

Robert Morris University Oral History Center

Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans Project



Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

Daniel Blevins

Cavalry Scout, Army, Iraq War, Afghanistan War

September 18, 2015

IAVP 2

**Blevins, Daniel. (1984 – ), Oral History Interview, April 30, 2015.**

Audio and Video Recording (ca. 38 min.)

Biographical Sketch: Daniel Blevins was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, November 24, 1984. He was in the United States Army and was enlisted as a Cavalry Scout. He served from September of 2002 until March 2012 where he left the Army as An E-5(p) or Sergeant Promotable. He deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan from 2006 to 2007. And he also deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2008 until 2009.

Topics Covered in Interview:

- Afghanistan
- NATO
- Boston Human Volunteer
- Iraq
- Reintegration
- VA

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Edited by Dr. John McCarthy

JM: Okay. This interview is part of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Project undertaken by the Oral History Center at Robert Morris University. I am John McCarthy. Today is September 18, 2015. I am joined by... please state full name.

DB: Daniel Blevins.

JM: And, do I have your consent to interview you today?

DB: Yes.

JM: Thank you very much. Okay. First of all we will start with your date and place of birth. Where were you born, raised?

DB: Pittsburgh, November 24, 1984.

JM: And, Dormont borough, is that right?

DB: Yeah.

JM: Cool. And did you go to ... what high school did you go to?

DB: Keystone Oaks.

JM: Keystone Oaks high school. Okay, and your branch of service?

DB: Army.

JM: Your years of service?

DB: Ten years, give or take a few months.

JM: And your rank whenever you got out?

DB: Sergeant Promotable.

JM: Sergeant Promotable, great, okay. So, the first big question that we ask people is why did you decide to join the military. Like, you know what was your thought process? What was your motivation? That kind of thing.

DB: I grew up with absolutely no support from my family so I knew that going to college was out of the question. I would rather work, but ever since I was young I was probably brainwashed by G.I. Joe at a young age coming out a couple years after I was born. I always had some desire to serve. I didn't think that I would ever serve for ten years.

JM: Right. So, maybe a combination of the financial side of it and also, perhaps, the, you know patriotic side of it?

DB: Yeah the financial side was probably the smaller side out of the two. It was more of a bonus cause you know back then, whenever I joined, we didn't have this kind of ... these benefits ...

JM: Right.

DB: It was a much different G.I. Bill.

JM: Right. And I wanna go back one second here. You gave me the years of service, but what year did you start and what year did you ... [00:02:01]

DB: I joined in September of 2002.

JM: Okay.

DB: And then I got out in March 2012.

JM: Okay. So, another obvious question is 9/11, and what was the impact of 9/11 on you? To what extent did that event, obviously, maybe contribute to you to joining, since it was about a year later.

DB: Yeah. I was already gonna join. I was ... I know I did ... I don't think it was Junior Marines. I think I joined the Marine Corps at first, something along that program. We had, at our high school, it wasn't the Junior Marine Program that they have, like the JROTC ...

JM: Right.

DB: But our high school had a young marines program. So I was in that from middle school all the way up until 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade until I was eligible to join. So I was already gonna join when 9/11 happened, and honestly, I figure I grew up like most white middle class kids with the view of American superiority and exceptionalism, so I assumed the war would've been over by the time I shipped out to basic training anyways.

JM: That's interesting that you say that. Did you serve ... can you specify your time in Iraq and your time in Afghanistan? In terms of ... you gave the ten years of service ...

DB: Yeah. So I was in Afghanistan from 2006 to 2007.

JM: Okay.

DB: And I was in Iraq from 2008 to 2009.

JM: Okay. So, I'm going to ask separate questions about Iraq and Afghanistan. This next list of questions, we'll take one at a time. Let's start with, I guess Iraq, since that was the first place that you deployed.

DB: I went to Afghanistan.

JM: Oh, I'm sorry. Let's start with Afghanistan. What was your understanding of the Afghanistan War on entering service? [00:03:47]

DB: Well, it never really got much publicity so ...

JM: Right.

DB: I understood why we were there, but you never heard about it in the service. All you ever heard about was Iraq, even in basic training. All you ever heard about was Iraq and (inaudible) they say the same year we invaded Iraq, so normally the drill sergeants had been in combat ... none of them had ever been there, but that was all they ever talked about. Afghanistan was never talked about in the service,

JM: Interesting. And it was the fall of 2002 whenever you first ...?

DB: I joined and then I switched cause I was in the delayed entry program so I was doing drill and training, and I switched jobs while my contracts ... so it delayed my basic training. So, I stayed drilling with the military, but I didn't go to basic until 2003.

JM: So, it was literally when the Iraq war was starting, whenever you were in basic training?

DB: Yeah. It was right after high school. The Iraq War started in February, maybe ...

JM: Okay.

DB: And then I went as soon as high school ended.

JM: Can you talk a little more specifically then, about your branch, and then you know, specifically like the platoons in your branch, training, like on your base, the overall deployment.

DB: (Inaudible) I was in a special program in the military when I first went in. I was a human research volunteer for four years up in Boston, and so it was very non-military ...

JM: Right.

DB: They would do experiments and we were just the guinea pigs. So, my platoon, literally consisted of seven full time people that were there year round, and then thirty to forty people that would come in every three to six months. And, eventually they would kick ... cause you had to be on your best behavior up there ... they kicked ten kids out right away ... sent them back to their units. So, it was a very ... unorthodox experience compared to most.

JM: Yeah, Boston. I didn't even realize. You had said on the history club trip that you were deployed there.

DB: Yeah and most people in the Army didn't believe me. I left. They wanted me to stay there, and I left cause I wanted to take it out to the real Army, and when I told people my story they assumed that I was undercover police from the investigation division cause it seemed so made up.

JM: [Laughter] Oh, wow. Right. So you were there for four years? [00:05:58]

DB: I was there, yeah, from 2003 to 2007.

JM: And so then you asked to be switched to a different job?

DB: Yeah.

JM: And what was that?

GB: Well, I was already in the ... I was already a Cav Scout, but I didn't do it, obviously, I was fulfilling a role at human research volunteer.

JM: Okay.

DB: Um, I just asked to go to a Cavalry unit. So, my last study was an altitude study, where I had to live at 14,000 feet, and below it was an Army base. So, it was beautiful out there so I asked to go there.

JM: So, talk ... can you talk about the Army Cavalry because in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when people hear the word cavalry they obviously aren't going to understand what that word intends.

DB: You know, even in ... we still have a lot of traditions, a lot of things that are still straight out of the Civil War in our branch, as far as our customs and the way we party, and ... it's a fun branch, but really in today's world it's no different than Infantry. The only ... the only difference you will find is we get more experience because we have less people, so we are manning multiple weapon systems, and you have to pass your [ASVAB] to get into the Cavalry or the Infantry, that's waived. But, those are really the two only differences. The weapons are the same, vehicles are the same, missions are exactly the same ...

JM: [Um, like more tanks or anything?]

DB: No, we just do it with less ... We have ... we usually have at most around 20 ... 21- 25 people on the ground ... per platoon, where an infantry platoon is gonna be a lot bigger than that, so ...

JM: So, small platoons?

DB: Small platoons.

JM: And did that ... maybe condition your relationships? Is it like, a tighter unit then?

DB: It's a much tighter unit. You can ... what do they call it? The [Sper décor]. It's super high. You know, ,we wear our Stetsons and our spurs ... we don't follow Army regulation all the time ... so, it was nice.

JM: So, let's now kind of start talking about Afghanistan, specifically, with regards to this stuff. When you were in Afghanistan, what was your specific mission? [00:07:56]

DB: I was working for ... I had gone to school while I was a human research volunteer because it was part of the ... the only incentive to be there because it was a really hard job. They would let you pick a school to go to. And everyone picked all like the crazy schools like Ranger school and Special Forces, but the Army had a really small school that was almost impossible to get into called Evasive Driving and Anti-Terrorism Driving. And you would take cars and you would just crash them all day long. It was the best school I had ever been to. I was a PFC at the time and they would send ... usually you have to be an E8, and that school is only designed for general drivers ... For the drivers of Generals. So, it was very weird for me to get to go. I was literally the only E3 in the entire classroom. And the class was only 15 people tops. So, I had that on my record, and I got orders to Iraq, and I was an E4 when I got orders for Iraq, and whoever the command was in Iraq ... I was still a human research volunteer ...

JM: Right.

DB: So, what they do is, if you are not part of a huge battalion ... they get ... they'll have at command level, in Iraq and Afghanistan, they'll have slots that need filled that they can't fill from the unit, so they'll take all of these soldiers that are in these random outposts, like a human research volunteer or someone that's in like a maintenance unit really far off and there is like two people there ...

JM: Right.

DB: So, you'll get these taskers, and I volunteered for it, but they needed an E6 so like two days before my deployment they came down and they were like 'you're not going, you're not and E6'. The email from the Pentagon was ... you could tell they were visibly upset that they would put me in that in the first place ...

JM: Right.

DB: So, my first sergeant, one of the best people I have ever met ... wrote back just telling them off, and they came back and they were like 'well, he has Evasive Driving'. So, there's a spot in Afghanistan, the command group, so, I ended up working for the commanding general of Afghanistan, being one of the drivers.

JM: Wow, so did you drive him specifically?

DB: He was always flying in and out of the country, so, if we drove him, it was like two feet to the airport.

JM: Okay.

DB: I mean, we did ... drove his sergeant major ... wrote back just telling them off, and they came back and they were like 'well, he has Evasive Driving'. So, there's a spot in Afghanistan, the command group, so, I ended up working for the commanding general of Afghanistan, being one of the drivers.

JM: Wow. So you were like ... your specific mission was literally like transportation for the commanding officers?

DB: Yes. And then also, there was ... you know, when nobody was going anywhere you would just sit in the office and ... do administrative work. I mean, not that there was really much to do, but you would ... you know, you're just a driver.

JM: Right. So, did it feel kind of like more of a bureaucratic type of job or more of a service job than ...? You know, like, it's not like kind of a typical ... job, right? [00:10:48]

DB: Yeah. It's not ... when you're on deployment you have the same mind set ...

JM: Right.

DB: It's kind of like ... I didn't feel any distinction between what I did in Afghanistan or what I did in Iraq.

JM: Okay.

DB: And, I don't think anybody I was with felt any distinction. I mean, we had a rough ... a very real mission ... you know, the Taliban would call out the commanders in the newspapers and say they were coming after you specifically. So, we were on full alert all the time.

JM: Right.

DB: If we had a car bomb pull through the front gate, we were the only ones not allowed to leave, so ... cause we had to stay with our commander, who also wasn't gonna leave. So, there were a lot of times where, like we were out there longer ... so it really didn't seem worth ...

JM: Sure. There's a question here about, sort of morale of the troops, and so in this particular case, maybe you could talk a little bit about that. Just kind of like the general sense of people's attitudes. Again, this is like 2007 and 8 correct?

DB: 2006 – 2007.

JM: 2006 – 2007, so the Iraq War is still hot and heavy and you are in Afghanistan, so?

DB: Afghanistan was completely forgotten about.

JM: Right.

DB: It there was actually more dangerous than Iraq cause we only had 9,000 soldiers. It was literally the Wild West. You could do whatever you wanted. There was nobody.

JM: So ... kind of the ... the people in Washington D.C. maybe, weren't paying as much attention, is that kind of what you're saying?

DB: Yeah. Oh yeah. They ... it felt like ... this is since I got there ... but it seems like we were just there to check a box and the focus was Iraq. That was where the mission was. So ... bare minimum in Afghanistan ... and, when I was there, what's interesting ... I think we had 300% more chance of dying in Afghanistan from combat than Iraq because there was so few American troops. So, they asked, while I was there for more American troops, and the pentagon said no, and that's when NATO stepped in and said we'll match the troops if we can take control of the country. And, of course, you know, that was all a big show cause then NATO had control for like three days and then an American general took over.

JM: Right. Right. [Laughter] So, did NATO bring 9,000 troops too? [00:12:50]

DB: Yeah. So, halfway through my deployment, the command group ceased to exist. Our unit was gone, they disassembled it ... they shipped everyone back to the States, and they asked if ... they needed volunteers to go to NATO cause up until this point, there's very few Americans in NATO.

JM: Right.

DB: So ...

JM: You switched to a different ...

DB: I switched to NATO.

JM: Okay.

DB: I volunteered to go. And it was interesting ... it was sad because I had to move my FOB, but it was literally ... like, I lived in the city of Kabul, and it was about five blocks down ...

JM: Oh, okay.

DB: It was a whole world of difference though. I was just partying every night, drinking ...

JM: Really?

DB: Yeah.

JM: So, NATO's just not ...

DB: NATO stood for Nothing After Three O'clock, and Needs Alcohol To Operate.

JM: [Laughing] Wow!

DB: We did one week in NATO what we would have done in a morning in the American Army. It was a great experience.

JM: Wow. What was the ... you said there was 9,000 troops ... and so that, I guess would be British troops right? French, Italian ... were they all there?

DB: Yeah. It was mostly British. My job in NATO was ... I was in every ... so, they took one American for each, kind of NATO unit. So, I got put with a British communications ... I don't even know what ... if it was a company ... it was more like a platoon, but it was high end communications, so like all of the really expensive electronics that were coming in through the country, they would be shipped to the Kabul airport, and then we would take them out to like the Pakistan border and just hide them out ...

JM: And you're still in transportation? [00:14:26]

DB: so, my job was actually to literally teach them how the American Army operated. So, when the Americans eventually did come in ...

JM: Right.

DB: It would be a smooth transition. I was a liason, but I was also filling a role. And, it turns out not many British ... and the British Army, the ones that I encountered ... driving was a real problem for them. And, it was all stick shift, so you don't think it would be that big of a problem ...

JM: They didn't know how to drive you're saying? Or they ... ?

CB: There was some ... just straight morons.

JM: [laughter]

DB: That's the best way I can put it. They were some really nice people ...

JM: Right, right.

DB: But some of the privates were dumb, lazy ... you know ... they really didn't have the same requirements that we did.

JM: Yeah.

DM: And then there wasn't ... the military service wasn't valued as highly there as it is in America. So, you just got like your run of the mill guy that didn't know what he was gonna do with his career ...

JM: Okay.

DB: And just went into the military.

JM: Right.

DB: So I ended up driving everywhere, or escorting [inaudible] up into the mountains.

JM: One of the questions that is on here is what an average day was like under deployment. So, you might wanna maybe tell us what an average day under deployment was like for NATO, and then also for United States.

DB: Yeah. So, with the Americans, I'd wake up. We lived in the city there; was no room. We lived in a very small FOB. Smaller than the Nicholson building. It was tiny. It was an alley way that was an L-shape that would have been the length of a regular city block, and there was houses on both sides that we bought off of the locals and just built around that. And so, the office buildings, the [inaudible], everything was just ... we were where the rich Afghanis lived in the 70's and where all the Taliban took over after the Russians got kicked out so ... nice houses ... like mansions. But that's ... that's where we lived. So, we were like four or five blocks into the city. Which the city was small, so four or five blocks away from the base was actually about the end of the city before you got like out into the desert.

JM: Right. [00:16:36]

DB: In the middle of nowhere.

JM: Right.

DB: So, we would get up and we would either find somebody to walk to work with, or they had like a local taxi shuttle for us.

JM: Oh, okay.

DB: And so, we would get in that and go to work or just walk to work ... full battle rattle. I mean, we we're just walking the streets of Afghanistan.

JM: Sure.

DB: It's like this very ... Like that would never happen in Iraq. They wouldn't be like you're gonna sleep over there, and every day you're gonna walk onto base to get your mission brief and all that.

JM: Okay.

DB: You know ... just ... completely didn't care ... at all.

JM: So, that's a good example of the way that this is kind of an afterthought?

DB: Yeah. We don't have to put money into building a new base. We'll pay a little ... buy a few houses, five blocks down the road we'll buy a few more, and then we'll split up our forces and not think twice about it.

JM: Right. Right.

DB: Which turned out to be terrible because we got overran. But you know ... like who couldn't see that coming. So ...

JM: And that's obviously later you are talking about.

DB: Yeah.

JM: Okay.

DB: So, we go into ... we go to work and we would sit. We had a room with three computers and four desks. Another example of how they didn't care cause we didn't have four computers. And we would sit there and see what was going on with [air view] the email traffic, where we had to go ... or what was going on for the week. We had to do some route recons.

JM: Okay.

DB: Go out and see what's going on or if the contractors ... there's nothing like ...

JM: Is it like a shift thing where you are kind of taking over? [00:17:53]

DB: Twelve hour shifts, yeah. So ... if the command group was out of town ... if they were out in D.C. or whatever reason ... at the pentagon ... we would help out the contractors. They call it KIR ... like Kellogg Iron Route Company. We would help them out ... deliver water to some of the houses around town, to our water station at our house, and convoy secure. Just whatever they needed ... we'd just go in. There was nothing going on. And we would do that all day. Go home at night. Or, if you worked the night shift, you would come in and hold the fort down, literally. And then go home and sleep during the day.

JM: Okay. And was that ... so, that's the NATO side?

DB: That was the American side

JM: Oh, that's the American side of the Army, okay. So, in terms of the NATO?

DB: So, the NATO, we would ...

JM: You moved five blocks away?

DB: Five blocks away.

JM: Another nice section of the city I guess?

DB: So, the city is small. I'll draw it, I guess I can draw it. So, if this is the embassy and this is the main traffic circle.

JM: Okay.

DB: And there's roads that go

JM: Yeah.

DB: These three are the ... we'll these two are town. These are the desert just going out to [Juraldad] or going further south in Afghanistan.

JM: Okay.

DB: The NATO was here. My house was back here. We had a street with houses, and the American base was right here. So I literally moved almost right next door to where I used to sleep.

JM: Right. [00:19:24]

DB: But now I was asked to sleep on base.

JM: Okay.

DB: It's just a crazy layout.

JM: Okay.

DB: Really hard for people to grasp for people that weren't there 'cause it's so non-military.

JM: Right. Yeah. You like commuted to work.

DB: Yeah. A lot of people ... I talked to my friends; they don't understand it.

JM: Right. Okay, so you talked a little bit of how the ... sort of the attitude of NATO was different.

DB: Yeah.

JM: It was a little more loose and things like that. But, on a day to day basis?

DB: So ... we would sleep in till nine. There was no need to get up early whatsoever. We would go into work. We had one computer. We had ... so we had like a little [inaudible] a little storage building. It was actually probably exactly the size of this room with a desk right down the middle. The door would have been on the other side and the refrigerator would have been right here, I'm talking like a full Pepsi cooler.

JM: Okay.

DB: Filled with water and alcohol. And the guy in charge, the E7 in charge would just sit at a desk tell us what was going on, and maybe there was nothing, we would sit there and bullshit for an hour, hour and a half. Then we'd go have tea. Now, every NATO base has ...

JM: Like at three o'clock or whatever?

DB: At like 9:30-10:00. Every NATO base has tea shops, coffee shops, alcohol shops, and food. Legitimate restaurants that came. That's like a priority.

JM: Right.

DB: That's what they put in. So, let's say 10:00

JM: That's not very confident that NATO could ever defend a Russian invasion or something.

DB: No.

JM: [Laughter]

DB: We would ... literally have tea at 10:00-10:30 and then lunch was 11:30, sometimes lunch was ...

JM: So, tea was at 10:30 and lunch was an hour later? [00:20:59]

DB: Yeah.

JM: Whoo!

DB: And tea might last an hour if you're in good conversation. And then we would go to lunch ... now if it was like ... let's say if we went out partying the night before lunch would be till three cause you would get an afternoon nap. Then you'd come back at three and you would just go home.

JM: Would you report, like ... your superior officer was a NATO officer?

DB: He was British.

JM: And then he would relay your stuff to the United States military?

DB: No. The military just like lost track of me while I was over there.

JM: Okay.

DB: To the point where the MP's were called for me being AWOL at one point until they realized the confusion.

JM: Really?

DB: So, we had ... we each have our own support elements, right? Every country in NATO has a support element which is basically an admin show up.

JM: Okay.

DB: So, I ... now I was at NATO headquarters. It's still a small headquarters, I know you think of like this huge base, but it wasn't. There was a British ... kind of like an embassy but something that only does paperwork. So, there was a British headquarters in it, an American with just a couple soldiers that were there mainly to get mail, send it out, and take care of any paperwork. So, obviously like me switching units and going is easily lost in the system. The Germans have one, but the Germans' is a bar, it was great. It had ... you walk into this room and they had a single counter all the way in the back. And at 5:00 ... you could go there without paperwork if you were returning ... whatever you needed to do ... mail some letters. But, at 5:00 the disco ball would drop from the ceiling ...

JM: Literally?

DB: Literally. And everyone would get hammered drunk.

JM: Wow.

DB: Yeah. I mean, I have pictures of it because I was so amazed by it.

JM: I'm gonna ... there's lots of other questions that we can ask. Kind of like posts and everything, but I'd like to ... maybe you could talk about your transition out from Afghanistan to Iraq. Right? [00:22:48]

DB: Yeah.

JM: So, you were, again, in Afghanistan in 2006-2007 right?

DB: Yeah.

JM: So, how did your time in Afghanistan then like end?

DB: It was just over. I went back to my unit. Then I went ... I was on ...I did NASA too. I did the altitude study 'cause I was still a human research volunteer.

JM: Okay.

DB: In Colorado, and I had asked to go to Ft. Carson and I ended up getting stationed to the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry.

JM: So, your, kind of, deployment time ends and now you circle back to the States basically.

DB: Correct.

JM: Okay.

DB: I went straight from deployment to ... I actually came down on another deployment as soon as I came back because ... this Afghanistan one was just like a favor. Someone in the Pentagon ...

JM: Right.

DB: Had tossed me ...

JM: Sure.

JM: And I came down on a deployment to Africa and ... somebody else wanted to go with it, and I was like well I just got home so feel free to go. Interestingly enough, the person that went, it was a female, one of the only human research volunteer females that ever lasted to the point where she is in the Military Hall of Fame ... crazy girl.

JM: Wow.

DB: But, she met her husband on that deployment and I ended up being stationed with her as a recruiter ... her and her husband. I was like that's crazy.

JM: Oh wow. So, where in Africa were they deployed to?

DB: Um, Djibouti

JM: Okay.

DB: So ... I switched I'm on the altitude study. It was in Colorado, on Pike's Peak ...I really loved it ...

JM: So, What's an altitude study?

DB: Well, they do all sorts of things like sometimes they'll test like [lasic] surgery versus other surgeries at high altitude. This one was how much exercise will get you to overcome altitude sickness ...

JM: Okay.

DB: And how much will make altitude sickness way worse.

JM: Right. And this is obviously in preparation for desert warfare?

DB: This was ... yeah, this was for Afghanistan, so, I came back from Afghanistan and there was a clear surge about to happen in Afghanistan ...

JM: Right.

DB: Cause they were just getting out of control, completely ... you know ...

JM: Right.

DB: I had spent my last like five months drinking with NATO. Obviously the country was going to shit real quick.

JM: And you were, obviously, in a safe city.

DB: It had clearly been occupied by NATO and the United States, so ...

JM: Well, safe in the context of ...

DB: Yeah ... it was still a war ... you know what? It wasn't safe. Like, safe was just our little areas like the little NATO base or the little American base. So ... the streets were still fighting. Which was crazy.

JM: So, there were still Taliban?

DB: There were still suicide bombers, car bombs ... you know, right outside the gates.

JM: Wow. [00:25:21]

DB: Right in the city. So, it was weird; it was an area unorganized like, I mean, not like bad guys ... locked down, you know ... you could still just drive right in and kill whoever you wanted you saw on the streets.

JM: Wow.

DB: So, yeah, the altitude study we went to the Airforce Academy first for two weeks to ... you know ... get our blood cells up, and I loved it out there so I asked to go to Colorado. Then I got stationed with the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry and we ... trained all ... this was the end of 2007 ... and we just trained for some time and all that and went right to Iraq in 2008.

JM: So you were deployed ... the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry was deployed to Iraq in 2008?

DB: Yeah.

JM: And you were there again for ...?

DB: For a year.

JM: Okay. Okay, so let's kinda rewind now and go back to ... so, this is now 2008 and you're in Iraq. So, it's a little bit later, obviously, it's six years into the war. So, what's your understanding of the Iraq War now, in the context of 2008?

DB: So, the first six months I was there, it was still the typical Iraq War. We were still doing the drills on the streets ...

JM: And where were you specifically?

DB: I was ...

JM: Actually, let's say what was your specific mission?

DB: Okay. So I was a Cavalry Scout. We're small, you know, we're the only unit in the Army that's authorized to retreat whenever we want for battle because we are so small ... because ... if you were Infantry you were gonna stay on a big FOB ... most of the time. And you're not ... you are gonna stay there for your whole deployment. Ours, every two to three months, we would move around, we would go to small outposts, live on fire bases with absolutely zero support, and do all of the ... trying to flush out the HVT's, the High Value Targets, in the smaller towns all along the border ... the stuff that would be too far out for regular infantry to ...

JM: So, your mission ... so, the idea was of your mission, since you were such a mobile unit and small ... they wanted to put you at these, kinda, remote locations because it was easier logistically to move you guys around from place to place?

DB: Yeah.

JM: So, you're kinda getting moved all over the place? [00:27:23]

DB: All over the place. We stayed ... we normally always stayed west of Baghdad or south of Baghdad,

JM: Okay.

DB: So, for the first six months ...

JM: What were you specifically looking for, again, when you go ...

DB: We had a list of HVT's ... we had different missions too ...

JM: When you say targets are you talking like people?

DB: Yeah. So, we would have ... we would work with local police or the local border patrol ...

JM: Okay.

DB: Or the local Army. In fact, the way it worked in one of our bases, we had a platoon of Iraqi Army that stayed with ... I was in second platoon and first platoon's mission was to train the

Iraqi Army. So, they would stay on this little fire base all day long and just train the Iraqi Army while we went out and worked with the police in town to try to flush out high value targets.

JM: Okay. And ... what was a typical day like doing that?

DB: We were ... we would get up pretty early ... depending on which town, because we had ... so, in that mission we had three different towns ... one was twenty minutes down the road, one was two hours down the road. It was so far out that we had to drill gas container on the outside of our vehicles just so we could get back. But, we would get up, drive out there, you know, get a safety briefing, get the daily intel, then we would get in the convoy to drive out there, go to the police station ... sometimes we would look at the list of the most wanted ... go after them, or sometimes we would just process prisoners. We would ... we had a little, looked like a game camera from Sega, if you remember that.

JM: Yeah.

DB: It looked just like that. We would take their pictures and everything that they were accused of, and it instantly went to every other unit in the Army. So, the facial recognition software, if they ever got out, would pick them up and they would see everything, sort of, literally like categorizing ... cataloguing ... I can't think of the word ...

JM: Right.

DB: But, all of these people that were ...

JM: So, what would a high value target or whatever that term is, I apologize for having it wrong, what was, like typically, what would they be, like were they allegiance to Saddam, or is that way gone now, is it other ... factions? [00:29:26]

DB: It would be ... that's a good question, I'm trying to think. Cause, you know, we had a list of like the top ten guys ... and it still had links to Saddam ... you had

JM: Obviously, you weren't necessarily concerned with that in terms of your mission right? Because you get in, you go find them ...

DB: Yeah. So ... but yeah, they were ... yeah it was all part of the same, the original guys from '03.

JM: Okay. Was it ... was that task easy? Like, let's say, so, occasionally you are processing prisoners but also you are finding people and arresting them right?

DB: Yeah.

JM: You arrested and threw them in jail.

DB: Yeah,

JM: So, was this a dangerous thing occasionally?

DB: It was dangerous everyday just due to the fact that we were out in the town every survey, making a giant target of ourselves.

JM: Right.

DB: But, one thing you will find in Iraq is that, they are not ... they're not dumb. They won't attack just anybody.

JM: Okay.

DB: So, like they will ... the regular ... the Taliban fighter or the regular Al-Qaeda fighters ... cause they would travel back and forth from Iraq to Afghanistan ... they, like the hardcore ones would go after anybody. But, if you were just your local, run of the mill insurgent, you're gonna wait for the weaker unit to come by. You're gonna wait for the MP's to roll through town and attack those guys. So, while we made huge targets of ourselves, rarely would anyone take us on cause our firepower was just outstanding.

JM: I see.

DB: We had air support too most of the time.

JM: Oh wow. So ... very rarely ... you're almost never dealing with like heavy combat, in terms of ...

DB: Yeah. It wasn't until we moved to like, Basra. We took over for the British down there.

JM: Okay. [00:31:08]

DB: They pulled out, and like ... you know what I'm saying ... I don't want to come out and call them lazy, but they definitely don't work too hard.

JM: It's your opinion, man, you're just saying what you saw.

DB: So, we ended up moving to Basra to go to the Iran border to stop smuggling, and you could tell some of these missions were like ... we'll what was nice about it is we moved right at six months to Basra, and at that six month mark, the Iraqi Conflict, the original wars, ended right then and it went to New Dawn or something dawn ... that was the ... no longer like the occupation but the rebuilding ...

JM: Was this Iraqi Freedom?

DB: No, Iraqi Freedom was like over here now, at that six month mark.

JM: Right. Right.

DB: This was ... the combat rules changed and you couldn't freely engage, you couldn't ...

JM: This was when you moved down to Basra?

DB: Yeah. But, see, we didn't know this because we had taken over for the British and we were on the Iranian border so, the rules had kept the same for us because it was like invading a whole new city because the British didn't have roadways ... they flew everywhere. So ...

JM: And your mission now is on the Iranian border ... is to try to intercept ...

DB: Weapons.

JM: Okay: That the Iranians were funneling to ...

DB: Yes.

JM: Okay.

DB: So, Basra ... they were so happy to see us because they couldn't wait to try to blow some people up. That is all they did. We were lucky because they were also terrible at it.

JM: Right.

DB: The only thing they had to fight against before was helicopters, and it's almost impossible for your local insurgent to take down a helicopter.

JM: Right.

DB: So, now the Americans are coming over, and we're in the roads and we're going out in the town and they are just having a field day. But, they were also terrible at building IED's.

JM: So, when you say they were having a field day, they're having a field day, like attacking you guys? [00:33:02]

DB: Yeah. This is where the whole unit saw the most combat. A lotta rockets, tons of rockets, just like NATO rockets ...

JM: Right.

DB: And you know ... it's funny our...

JM: Did you experience, and you don't have to answer this if you don't want to ... up to this point, did you experience casualties like amongst your units or platoons or anything like that?

DB: Yeah.

JM: On a pretty heavy basis or ...?

DB: I don't want to say it was rare. It wasn't heavy like somebody died every day ...

JM: Sure.

DB: Like I said, they know who they are attacking. And you'll find that some of the units with the heaviest losses were the Reserve units or the National Guard units because they would much rather go after them.

JM: I see. They could distinguish between units?

DB: We all had markings on the vehicles and they knew.

JM: Right.

DB: And usually they could tell by the equipment too. So, we would ... we experienced casualties, but you know ... if we had like, a few throughout deployment, that was like a pretty normal pace ... your company losing one or two, or your squadron, which in Cavalry it's called a squadron, normal army would be a battalion, lose 5-10 guys. That's ... I think that's probably about average. Unless, you know, some units you were in like the Marines, they got dumped into some heavy combat with little to no equipment, and of course they got slaughtered ... but so ...

JM: So, we were talking about casualty rates, and things like that. So, that does intensify whenever you are down in Basra?

DB: Yeah.

JM: Okay.

DB: But, you know, we had a few deaths, but ... someone was looking out for our unit because a National Guard unit came to replace us about two months in, and we got rocket attacked on a regular basis down there, and the only people that ever died during the attacks were the National Guard unit and you could have our soldiers standing right next to the National Guard soldiers, cause that's how it worked, you know, they would train from us to take over.

JM: Right.

DB: And it was always the National Guard unit that ended up dying. And it's sad because some of them were only in country for a week to two weeks ...

JM: Oh man.

DB: And all of a sudden we're sending home all of these death notices. We've been here a year and I think we sent home four or five tops ... so yeah.

JM: So ... a question here is about how deployment affected your family back home and your relationship with family members, so if you'd like to talk about that, feel free. [00:35:42]

DB: Yeah. Well, okay so ... deployment didn't affect my relations back home. What affected my relations back home was the pop culture behind deployment, and everyone just assumed I was gonna come home a broken person, angry, violent ... and they started using those lines out of

nowhere ... that you're an angry, violent person. People that I haven't even talked to since before deployment, and they'd be like well you know Dan has changed so much since Afghanistan we just don't want to hang out with him. So, I found that all of the media attention had negatively affected my life when I was ...

JM: So, is this when you would visit? Cause the question was kinda asking like while you were in deployment, but ... are you saying like you'd come back home?

DB: Oh, I had come back home. I'm sorry I misunderstood.

JM: No, that's okay.

DB: yeah, so while I was on deployment ... I don't know ... like I said, [inaudible] had a family at all. I had a son at the time and I would Skype him about once a week, so ... but he was used to me not being there because I was in the military active duty.

JM: Sure.

DB: So, I would only see him on the weekends before deployment.

JM: Right.

DB: But, anyways ...

JM: Okay. Another ... we'll get back to that stateside question in a second, but in the media, one of the questions here is, how did the media give Americans an accurate portrayal of these wars, or, you know, how did you kind of think of that? Were you aware? Were you, kind of, able to digest what the media was saying whenever you were deployed, or ...? [00:37:05]

DB: No, we didn't have ... you know, I was always on fire bases, patrol bases, so we didn't have TV. I mean they only have the Armed Forces network anyways and that is completely censored.

JM: Right.

DB: So, I never really saw what was going on besides inside of my unit, I wouldn't know what was going on.

JM: Right.

DB: Unless it was a major operations on the [inaudible] that would come down on the intel brief that they would want me to know about.

JM: Right. So, since ... I guess after you got home then you did obviously see that from that perspective, did you think the media did an okay job of conveying the wars to people, or ...

DB: I think they did too good of a job when they focused on all the names and the back facts, just like the local veterans ... I said local ... national veteran stories do now where they take a soldier

and they're like 'look what a tough life he's had', he's a terrible wounded person and he looks like a beat up dog at a shelter, and it's like please donate now, he doesn't have anywhere to go. Starting from Afghanistan whenever I went over everyone was like 'Awe you're such a poor soldier, come here and let me rebuild you'. I don't need rebuilt.

JM: So many different people say that now. A good friend of mine, he was in the National Guard in Iraq ... that's what he always says. He says we're not, you know, toxic. Gabe at the thing yesterday said the same thing. It's interesting that I'm hearing that a lot. How did the war, or in this case, wars, did they change you personally, like did you return a whole different person or like, you know?

DB: Well, so Afghanistan, you kinda ... I was younger and I ... when I say younger it was like a year and a half apart I think total between the two.

JM: Yeah.

DB: But, I guess you can mature a lot in those ... under those circumstances.

JM: You kinda have to I guess maybe.

DB: Yeah. I didn't really care about my life too much at the time, I would do whatever, I would volunteer for any mission like no matter how dangerous. At the end of Iraq, with all of the rocket attacks, like ... coming so close to being able to go home to my son, by then coming so close to dying so many times, kinda made me more cautious in life ...

JM: Right. [00:39:12]

DB: Kinda calm down a little and let's think with our heads here.

JM: Okay. So, when you returned to the States, can you maybe talk a little bit about your adjustment period into civilian life, that kind of stuff?

DB: You know what? Oh, God that was a mess because I didn't even get to return to the states I went straight to Korea. Right to the ... by the DMZ and you want to talk about party.

JM: You went from Iraq back to the states but you were still on active duty?

DB: I went to school for two months and then I got sent to Korea. It was between Korea or back to Afghanistan. So I was like well let's go to Korea. It was just a booze fest every day.

JM: Did you like the Korean Army? Did you see the Korean Army? Were they ...

DB: We saw them a little bit, but every platoon has these two Koreans, American platoons with two Korean Army soldiers in them.

JM: Okay. More effective than the British you think?

DB: Yeah. They're brutal. That's an army I wouldn't want to mess with.

JM: That's good to hear cause considering who their neighbors are right?

DB: Yeah they're tough.

JM: Good. Alright. So, when did you ...

DB: I came back to the States around March 2011.

JM: And were you discharges at that point?

DB: No ... it's weird how it all works out ... I was ... I got orders for recruiting in Korea and that's very rare because ... you could tell this is when the budget kinda crunched and they were ... can't just spend endless amounts on the Army anymore, so, usually how it works is if you get orders for recruiting you leave the station that you are at, you go to a recruiting school, if you ... whether if you pass or fail you go back to your duty station, and then if you pass, recruiting command will pick you up as a soldier and they will give you orders, but they didn't want to pay for my plane ticket to recruiting school. So, I flew to the recruiting command in Baltimore, which is where I got orders for. They had no idea I was coming they let me pick any station I wanted to, and I had a year left on my contract, and they were like just sit in the office for a year.

JM: Why Baltimore? [00:41:25]

DB: Well, I picked closer to Pittsburgh so I was in Hagerstown, Maryland.

JM: Oh, okay.

DB: It was the Baltimore recruiting command, I could have gone anywhere ...

JM: So, it was kind of like a soft landing.

DB: Yeah.

JM: So, you were in Hagerstown, Maryland?

DB: Yeah.

JM: Recruiting like high school kids?

DB: High school kids with no future. It was easy, like, you know shooting fish in a barrel.

JM: What did you go out to high school?

DB: Didn't even have to. These kids had no future. They were lining up at our door to get into the Army.

JM: Wow.

DB: Yeah. We were turning people away. We ended up being one of the top recruiting stations in the country.

JM: Interesting. So, the local economy was bad ...

DB: It was bad ... education was terrible there ...

JM: This is what, 2011?

DB: All through 2011.

JM: So, the recession is still going on ...

DB: Yeah.

JM: Okay. Right. I see. Let's see ... so, I guess, maybe you had kind of a soft adjustment period because you ... go away from combat but you are still in the military, and then you're recruiting ... and then maybe talk about your transition to kinda civilian ... well actually, let's do this question first. How do you look at the wars that you fought in now compared to 2002 after you joined the military? Do you have an opinion?

DB: Oh, yeah. Now I look at them as a complete waste of time and manpower, energy ...

JM: Both wars? [00:42:46]

DB: Both wars. Fighting for ... some of the worst politicians I have ever met in my life, you know? I remember ... I think this is the worst America has ever seen, really to be quite honest.

JM: So, you strongly disliked Bush and Obama's policies on the wars?

DB: Yeah. I don't regret going, but you know, when I was young, I thought it was the coolest shit ever. And now, like, what a fucking idiot I was, right?

JM: So, what specifically, like what problems did you have with like the way that the wars were fought or the choices, like why did you think that these ended up being a waste of time?

DB: They were political wars, you know? There's ... they tied your hands so much ... you lead people over there to get killed and then you bring them home, you don't care about them and then everything just goes right back to the way it was cause you don't give a shit deep down inside. Which is ... like Vietnam ... what a ginormous waste of time ... just wasting.

JM: So, are you saying that while you were over in Afghanistan and Iraq, did you get a sense that the only reason why the area that you were in was "Stable", you know, to the extent that it was, was because you guys were there and the minute that you walked away ...

DB: Oh, yeah. Okay, so I was on the Iran border, and ... it's funny too cause when you're in Iraq, it looks like [inaudible] but dirty. There's just sand everywhere. So we go up on the border ... it's ... the berm is probably just about this high, sand berm all the way down through the whole country ...

JM: Right.

DB: And we go up and we look at Iran, and I have pictures of Iran ... um ... green, spots of green grass, right, not everywhere. Little ... I don't wanna say lakes, but like little puddles but big ... water.

JM: Water.

DB: Yeah. Any water over there looked amazing. Guard towers, they were building roads right up to the border and all the Iraqi ...

JM: A more advanced country?

DB: Yeah ... it was just night and day between three feet; it was crazy. But at all of the Iraqi border patrols ... like as soon as you leave we're just gonna give all of the stuff you give us to the Iran Army cause they're just gonna come over here.

JM: So ...

DB: And that's coming straight from the horses mouth.

JM: Right. Right. So the minute ... are American forces still there or have they left? [00:44:57]

DB: That's a good question. I know there's still a lot in Kuwait. I don't know how many are ...

JM: Yeah.

DB: Yeah.

JM: Okay, wow. Did you ... since you served under President Bush and Obama ... Correct?

DB: Yeah.

JM: Was there a difference to you?

DB: Oh, yeah. So, President Bush was ... I mean he might have been an idiot ... at least come off that way in real life, but under him in the military, it was awesome. Morale was up, money was flowing, people were happy, people weren't struggling, there was programs for everybody ...

JM: Is this just cause there was war and the funding was better because of the appropriations, that sort of thing? Is that what you would say, or?

DB: Well, yeah, but I'm sure ... there was more focus on the military. Morale was so high, and everyone genuinely enjoyed what they did. Most people ... you know obviously some won't enjoy everything.

JM: Right. Right.

DB: But then under Obama, we became like a tool. A little pawn, and it was ... well you might not get a paycheck because the republicans and the democrats can't get along. So, we're not gonna have a budget. So, next week you're not gonna get paid. We'll that great, you know if you're a private and you live in the barracks which who cares. But what about the 35% of the force that has families, you know?

JM: Right.

DB: Like off post.

JM: So, what you are saying is like, political conflicts between republicans and democrats under Obama really affected you guys.

DB: really destroyed morale in the military. And all of the pink slips didn't help anybody, but really the military now it was just so high stress and so ... everyone hated it under ... the last like, 2011, 2012, 2013 ... just kind of was a terrible place to be.

JM: And, so ... were there cuts to the budget that affected the people too...

DB: Oh, yeah

JM: Or was it also partly because maybe ... it seems like most people in the military are more inclined to be republican to begin with, so was it kind of like a 'well now I'm serving under a democratic president that I don't agree with' ... [00:46:54]

DB: Yep. You know what, it's very funny too cause when I was in Iraq and that was when Obama was running ... people were legitimately happy that he was going to put an end to the war. Like there was a surprising amount of people that were like I'm gonna vote for Obama because this war has been going on for way too long now.

JM: Okay.

DB: And ... it's just ... I mean, obviously not all his fault, but it ended up being a terrible world. If you were in the military, it was just a terrible time.

JM: Do you feel like the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were different like in a sense of ... I've talked to some people who were in both wars and they said that, well you know I really thought that the Afghanistan War was like necessary? Especially related to 9/11 and the Taliban.

DB: Yeah.

JM: And they were less clear about Iraq. Was there any sense of that for you? Your experience in Afghanistan seems a little bit different.

DB: Yeah. Well, I mean ... was it necessary? It took ten years and no one even saw Osama Bin Laden get killed and his body, and I'm not trying to say conspiracy, but if you do things in the middle of the night and don't make a public announcement of it and you throw his body in international waters that nobody saw, I'm inclined to believe that it wasn't the case, but so ...

JM: You're not helping your cause ...

DB: Yeah.

JM: Trying to make it ...

DB: There's people still in Afghanistan ... is 14 years anywhere worth it with no results? No. So, I don't think ...

JM: So, you're saying the length of time especially, since it's such a long war.

DB: Yeah. There was never a clarified mission, so ... go climb some hills and look for some terrorists and some dudes with goats, you know ... and bombs ...

JM: Right.

DB: Who cares, right? Why wasn't the mission to always just either blow the shit out of the country, you know, or focus all of your effort on Osama. It just wasn't it ...

JM: So, you're saying it was just kind of half measures? [00:48:41]

DB: Yes. Always half measures.

JM: And then what, it was just doomed to fail from the beginning because if you're putting that kind of limitation on the people who are fighting, you're not gonna get the results that you are looking for? Is that a fair way of saying it?

DB: Oh, yeah, for sure. I mean, that's you know, you can just see it now ... what a colossal waste of time. It was for everybody.

JM: So, here's ... I've got one more ... I got two more questions for you, and you don't have to answer this one if you don't want to, but I know you have strong opinions about it. Medical care at the VA?

DB: Ah, it's fucking terrible. Its criminal is what it is. You got a bunch of people that sit there and collect nice paychecks for their level of experience and schooling and they are tenured after three years, plus they have a union. It's a government job. Why do you need a union? And ... a job that is 100% required to follow the labor department guidelines, like if you go off even for a second, you know ... someone is gonna tattle on you.

JM: Right.

DB: It's absolutely ridiculous. You have a bunch of workers that don't give a shit about anything, a few good ones, but you know, some people get great care, a lot of people get no care.

JM: So, you've had poor experiences ...?

DB: Very poor experiences.

JM: Okay.

DB: If you go to the VA, they will try to say ... they spend more time and energy trying to say that there is nothing wrong with you, than trying to find what is wrong with you.

JM: So, you think one of the big problems there is that they ... maybe they try to take the expedient route and they try to just kind of triage, and they don't really spend enough time ... Is that kind of what you are saying?

DB: They just want to get rid of you.

JM: Okay.

DB: As blatant as just throwing away your form, your paperwork ...

JM: Right.

DB: And losing your appointment or keep going and be like 'there's nothing wrong with you'.

JM: Right. Right, right. This last question is, how did you feel about the way your country treated you, in terms of your service? You can interpret that to mean fellow citizens, or you could also talk ... you could interpret to me maybe like the armed forces or whatever. [00:50:40]

DB: Nothing was like top notched to be honest. Everyone was great ... overkill to be honest ... I get tired of being thanked all of the time. Night and day from the Vietnam War ... 100% opposite.

JM: And, since your attitude toward the war is kinda sour, maybe that is a reason why that kinda bothered you ... did that bother you when people were thanking you?

DB: Can you imagine if someone thanked you for being a historian every day? Like you are a historian cause you like to be a historian.

JM: Right, right, right.

DB: I was a soldier because that's what I wanted to do. I don't want to be thanked every single day publicly for it.

JM: Right.

DB: Yeah so ... it's ...

JM: And, do think, perhaps, that kind of enthusiasm might also be why people have this kind of weird paternalistic attitude toward veterans that you were talking about? Where you compared that lost puppy in the animal shelter.

DB: Yeah.

JM: And then, like, maybe that kind of robs you of your agency a little bit, right? Like, it makes you kind of, the word that people might use is "infantilizes," like makes you like, kind of, a little kid?

DB: Oh, that's exactly what it does.

JM: Alright. This last question is, do you have any photographs, journals, maps, home movies, even poetry you wrote while you were deployed that you would wish to share? And if the answer is no, then it's no problem.

DB: I got a bunch of stuff, you know. There was a lot down time ... it's just something that nobody ever talks about. There's the same amount of down time in the war ... so ... yeah, we did nothing but ... and so, Afghanistan was harder cause digital cameras were just on the market ... ones that you could afford, you know, I got a 6 mega pixel camera and it was \$300. And, it was like the best thing ever, but it was like that thick and that ...

JM: Yeah.

DB: And at 6 mega pixels ... you can't even buy a phone that only has 6 mega pixels in the camera ...

JM: Right.

DB: So, of Iraq I got a bunch of stuff ... Afghanistan I got a decent amount, it's probably [inaudible].

JM: Nice. Thanks for your time; this interview is over. Thanks, that was great, that was awesome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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