I didn't work for a little while but when I did go back to work it was almost an instantaneous hire. All you say is like your prior service and they're like, oh, we would love to have you. Because they know you're going to work hard, you're going to do what you're asked, most the time not have to be told what to do, and you're going to respect not only your customers or yourself but also your boss and your fellow employees so that part was easy to transition into.

FOUGERAT: Did you face any challenges when you returned to civilian life? If yes, what challenges?

MEZZLES: We kind of just described that. Just finding where I really belonged again. When you go from having the sense of a team to now you're an individual, like your family is a team, but it's different. Just because you're so used to every morning you wake up at five A.M., you go to P.T., you clean up, you go to work, you know. You go to the gym after work with friends. You go home. That's all you do every day. In civilian life, like, I have no routine. You have to find a . . . kind of figure out what your new routine is. That was a big challenge too.

FOUGERAT: You said you're from Oregon, right?

MEZZLES: Mmhmm.

FOUGERAT: OK. But did you ever live in Texas before?

MEZZLES: No.

FOUGERAT: No? OK.

MEZZLES: So, I came to Texas in two thousand and nine. And all . . . Pretty much my whole military career was here. And I've lived in Texas since.

FOUGERAT: OK, so I can still ask this question. Did being from slash being in Texas shape your years in the service in any way?

MEZZLES: I will say that being in Texas was probably the first sense of experiencing a similar level of respect. Just because . . . I don't know if it's just how people are raised here or if you're just born that way. But, "Yes, ma'am," "Yes, sir," it's almost the same. Not everybody of course, but . . . It was kind of like being in Texas was the same as being in the military, just because there's a higher standard here. It was great. I mean, Oregon's great. I love it. I'm not trying to talk bad about my home state, but . . . It's more like a free spirited state there and everybody here is kind of more military. Does that make sense?

FOUGERAT: Yeah, that makes sense. I haven't been to a whole lot of other places but, when I have, they've been like, "Oh, yes, ma'am," "Yes, sir." Yeah, it's like . . . We have to do that. And after your time in the military has your conception of Texas changed? Why or why not?

MEZZLES: Uhm . . . No, because when I . . . When I came into Texas I could tell that Texas cared about their veterans, cared about their service men and women. Since I've been out of the military and since, like, I've gone through the whole veterans affairs process of like, getting my disability rating, Texas is like the best state for veterans. They have more . . . Not necessarily products but like plans of action for veterans to still live a manageable life. And it's awesome. Talking to my husband after he got medically retired of where we wanted to move back was pretty easy. Of course, I wanted to live a little closer to home but we knew Texas was going to be the best place for us as far as getting the help we needed and help for our family. So, if anything I've grown more respect for Texas because of that.

FOUGERAT: Okay. After your time in the military has your conception of the United States changed?

MEZZLES: Yes, it definitely has. Uhm . . . When you're . . . When you first go on deployment and you're like all, "Hua! Hua! This is so cool!" Umm . . . I think it was actually after my first mission where I actually saw, like, combat. It made me question my mission, one hundred percent. Made me question like how we as American could be like, "Oh, yeah, go kill everybody!" Not everybody, but, you know, that happens. You think an area is secure, and that, who you're going in to target is the only people there. And sometimes that's not the case. And then you have to deal with that. So, for me . . . I wouldn't say it was a pointless mission, just because there was a lot of good in it but, coming back, and like a lot of American people thinking, "Oh, well how many people did you kill?" Like, that's not an appropriate question. Uhm . . . I really feel like a lot of Americans have blinders on as far as, like, what really goes on

in war. Movies paint a different picture than what really happens. And until you've been there and you've really experienced it, you're going to think that it's a cool thing or not necessarily a cool thing but that the mission is essential. And sometimes it really felt like it wasn't, that we were doing more harm than good. Even now, furthering my education, uhm . . . You know, Afghanistan has one of the highest drug problems—drug trafficking of opium—and it's increased since the military's been present. How does that make sense? It doesn't. So, I really think that the American people went over for a better reason but, I think, in the long run it's made things worse. Not only for our troops or Afghanistan's citizens but also for the people back home, because they don't understand and they don't know and they don't educate themselves on it. So, if anything, my conception of the United States is that we're kind of blind. People just assume that somebody is telling the truth or that they mean well but they're not. They don't. And until we as citizen educate ourselves and really learn, it's not a war that we should've been in, in all honesty. Love, love this country. I'm proud still to serve. I would go back in in a heartbeat if I was allowed to. uhm . . . but my conception is that we are blind. I still think this country is hopeful. I mean that we provide hope for immigrants, but me as a service member . . . I think we're blind. We're blind.

FOUGERAT: How do you feel about your military service looking back?

MEZZLES: I wish I would've stayed in, in all honesty. Even with the struggles that I'm experiencing now, uhm . . . If I could reverse time back to when we found out I was pregnant and my husband and I got separated from where, you know, we were assigned . . . I would've stayed in. Just because . . . Not for the easy route but just because it was so immense, so much to me, to be in. I'm very proud of it. I think most veterans are and they should be. But I feel like I could've done more. Could've helped more soldiers. Learned more. I still have plenty to offer and I can't . . . I really shouldn't say that I would go back and do it. Because I don't know if I would have my second child. I don't know where I would be right now. I don't know if I would be the same person I am. But, I loved it. I've loved it one hundred percent. I'm so happy to be going back and working for the Department of the Army again in a different . . . same kind of career field but it'll be different. It'll be fun.

FOUGERAT: Do you have any advice for the young men and women who are just entering the service?

MEZZLES: Don't be afraid to ask for help. Don't be afraid of your weakness, because it can turn into strength. You can learn from anybody. You are not perfect. Don't expect everything to be easy. Don't expect to not ask for help, 'cause you'll need it. There's always room to improve. Just . . . try to keep hold of who you are throughout all of it. When you feel like you're losing yourself, try to find the little thing that still drives you back home, because that's where you can find who you really are. And just . . . Just . . . Overall just be proud because there's not . . . There's not . . . There's nobody else in this country that can do what you do. So be proud of that and overall just try to educate yourself while you're in the military on what you're really doing. And don't be afraid to ask questions and get backlash for it.

FOUGERAT: This is my own question, but do you think that a lot of people go in like not really knowing what they're getting into?

MEZZLES: Yeah. Even . . . I have friends that didn't join until their mid to late-20s and they're college educated but they weren't educated in a military sense. So, they come in thinking, because they're educated, they know more and that they're more grounded and more ready. But they are the ones that were more shocked in the end than kinda like us 18, 19-year-olds that come just like ready to do whatever. You know, they're kinda more set in their ways, where as we're just more flexible, ready to learn. But, yeah, hundred percent, they go in unprepared. Especially because they don't know what kind of questions to ask their recruiters or, if they don't have friends who have served or family, they don't know. They don't get that knowledge from anybody else or from their peer group. They're just told this is cool thing or "We can give you so much money" or "We can provide schooling" or . . . They hear those good benefits but they don't understand the political aspect of it.

Military is very political. Uhm . . . A lot of times people are there for themselves and they don't care about you. So, especially when it comes to like promotion. If they can get themselves ahead and make it look like they're doing all the work but it's really you . . . that happens. On my deployment, that happened, like I didn't get picked up for sergeant till after my deployment because my leadership wanted their promotion and cared more about that. So, instead of using me as like, uhm . . . I guess as a . . . Gosh, how should I say it. Uhm . . . Say we have bullets, like actual bullet form. We each have so many bullets. Bullets like what have you provided for the mission, how have you grown as an individual, uhm . . . So, they take what you say and put it on their own. So, they kinda use you so they can get promoted but then they don't care about you getting promoted. Because then they don't look as good, because they can't say that they took credit for all that or that they did it all. So when you have a lower enlisted saying that they were in charge of writing our SOP or they did such and such amount of work or they never miss a flight, they have this new flight hours, et cetera, and they outshine you, they don't want you to get promoted because now you're competition. They don't like that. [Laughs.]

FOUGERAT: Do you have items, objects, correspondence that you wish to share with the project?

MEZZLES: I can get you some pictures if you'd like. Dr. W has one of the flags I flew on deployment in his office, if you want to take a picture of that. It has a certificate with it, um. It'll have my previous last name, Williams, on there. But that's me, if you want to take a look at it. It's been flown from Afghanistan. It's pretty cool. Other than that, I only have like my own personal flag at home. I won't share, sorry. I don't think kept correspondence letters, just because they're mostly from like my ex-husband . . . So . . . Everything else was mostly like email, it's just faster. You wouldn't get a letter for like over a month after it was sent.

FOUGERAT: And then would you like to share anything else? Just that you feel is important to the project?

MEZZLES: No, not really. I think I pretty much said everything.