U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH HM2 DANIELLE ALBERT, USN

CONDUCTED BY
ANDRÉ B. SOBOCINSKI, HISTORIAN, BUMED

17 OCTOBER 2013
TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

OFFICE OF MEDICAL HISTORY
BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY
SKYLINE COMPLEX, FALLS CHURCH, VIRGINIA

An Oral History with HM2 Danielle Adell Hall Albert, USN

Narrator/Interviewee: Petty Officer Second Class (HM2) Danielle Adell Hall Albert, USN
Interviewer: André Baden Sobocinski, Medical Historian, BUMED, USN
Date of interview: 17 October 2013
Location: Telephone interview

Abstract:
In 2013, the film *Captain Phillips* was released in theaters to critical acclaim. The film starring Academy Award winning actor Tom Hanks and directed by Paul Greengrass presented the story of the 2009 hijacking of the container ship MV *Maersk Alabama,* and the role the U.S. Navy played in the rescue effort. The film is also notable for featuring performances of several U.S. Sailors; among them a real-life Hospital Corpsman, HM2 Danielle Albert, who portrays the character of "Chief O'Brien" in the film's most heartfelt scene. At the time of this interview session, Petty Officer Albert was a five-year veteran of the Navy and serving aboard the guided Missile Destroyer USS *Truxtun* (DDG 103), based in Norfolk, VA.

Background:
Born date, place: 27 September 1989 in Federal Way, WA (near Seattle)
Where grew up: Easton, Metaline Falls and Spokane, WA.
Family: Colby Albert (Son); Kimberly Hall (Aunt); Shane Hall (Uncle)
Education: Shadle Park High School, Spokane, WA (Class of 2008)
Hobbies: Reading, writing and working out.

Chronology:
2005: Entered Sea Cadet Program
July 2008: Enlisted in the Navy; Delayed Entry Program (DEP) recruit, July 2007
Jan 30, 2009: April 17,′ 2012- Floor Corpsman, Shift supervisor, Training Petty Officer, Assistant Lead Petty Officer (ALPO), Emergency Room, Naval Medical Center Portsmouth, VA
May 1st 2012-Present: Ship Medical Junior Hospital Corpsman, Lead Petty Officer (LPO), USS *Truxtun* (DDG 103), Norfolk, VA
June 2012: Filming of *Captain Phillips* aboard USS *Truxtun*

Key Word/Name Listing:
Abdi, Barkhad
Assistant Lead Petty Officer (ALPO)
Biehn, Andrew, CDR, USN (XO, and later CO, USS *Truxtun*)

Captain Phillips, 2013 movie
Cobler, FC1 Nate (Fire controlman, USS *Truxtun;* appeared beside HM2 Albert in film)
Delayed Entry Program (DEP)
Ferguson, John, CDR, USN (CO, USS *Truxtun*)
Greengrass, Paul (Director, *Captain Phillips*)
Hanks, Tom (Actor, *Captain Phillips*)
Hastings, HMCS (USS *Truxtun*)
Hospital Corpsman, USN
Lara, Michael HN (USS *Truxtun*)
Lead Petty Officer (LPO)
Maersk Alabama
Mathis, HMC (IDC, USS *Truxtun*)
Medical Enlisted to Officer Commissioning Program (MECEP)
Meijia, HMC (FMF) (USS *Truxtun*)
Movie acting
Naval Medical Center Portsmouth, VA
O'Brien, HMC (Character portrayed by HM2 Albert)
Spokane, WA
U.S. Navy Hospital Corps School Great Lakes, IL
U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps
USS *Bainbridge* (DDG 96)
USS *Truxtun* (DDG 103)

The date is October 17, 2013. Today we have the great pleasure of talking with Petty Officer Second Class Danielle Albert. Petty Officer Albert currently serves aboard the guided missile destroyer, USS *Truxtun*. She recently appeared alongside Tom Hanks in the box office hit, *Captain Phillips*, which details the 2009 hijacking of the *Maersk Alabama*. This session is being conducted telephonically as part of the BUMED Oral History Project.

***

Petty Officer, we sincerely appreciate your taking time to participate in this project. As with all of our oral history sessions, we like to start off in the very beginning. Could you share a bit of your background and tell us why you became a hospital corpsman?

Thank you for letting me interview with you. Well, I had a really hard life growing up. I grew up in a broken home; things just kind of happened, and there were a lot of significant changes. I remember living in a 32-foot camper, and I remember growing up in an abusive home.

I remember going to five different schools during my freshman and sophomore years of high school and moved around to seven different homes. I eventually ended up with my Aunt Kim and

Uncle Shane in Spokane, WA and shortly after that joined the United States Naval Sea Cadets at the age of 16.

Through all the time, trials and everything that was going on, I learned a lot. Finally, when I got to my Aunt and Uncle's house in Spokane, something clicked. I was 16 at the time and I was just like, "I need to do something." My uncle was a strong role-model for me, and he just kept saying, "You need to do something. You need to get your life right. You need to make sure you don't follow on the same path as your mom did."

One Saturday, around 10:00 or 11:00 AM, my family and I were walking through downtown Spokane where it has a little carnival area. I saw these kids that were my age and younger marching. They were all in uniform and they were holding flags, and I'm like, "What is that?" I walked over to watch them more closely and I was so interested I asked one of the adults standing there, "What is this?" And they said, "They're United States Naval Sea Cadets."

"Oh, okay. So what do you do? Is it like ROTC?"

"Well, we're better."

We talked some more and after I remember thinking, "You know, I would really like to consider joining the military because this thing is really cool," and my Uncle said that it

would be great for discipline. So my Aunt, my Uncle and I went home. We all sat down with my cousins (that are just like my sisters), and talked about it. I said, “You know, I really want to do this.”

Even before I was 16 I knew I wanted to do something medical-related. Originally I wanted to be a doctor, but then I learned about nursing. My Aunt told me that, “a nurse knows more than a doctor,” and “a nurse is the doctor’s backbone.” I said, “Okay, I want to do that.” But because of everything that was going on in my life, I just didn’t have the academic background to pursue nursing. I started researching other options and I began reaching out to Navy recruiters that were coming to my high school, “Is there anything enlisted sailors can do medically?” That’s when I learned about Corpsmen.

I asked, “What is a Corpsman?” At the end of my sophomore year I actually did a career project on being an FMF Corpsman, a field medical Corpsman. I remember I had a huge poster board, and I was so proud of it. I got an A+ on my project, and it was great! Around the same time I had become a member of the Sea Cadet Corps, and that was great. Ever since the day I saw the Sea Cadets marching I knew in my heart I was going to be in the military.

My senior year of high school was probably the hardest year. I ended up getting kicked out of my house, not because I was doing drugs or alcohol or anything like that, it’s just that I was a rebel and I didn’t really care. I was 18, young and dumb, and I thought I knew the world; so I ended up moving out. I was working nearly full-time at a daycare that I had started working at when I was 16, and I was also doing the Sea Cadet course. I really struggled with my school work in my senior year and almost did not graduate. I owe my Navy career to my math teacher; if it wasn’t for him, I would not be where I’m at right now. I passed his class with a 60.29% my senior year, which was terrible. I found out later that my aunt had emailed him just before I was to graduate, “If there’s anything you can do for her, this is all she needs, to just go. Just let her go be what she needs to be. She has the potential.” I didn’t know about this until last year--2012. I remember the last day of class that we were going to receive our final grade. I was sitting in class and my math teacher was calling each senior up one at a time to let them know their fate, as in “you’re graduating” or “you’re not graduating”. I think I was the last one to be called, or at least it felt like that. I was trembling. I was scared, and I walked up and looked at the computer screen as he turned it toward me. I saw a score of 58-something, and I just got let down, but then I realized I was reading the name below

mine. I looked up and it said 60.29, and I started crying, “Oh my god.” About a month after I graduated, I went to Navy boot camp at Great Lakes.

What were your first impressions of the Navy?

I’m not going to lie. Going through Sea Cadet boot camp was a lot harder than Navy boot camp. In the two weeks at Sea Cadets I got drilling from all retired Marines screaming “AARR,” all the time. That was probably the hardest thing I ever had to go through. When I went to Navy boot camp, I was expecting that same intensity, but I was severely let down. But, boot camp is boot camp, and you get fit.

My first command was amazing. I got all of my experience there, and now on a ship.

Where did you go after corps school?

I went to Portsmouth Naval Hospital. I worked there for just about three and a half years. When I first checked onboard at the Naval Hospital, I went to the Directorate of Medical Services, and I met with my senior chief at the time, she’s like, “Okay, where would you like to go?”

“Well, I would like to work in the ER or somewhere with pediatrics.”

She said, “Okay.” So she turned around. Five minutes later she turned back and said, “Well, you’re going to go work in the ER.” So I ended up working in the ER.

Did you enjoy this experience?

Oh yes, that was probably the best experience I’ve ever had. I did a lot as a Navy Corpsman, a lot.

And then you reported aboard the *Truxtun*?

I was at Portsmouth Naval for three and a half years, and I got a lot of experience. At one point, I was the assistant LPO for the whole department, which consisted of a 68 corpsmen, and it was just my Senior Chief (HMCS Hastings), HM1 Mejia (now HMC Mejia) and myself as the leadership. My Senior Chief made senior by the time I left. It was us three for awhile, and we ran that department with our department head. Right after that, in 2012 I got transferred to the *Truxtun*.

What do you do aboard the *Truxtun?*

I’m a corpsman, so we do a lot of sick call. We do a lot of basic Corpsman stuff. You know, some of that side of the specialty I didn’t really get working in the ER, which is more like basic admin. On the ship we really do everything. There is three of us onboard; my HN (HN Lara), my HMC (HMC Mathis) and myself. My IDC at the time of the movie was an HM1 female. We

have a crew of roughly 280 people, and we take care of everyone of them. We do immunizations, pharmacy, labs, and patient care as far as primary care stuff. We do just about everything. The only thing we really don't do is radiology. We send them out for that.

Tell me, how did you become the character, "Chief O'Brien"?

Ah, the famous question. Three weeks before the filming started on the ship, it was brought to our attention that the movie was going to be filmed aboard the *Truxtun*. Our Captain, CDR Ferguson, at the time, had an all-hands call and said, "Okay, this is what's going on." Now, it didn't really faze anybody at the time. The main thing everyone heard was we were going to be underway for that week. No one likes to be underway, so that was kind of a downer.

During that same time, they opened up casting for the crew members on the ship. I think there were six or seven parts open for auditioning. I auditioned for the role of "doc," because I was "highly" encouraged to do that, and I guess my mentality was I wasn't going to let anybody else be the "doc" on the ship that wasn't an HM.

So, we did the auditioning, and it was a real audition. It was one of those things you see in the movies where there's a

green screen, a bunch of cameras, and there’s lots of light. You walk in and you rehearse your line. My line at the time was, “Can I see that hand?” That was the line I auditioned for.

Two weeks before the movie started filming onboard, the film crew came on board and told me I had gotten the part for “Doc.” Originally, my part was with the Somali pirate “Muse,” played by Barkhad Abdi. Barkhad Abdi and I are still good friends today. Actually, I am friends with all four of the Somali pirates today.

So, it was a Saturday morning when the film crew was getting oriented to the ship. I was off that weekend, and my CO and XO (CDR Biehn), said to the CDO that they needed medical on board. “We’re going to have a lot of civilians onboard. They’re not going to know what they’re doing on board a ship; they’re going to fall, and we need medical people here.” So they ended up calling me in because my HM1 at the time was on leave. We had a TAD corpsman, but he was off and he wasn’t going to make it on time, so I went in. I’m not going to lie, I was pretty mad, because it was my day off and I did not want to be there if I wasn’t on duty.

So, I go in and I’m in uniform, and they told me, “Okay, we might film your scene today.”

And I said, “Okay, cool.” So they come and get me prepped up and ready to go. In the mean time Paul Greengrass, the director, asks my CO and XO, “If Captain Phillips were to come onboard, where would be the first place he would go?”

And they told them, “Well, he’d go to medical first.”

I didn’t know they were talking about this; I didn’t know they were discussing medical. When Paul Greengrass knocked on my door, I opened it, and I said, “Oh hey, nice to meet you” oblivious that they were there to film a scene with Tom Hanks. He was really sweet with his little British accent. We talked and he said, “Okay, I have a question, HM3.” (I was HM3 at the time.) “What would you do in a real situation? What would you do if you had a patient like Captain Phillips come onboard? How would you treat him? What would you say? What would you do? How would you act?” So, I just told him what I would do. And he said, “Okay, I don’t want you to tell me anymore.” He said, “I want you to do it now.”

I said, “Do what?”

“I want you to do what you just told me.”

“On Muse? On the pirate?”

“No Danielle, on Captain Phillips.”

I said, “Tom Hanks?”

“Yes.”

And I was like, “Shut the front door!”

I said, “Are you serious?” At that point I was already scared because of the one line I was supposed to have. I think, maybe 45 minutes later we actually started filming. They got me into hair and makeup and I got into uniform. The reason why I became “Chief O’Brien” was because the “doc” on the *Bainbridge* was an HMC at the time, so they at least wanted to stick to that. Even though I’m a female, they still wanted me to play a chief. The name Chief O’Brien was a made up name. No relevance to the actual event. I ended up putting a uniform on and wore the anchors for the two hours that we were filming. So that’s how I ended up being Chief O’Brien.

Can you tell me about the first encounter with Tom Hanks?

Oh goodness, yes. Well, after Paul had come in and told me I was going to do the scene, the makeup artist and hair stylist were trying to coach me and talk me into it, telling me “It’s going to be okay. You’re going to be alright.” They’re actually still my good friends today.

They sent me back into medical. I was getting ready and FC1 Nate Cobler was my counterpart in the scene. I think he got

more of the short end of the stick, because he was told 15 minutes before we started shooting that he needed to change into uniform and get back into medical. He runs changes and comes back. He and I are trying to set up the tray and gauze, and we're like, "Well, maybe we should put this in this here." Or, "You take notes and I'll do this."

He's said, "I don't know what I'm doing. I'll write down everything."

I said, "Okay." There was a knock at the door, and we turn around. It was Paul and his producer, and then I saw somebody else walk by. I later found out that was actually Tom Hanks' bodyguard, and then all of a sudden I see Tom Hanks in full dress right in front of me! I'm like, "Oh my god!" I started to freak out and could not believe that it was Tom Hanks. FC1 is very outgoing and very happy go-lucky, but I'm standing in the background feeling petrified. FC1 is pointing at him, shaking his hand, teasing and stuff, and I'm like, "Oh my goodness." I shook his hand and said, "It's nice to meet you." I guess when I get nervous I become calm from what I am told.

He was so personable. There were six of us in the room and we were talking about the scene and what we were going to do, and he was just so nice, sweet, genuine, and light-hearted. He just wanted to talk and laugh and joke. He actually took our eye

exam chart and was asking, “What is your level? Are you 20/20, 20/15?” He was just joking around, trying to lighten the mood. After that we all kind of discussed what we were going to do and they all left, leaving the cameramen and the light people in there with us.

Well, as a corpsman, you have to prepare for a lot of contingencies, but none of them include acting beside one of America’s greatest actors. How were you able to accomplish this feat?

I don’t know; last week I actually got “hated on” [Facebook] for this, because I got nervous when Tom Hanks was standing there. Someone said, “I wonder what you would do on a battlefield?” Okay, I can understand why they would think that, but let me just put it this way: as a corpsman, regardless if male or female, we are trained to fight; we are trained to heal, and we are trained to fight and heal in battle. That’s what we are trained to do, and that is something I can do. I can do that because that’s expected of me. I am not however trained for something like filming a movie that’s going to be premiered worldwide. That’s something that I’m not trained to do, because that’s just something we don’t do. That’s not even in the same realm. If I’m under fire and I’m treating a patient, then hell yeah, I’ll be the first one out there because I know that is

expected of me and patients rely on me; but working with Tom Hanks, that’s a different story. That was a completely different realm because not only was I under pressure because of Tom Hanks, but I kept thinking, “Oh my god, I hope I don’t mess up.”I am representing the entire Hospital Corps. I’m representing them right now. So, I was under a lot of pressure.

When I think back on it now, I wasn’t nervous about working with Tom Hanks. I was really nervous about letting my fellow corpsmen down. They put me on the spot, and that was something that I was not expecting, that’s something that most corpsmen probably would not expect, and they probably would act the same way that I did. So, it was terrifying, very terrifying.

Well, it’s a very emotional scene and I don’t think there was a dry eye in the theater. Did you ad lib at all?

Everything in the four takes that we took was improvised. I had no lines; I had nothing. I made up everything as I went; because that’s something I would say to a real patient. I’ll tell you, the first take, like I said, were terrible. I’m so glad they didn’t play anything in the first take in the movie. But Tom Hanks acted like a real patient. As a corpsman you’re trained to shut off your emotions, especially working in the ER. I have had a 19-day old baby die in my arms. I’ve given life and I’ve seen death, and I’ve seen so much working in the ER. I

can’t say what it’s like to be on a battlefield but what I can say is that I’ve seen a lot of reaction to trauma, and Tom Hanks did a fantastic job of acting just like it. And that is what really made me react the way that I did. We are trained to let your knowledge run through your veins. You don’t really think about it, you’re just emotionless; you just do it, because if you freak out or if you put emotion into what you’re doing that patient will die, or will have more severe trauma or injury because you’re freaking out. So in that situation, I guess I fell back on the training I’ve had to calm my patient down. So you ask questions, you keep them talking to you, you focus on the eye contact, and you make sure that you gain that patient’s trust. Even though you didn’t cause the injury, they’re going to have a hard time trusting you. So everything I did in that situation was real, except for the fact that there were no lines. I improvised everything.

That’s incredible. How long did it take to capture that scene?

Like I said, we did four takes. I think in total we spent about 45 minutes filming. The rest of it was just lighting, camera set up and hair and makeup. It was a total of roughly, two, two-and-a-half hours; but the filming part was only 45 minutes.

I’ll say this: during the first take I was pretty much gone. It was like everything just left my mind and I drew a blank. I turned my back to the camera and could only concentrate on my breathing; I started to tear up and was shaking so bad. They eventually stopped rolling the cameras and I broke out into bright red blotches and just fell to pieces. That’s what happens when I get worked up; have always been that way I guess. Tom, after filming the first take, coached me and told me that “it is okay, it happens to all of us at some point or another, you just have to remember you do this everyday; this is normal for you. Just focus on that, because right now I wouldn’t trust you working on me in real life”. When Tom told me that, something just clicked. I took a deep breath and that’s all it took.

From what I was told the second take is in the movie the most. The third take, was probably the most emotional. I’ll admit, I was tearing up, because I’m a sympathetic crier. I’m a very emotional person. I try to put myself in their situation and I try to feel what they’re feeling, because I think as a caregiver, you have to be able to feel what they’re feeling in order to care for them more. You relate more, so instead of being empathetic, you become sympathetic, and I think that’s mainly what I was trying to do. But Tom was amazing, and when he was crying, I felt for him. I was tearing up in the scene and my

voice was cracking; they didn’t put that in the movie, thank God.

The whole experience was very emotional; such a surreal feeling.

I do have to say that before this whole movie thing and everything that had happened to make this movie a possibility; I had no idea about the actual event. I didn’t know about the kidnapping or anything about the *Bainbridge*. After the first day of filming I actually researched the whole thing and found out what it really happened. I felt terrible.

I have to think that your old instructors at Hospital Corps School must be very proud of you. What has the feedback been like?

I do stay in contact with one of my HM2s. He was my instructor in corps school, but now that you mention it, I haven’t really talked to them. But a lot of my old mentors, a lot of nurses and a lot of the doctors I used to work and train with have been supportive. My senior chief HMCS Hastings, that I absolutely adore -- she **IS** everything in a role model that I want to be, and I hope one day I can live up to what she is -- told me that she was proud of me, and said she started crying. I even wrote an essay on her just recently for my English class

because she was just amazing; I learned a lot from her. HMC Mejia (he has been FMF all his career and he’s deployed now) is another one that I learned so much from. They are both extremely proud of me, and they tell me, “We helped you grow. Remember that!”

I say, “Of course.”

I am surprised that some of my lieutenants and some of my doctors are emailing me on Facebook and they say, “Congratulations. We are so happy to see you grow from what you were to what you are now. You have grown into such a strong, independent young woman and a fantastic corpsman.” It feels really good to get that kind of feedback, because when you’re doing the grind work, and you have the short end of the stick, you really don’t hear that stuff until something like this happens. I didn’t know that I had so many people who cared for me because, you know, sometimes when you’re a junior sailor, you really don’t feel like you’re being cared for.

Other people have gone before me and have done way more than I have, this is just a very humbling experience, and I pray a lot to keep me that way. I try to stay grounded as much as possible and remember where I come from. I don’t let it get to my head and act the same way I did before the movie came out.

Can you tell me about the film premier and what you thought of the movie?

The first time I saw it I was pretty excited; I had almost an entire row and a half for all my friends and family that came with me. It was intense. Like I told you before, I'm friends with all the pirates, and they're not mean in real life; they are such sweet men.I was texting them during the movie, and I was like, "Oh my God, I see you right now and you're so cute."

They were texting me back, "LOL, shut up."

That's kind of surreal.

I was so impressed with our crew. It was just so awesome to see everybody be a part of something so amazing, because not everyone gets to say they have had an experience like ours. I didn't know the Somalis' got shot towards the end, so when the movie was closer toward the end, I'd say the last 15 minutes, that's when it really, really started to hit me, "Oh my God, this is amazing". I had two of my friends, with me, Nikki Tucker; she was my hair stylist, and my friend Shelley Williams. When my part hit, they were both holding my hands. I was freaking out, because I was so embarrassed. I didn't want to let anybody down, I was like, "Man, this is a lot of pressure." When I saw the film, I cried. It's like looking at yourself, but not

looking at you. It didn’t even look like me; almost looking at a stranger.

Where do you want to go now in your career? Would you ever entertain a life in film?

I don’t know, I really don’t know. I mean, I’ve gotten some inquiries and I’ve been hinted at to get my resume ready, but I really don’t know. I’m not sure about the Navy right now just because I have a two-year-old son. I haven’t lived with him since he was 10 months old, and I really need to be with my baby. I’ll tell you, when you are a single mom it’s hard to see pictures of your baby with other people and your baby bonding with other people. No matter how much I love my job of being a corpsman, and being as proud as I am of being a corpsman, my baby comes first, regardless. I have to look out for what’s best for him. As for my being away like I am all the time, he doesn’t understand that right now, and it’s hard. He knows I love him; he kisses my picture every night and every morning; he says, “Good morning, Mama.” “Good night, Mama.” “I said my prayers, Mama.” “I love you, Mama.” He says all these things, but he knows that I’m not there, and he doesn’t understand it. I’ll tell you, as a mom that’s probably the hardest thing. I can probably speak on behalf of a lot of single moms in the military

that this is hard. So I have that choice of do I do this for 20 years or do I get out?

But, at the same time, this is my job; this is my life. And I'm living with what that is. What if I get out and I regret everything later? What if I get out and I miss out on so many opportunities? I don't want to regret anything. So it's a terribly hard decision to make. I have about another month and a half to make that decision, or I get out in May of next year.

Where is your son?

My son is in Texas with family and friends. I go about every month to see him for at least a couple days, but sometimes that's not enough.

You did mention an English class, are you enrolled in school?

Yes, I just finished up this last semester. I had to withdrawal from one of them because it was kind of hard being underway and doing the classes. I am finishing my prerequisites for nursing school. If I do stay in the Navy, I really would like to put in an officer program MECEP [Medical Enlisted Commissioning Program] so I can get my nursing degree. At least that's my plan, but I'm not sure yet. Like I said, I haven't decided. I don't know. It's a hard decision to make.

I can understand and know whatever decision you make will be the right one. I just want to say that I sincerely appreciate you spending time with us today and sharing some of your amazing stories.

No problem. Thank you.

End of Interview