

**CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

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**INTERVIEWEE: Captain Sarah Heer**

**INTERVIEWER: Amber Lloydlangston**

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**Transcription of Interview Number 31D 8 Heer**

**Captain Sarah Heer**

**Interviewed 19 February, 2007**

**By Amber Lloydlangston**

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program interview with Sarah Heer. Recorded on 19 February, 2007 at Milton, Ontario. Interview by Amber Lloydlangston. Tape one, Side one.

CAPTAIN HEER: My name is Sarah Heer. H-E-E-R (spells name).

INTERVIEWER: We have both signed the legal release. Is that correct?

CAPTAIN HEER: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Could you please provide some biographical data?

CAPTAIN HEER: I was born on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1978 in Cambridge, Ontario. I graduated high school in Kitchener, Ontario at Forest Heights Collegiate Institute. I then went to the Royal Military College of Canada for university and graduated from there with an Honours Business Admin., Arts degree in 2001. I completed my Artillery Phase Training in the summer of '01 and was posted to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment Royal Canadian Horse Artillery in CFB Petawawa. I was employed as a Gun Troop Commander from 2001 to 2003 in D Battery. I married my husband, Jamie Heer, on the 20<sup>th</sup> December '02.

From August '03 to February '04 I deployed to Kabul as part of Op ATHENA, Roto 0, as Bravo Troop Commander. I completed my Forward Observation Officer course and my Forward Air Controller course in August-December '04. In January-February '05 I deployed to Sri Lanka as the Operations Officer with the DART, Disaster Assistance Response Team. From February to October '05 I was employed as the Acting Adjutant for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment Royal Canadian Horse Artillery. On the second of November, 2005, I gave birth to my daughter, Jenna Elizabeth Heer. In June of '06 I was posted to the Canadian Forces College in Toronto as the Operations Officer. I currently reside in Milton, Ontario.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me why you joined the military?

CAPTAIN HEER: I was a competitive swimmer in Kitchener-Waterloo and one of the other swimmers had went to the Royal Military College. I became interested in going to the College and then pursuing a military career. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do outside of high school. The military appealed to me just because of the challenge

involved. I didn't join the Artillery right away. I was signed up as an Infantry Officer. I completed the Phase II training and decided to change over to the Artillery.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe your experience at RMC?

CAPTAIN HEER: I thoroughly enjoyed my experience at RMC. RMC is the type of school where you get what you put into it. I was an active member of the varsity swim team, which led to some CISM opportunities with the military swim team and some travelling abroad and eventually the CF [indistinct word] of the year in '98. That was something that I got out of that as well. At RMC I fulfilled a lot of leadership roles as Squadron and Cadet Senior and Recruit Term and a Section Commander and that sort of a thing. There you start to learn a lot about yourself and what your leadership skills are and how to develop them. I thoroughly enjoyed my experience and became bilingual as another addition to my degree.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe the events leading up to your selection for the deployment to Afghanistan?

CAPTAIN HEER: The deployment was set, however we weren't sure of exactly what the make up would be and what elements would be going. We were in Wainright with the brigade training exercise in the spring of '03. That's where we learned that they would be sending a light gun troop of 105 howitzers to Afghanistan. F Battery was going to be the Battery that was, kind of, represented, however it was made up of our regiment. My name was kind of being tossed around as the Gun Troop Commander and a Radar Troop Commander. I was asked what I would want to pursue and I decided to stick with what I knew and deploy as a gun troop commander. That's pretty much the time that, yes, we are deploying. That was actually a good time because while we were on the BT that gave us a chance to work together and form our teams. We didn't go through a traditional year long cycle to get ready for the deployment. It was a bit quicker.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me why your name was being bandied about?

CAPTAIN HEER: Well, there was only a certain amount of junior officers in the Regiment. During the BT, I was working with F Battery. I had gone over to work with them because they were short a Troop Commander. The team was already established and I think that was probably the major reason why I was selected. I was already a member of the team and started working with them. We were working fairly well.

INTERVIEWER: What operational briefings did you receive prior to your deployment? And can you describe the training of your unit?

CAPTAIN HEER: The training began with the BT as I already mentioned. We were already doing a full out Brigade level exercise so we trained as a Battery. When we returned to Petawawa, we went through a theatre mission-specific training, which is a series of small tasks that you go through to prepare for the deployment, such as mine awareness training, first aid training. You go through some environmental briefs where

they discuss the culture of Afghanistan, the religion and go over some key phrases to learn in Afghanistan. Some other briefings included – it's difficult for me to remember, but I think those are the majority of them. The training, like I said, was mostly geared at the actually deployment.

INTERVIEWER: Was this useful to you, the training?

CAPTAIN HEER: I think it was very useful, especially because it was my first deployment. I took it all in and really paid attention to all the details. Especially the mine awareness and explosive device training that we received. First aid, that's useful where ever you go. It was difficult to know what we should prepare for as a gun battery because guns hadn't deployed into Afghanistan. There were mortars there, but this was Roto 0. Things were new, so we were learning as we went more than relying on the training we had in Canada.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe your personal, administrative, medical and living arrangements pertaining to your absence from home?

CAPTAIN HEER: You go through a series of immunizations and a medical check up as well as a dental check up to make sure you're good to go, so to speak. You also do a lot of your administration, make sure your passport's up to date, your dog tags, your will, your insurance, that type of thing as well. My husband's civilian so I didn't have to worry about any arrangements at home. He stayed home with the house. He also went through some briefings to better inform him of what was going on. They did up a little handbook with emergency numbers for the spouses. Other than that, we didn't have any kids so that was a bit easier. There was also a chaplain that you sat with and had a conversation with him to make sure there weren't any other underlying issues that the unit needed to be made aware of.

INTERVIEWER: How did you deal with the family arrangements?

CAPTAIN HEER: My husband was aware that there was always a possibility that I would have to deploy and the fact that I was a junior officer. After 9/11, that became even more clear that eventually a deployment was going to occur. It was just a matter of time. With the deployment to Afghanistan, Roto 0, we did have some time to prepare. We realized it would be difficult, especially since we had just been married the past December. It went fairly well and we prepared. My husband kept himself quite busy while I was away getting himself involved in the community and the Military Resource Centre and coaching a local hockey team. That kind of kept his mind off of the situation with us apart. It's never an easy thing to do to leave your family for six months, but with a military family you just adjust and know that that's the life that we have to lead.

INTERVIEWER: How did you or your unit travel to the theatre?

CAPTAIN HEER: We traveled by military airlift. We staged out of Trenton. We flew from Trenton on an Airbus to a staging area. From there we were boarded onto a more

austere aircraft [laughs], the C-130 I believe it is. It's the Hercules. We travelled from there and it was a bit more of a rough ride into Kabul. From there we were transported by LAV to the actual camp.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe the operational situation you found upon arrival?

CAPTAIN HEER: We arrived at the camp. It was pretty austere. It was pretty much a big open area between two palaces. There was a group in before us that was setting up the camp for us. There was some mod[ular] tents. It was clearly just the start of something. It wasn't that developed and everyone was kind of in temporary housing agencies. It took ourselves a couple of months to get ourselves established and get the Weatherhavens up and make it more of a permanent camp with a mess and other functions.

INTERVIEWER: Did you or your unit have to make any adjustment upon arrival in theatre?

CAPTAIN HEER: Actually, once we had arrived and had established ourselves there became a time when a rocket attack had hit one of the camps, Camp Warehouse. I was staying in Camp Julien on one side of the city and Camp Warehouse was on the other. It was an international camp. A rocket hit that camp one night and I had to drive with two guns over to the other camp, set up a gun position there to provide us with better firepower coverage. In that case, that was a huge change for the Battery as we were now operating as two separate troops instead of one complete Battery. This resulted in a few issues, manpower being one. We had to – myself and the other Troop Commander, who was over at Camp Warehouse – we eventually switched. We ended up both having to do the Recce Officer position as well as the Command Post Officer position. In one location we could share those positions instead of doing both ourselves.

Another aspect that we had to change when we got there was our vehicles. The guns are towed by a MLVW truck, which is a fairly old truck. It does not have any protection. There was a tarp all the way around the truck and the seats faced inwards. What we did is, we moved the benches into the middle and we took off the tarp completely so that the troops riding in the back could see out and see what's going on around them. One thing we also had a problem with was communication between the front of the cab and the back of the truck. There was usually no need for that in Canada, however someone in the back might see something that someone in the cab doesn't so we ended up getting portable radios for them to use. Those were the biggest changes I would say. Ideally, what we would have wanted was an armoured carrier to tow the guns, just for extra protection. But we made do and we didn't have any issues throughout the tour. Those were two big changes that we made.

INTERVIEWER: What was the makeup of the organization that you were involved with?

CAPTAIN HEER: We were part of ISAF, International Security Assistance Force. The role of ISAF was to assist the Afghan Transitional Administration in providing a safe and secure environment within Kabul and the surrounding areas. The role of that, we were part of the Kabul Multinational Brigade, which was led by a Brigadier General from Canada. The mission of KMNB was to assist Afghan Security institutions in maintaining a secure environment within the KMNB area of operations with a view of supporting the Transitional Administration in the establishment of a representative government. The key there is, we were there to assist. We were to take a second role approach.

Down the next lower level we worked very closely – although we were a Brigade asset, we were attached to the 3RCR Battle Group. That was led by a Lieutenant Colonel Denis. The Battery that I was involved with was 1 Gun Battery. It was led by a Major and it was made up of two Gun Troops, one Radar Troop, four FOO/FAC or Forward Observer Parties, plus a Battery echelon. Like I said earlier, half way through we ended up splitting into two Troops in two separate locations, however we still worked as one entity. It just made it more difficult for Command and Control that we were in two separate locations.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe the outpost camps or barracks in which your unit was stationed?

CAPTAIN HEER: I was stationed at Camp Julien for the majority of the time. Camp Julien, like I said before, when we first got there wasn't really set up. It was just mod tents. Pretty much, that's it. Tarp covered tent with no flooring. We had cots and we had bug net, which were definitely a necessity there with the bugs that were crawling around. The washrooms were already set up – sorry, the showers were set up. The washrooms, we were using portable toilets for the early on stages and we moved into Weatherhavens which are more of a structured tent that have a floor built in and a heater as well attached. Eventually, they were supposed to get partitions to separate it into private areas, we never received those towards the end. I was in a tent with other female officers that I knew so it wasn't really an issue for us. We had a space of about two and a half meters by one meter for our living area.

When I went over to Camp Warehouse, it was the same situation. Mod tents at first and then they moved into Weatherhavens. For the FOO Parties – I deployed one evening with a FOO Party. What they do is they are up on an austere location by themselves and they just basically sleep in their vehicle, in a small recce tent we call them, just a four man tent. Right from the start in Kabul, the kitchen was set up. We ate fresh meals the majority of the time. I think at the start we may have been on one hard ration a day, which was our IMP meal. The FOO Parties, when they deploy outside of the camp, obviously they are on hard rations as well. But in Kabul we were pretty fortunate to have fresh meals throughout. Eating really wasn't that big of an issue there.

INTERVIEWER: What was the state of relations with local population?

CAPTAIN HEER: My interaction with the local population was fairly limited. We had specific reps that would go out and encourage the local population and do different projects with them. However, I wasn't involved in that. I did do a bit of interaction with the Kabul Military Training Centre, which is where the US Forces were training the Afghan National Army. In that case, I walked through the training centre and go through 'the gauntlet' we called it, because there were a lot of stares because they weren't use to seeing a woman in uniform. Just more a lot of stares and strange looks. I remember we were taking the Afghan National Army out to a range one day and I was in the front of the truck and a bunch of them were in the back and we stopped. I was trying to get them back into the truck and the translator said they wanted to know who was driving in the front. I said, "Tell them I am." And they said, "No. No. You're in the back." And I said, "No. No. I'm leading the truck. I'm getting in the front." They looked a little startled, but then they quickly understood that I was in charge. That was a bit of an interesting story. Those were probably one of my two big stories with the interaction with the population. For the most part, when you drove through the city – I usually drove through in an Iltis, a normal jeep type vehicle. It was very open. You're very close to the public. They were more curious because at that point because we were still fairly new to Kabul and they weren't use to seeing Canadians in uniform, and especially women in uniform. However, I have talked to women who have been over there since and they are pretty used to it by now so it's not quite a strange thing.

INTERVIEWER: What were the tasks that your unit was called upon to do mostly?

CAPTAIN HEER: The Battery was there to provide fire support as required. We always had to be ready, on call for any fire missions that would come down. What would happen, the FOOs, the Forward Observers, would be out observing different positions at night or during the day. If they came across any suspicious activity, they may have needed us to react with a fire mission to light up the sky. That would be with an illumination mission. That was the type of task that we had to be ready to perform. Usually, they were just more close calls or we reacted. However, the mission never necessarily occurred because we wanted to be sure exactly what we were firing upon. They were very cautious on how that occurred.

Other things we did was we built a very structured gun pits for our guns for protection in case the camp was bombarded. The soldiers in my Battery and my Troop were also tasked as gate guards to do security. For myself and the other officers, what we did was, I would do reconnaissance on other gun positions say at the airport or at some of the other international tents, the Italian camp. We just sort of recced and set out gun positions there in case we had to move the guns there for an unknown reason.

A lot of it was also training. We did it just to keep our skills fresh in our minds because you weren't always forced to use them. You had to make sure you were still able to if the time came to it. We also did a lot of helicopter operations. We lifted the guns by the CH-153 Sea Stallions and the German helicopters, which was quite a good experience for all of us because most of us hadn't done that before. It was also seen as a deterrent so that the local population could see what type of firepower we had. And there's no better

way to travel in Kabul than by the air because the roads are quite a bit slower and you can't move very fast. It was a good way to move around and let everyone see the type of equipment we had.

INTERVIEWER: What were the most important events that occurred during your time there?

CAPTAIN HEER: I don't think I could really go down on a specific incident. There were a few big events I would say on my tour that I felt. One was when the rocket hit Camp Warehouse and I had to move across the city in the middle of the night with two guns. That was a bit of a pressure situation. However, it all worked out fine. In those situations where the heat's on, so to speak, your training takes over. You really don't think about it during the time, but afterwards.

Another important event was one night FOOs observed what they thought was an individual planting an IED on the road. We were called upon to actually fire the illumination and we had the authority to fire it. That was actually the first time rounds were fired in a conflict – however, they were non-lethal rounds – since the Korean War, and it's important to note that they were non-lethal. We ended up firing, I think it was, five fire missions that tour, which was pretty significant. It really was interesting to do your job for real.

The other incidents I would say that were key incidents or difficult to deal with was when we lost soldiers in operations. Although I wasn't present, I was in the Duty Centre for the majority of them as a Duty Officer responding to any calls from the FOOs. You hear it all on the radio and you have to react, and you have to think about how to brief your soldiers on it. That's also some key events that occurred.

INTERVIEWER: How could you coordinate the movement of the two guns to Camp Warehouse?

CAPTAIN HEER: What happened was, we were all called to the gun position, the entire Battery. The Battery Commander then said that the decision had come down to move a troop of guns. So it would be myself and a command vehicle, a small Recce Party and two gun detachments made up of roughly 10 soldiers, to move to the other camp. My troop was selected to do it. We were actually escorted in the LAV with – the Battery Commander went over as well to make sure we were set up. However, I was in control of the troop. We deployed over to the Warehouse. Once we drove through the city with our small convoy, myself and the recce sergeant dismounted, figured out where we were going to put the guns in the camp. Obviously, it was an international camp so we were limited in our space. We ended up setting up right in between the Canadian camp and the international part of the camp. The Canadians were sort of on an annex so there was a bit of space in between. Once we had marked out our position, the guns come in and they deploy in the occupied out position. And then we orient the guns and get them established. Then we find a place to sleep. Pretty much that's how it went. It was a

pretty rushed thing, but it was also really good for the troop to get away and to do something like that. It keeps them busy so it was good.

INTERVIEWER: What do you understand the Rule of Engagement to have been for the deployment area?

CAPTAIN HEER: In Kabul we were given soldier cards which specified exactly our Rules of Engagement. I can't recall all of them. However, the gist of it is self defence and the escalation of force. As in, you used the minimum amount of force necessary and you escalate as required. One interesting aspect of the Rules of Engagement for the gun battery itself is that we had specific Rules of Engagement for when we could fire the howitzers. The guns were laid on, ready on a target quite often. However, we never always received that authority. What we were waiting for was there were three things I had to hear in the Command Post. One was that there were no friendlies within a certain meters distance away. That was usually given by the FOOs or the on-scene commander. We also had to hear airspace clear from the FFCC at the Brigade HQ, and we also needed the authority of the Commander of KMNB before we would fire the howitzers. That was something that was different. It depended on which mission. The mission after us it went up even higher. However, the commander of the brigade at our level delegated it down to the Battle Group Commander for non-lethal. But for lethal ammunition he held the authority to do it. That was something we were not use to having to hear. We got used to always practicing to hear those three things before we were to fire the munitions.

INTERVIEWER: Describe your daily personal routine in Afghanistan.

CAPTAIN HEER: My daily routine depended on whether I had been on a night shift in the Tactical Operation Centre, we called it the TOC. If I was on duty all night, I would try to get some rest throughout the morning and wake up at noon and report to the Battery office. If I hadn't worked, the day would begin at roughly 7 a.m. Get up, eat breakfast, report to the Battery office. The Detachment Commander and my troop Sergeant Major, he's a Warrant Officer, would report and we would discuss the tasks that we had to accomplish that day. Daily maintenance on the gun pit, going through a 'check bearings', some of our drills that we needed to do on a daily basis to make sure our equipment was in order whether it was a personal weapon maintenance or, perhaps, we were going to recce different positions that day. There was also some administration to take care of, whether it was just paperwork for the soldiers. If one soldier was sick, checking up on him. If the soldier had to be sent home, that sort of detail is the stuff we had to concern ourselves with, mostly administration. In the evening we usually had an orders group, which would give us our task for the next day. We would then give orders to our troop and then again, depending on what was going on whether you were on a shift or not, get some rest, go do your shift, go to the gym. That sort of thing. There was never really a standard day. Each day was a little different and depending on what was the job at hand. It was difficult because we always had to be able to react. We were always on call to do our jobs so you couldn't really have a significant amount of down time for an extended period of time.

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe the amenities?

CAPTAIN HEER: When we first arrived, there was some gym weight stuff that was set up outside. Once the Weatherhavens arrived, a complete gym was set up inside the Weatherhavens with cardio machines, weight equipment. Pretty much a like a standard gym you would see here in Canada, but on a fairly small scale. The PSP people that were with us on the deployment set up aerobic classes. You name it, there was lots to do in that aspect. Eventually a floor hockey arena was built outside. There was an Officers'/NCOs' Mess. There was a Junior Ranks Mess. There was a Canex set up. The actual travel agents had a little department as well. It was fairly comfortable. We had a CANCAP show come and perform. Adam Gregory, the country singer was the big name that came with Rick Mercer and did a bit of a show for the soldiers. There was quite a few amenities by the end of the tour.

INTERVIEWER: You were in Afghanistan at the time that Canadians soldiers were killed. Would you speak to the impact that their death had on you and those around you?

CAPTAIN HEER: I've already mentioned that it was difficult to be in the TOC when you hear that an accident occurred. At first, you're listening to see if it's someone you know because as Troop Commander you're friends with the Platoon Commanders and the other Senior NCOs and soldiers over there. I remember once listening and hearing the certain call sign that had been injured and recognizing that it had been a friend of mine that had actually been injured in the blast. However, he hadn't been a fatality. Another incident, I was in the TOC when a soldier was hit by a suicide attack. I found out later on actually when I called home to my husband that that soldier was actually a brother-in-law to one of my soldiers. I had to try to find him, first of all, and tell him prior to a parade that was going to take place where the names would be announced. A lot of the confusion came when a lot of rumours would spread about who it is. Until you heard anything officially, you tried to inform the soldiers not to listen to the rumours. However, it is difficult because it's a very small organization and word travels fast. That was probably the most difficult thing I had to do on the tour was to tell one of my soldiers that a member of his family had been killed. I was able to tell him privately and we were able to console him as required and get him on the flight home with his brother-in-law to be there for his family members. In the end, I think we did the best we could, but it's never an easy situation.

INTERVIEWER: How would you rate your personal security and the security of the area in which you were deployed?

CAPTAIN HEER: Obviously, Kabul was a pretty intense area. We received daily int reps on different insurgents and different threats that we had to look for. You always had to be careful. We heard everything from possible pen bombs to people making bombs in crock pots. We were always prepared and you always had to be alert. It was when you felt that you relaxed that you always worried that something could occur. I think my personal security, every time I left the camp I tried to keep my senses, looking and keep my eyes open for anything that could be seen as suspicious.

INTERVIEWER: What was the state of discipline among your soldiers?

CAPTAIN HEER: The discipline among our troop and our battery as a whole was excellent. I think we attributed it to the soldiers were too busy to get into trouble. We tried to keep them doing actual work every day. Stuff that they thought was fulfilling and they thought they were making a difference, and any chance we got we got them to augment a food party or get them something exciting to do to leave the camp and experience something new. No, we had absolutely no discipline problems in our troop, which is something we are extremely proud of for that mission.

Some other administrative stuff that we had to deal with on the tour was, like I had mentioned before, death in the family, or a birth of a child at home, different child support plans or family issues. Just like things happen in Canada, things happen abroad. It's difficult for the soldiers because they are not able to be there with their loved ones. Different things we try to do, we always ensure the soldier knows that it doesn't necessarily mean they can always go home right away. But we do our best to try and accommodate them and get them back. If it's moving around their leave plans to try and accommodate to a certain situation, such as a family member is sick or has unfortunately passed away, we try to make those arrangements. Other than that, I think that's about it for administration.

INTERVIEWER: Describe the redeployment back to home base.

CAPTAIN HEER: We redeployed pretty much the same way we deployed. We used military airlift back into the staging area and then Airbus back to Canada. We arrived in Trenton and we took buses back to Petawawa. Once we arrived in Canada, we completed three half days of work to try and re-integrate, get through all the administration that we had to do prior to going on leave. That also gave soldiers a chance to bring up any issues they may have been having. I went through a number of briefings to see how we were emotionally. There were different surveys that had to be filled out, different interviews that had to occur.

Once you get home there's always an adjustment because my husband had been living on his own. He had been doing things a bit differently, such as putting the plates in a different drawer than I had or putting the spoons where I use to put the forks. Little things like, "That's not how it was done when I left." I had to realize that this is the way we do it now, or this is the way he's doing it until we adjust back to the way we do it. It's kind of, like, you lead two separate lives and then when you come back you rejoin into one, you do a life together again. That takes a bit of an adjustment. Then you're given a couple weeks of Disembarkation Leave where you're able to reconnect with your family and readjust, sort of go through the things I just discussed.

Then it's back to work and getting caught up on courses that you've missed because you're deployed. Paperwork and training, there's lots of training that needs to occur for the soldiers to stay current and to move up in the ranks. When they are away for six

months, unfortunately, they can't get a lot of that training so you re-embark on that sort of task. Reconstitute, I guess is the proper word we use for that. For myself, that was my first deployment overseas and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I think the big things for me were to gain the confidence that I could do my job in a difficult situation on a deployment outside of Canada. I feel proud of what we did and I feel we definitely made a difference, although differences were small and they weren't necessarily evident through every individual. You could see them when you drove through town. There were more little girls going to school, or we had done a lot of engineering tasks or the Afghan National Army was a lot more prepared than it used to be. That sort of thing. You could definitely see a difference in only six months. And I'm sure now it is even more noticeable.

The camaraderie that you form with the group that you go over with, the troop that you deploy with, they'll always be a close knit team and you'll always have those stories or that experience together to share. It just really makes you feel justified that all your training has been worth it and you've been able to serve your country. You put your training to use. I thoroughly enjoyed my deployment to Afghanistan.

INTERVIEWER: Can you speak to the training that you received when you came back?

CAPTAIN HEER: Once I got back I began my normal progression as an Artillery officer. To continue on the next step for me was the Forward Observer course, so that's what I was preparing for. I subsequently got that training, as well as the Forward Air Controllers. I had those two qualifications. When we were deployed in Afghanistan, myself and the other troop commander and a few other platoon commanders were Lieutenants at the time and we were promoted for Captain about three months early. That was a nice reward for a job well done. The training just kind of continues as needed and each officer is different and each soldier is different for the courses they need to obtain.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe the events leading up to your selection to the deployment to Sri Lanka?

CAPTAIN HEER: The DART was a secondary task for D Battery, the Battery that I was a part of in 2RCHA. What that meant was, if the DART deployed, D Battery would make up the company HQ element as well as the D & S Platoon, the Defence and Security Platoon. It was always a standing task that we had and we would annually go down to Trenton and go through training so that we were familiar with the DART and how it deployed and the organization it's made up. It was just before New Years in '05, January-February – sorry, I guess it would have been the end of '04. My husband and I were on our way to Niagara-on-the-Lake for a little holiday to meet friends for New Year's Eve and we were half way home and I had a call from one of the officers in my Battery saying, "You need to come back. The DART's deploying because of the tsunami that hit Sri Lanka." So we turned around. Had a pretty long conversation [laughs] on the way home and discussed the options.

When I returned back, I was told that I was selected to deploy as the company's operations officer. I was given the option not to deploy because I have just returned from my FOO course and had been away from home for pretty much four months with that course. However, it was such a unique opportunity to provide humanitarian assistance, my husband understood and thought it was something I should do. It's also only a 40 day deployment at the most. You can already see the finish line, so to speak. It was nice to be able to go and make a difference in that situation. We were able to go and have our New Year's because, the way the time went, the CO actually let me go back before the flight. That was nice. At least I got our New Year's Eve in before we deployed. That's what led up to the deployment.

INTERVIEWER: What operational briefings did you receive prior to deployment?

CAPTAIN HEER: When the DART mounts, or when it's told its going to deploy, there's a series of things that occur. And it's not just the people deploying. It also needs a lot of support from those that are staying back home. What we do is go through a thing called a DAG, a Departure Assistance Group. That is a make up of going through all your checks, your medical checks, your dental checks, your immunization, your dog tags, your will, power of attorney. You go through all those checks. It's just a very condensed time frame because you only have, maybe, 48 hours before you need to deploy. You also receive some int briefs. The situation was, we weren't considered a high threat area. However, we were briefed on the environmental impacts of the tsunami. As well, we were given another brief on mine awareness because there was certain groups that were based out of Sri Lanka, not necessarily the area that we were in, but there was some stuff to be briefed on there. As well, a bit on the custom. Again, it's all just condensed. It's the same type of thing you do for a regular deployment, but it's just squished into a 24 hour to 48 hour period.

INTERVIEWER: How did you or your unit travel to Sri Lanka?

CAPTAIN HEER: The way the DART deploys is the reconnaissance group goes over ahead of time to sort of figure out where we are going to set up camp because the whole point of the DART is to be able to react and respond to a disaster, try to help as many people as possible. So the reconnaissance team went first. I was not a part of that. What they did was find a suitable location for us. They had difficulty because, obviously, they have a fairly significant group and you need a fairly large piece of land, dry piece of land, which was difficult to find where the disaster area was. They chose to put it a bit further away from the actual impact area of the disaster and deploy into sort of an old sugar factory lot. That was our camp.

How we arrived was, again, we staged out of Trenton. We took a military Airbus to Colombo, the capitol of Sri Lanka and then we were taken by bus, which was a brutally long bus ride through pretty much rain forest type conditions. We passed everything from elephants to monkeys to small villages. Trying to stop for a pit stop was pretty difficult, pretty austere [laughs]. We finally arrived at the camp. It was unlike any convoy I had ever been a part of. It was quite a trip.

INTERVIEWER: Describe the operational situation you found upon arrival.

CAPTAIN HEER: Like I said, there really wasn't a threat. We weren't carrying weapons at all with us. People were more curious and very thankful for us to be there. I remember arriving at the camp and the camp sergeant major took me out to the front to wait for another group of buses to arrive in. And while we were sitting there, the locals walked up trying to give us a pop or give us a juice and tell us their stories of the family members they had lost in the tsunami. Everyone you spoke to had been affected by it in some way. It was just a complete devastation that had occurred. Actually, the locals couldn't understand that I was – well, we were standing there together and they thought we were husband and wife and the Sergeant Major said, "No. No. She's my boss." And they all couldn't believe that. They thought it was pretty funny. They said, "How come your husband will let you go away?" They didn't understand. Just a bit of a different culture. But, no, there wasn't much of any sort of a threat to us. We were there to provide humanitarian assistance and we were all just anxious to get there and start making a difference and helping the people.

INTERVIEWER: Did you or your unit have to make any adjustments upon arrival in Sri Lanka?

CAPTAIN HEER: As I mentioned previously, the reconnaissance group had to, sort of, had to pick a location that was further away because of the conditions of the tsunami. There wasn't suitable dry land other than beach that was washed up and not very stable. We ended up having to provide a lot of transport that we normally wouldn't need. The DART's usually right in the area of the disaster and able to respond immediately. We ended up renting vehicles from town because the DART equipment is more with engineer trucks, a few MLVWs. However, not that many cargo vehicles. What we did was rent a few vehicles. We had a few drivers and we used the other 4x4s that we had and we used that to transport. That was an adjustment we had to make because we weren't – the DART make up wasn't use to having to travel in different directions as we did. It has now since been reorganized to better suit different situations like the ones we were faced with.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe the organization of the force and of your unit at the time you were in Sri Lanka?

CAPTAIN HEER: The Disaster Assistance Relief Team is made up of a HQ element that comes from Kingston. That's mostly staff officers led by a Lieutenant Colonel and there are pretty much in charge of the overall higher level of the operation. There's also the DART company, which I was involved in. That's led by a Major. It was made up of an Engineering Troop, a Defence and Security Platoon, a Medical Platoon and then the Company HQ element, which I was the Operations Officer for. There was also a Logistics Platoon in there as well. We were pretty much the, actually, work aspect of it and then the HQ would do all the liaison back to Canada. Not that they weren't working.

It's just a different type of hands on work vs. more paperwork and communications back to camp.

INTERVIEWER: Describe the outpost camps or barracks of which your unit was stationed.

CAPTAIN HEER: There wasn't really an outpost because we were all based out of the one camp. We arrived at the Sugar Factory. It was less than ideal. The Sugar Factory was pretty much condemned. We hired local ladies to clean, to try to disinfect as much as possible. Each platoon, sort of, occupied a different room in the factory. It was pretty rough. We had rats and cockroaches, spiders and different types of lizards, a lot of different bugs. It was a lot worse living conditions than there were in Kabul. Washrooms were pretty much just a hole in the ground. The engineers are amazing. Eventually they built us full stall bathrooms, as well as we set up portable showers.

One thing that was difficult was that a lot of the make up of the DART is completely Air Force, Navy and Army. The company is mostly Army because it is based out of Petawawa. However a lot of them haven't deployed a lot and aren't familiar with different things. We had to teach different elements of preserving water, how to use the different sanitary items that we had with us. The mess we had set up was pretty much a mod tent outside and we were on hard rations the whole time. We got very use to the IMPs and what was in each one. They system we had was, they were all in the box and they were open and you just picked the box. There was no choosing and picking the meal. That was the fairest way we could do it. Eventually the locals – we were able to get some bread and potatoes from the locals. That was about it.

I was mistaken, we did have one outpost. One of the crews was tasked to use the assault boats and sit on one of the points of the beach to transport people from an island, back and forth to the medical clinics. They were actually staying on the beach pretty much in reconnaissance tents. They locals were feeding them pretty much [laughs]. I mean, it was rough, but it wasn't unbearable either.

INTERVIEWER: Interview with Captain Sarah Heer, end of side one.

### END OF SIDE ONE

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program. Interview with Captain Sarah Heer. Tape one, side two.

Could you describe the challenges you faced with the sanitary equipment?

CAPTAIN HEER: Like I said, some people were inexperienced with the being out in the field, so to speak. One of the issues we had to constantly remind people, when you're using the showers that are set up, there's a certain tank of water and there's only so much water. What you do is step into the shower, turn the water on, quickly wash with the water on, turn the water off, lather up with the soap, turn the water back on and turn the

water back off. We couldn't have nice half hour showers where you're enjoying the cool – you wanted cool water there, not hot, because it was so hot there. As well, just with the toilets, it was the same thing. Unfortunately, at first it was a type of portable toilet that someone had to empty and you had to teach them that everyone had to take their turn emptying it. That was difficult as well. Eventually the engineers set us up with running toilets that actually flowed out into a sewage system. That made it a lot easier.

INTERVIEWER: What was the state of relations with local populations?

CAPTAIN HEER: Obviously, the local population was fairly devastated from the disaster. There was over a hundred different non-government organizations there trying to work to help with the disaster. Part of my job as the Operations Officer was to work with the CIMIC NCO and decide which task we could support and make a difference with. This was actually incredibly frustrating at times because the NGOs, although they have incredibly good intentions, they don't necessarily work all as one solid team. They all have their own interests, sort of, and their own agendas, different funding and different projects they can get involved in and others they can't. They don't work with certain agencies, but they work with others. That was difficult for us because we weren't there to provide an ongoing, long term service. We were just trying to provide a quick response to the disaster and we were limited in what we could do. We needed support of the NGOs to keep projects on going. Such as, we could do minor modifications to a school and fix the playground. However, we couldn't rebuild the entire school. That was something we needed a non-government agency's help with. Although there was some frustrating aspects, we were able to get a lot of good work done with different NGOs that were out there.

There was a lot of great stories as well. It was just understanding that organization and how they work because it's completely different than how the military works. One example of a story where the NGOs were able to assist, myself and the Warrant Officer went out to visit this local minister. He was in charge of an orphanage. His orphanage was about 100 meters from the beach and it was completely gone. There was nothing left. You could see little books, different shoes, different school supplies scattered. There was a library and all that was left of the library was the four corners. You could see up the orphanage's main wall the water mark, and it was up above the second story. He wanted us to help clear the land and help him rebuild, and that's not something we had the equipment to do. We went out with an engineer as well and, unfortunately, we couldn't help them. The Warrant Officer was able to coordinate with one of the NGOs that was on site, I can't remember the exact name so I don't want to try and quote it, but they were able to get the ball rolling and help rebuild this orphanage. It's my understanding that it was rebuilt, at least cleared up, and he got on his way to improvement. That was one good story.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe operational plans, planning or operations mainly conducted by your unit?

CAPTAIN HEER: What we did within the company was each platoon, sort of, had the task that they took care of. The medical teams deployed out to different refuge camps and they deployed in smaller groups, section sized elements, and they would go to different refuge camps and different places that were set up around the disaster to provide medical assistance and first aid where required. That was a big aspect was, sending out the medical teams.

Another thing we coordinated was the Engineer task. We would send the Engineers out after two different types of operations. One was they were trying to purify the water. We set up two ROPUs they are called, and they are water purification centres. We were able to distribute clean water to the local populations, which is a huge thing. It is something our Engineers are extremely proficient in and can do it incredibly quickly. I think it was over one million gallons or litres of water. I can't remember the exact figure that we were able to distribute, but it was quite incredible. The Engineers were also excellent at performing other tasks such as cleaning walls or helping to reconstruct a road. A lot of the roads were washed out and they needed that to be fixed up.

We did a lot of Engineer tasks, water purification, medical teams and, as well, our D&S Platoon would deploy out to do other tasks such as fixing up a school yard, distributing any sort of humanitarian supplies we had. We didn't have a lot of that. However, we did set up a refuge camp for one small group. That was for women who had lost their husbands and with small children. We were able to gather the supplies that we had and with the help of an NGO we provided the work party, made up of our D&S Platoon, to set up that camp. I remember that day it was raining and the call came back, "We need to get these people shelter. They have nothing." The guys were amazing and were able to set up a number of tents in that day and that was quite a rewarding thing for them to do. That's a majority of the type of tasks that we took part in.

INTERVIEWER: What made your job hard in Sri Lanka?

CAPTAIN HEER: I think the hardest part in Sri Lanka, in the Ampara district, which we were in, was that there was so much to do and we just did not have the resources. The DART make up is to initiate that initial response to provide assistance. Sometimes you just felt helpless because you couldn't do what needed to be done for these people. You drive through entire villages and they were just flattened. There was nothing left but the foundation. It was very difficult to walk around and see what was left of this district of Sri Lanka.

Another thing that was difficult was just the language barriers and the different customs. One of my duties was to work with the translators and send the translators for different tasks the following days. I would give a nightly briefing to the translators. Some of them we brought from the capitol of Colombo, others we hired locally. It was difficult because everyone was looking for employment so they all wanted to work for us. However, some of them couldn't speak the two languages that we needed them to speak. Another thing was their custom, it's customary to sort of shake your head as we would consider as a 'no' shake. However, that's means they are in agreement. That was very difficult. I

remember having a conversation saying to one of the translators, “You’re going to go out with Medical Team One. You’re going to go to this location at this time. Is that alright?” And they were shaking their head, which I believed them to be shaking their head ‘no’, but they seemed to be in agreement. I was confused. Finally, one of the other translators who spoke better English was able to explain to me that that was actually their custom, but they were really saying ‘yes’ and affirming that they were understanding what I was saying. Definitely the most difficult thing was not being able to do enough, although we were able to provide significance assistance. Obviously, with a disaster with that type of magnitude, they are still feeling the effects now three years later.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe your daily personal routine?

CAPTAIN HEER: I would usually wake up roughly around 6-6:30 am to be up and to make sure everyone was getting off to the necessary tasks that needed to be done. In some cases, I was leaving, too, to go on a reconnaissance to see where we could provide assistance. I’d usually get up and try to get a shower in. It didn’t really matter [laughs] because as soon as you got out of the shower you were sweating again anyway, get into uniform. Some mornings myself and one of the clerks that was there, we’d actually go through a run, which was pretty interesting to go and run around our district. There were wild dogs, though, which I didn’t enjoy because they were quite yappy and they made me a little nervous. We’d run around. It was a beautiful mountain and a beautiful countryside. Like I said, it’s almost a rain forest. It was pretty interesting to see that type of environment.

The daily routine would just be eat breakfast, do the daily tasks that needed to be done. I was in charge of doing up a company Ops Sitrep. That’s how I spent a couple of hours in the morning, doing that up for the company HQ. I also did a lot of liaison with the HQ Ops O. Any messages that had to go back to Canada, any intelligence that needed to be passed on to the company members, I was in charge of gathering that. The afternoons, maybe going out on a recce, leaving the camp, visiting a local school, waiting for the groups to come back to file their reports. We had an orders group every night and we delegated the tasks for the next day. And then it was to bed fairly early. By that time, you’re pretty exhausted. It was a pretty fast paced deployment. There was movies. We were able to get a TV with a DVD player so the soldiers could watch movies down where we had our kitchen. That was about it. There was a lot of chess going on and games they made up themselves because we really didn’t bring a lot of that stuff with us.

INTERVIEWER: What were any problems with dependents that affected your unit?

CAPTAIN HEER: When the DART deploys, it’s very quick, it’s very sudden and soldiers never want to turn down a deployment. They are very quick to agree and say, “Yes, everything is fine and, yes, I want to go.” However, once they get there they realize that maybe some things were forgotten back home. This was right after the holidays. We did have some issues with soldiers sorting out financial matters with their spouses back home. One soldier hadn’t really set a clear child support plan in place and her husband was also in the military. That became difficult. However, it was all squared

away and we had a lot of help from the unit back home. All these issues can always be dealt with. They are just things that, although you go through the necessary precautions to screen soldiers before a deployment, like I said, no one wants to turn it down, and there's only so much a Padre or a troop commander can do.

We had another soldier that deployed knowing his wife was going to give birth in a few weeks. And, although we discouraged it – we actually had a few soldiers in that case – although we discouraged it that soldier wanted to go. One soldier dealt with it quite well while he was deployed. Another soldier really wanted to go home. And the part about being on a DART deployment is, it's very unlikely to send someone back early because the deployment is so short. Just things you kind of learn as you go and, you know, for next time that maybe you'll try to convince that soldier that maybe it's not the best time to deploy for his family. However, other soldiers react without any difficulty. I guess it just comes back to the soldier always has to be ready to go, no matter what, and have those plans in place. Family support plans we call them for financial matters and different things like that in place so that you're prepared to deploy.

INTERVIEWER: Why are soldiers so anxious to get deployed?

CAPTAIN HEER: Well, in the case of the DART a number of the soldiers in D Battery were fairly new. They'd just come off their basic training and they were new soldiers to the Battery. This was an opportunity for them to deploy. A first time deployment, which is something everyone always wants to do, because you finally get a chance to put your training into place and kind of confirm yourself as a professional soldier. Another reason is, there's a lot of benefits to deploying. The finances are quite considerably good and the benefits as well. As well, just the confidence level that you gain from being out there. In this case with the DART, it was such a huge international incident that the entire world got behind trying to make a difference. Any soldier that was interviewed at the time, the feelings were all the same. They were just honoured to be able to go and contribute and make a difference. So many people wanted to help. We actually had the chance to go and be on the ground. In this case, it really was about wanting to go and help these people. It wasn't so much about the money or what it would do for their careers or anything. It's a 40 day deployment of humanitarian assistance and that's what you're trying to do, provide some relief for those people in that situation.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe the redeployment back to home base?

CAPTAIN HEER: The redeployment for the DART is a bit more complicated because you come with all this kit and you have to leave with all this kit. There were a number of different elements that would depart. Most of the soldiers went home with myself, fairly regular like any other deployment. Took the long bus ride back to Colombo. We then went through some disembarkation leave at the capitol in a fairly fancy hotel to sort of readjust to civilization, I guess. That was nice, a couple days in Colombo to sort of unwind and prepare for the trip home. Others stayed behind and helped load the sea containers. We also had a ship boarding party that, sort of, went with them because they had to be taken by sea to get back to Canada. So there's different elements to it. Once

we were in Colombo, we flew back on a military Airbus back to Canada. From there, it was pretty straight forward.

Once we got home, again, it was three half days to reintegrate and go through all the briefings that are required because, although it wasn't a high security threat type environment or your personal security wasn't compromised, you still saw a lot of disturbing elements, for some more than others. The medical teams saw a lot of disturbing things as well as the Engineers and the D&S soldiers. It was still difficult, the things you saw, and some soldiers needed to talk about those. Then we had some disembarkation leave when we got back. Just back to work after that. For myself, I became pregnant pretty much soon after I returned and from then on we just prepared for the birth of our daughter. That was pretty much the redeployment for me in Sri Lanka.

INTERVIEWER: In your opinion was this deployment worth while?

CAPTAIN HEER: Obviously, it was more than worth while. It is something that I am so glad that I was able to be a part of. Not often do you get to be a part of humanitarian missions. It was such a rewarding thing to go there and to be able to see that we were providing some assistance to the Sri Lankan population and the Ampara district. The people are so friendly and so thankful. A lot of them didn't want us to go and that was difficult to leave. And you wish you could have done more for them, but at least we were able to do something. It was really nice to be able to be a part of something so completely contrasting to deployment to Kabul. I thoroughly enjoyed it, definitely.

INTERVIEWER: Interview with Captain Sarah Heer on 19 February, 2007. Interview ends.

**TRANSCRIPT ENDS**