

Summary of Oral History Transcript
Student, Citizen, Soldier: Oral History and Student Veterans

Wilson, Alana

U.S. Army Reserve, Combat Medic, E-3/PFC

Interviewer:

Interview conducted by Mr. Liam Jones, Salem State University on 4/5/2018

Summary of transcript:

Alana Wilson was born on January 25, 1997 and lives in Quincy, Massachusetts. She joined the Army reserves when she left high school and became a combat medic. She follows in the footsteps of her mother, who was also in the Army Reserves, as well as her grandfathers and uncle. She has completed 3 years in the Army reserve while attending Salem State at the same time. She hopes to one day be deployed to Kuwait. Alana discusses how, although she enjoys the Army reserves, she wishes she went active duty or joined the Air Force National Guard.

Alana Wilson

Narrator

Liam Jones

Salem State University

Interviewer

April 5th, 2018

At Salem State University

Salem, Massachusetts

Liam Jones: Hello I am Liam Jones. I am with Alana Wilson and we are here to talk about her life and her service. So, I noticed on your form, your bio form, that you grew up in Quincy. Do you want to tell us anything about that?

Alana Wilson: More like I grew up in Middleton and then we moved to Quincy two years ago, I would say. Living in Middleton is like a very small town that is just very close-knit. Like it's a very small community, nice little community. I grew up used to diversity and all the nice things a small rich town can offer. But I actually went to high school in Canton and that was a whole mingle of towns, Holbrook, Braintree, Randolph. So completely different scenery. I just like got used to the real world by going to a vocational high school outside my town, so.

LJ: Did you enjoy going to a vo-tech?

AW: Oh definitely. I actually learned, like, more about other people than in the small little community so it was nice to actually really learn, like, about your trade instead of just English, science, whatever they teach in school.

LJ: The normal public school curriculum?

AW: Yeah, I got to become like a Certified Nursing Assistant when actually I didn't like the medical field [laughs], then go on to do things I actually like in college.

LJ: Now, growing up you said that your whole family, like in your bio form you mentioned that in your family you have a lot of family members who are military themselves, including your mother. What was it like for your mother?

AW: Well she got out when she was like in her thirties, so I wasn't born until she was 40 years old, so yeah. That's the norm in my family we usually wait until thirty-nine forty to have

children. The same thing with my grandmother. That's actually how my grandfather and grandmother met was my grandfather was a soldier in the U.S Army, went over to Japan, found a wife, came back, yay. But for my mom she was a reservist also. She was a lab technician, got her all of her learning job trades from that. She loved the Army, absolutely loved it because she didn't have to do college while doing the Army[laughs], so you know. It was a little easier. She was supportive of me joining. She said, "Oh the Air Force pays more but you can go with the Army since the recruiters are right here and ready for you to join, so." There's the convenience of that instead of having to track down whatever Air Force recruiter-[unclear]. And on my dad's side my dad was a hippie protesting the war while my uncle was actually a colonel in it. Well he was a Lieutenant at the time of the war but became a colonel eventually so there's that. And my uncle, he's very happy I joined. He was like oh good for you it will, you know, help you grow up, you know get out there, learn about more of yourself than, you know, having to stay at home with your family. You get to be on your own for the first time.

LJ: Did you have any other family members who were part of it? One thing that I noticed is that your sister is not is- there any story about that?

AW: My sister is crazy.

LJ: Okay. Alright.

AW: Well, no it's more of her physical things, like her arm always pops out of her shoulder. She had been in the psych ward for a time after getting, well starting to get out of high school she went and got admitted in. But she got out and she's doing a lot better now. She actually has a job and hopes to get an apartment soon herself, so yeah.

LJ: That's good, that's good.

AW: She's not crazy you know. [laughs] We're all a little crazy. We're all a little crazy, and it's mostly her physical ailments like her arms, both of them were having the poppy thing and then she had to get surgery on one of them and she also tore her ACL so there's that, too. [laughs] You know, it's pain but you learn how to live with it and you get over it but I wouldn't recommend somebody tearing their ACL and joining the Army. It's not good to go through boot camp with a torn ACL.

LJ: Well on the topic of boot camp what was boot camp like for you?

AW: Well, it was like a lot of physical work, you know, just a lot of push-ups. For once in my life I learned how to do more than four push-ups so I was pretty happy about that. It was good mostly. I did pretty well in it. Just most annoying thing is not the actual curriculum of boot camp but people talking. People talking in formation is the worst thing. Just, you know, that little bit of integrity like, you know, it's not time to socialize. It goes back to like elementary school rules. Just don't talk when the teacher's talking. Or else you have to go and do pushups that's the only difference, really. [laughs]

LJ: So would you say then you enjoyed your experience at boot camp or would you say it was just boot camp?

AW: I mean when I first got into reception, I absolutely loved reception. I was able to sleep under sinks- it was great. But when I got into boot camp, the first day was the worst and then it gets a little better, then it's great. You know, I didn't actually want boot camp to end for a good amount of time. I was like, yeah I'm really enjoying this. And I even started really enjoying the physical activities too. NIC[Night Infiltration Course] at night, it was actually a lot of fun. For some people they hated it, they were bleeding. I had a great time. I had a blast. I actually really liked it.

LJ: One of my cousins, he's also in the Army and he was saying that boot camp is mostly mental. Would you agree or would you say that-

AW: Yeah especially with other people. Sometimes like you just want to get angry at other people for talking. Just the whole talking thing made me very angry. But it is mental like in the sense that you decide where to put your mind towards. You could be studying your cheat sheet as you always want to for getting extra points with the drill sergeants when they test you and you get total awesomeness. You get to have your own little honor when you get through boot camp and get like player of the game basically for memorizing just random little knowledge about the Army.

LJ: So is there like a, I guess, teaching side of boot camp that's not just like what we see on T.V., which is, you know, the pushups?

AW: Oh yeah, there's definitely a teaching side. You do land nav, you learn like all the nice little things about the Army. Like you learn all the chain of command, all the nice little technical things about an M-16. Even fire guard you can study up on your stuff which is why I really didn't mind fire guard at all. It's like, people made it seem bad to be up for an hour in the middle of the night but it's really not that bad. It really isn't.

LJ: So while I understand that some people say being a women in the Army and like in boot camp and things it has a different experience from men. How would you rate, I guess, your experience being a woman in the Army?

AW: Well it's a lot harder to go to the bathroom because, you know, there's three times more guys who can take you to the bathroom than women. So it's like you keep asking your friends, "Hey want to go to the bathroom?" and they say, "No I just went with our other friend over here 10 minutes ago so I don't want to bring you." Whereas with guys, they're so ready to bring you. They're like yeah there's a million of us here, one of us has to go to the bathroom. And that's about it, except for sometimes you'll have the random comment of, "Oh, this is kind of weird. I don't think we should have females in combat MOSs [Military Occupational Specialty]." Because I was a combat medic so we're supposed to lift people. Some of the females were just very delicate, like some of them were 100lbs and they are trying to lift a guy who is twice their weight with 50lbs of gear on. It just doesn't seem physically possible. But for me luckily, I'm a bit taller, I'm a bit, like, heavier so it wasn't too hard for me personally. But for some other females it was a little harder I feel.

LJ: Now for a combat medic, what is that training for a combat medic?

AW: Basically you learn how to do everything you can before you get into the ambulance or hospital. You are like the pre-ambulance. You gotta get that I.V. in there, make sure they stay alive, and that nice little golden hour before, you know, they croak. So, we call it that golden hour when you can get there as soon on the scene. That one, you know, window of hour is that. You know, you have to get the I.V. fluid in. Get whatever they need patched up, patched up. Just stop that bleeding. That's like the main thing is stop the bleeding, like that's pretty much a combat medic. And the lifts are huge. You gotta carry these people like a lot. I mean in real life, if you're in FOB[Forward Operating Base], you're not the one carrying. It's some other guy, CLS, combat life savers. But they train for it, which is good because you should know those carries. They're important. And you know if you have a 300lb guy dying and you're there you gotta find some way to get this guy to safety. You're the only one, so.

LJ: Would you say that training then as a combat medic would have helped you with your civilian life, then?

AW: Oh yeah. You know if something happens you now know exactly what to do. You know if anything happens everything to do. Like somebody gets hit by a car you know exactly, stop the bleeding. If they have max-low facial trauma you know not to shove a little nose nasal fringial tube up there.

LJ: So do you know all the medical terms and everything? Ready to be a full doctor?

AW: Pretty much. It's like, you learn paramedic but aren't certified for paramedic. I definitely think they should certify all combat medics as paramedics as on the civilian side.

LJ: So now kind of going into the civilian side, now you are at Salem State how do you feel being a veteran at this school?

AW: I feel fine, you know. It's like, I definitely appreciated the veteran community because coming out of the Army you don't realize not everybody knows that you had been through all of this army stuff. People are gonna treat you exactly as they treat everybody else and, you know, you have to have your own filter, too. Gotta stop swearing so much. It's not the Army anymore. You can't say the "F" word after every single other sentence. So yeah, there's that.

LJ: So, when people look at you, do they immediately assume you are a veteran?

AW: Oh no, no. And even with friends who I've known for like, you know. When I am coming out of the Army and I've known them for a good year, even then they don't know unless I specifically bring it up in a conversation and even that, it might go in one ear and out the other.

LJ: So, would you like being more acknowledged as a veteran or do you enjoy, kind of like, the more incognito aspect of it?

AW: It's definitely good to have a bit of an incognito aspect when meeting people that you don't know before. What if they are a die-hard pacifist and they think you're evil. Or one of those Westboro Baptist people who full-on, you know, protest the Army funerals. But I definitely think that it's nice for then your friends to like, know that you're in the Army because then they

understand how busy you are. How, like, you might not be able to hang on the weekends, or teachers will know that you have to sometimes miss a Friday class because drill. [laughs]

LJ: So, kind of on that aspect, I know that this term can be very offensive to many people but what do you think of the term weekend warrior?

AW: Weekend warrior. I think it's like, it's not just a weekend warrior. I have to do my 2 mile runs, I have to do my pushups I have to do my sit-ups. I have to find an hour of the day, every day, to somehow, like, do something for my job on the weekends that's once a month. So, it's not exactly a weekend warrior. If it was that easy if I just had one weekend to devote to the Army, that would be great but no, I have to devote every day until I'm out of college, you know. That's hard.

LJ: So, when you see posters and things for the Army reserves that say one weekend a month, 2 weeks a year- that's not true?

AW: Huh-uh, no. [laughs] It would be so easy if that's how it was. You gotta keep up with it. Like you have to get all the medical done, too. You have to get all that paperwork in. And if you lose your CAC [Common Access Card] card, your I.D. card, you gotta wait like 6 months to get a new one and that puts everything on hold. Everything. And you can lose so much from losing just one card. And you know, that's how you get your free T passes. You can lose it so easily. So, there's a lot more dedication than just one weekend a month.

LJ: Now as in the Army reserves, as a member of the Army reserves, when you see people being deployed do you want to join them at all? Is there any wanting of that?

AW: Sometimes, definitely. Because then you don't have to deal with all the extra stuff at home. It's like, you can get away. It's almost like a vacation. [laughs] You can go off to somewhere else and read in a book in 130 degree weather and there you go. It's a little nice.

LJ: Yeah. So, do you have any ideas of if you might be deployed?

AW: Probably to Kuwait. But like that's what I'm describing here as Kuwait. You just go there, read a book in 130 degree weather, do nothing basically. If you go to Iraq or Afghanistan, you're actually doing stuff and in like an active duty case. I wouldn't mind it because it would actually have me training my skills again. I would actually be doing my job I was trained to do, so I would like that. But yeah, for now it's just like get college done. [laughs]

LJ: On the topic of college, I noticed that you wanted to be a cyber security technician and that's very different than being a combat medic.

AW: Yeah, well I found out the hospital is just not for me, you know. There's too many preventative things that people do to themselves and I don't think we teach, like, preventative medicine enough in this country at least, like-

LJ:L What kind preventative medicine do you mean?

AW: Like for diabetes two that's like the perfect example, you know. All you do is have to cut out carbs. It's not even just soda but pasta, bread, anything like that. You need your veggies, and

some people, they just straight up do not eat their veggies. It's just a change of lifestyle and that doesn't happen overnight. You can't just change someone.

LJ: Yeah, yeah. So why cyber security then if you were not going into the hospital?

AW: Well it's sort of like a person but it's a computer. It's something that you force to get fixed instead of having to work with them you just fix them on your own.

LJ: Are you planning on doing that with the military at all, or are you hoping to go into a private firm and do cyber security.

AW: Probably a private firm, I mean unless I ever wanted to go active. I really feel at this point it would either go active or not. The reservist life is like what I said. It's every day you have to dedicate some time but then on top of that you also have your college.

LJ: So in college do you find it difficult at all then to keep up with the Army reserves and all the requirements necessary for it or have you been able to find time?

AW: I mean I can find time, it's just, you know, when your expected to go to a 9:00 class and you're not home until like 6:00 P.M., 5:00 P.M. You have to do homework then. You have to make dinner, make food for yourself. Sometime you gotta eat. I actually carry around a bag of trail mix so I don't starve. [laughs] And, you know, you gotta find time to do that. It's like a good two or three hours can be dedicated towards homework and at that time you just wanna go to bed. [laughs] But, you know, you have to either wake up early or take a run at night then if you want to actually keep up with your exercise.

LJ: Now kind of going back a bit how did your family feel about you joining the Army reserve and then going into college as opposed to going straight into the Army and going onto active duty?

AW: Well they didn't want me to go active duty. I was thinking of switching to active while I was in there but they were like, "Oh no, you have to do college", and I was like well I think I can do it and now doing it I was like, oh I should have gone with active. I mean, they would pay everything in full, more benefits then. It would have been better going into active first and actually getting done with 4 years. Four years goes by very fast. I'm already 3 years in the Army and I'm like, how?

LJ: So how much support, I guess, then did you get from your parents when you started joining into the military?

AW: Well my mom was absolutely for me being in the reserves. My dad was absolutely against me deploying at all. And even if I said oh yeah, I would be interested in deploying, they're like oh well you're a combat medic, you'll be over on the front lines. They definitely don't want me, like, over in Afghanistan or whatever but I personally wouldn't be too against me doing that. [laughs]

LJ: What about your uncles? You said you they were in the military as well. Did they have any say in what you were going to do? Did they give you any input?

AW: Pretty much was supportive of any of my decision. He said, you know, he was very proud of me just joining the military in general. Like I make my decisions, he said. I feel he sees it as me being mature and making my own decisions. That's how the military should be, you know, is once you're in, you're an adult, you make your own decisions. But my parents, of course, being my parents, they're gonna still see me, you know, as their little girl.

LJ: What about your grandfather? Did he ever have any say in what you are doing?

AW: I never met my grandfather. Like I said we have children at 40 so. [laughs]

LJ: So I guess, if you were to have your own children, what would you say to them joining the military?

AW: I would say definitely go active. I would pretty much give them advice on my experience. I would say go for any branch you would feel passionate towards. If you are just doing it for the benefits, I mean, go for the Air Force. But if you want to, like, carry on family traditions go for the Army. If you to go a bit beyond or whatever go with the Marines. Whatever you feel passionate towards, basically. Even Navy because my other grandfather was in the Navy. So yeah, I have one in the Army one in the Navy. I didn't meet either of them but yeah.

LJ: Did you feel any pull to the other branches as well or were you set on the Army?

AW: I always wanted to be in the Air Force just for the benefit idea but I was like, you know what, the Army always seems to be a bit more on their game. Like, the recruiters are right there, they seem to really want people and I want to be where I'm needed. So that's why I was like, I'm like going with the Army.

LJ: Is that kind of why you chose combat medic as well? To be where you're needed?

AW: Yeah, because they always need combat medics in the Army. I mean, there's no not need of medics. Everyone needs them.

LJ: So, if you were to be deployed overseas and if you were in a combat zone for instance do you feel with the Army reserve training you are prepared for a combat?

AW: Yeah definitely. I actually feel like the reserves are kind of trying to make me a little less. Because we are an engineering unit. So, we're more geared towards going to Kuwait, maybe some parts of Iraq. But there's not much combat nowadays in Iraq. But I personally feel if I take the knowledge I have from advance individual training I would be very much ready for a combat situation just from all the knowledge I learned there. We actually don't use needles that are reservist units. So, again they're sort of desensitizing.

LJ: You don't use needles?

AW: Yeah.

LJ: Really?

AW: It's crazy. It's like they are nurfing me. [laughs] They're nurfing me in the reserves.

LJ: Did they give you any explanation for it?

AW: Just that we don't really go into combat. We're an engineering unit. It's just we go to Kuwait, it's our thing

LJ: I mean if that's what they are training you for. [laughs]

AW: Yeah, so.

LJ: So, like going back to training a little bit, what would you say your favorite part of training was?

AW: Probably just being able to go into a leadership position. I love being the Platoon guide was very fun and being able to be, like, the leader when we go out to these sort of mock trainings where we would have casualties and I would be the person on the walkie-talkie being like okay, we are going to storm this wall. You know you check first and then you have all the people go around the wall and then you'd go and find them. It's very, like, good to have these simulations. It really gets you ready for real-life situations. To be able to have that little bit of leadership, it gives you, like, a good experience to have responsibility. I was a tactical advisor, you know, a tactical leader and that was definitely good to learn how to use the walkie talkies to learn how to communicate efficiently over them. Definitely a good experience.

LJ: So then on the flip side, what would be your least favorite part of basic?

AW: Standing there. I mean we'd stand for like 4 hours on end, just standing there waiting for something to happen. When we'd get our uniforms inspected, you know. We would be the last because my last name is Wilson. So we'd be standing there after everyone is gone and then eventually we would get inspected.

LJ: So I guess, if you could go back, do it all over would you still want to go into Army reserves or would you, because as you mentioned before were thinking about active duty. Would you want to do that?

AW: Yeah. I would probably be more partial to active duty. But considering my family like how against they were for me to go into active, if I were to do it over again I would probably go with the Air Force just because I feel like they would be more supportive of me, especially my dad. And it definitely, like if I went with the Air Force National Guard they would have given me a full ride for college which is what my parents wanted for me. Like considering I was still 18 the time I went in, I'm still depending on my parents, they still expect me to depend on them since my sister still lives with them and she's older than me. Like if I was older I definitely would have gone into active duty with the Army. But at the age I was at, I would have gone into Air Force National Guard.

LJ: So as almost kind of a wrap up question just to try and tie the whole interview together, would you like to say anything to anybody that you think about the Army reserves, about the Army in general, that you think people either should know or people should keep in mind, or even just something that would help this interview at all?

AW: Well if you think about the difference between my mom's experience and my experience she used the reserves for job training which made it a lot more flexible on her schedule she was able to get free job training for her career. That's definitely a better way than to just go into reserves for the college money because that doesn't make sense. If you're going to go into the Army for college money, go into the National Guard. They'll give you, like, the full deal there. If you, are going into the reserves, use it for just getting a foot in the civilian world. Or use it to gradually go away from active, you know. You could go active first and then go reserves. I wouldn't recommend just going in for the college money. It's really not for that.

LJ: Is it not necessarily that it's not worth it for that or that's it's just an inappropriate use of it?

AW: It's an inappropriate use of it. If you really wanting free college, you know, do the 4 years. Go active. It's really not that long. I mean, you're doing 8 years reserves. It doesn't make sense. If you're ever going to go in the reserves at all it really should be like how I said with my mom. Where you are just doing a job or a career you can plan around that with your employer as well instead of with college you have all these courses at the same time you have a job too so then it's like you're working on weekends, you don't have as much flexibility as you would if you already went through college. Or you can even get a higher pay grade if you go through college, you know, go through and become an officer before you go into the Army. So, I wouldn't recommend what I did. I wouldn't. no.

LJ: Alright well I would like to thank you very much for this interview and thank you very much for joining the Army reserves.

AW: Thank you.