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Honor: US History 2
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Haertter, Shawna. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 19, 2016.

“...”- unfinished sentence or change of direction in sentence

Overview by Kaitlyn Stauffer:

Shawna Haertter was part of the US Air Force. She worked on the casualty crisis team for them, meaning that she informed family members of deaths. In 1996, part of the US Air Force was being housed in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia in a joint base with marines on the outside, army in the middle layer, and the air force in the center. The Saudi Arabians did not want the US military there at all. They drove in white trucks filled with 5,000 pounds of explosives and exploded the dormitories where the US was being housed. The air force all survived, but they had almost 500 injuries! The marines, however, suffered from about twenty deaths. Haertter had a best friend over in Saudi Arabia at the time of the attack, but thankfully he survived to tell her his fascinating experience. At the age of 42 years now, Haertter still lives to tell the story.

Kaitlyn Stauffer: So, when were you born?

Shawna Haertter: Oh God. October 3rd, 1974

Stauffer: And, what was life like growing up, like as a child?

Haertter: In Lancaster? It was fabulous. No, it was farm country. It was, it was okay. It was fine.

Stauffer: Oh.

Haertter: The typical Penn Manor life, so. That's all.

Stauffer: Yeah, and then what branch of the military were you in?

Haertter: Air force!

Stauffer: Oh okay.

Haertter: Yeah. It's the best program for women.

Stauffer: And then, what made you decide to join the air force and when?

Haertter: Well, I was supposed to get married after high school, and that didn't work out. So I had no college plans, and I had a job at a bank, full time. But who wants to sit... I wasn't an, I wasn't going to be an accountant. So my only out was military. The only branch that I felt was safe was air force. You get housing, education, medical, and income.

Stauffer: Okay. Did you have any, like, close relatives or family members in the military?

Haertter: Yeah! My dad was a marine, my uncles were marines, my dad was, during Vietnam, he was a Russian linguist. Russian linguist? Yeah okay. He was over in Russia and not Vietnam.

Stauffer: Okay, how long were you involved in the military before the Khobar Tower Bombings?

Haertter: Two years. I think that was '96. That was July '96. I was in and May of '94. So two years. Almost a little over two.

Stauffer: Yeah okay.

Haertter: Sorry.

Stauffer: Did you, do you know why, like, the air force was being housed in the building that was bombed?

Haertter: Yeah! It was a shared military compound. There was, you had marines, army, of course no navy, because they were in boats out at sea, and air force. The way it worked was, the way they built it, it's marines were always on the outer perimeter. And then the army's the second level in, and then the air force is kinda, tucked safely inside, like a little blanket. They spent a lot of money on the air force, that's why. It is! Yeah, so the marines were always completely exposed 24/7. Yeah. It was a, it was a joined base.

That's what you would say. When you have all different branches it's called a joined base.

Stauffer: Is, is it true that there was an anonymous threat to the US Air Force in the building, and the threat was trying to make them leave the country?

Haertter: Oh yeah. No one wanted us there. It was very hostile. Plus it was an Arabic country. I know that women weren't allowed to leave the base without a head covering. They definitely didn't like women there at all. But they did not want us there.

Stauffer: So yeah, and the threat... that was anonymous? Or did they ever, like, figure out who?

Haertter: I have no idea about that. I just know that they were on constant guard, they had twenty four hour surveillance, and that was up to the marines. They were the outside. That's why it was a joined base. They kind of took care of the security not so much the air force because it wasn't an air force base at that time; it was joined.

Stauffer: Do you know anything about Alfredo Guerrero or no?

Haertter: No

Stauffer: I think he was like a staff sergeant at the time.

Haertter: Okay. What happened to him?

Stauffer: I think he was like, he became suspicious of it, and he started having a floor by floor evacuation of the building. Yeah.

Haertter: He's... you mean the trucks that were parked outside?

Stauffer: Yeah.

Haertter: Yeah there were these huge white trucks. Yeah see! The marines think, ' Oh it's okay; it's just a truck,' and then they navy's out to sea, the army's sleeping, and the air force is like 'hmmm, that shouldn't be there'. See! But it went through like three layers of... okay. Yeah. Of course it's suspicious.

Stauffer: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That's what I was wondering when you said that!

Haertter: It's parked at the (undefinable), right? No I didn't know anything about him. We had our own people there.

Stauffer: Yeah. So you were in Saudi Arabia when the attack on the air force happened?

Haertter: No. I was stationed in at Hill Air Force Base in Utah. And when the incident occurred we had all of our, it's called EOD, it's Explosive Ordnance Disposal, all of our... basically our bomb squad was over there. And most of them I was very good friends with, so when that incident happened, being human resources, we're also on task with notifying family members of deaths. And so I was part of the casualty support team, on call, to see if people from our base were killed. So I could start prepping the notifications for the family members, so.

Stauffer: So you didn't go to, like, you didn't have to go there and find out at all?

Haertter: No, they come to us. The bodies would have come back home to us.

Stauffer: Do you know how many US Air Force members were killed or?

Haertter: None. It was all marines. I believe it was, none from our base. The bulk, I think there was what? 230 deaths? What'd they say? (Omitted stuttering) Deaths were twenty. Wait that can't be right. I thought there was more than that! Four hundred and ninety eight injuries. We had injuries. But the deaths were all marines. And they were out of Florida. Some of their marine base is in Florida. So I'm air force, and I'm not familiar with marine bases.

Stauffer: And do you know how many people were stationed there that were, like, part of the attack?

Haertter: That were there at the time of the attack? It was all... I would say about twenty or thirty of our EOD team was there that was stationed with us. So we had twenty to thirty, between twenty and thirty, bomb squad units members. And one was my best friend, and he... well I'll get, if you want to hear a story, I'll tell you what happened when he experienced it and he called me.

Stauffer: You can.

Haertter: Okay! Well, like I said, it's a huge perimeter. They had marines and then the army and then the air force was tucked in the middle, and he had worked all night doing what they would do. I guess they did rotations and finding what's called IEDs, which are the bombs. You know, they left boobytraps everywhere, and they didn't want us there at all. So he went to sleep, well he was trying to sleep but the sun was in his way. So if we have metal lockers in the dorms, so he moved his metal locker in front of the window, and his bed was in front of the window. So he kinda slide it behind the bed to cover the window, and then laid down, and when the bomb went off, it shook everything like all those three levels kinda blew in, and he had shards of glass from windows, not even his own, that pierced the locker and were shooting inward to the room. So he would have been shredded, had that locker not been there.

Stauffer: Yeah.

Haertter: Yeah. I'm sorry. But yeah, it's kinda creepy, but (omitted stuttering) I mean these are concrete blocks of buildings like dormitories. Probably two to three stories of dormitories inward. Right? Kinda think of it like the Pentagon. How they have those structures. That blew inward, and he was like the middle, protected part and that was shards of glass. And he, well, how bad do you want to get into this?

Stauffer: I don't care.

Haertter: (Omitted irrelevant information). Well he said when he went out, he just had some (undefinable) cuts and some glass pieces and when he went out, he saw people walking, holding eyeballs and, like, missing limbs like they had triage and those people weren't even being touched. So people holding their own eyeballs were waiting because you knew someone was worse than them.

Stauffer: Yeah.

Haertter: Like probably limb, kinda things like that. Yeah, it wasn't very pretty. Sorry.

Stauffer It's okay.

Haertter: (Omitted irrelevant information). I was like least likely to join the military, seriously. I was so not... but okay.

Stauffer: So yeah. You kind of answered this earlier, but what exactly do you do when you work on the casualty crisis team?

Haertter: Basically, (omitted stuttering) human resources, we're like your life insurance company also. So when they deploy, we take care of them and we get them to make sure that they change the beneficiary from their old spouse to their new spouse, 'cause (SIC) that happens all the time. So that the old spouse doesn't get all the money and the new spouse gets left out with all the kids. So we update all their records constantly, and part of that is, when they pass, we know who to contact and who gets the money. "Cause (SIC) basically everybody that deploys, gets like a \$250,000 life insurance policy. So you have 220 people died, multiply that by 250,000; that's payout.

Stauffer: Oh yeah.

Haertter: So I mean, we have to get it right 'cause (SIC) if you go to the wrong house, the wrong person that's just a mess. So you gotta (SIC) be really on it, and you just... The officers go and notify the family members and stuff, but we gotta (SIC) get everything in order to send that out so. We never had to do it that day 'cause (SIC) no one died.

Stauffer: Was the air force really left vulnerable in Saudi Arabia after the attack? Do you know, or?

Haertter: I don't think so, I think we kinda cleaned up fast. The military works really, really fast. Plus it was joined, so you had not just the air force there. You had the marines and then the army, so all those units came and rebuilt. Nothing ever happened again. They built barricades out in front of the dorms. If you Google that they can show you what the dorms looked like before the bombing, and how when they rebuilt, how there were barricades well out, like twenty/thirty feet before you got to any of those bare dorms. So they, no one wanted us there. It was really a hostile environment.

Stauffer: Yeah.

Haertter: It's what happens when you invade a country, take it over, and then they get kinda upset. Right? It's like... it's what happens.

Stauffer: Do you know how the attack happened (undefinable)?

Haertter: Well I know I was told... the sad thing was is that we knew before like CNN did. We were in a briefing room 'cause (SIC) we had to be told what was going to happen, and placed on twelve-hour shifts, and we were told that there was trucks. White

trucks that parked in front of the dormitories and blew up. Exploded. So like they pulled up right to the gate, and this was before they built the barricades that they have now and stuff, and just blew inward. I mean, tons of explosives, and it just... it basically demolished the dorm. So, that's what I was told.

Stauffer: And then, how soon were you notified after this attack?

Haertter: Oh. We were alerted probably within an hour or two after it happened. (Omitted irrelevant information) I remember, I was in Utah. It was July right? So July in Utah. No, June 25th 1996. It was hot in Utah. (Omitted irrelevant information) I thought it was afternoon. I thought it was early afternoon, like one or two, and we were sent home to just wait for the night shift. So the upper-level people with more stripes stayed, and the people with less stripes were gonna (SIC) do the night shift. Like short end of the straw. So, we got sent home to wait for notification of what was going to happen. So it doesn't give a time 'cause (SIC) I'm not sure... Bahrain was well ahead of us. I thought it was afternoon our time in Utah which would make sense because Utah is three/two hours behind us here. And then Saudi Arabia is more than five hours ahead, right? 'Cause (SIC) Portugal is five hours ahead, right? I can't imagine what time it would have been there.

Stauffer: And, do you know who was like involved in the attack? Like, who attacked the air force?

Haertter: No. I didn't know at that time; (Omitted irrelevant information) I would have been twenty. So I mean, you're young; you're thinking 'Oh my gosh, what's going to happen? Are we going to another war?' So, what was your question? I'm sorry.

Stauffer: Do you know who was involved in the attack?

Haertter: No I just knew that it was, it was Saudi Arabians that didn't want us there. At that time, we didn't have... it was basically... it was the Saudi's right? We had no idea what it who. At that time we weren't focused on, like now we know Islam and terrorists. It's basically terrorists. Saudi terrorists. It wasn't a religious thing, so they smuggled explosives in from Lebanon. Yeah they were just Saudi terrorists that didn't want the American forces there at all. So that, what 5,000 pounds of explosives? That's insane. So, no.

Stauffer: Do you have anything else that to want to add?

Haertter: Well when they came back they were really shaken up. All over EOD we had some, some like personnel there. But I mean, we just had minor injuries. Nothing like that. Like I said it was the marines that were really, that really really were injured because of the way the dormitories were. But they were never the same. They came back totally different.

Stauffer: Yeah. I mean, I would.

Haertter: I can't imagine. But he was pretty descriptive. So yeah, but he was. And of course, probably some PTSD from that. I can only imagine. But that's their job; they blow up things for a living, and here they got to see it, like part of it. It was weird like part of it was like 'wow, I'm inside the explosion' and the other part is 'I set this stuff up all the time' so. It's weird.

Stauffer: Ah, yeah that's all I have.

Haertter: Okay.