

Robert Morris University Oral History Center

Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans Project



Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

GUY RESCHENTHALER

Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps, U.S. Naval Officer, Iraq War

May 12, 2016

**Reschenthaler, Guy (1983 –), Oral History Interview, May 12, 2016.**

Biographical Sketch: Guy Reschenthaler was a Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps Officer that served in Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2009. Reschenthaler served under Task Force 134 as a prosecutor trying cases against terrorists and terrorism related offenses. Guy Reschenthaler left the service in 2012 and became a District Judge and eventually ran for public office becoming a Pennsylvania State Senator which is his current job.

Topics Covered in Interview:

9/11

Green Zone

Baghdad

Judge Advocate General Corps

Task Force 134

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[00:03]

JC: This interview is part of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Project undertaken by the Oral History Center at Robert Morris University. I am Josh Caskey and today is May 12, 2016 and I am joined by Guy Reschenthaler. Guy, can you state your full name and if I have your consent to interview you today?

GR: Sure, absolutely. Well you have my consent, and Guy Reschenthaler is my name. Do you need me to spell it for the record, or...?

JC: No, that's fine, I have it right here. Excellent. And, uh, and you don't remain... obviously you don't want to remain anonymous, so we can jump right into this. Let's start with when were you born and where you were born.

GR: Sure. I was born in Pittsburgh in 1983.

JC: Okay. And, uh, talk a little bit about wanting to service. Well, let's even back it up a little more, uh, where did you graduate high school and what did you do out of high school?

GR: So I graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School, which is in the South Hills of Pittsburgh. I was raised there and went all the way through Kindergarten all through twelfth grade, uh, through the West Jefferson Hills School District system. But I was always interested in the military, uh, I think I started really getting interested in middle school, that's when I really got turned on to it. I remember that I liked the Navy in particular. I played roller hockey... my goalie year I had a Navy sticker on the pads and everything. I just, for whatever reason, I was always really drawn to the military but specifically the Navy. So when I went into college I, my goal was to be a JAG, a Judge Advocate General, and they do all the military work in the, uh, all the legal work in the military. And each, uh, the Marines, Air Force, Navy, Army, they all have their JAG Corps. Uh, but to back up, I really was torn in middle school with what I wanted to do. A part of me wanted to be a lawyer, but another part of me wanted to be a military officer. So we just, my parents were just stopped in Charleston, South Carolina on the way from Pittsburgh on the way to Hilton Head for summer vacation. We talked to my dad's best friend from High school, who I didn't know at the time was a Navy JAG who had become an Assistant US attorney. So he asked me, I was in seventh grade, "What do you wanna do when you grow up?" Real generic. And I told him very seriously this dilemma, I said "Look, I really wanna be a lawyer, but I also really wanna go into the military." And he said, "You can do both." And I said "What?!", because I had never heard that before. And he told me about the JAG corps, and he told me some stories about cases he had, talked about training in Newport, Rhode Island, and then going from the JAG corps to the US attorney's office to be a federal prosecutor. And right then in there I said, well, that's what I want to do. So going into eighth grade I knew I wanted to be a JAG.

JC: Okay. So... so you knew early on what you wanted to do.

GR: Right, it's unique. I don't know too many people who knew right away that they wanted to do that.

JC: That's... that's really cool. Uh, so you went to college. Where did you go to college at?

[03:05]

GR: I went to Penn State Behrend in Erie.

JC: Okay, and then you went to law school?

GR: Right, and I was so... It was funny because when I was at... My freshman year is when 9/11 happened, and uh, I had already really wanted to be in the military, but after that it was really heightened. So I actually thought about enlisting in the Navy or in the Marines after that, but I thought no, just stay, finish, get in the JAG Corps, then go. But I graduated in three years, but part of my motivation to graduate was to go to be part of the War on Terror in the capacity of hopefully a JAG officer. So that was one of the reasons why I graduated early, uh, then I went right from undergrad to law school. And at Duquesne, the uh, one of the reasons why I went to Duquesne was because the Dean, I'm sorry, the head of the Navy, the actual JAG, was a graduate of Duquesne law school. Dean Guter, he had graduated from law school. Then when I went after my... first year, the Admiral left the JAG Corps and became the Dean of Duquesne University School of Law. So you talk about just being very fortunate. So Dean Guter, uh, former Admiral Guter took me under his wing and I applied for the JAG corps as soon as I could, which is after your first year. Very fortunate, got in, the acceptance rate... it was competitive to get in. Got commissioned, by the time the paperwork went through it was 2006 in October. Got commissioned then, and then just waited till I graduated, took the bar exam, and then I went to Officer Development School in Newport, Rhode Island. So I took the bar exam in the summer of 2007, within a few weeks went to Officer Development School. And then at Officer Development School I found out I passed the bar exam.

JC: Oh, that's, that had to have felt great.

GR: Yeah especially being... in the middle of Officer Development School, and then knowing that you passed. And then I went to Naval Justice School in the, uh, winter... spring of that year, January through I think like late March. And Naval Justice School is just an extra, they say an extra semester of law school, but the emphasis is really on trial advocacy and military law, and the nuances between law and military law. So we did a lot of focus on the SCRA, Service Member Civil Relief Act, and a lot of family law from the difference, uh, the different point of jurisdictions. Because in the military you'd have different custody arrangements and people would be moving from one place to another, and the SCRA is huge, it just it protects service members when they deploy. We don't need to get in the details of that, but you learn about that, and then the UCMJ, Uniform Code of Military Justice. And then from there got out and went to Norfolk, uh NAB Norfolk, where I was... It was called a legal assistance attorney. So I did real small matters of criminal defense, and uh anything that related to an individual sailor, Marine or Coastguardsman. So anything from family law issues to a consumer law issue to landlord-tenant problems. Being a veteran, you know a lot of times we have problems with landlords. And so, it was just a hodgepodge of experiences, really like a general practice for being in the law. And that's really where all the JAGs cut their teeth, they usually do that for about a year or two years. But I remember the first day I went, I reported, I told my Commanding Officer, Katherine Wagner, I said "I'm glad I'm here, but I

really wanna be in Iraq.” And he was almost offended by it, because you came and you report, and you said ‘I wanna go to Iraq.’ And I explained to him why I wanted to go, and he said “Okay, as soon as you’re able, we’ll take a look at it.” At the time, the JAG corps had a moratorium on Navy JAGs, they had to be in active service for a year before they could deploy. Which made sense, because you had to have some kind of experience before you just went over. So, the year passed when I was in Norfolk, I had some interesting cases but they were in the general practice. Volunteered again to go to Iraq and then, uh, was finally selected to go, and I went to uh.... I reported to, uh... Fort Jackson. South Carolina. So, uh, couldn’t remember for a second. But, Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and it was called Navy IA Combat Training. And, uh, you’re a Marine, so what you went through pales in comparison to what we went through. But it was, I actually had a fun time, because we did all these exercises. Convoy exercises, they had uh, a Humvee that would flip, and you had to unbuckle yourself and take a defensive position with your M16. Uh, we did a lot of rifle practices with the M16, 9mm, uh did orienteering. It was like a crash course, I think it was like three or five weeks, somewhere in that range. It wasn’t really that long.

[07:48]

JC: Okay, so still pretty long though.

GR: Yeah, but I was... I really enjoyed it, I had a good time. And then uh, from there we went to, uh, Camp Udari and Camp Virginia in Kuwait. And so we did, uh, live convoy training, they had locals that came and instead of rocks they were throwing tennis balls. We were working on the radio to make sure we knew what we were doing in a convoy, and again, and to you, a Marine, that’s probably normal everyday training for you. But for a Navy JAG, for us, it was a blast.

JC: Oh, I’m sure it was.

GR: Because, it was... You know, our friends were sitting there doing research in some firm back home, and we’re on the Udari range, shooting M16s.

JC: Is that Camp Buehring, is that what it was called?

GR: Uh, I thought it was Udari.

JC: The Udari Ranges, yeah. Okay. Camp Buehring is there as well, so it might be separate.

GR: Okay, it might be. I think... We originally got to Camp Virginia, does that make sense?

JC: Yeah, yeah, I know where that’s at.

GR: And then from there we went to Udari, and we were only in Udari for maybe three or four days. I mean it wasn’t too, too long. Uh... and then we came back to Virginia and then we went to BIA, Baghdad International Airport, and from there everybody went to their own duty stations. And just to clarify, there was a lot of JAGs that I was with, but there were also, uh, pilots that were doing individual augmentations, nurses... And what the individual augmentation was, was it an idea where you would take... the military would take someone from the Coast Guard, Air Force, or Navy, and then take them as

an individual and put them in an Army unit to augment the forces and give somebody in the Army a break. But by this time, that would have been 2008-2009, some of the task force in Iraq that were Army task force were completely manned by service members that were outside of the Army. So where... when I eventually got to where I going, Task Force 134, it was an Army task force but the CO was a Captain in the Navy in '06 that... his XO was in the Air Force. It was mainly Air Force, Navy, and we had one Coastguardsman who was a JAG that was with us. But we responsible for detaining operations and prosecutions.

[10:00]

JC: So this was 2000... When did you finally get to Iraq, 2009?

GR: Right. So I got to Iraq in the spring of 2009.

JC: So what was your understanding of what was going on over there at that time?

GR: It... From a legal perspective, we were really hyper-focused on the detainee ops and... what was really going on was we were prosecuting... really, there was a two-fold mission. One was the actual detainee operations and what we were gonna do with a prisoner, the internment facilities... as you know, POW camps but a little different from a legal perspective. But, what we were doing with the TEFs and also how we were prosecuting those detainees and those insurgents that were still in the custody of the coalition forces. So a lot of us went to.... Either went to the Central Criminal Court of Iraq, or a unit called Blue Cell, or you went to the main office. The main office was more concerned about the actual detainee operations, and that was at Camp Cropper in Iraq. That's where it was headquartered. The Central Criminal Court of Iraq was an... was at FOB Unit 3, which was in downtown Baghdad, right across from the US embassy, right near Camp Prosperity... or Forward Operating Base Prosperity.

JC: Is that considered the Green Zone or no?

GR: Yeah. So it's interesting, so when I got there it was the Green Zone, and... I should have brought a map, because I actually have a pretty interesting map that shows this, but... It was a Green Zone when I got there, but in June, they opened it to the international zone. And what happened was for three days, three days we couldn't leave the forward operating base, and the t-walls opened... or they tore down some of the t-walls and then the local Iraqis had access to the heart of the city. And then we retracted to our forward operating bases, so at the time it was FOB... Forward Operating Base Unit 3 right across the Embassy, Embassy was right across the street. And then we had... Prosperity was right around where we were too. I forget the other FOB, but those were the ones we went to the most. And then right around there was the Central Criminal Court of Iraq, and that was always in the Red Zone, because that was... The Central Criminal Court of Iraq was set up by the coalition forces but with the Iraqi government, and they had never had a federal court system before. So that was established in order to prosecute federal cases, particularly acts of terror. Josh, I'm jumping around a lot.

JC: No, it's perfect. It's perfect, in fact you're kind of going right in line with what I was gonna ask anyway. Uh... so let's talk a little bit about your time in country, where exactly did you live at, and what

was like a... I know there's no such thing as a normal day over there, but what would your days consist of?

[12:56]

GR: Sure. Well, uh... I guess first I should say this, I was delayed for three weeks from uh... Camp Jackson, Fort Jackson, because I had a surgery, and I was cleared by Navy standards but the Army standards required a longer wait time. So there was a little bit of a mix up. So I had to go back to Norfolk, then I had to go back to Fort Jackson, then go. But the good thing about that was that I met all the JAGs that would be eventually with me in Iraq, but when I finally got to Baghdad in the Central Criminal Court of Iraq, the uh... There wasn't any space for me to sit with the other attorneys in the... We were in a building called Building 5. Very generic name, but the building was actually the Baath Party Headquarters. So... so a really ornate building, it was five... it was actually five stories high, but really ten stories because all the floors were double floors. But anyhow, so I get there, and the only place for me to sit was a desk with all the linguists, and it... which was really interesting 'cause I didn't speak any Arabic, but from... pretty much all day unless I was with the other Americans, Arabic was being spoken, so I started to pick up Arabic quickly and... Two of the linguists in particular took me under their tutelage to speak Arabic, and we would eat and they would refuse to speak in English with me unless absolutely necessary. So I learned real fast to say "pass me the coffee" or uh... "I want this or that"... Then in court I got to know the numbers quickly. I could say things real quickly like "sit down" or "stand up" or "here's a photo." But anyhow, I'm digressing, my normal day... My normal day was get up, my roommate and I would usually go to the gym, run, get breakfast, and then we would go to the Central Criminal Court of... I'm sorry, we would go to Building 5 to get ready to go to the Central Criminal Court of Iraq. We would change up our times just so we weren't predictable, but we would usually leave between 8:45 and 9:15. We'd get in, uh... I'd call it a convoy but it was really up-armored SUVs, and we'd get in, there'd be like five or six lawyers. Every lawyer would usually have their own interpreter, usually, and then there were Masters of Arms that would take us from point A to point B. We'd, uh... get on our battle rattle, which again I don't want to overemphasize this 'cause I was a JAG, but we had your normal body armor, Kevlar helmet, and then the officers had 9mm that... Masters of arms had M16s and 9mms, and then we would convoy to the Central Criminal Court of Iraq. It was... It was a fairly short drive, but we would change up the route all the time, and then we would park, get out, and then we would walk into court. And there was a room in the court, I remember it, and it had pegs so we could hang up our body armor. Some of us would bring fresh shirts to change into, 'cause of course it was really hot in the summer, and then from there we would just start to try our cases. The court systems a little different over there, I could talk about that, but uh... We would do that, sometimes I would get there early enough to have breakfast with the Iraqi judges or prosecutors and the lawyers... Sometimes I'd even eat lunch with them, and sometimes if I was there late enough I would have dinner with them before coming back to the FOB. And then, uh... So then at night, we would come back to the FOB and we would... I'd go to my computer, put in all the information, take notes, prep for the next day's cases. That would be pretty late, then we would usually... My friends and I would usually lift weights at that point, and then go have dinner if we didn't eat already. And then at night, usually... as you know, there's not too much to do over there, so we would uh... usually go on the roof of the Building Five and have a cigar or two. It was phenomenal

because the city was actually really beautiful, especially at night, it was all lit up. And we were up on one of the tallest buildings of the city, so some of the best times I had were just on that roof smoking cigars, and talking to the linguists, and the guys who were in the uh... the Central Criminal Court with me.

[16:53]

JC: Oh wow. I don't know how much you can actually talk about as far as cases that you maybe worked on while you were over there, but if there's anything that you can talk about, I'd be interested to hear.

GR: Yes. So, the uh... The cases that I had started off fairly low profile. They were... We started out with fake identification cases, which to us as Americans we think of it as... pretty minor crimes, because you think of college kids using a fake ID to get beer. But in Iraq, the fake ID was indicative of someone that was usually engaging in terrorist activity. In the past, the penalties were somewhat... they were pretty stiff. If you could show possession, that was a two year penalty. If you could show use, it was five years. So... and by the way, in Iraq, they're usually consecutive sentences, which means that you serve one sentence and then you serve the next sentence. And seven years... If you could show that someone possessed and used a fake ID that was seven years. Seven is very important because that's the number of years that was the average life expectancy in an average Iraqi prison. So you got somebody for seven years, that was almost tantamount to a death sentence in Iraq. Now there's a lot of other factors... Escapes are pretty common in Iraqi prisons and some other things. But, it was a pretty serious crime. So start off with that, and then we worked our way up a list. And I can't really talk about the details of the list, but it went up by threat level, so every terrorist that we had in our custody was ranked from the most threatening to the least. And at the time, we were really trying to release a lot of the prisoners 'cause we were getting ready to wind the war down. Uh... and so from a kinetic operations point of view it was winding down, but from a prosecutions point of view we were just ramping up and I got there right at the right time. So uh... we started off with the fake ID cases, we had some other cases, but then I started to do acts of terror cases. And what was really interesting was the way that the statute of forces agreement was written, and the way our understanding of uh... our agreements with the Iraqis were, if a detainee had a crime that was against a member of the Coalition Forces, then we got jurisdiction as grievance party to prosecute. Not only for the crime that affected us as a coalition forces, but for any crime that they were accused of. So you really had a wide range to prosecute the terrorists for. And sometimes we could get them for one crime but not for another crime, but we knew that the penalty on one crime was more severe so we would get jurisdiction and then prosecute for the other underlying offense that may or may not have involved the coalition forces. But again, I'm kind of digressing. One of the... A few of the bigger cases I had over there was I had a bust-and-turn case. So bust-and-turn is when you get someone that's low on the totem pole uh... they're arrested and you make a deal with them, so in exchange for either them walking free, or having a reduced sentence, or being charged with a lower crime, they're to provide testimony against the next person up in the chain. It's very common to use in a prosecution, especially a federal prosecution, but we were involved in a bust-and-turn with uh... a few individuals, and we were going after the top dog. He was in our custody, I do not remember his name, but he owned... He would have been tantamount to the Best Buy or Circuit City of Iraq. So he was getting a lot of... he was getting a lot of, uh, like circuit boards, and a lot of electronics. But he was using that to make IEDs [Improvised Explosive Devices]. So, uh... we had to do a bust-and-turn, but he was... it



was very hard to get him because he was buying these in the course of his normal business but then of course using them for nefarious purposes. So finally, I was able to get somebody to testify against him, and we were to get a conviction on him for supplying parts for the IEDs. Those that were in the chain that we busted-and-turned, we were able to get them to plead guilty to lower offenses. And uh, these guys had been in our prison facilities for a while, so normally if we cut a deal with them then they would actually walk free. 'Cause the agreement was this: if they had been convicted, then the time they spent in the TIF, the Theater Internment Facility, would count towards their sentence. So if I had a guy who had been in our theatre internment facility for five years, and I got him a four year sentence, he'd walk out because he had already been detained for over four years. If I had somebody who I had a ten year conviction on and he had been in our prison for five years, then he would be released to the Iraqis to serve out the remaining five years. And I can tell you that a lot of the times it was very traumatic, they... a lot of the terrorists would cry, they get very upset, because they were horrified of being released to the Iraqis. The standard of life in the theatre internment facility that we had was much higher than that in the local Iraqi jail.

[21:35]

JC: So they didn't wanna be... they didn't wanna be in the Iraqi facilities at all?

GR: Not at all.

JC: It was like their worst nightmare.

GR: Exactly, a lot of them didn't want to go. If they were high ranking and... they came from... they had money, then they might welcome that because they could usually buy their way out or they could get released uh... But for the most part, for rank and file terrorists, they wanted to stay in the theatre internment facility.

JC: Okay. So, uh, did you travel around at all to different FOBs [Forward Operating Bases] or combat outposts (COPs) while you were there?

GR: You know, not too much. I had friends who did, but my role over there was... So we were divided into, some people covered the north and some people covered the south, and some people covered... Anbar [large province in western Iraq], or some people... You were given a region. I wasn't given a region, and that's because my officer in charge... I think he just recognized that he thought I would be good at the cases, so he wanted me... I don't know, I could ask him why, but I think he just thought I'd be good at it. But he gave me the Special Forces cases, so... other people had geographical regions, I was focused simply on special forces captures, so anybody that special forces had captured I had... I had them in my docket, so to speak, to prosecute.

JC: So these are higher profile insurgents?

GR: I did, I had higher profile cases, and my cases were from all over the country. Which was really... was really nice. But the other folks would travel more, I rarely... I rarely uh, went anywhere outside of Baghdad. And a lot of that is too is because we had a group called GIDDICK, and I forget what GIDDICK

stands for, and Blue Cell, and they prepped a lot of the cases before they handed them to the prosecutor. For example, they had already done interviews, they had already collected the evidence, we'd get a big box or several boxes of that physical evidence. Those guys were traveling a lot and doing interviews because they had to collect the information, and we were just given it to prosecute in court. It's much different because normally when you're a prosecutor, you're dealing with emotions, you're dealing with talking to the police that are involved, the witnesses... In Iraq, partially because travel was so difficult, we were just given the tail end of the cases. And frankly, it was really nice, 'cause you really got to focus on your litigation skills when you were there, 'cause that's all you were doing. So you were preparing cross examinations, direct examinations... They really didn't have closing or opening arguments but you were still expected to say a few words, and then really working to get the convictions when you were there. And the convictions were... I'm really Americanizing a lot of the terminology, but their court system is different. So instead of having a trial, which is a fact finding part of our legal system, you would have what is called an IH, an Investigative Hearing, and the judge... They don't have juries, so they have a judge, and that judge is there just to decide whether or not there's enough information for a detention order. But that's tantamount to a conviction. Then that case, whatever the detention order is given on that the defendant is convicted of, that goes to what they call the trial level. The trial level would be our sentencing phase plus the first appellate level. So it goes to a panel of judges, and they decide if the penalty... well, normally you know what's gonna be assessed and you ask for that, but they decide if that penalty is just and whether there was enough evidence to hold that conviction. Again, that was called a detention order. So, I don't want to get too much into legalese, but the terminology is different. And then their first appellate level, Court of Cassation I believe it was called, was there, and they had a supreme court. And anybody that got a life or death sentence got an automatic appeal to their supreme court.

[25:41]

JC: Just one appeal?

GR: One appeal, and I did the appeal, so.... I did all the Special Forces captures, then as we call them 'collateral duties', which is crazy because they really weren't collateral at all, but... uh, you know how the military works with... with what they call collateral duties. I was responsible for the appeals, and then I was also responsible for all crimes originating from the Theater Internment Facilities. So, uh, I did do some of the pallet work and it was basically writing responses to the appeals. Just like in the United States, you would just write a brief in response to the appeal.

JC: So it... For the appeal process, is it similar in time to what you would see in the United States, or...?

GR: No, no, no. It's much faster.

JC: It's faster, okay.

GR: And for the death penalty... Once the death penalty conviction is upheld, I believe they have to be executed within—before the first full moon. I forget the exact thing but it's actually a lunar cycle. But there's a reason for it, and in Iraq, uh... it's very, it's very common to escape from prison, so the

emphasis is to the case over with and then execute before that person has the chance to escape. If you remember, when... I wasn't there when Saddam Hussein was executed, but when Saddam was executed... sentence came down and he was quickly executed, and it's because that lunar cycle was about to end. So, I don't know if you remember but... [Unintelligible] it was very, it was very quick, and people thought that it was somewhat underhanded, but really in their system you have to get that conviction done before their lunar cycle ends.

JC: Okay. So during your time over there, did you feel like what you were doing was... you were being used effectively? Were you... like you were actually accomplishing... You get people from—In all different job fields in the military, and some people have different perspectives on how they were used. How did you feel?

[27:23]

GR: Right. I mean... It was... My six months or so in Iraq and Baghdad, that first... that deployment I had to the Central Criminal Court of Iraq was phenomenal. I felt like I was part of a mission, I felt like what I was doing was very worthwhile, I felt like I was contributing to the War on Terror. I felt like I was helping contribute to the law, and order, and stability of Iraq. So I have no complaints whatsoever about my time in Iraq, and... a lot of people come up and say "oh thank you for serving, we really appreciate it." I almost feel guilty because I really enjoyed my time in Iraq. I know it wasn't all rosy and everything, and there were definitely... You know, some things happened and everything, but. But for the most part, I was very thankful being given the opportunity to serve in Iraq, and given the opportunity to serve with a litigation role. 'cause I felt like that was my strongest suit and I could actually go and prosecute cases.

JC: Okay. Was there any uh... instances of death threats or anything with litigators over there?

GR: So it's interesting, 'cause when I left one of my instructors from Naval Justice School ended up taking over the officer in charge position, and I met up with him about a year later and he said, "hey we got a lot of intel," saying that there were all these threats and all these plans to attack the Central Criminal Court of Iraq and etcetera. But I don't really remember ever being all that concerned. I mean some things happened, we had... I was very fortunate, I was in the right place at the right time, so I'll give you an example. August 19<sup>th</sup> was when the August, of course the August 19<sup>th</sup> bombings took place, but it was a... like the Oklahoma City bombing of Baghdad, but it was synchronized attacks. Now looking back, there's some thought that it was the beginnings of ISIS, but at the time we just thought it was Al-Qaeda. Uh... but a lot of people do think that that was the first, one of the big ISIS attacks. Again, we just didn't know about ISIS at that point, but uh... There was synchronized attacks on federal buildings in Baghdad, and I was uh... I was on my morning off or my day off, we got a half-day a week and one full day a month off, otherwise we were just working, I mean we really did work twenty-four... I don't want to say 24/7 but we were usually working seven days a week. Uh, and uh I think it was my full day off, so I went to the gym, went for a longer run, lifted weights, and I was coming back, and I was staying... A lot of people were staying at CHUs, compartmentalized housing units, but I was staying at a building right next to Building 5, which was where the Iraqi Operational Military stayed. And for Iraq, it was really nice, it was all cinderblocks and there was indoor showers, you could still go out with white shoes and

everything. But long story short, so I'm coming back from the shower outside, for whatever reason I showered and the wet shoes... That day I was coming inside and going to my room, and the door just blew open, and I mean it was really powerful, and it was because of the bombing. So I went back in my room and I didn't have time to get on my ACUs, Army Combat Uniform, but I threw on my Navy PT shirt, my shorts and my flipflops, and just ran to the top of the building to see what was going on, 'cause I knew something had happened, I knew something was going on out there. And I look out and you could just see black spots from the bombings of August 19<sup>th</sup>, and it was kinda... I was really worried because I couldn't tell if the Central Criminal Court of Iraq got hit and uh... It's not like back in the States where we... we didn't have cell phones, but only the officer in charge had a cell phone, and one, maybe two people that were at court that day had cell phones, so I didn't know what was going on. So I ran back down, threw on my gear, and ran into Building 5, this happened very quickly, just to see what went on. When the guys came back and they said there was a bombing, and they said... I wasn't there, but they said that when it hit, the ceiling of the Central Criminal Court of Iraq lifted, so they could actually see daylight coming through it. And uh, they said the cases just stopped and uh... then they came back, but they were very concerned. None of... none of the members of the Central Criminal Court of Iraq were injured, that building was not hit, I'm not sure why they didn't target it because you would have thought that it was a big target. Maybe they tried and failed, I don't know. But uh, no one was injured, but a few of the lawyers that we were prosecuting with had relatives that had been killed or injured. I remember one guy lost his, I think it was his first cousin, he was really upset. His first name was Teriq, I can't remember his last name. But anyhow, I remember he was away for a few days because of that. But yeah, that happened, but then again you just didn't... I don't know, I just don't remember really registering it, I was just like 'I'm here, I gotta do this job, and...' Honest, you can't be that—too... too concerned.

[32:20]

JC: So the moral of the story would probably be that there's no safe place in a country like Iraq during the war?

GR: Yeah, not at all. I mean, not at all. When I first got there, there was a uh... Someone found an IED in a Port-o-John that just didn't detonate, and that was pretty close to when I came in, and so... Think about it, you go in the restroom and there could be an IED, you don't know. So I don't know, what I did was I was just like I can't control that, I got a job to do and I'm just going to focus on that. But... We actually got mortared a lot too, 'cause Sadr City was across the river, and so when uh... When the terrorists would try to hit the embassy, if they overshoot it would hit FOB Unit 3. So we had bunkers, and... I remember at one point I kind of got sick and the alarms were going off on the mortars, and I went to get my laundry, and I was walking from where you picked up your laundry to back to my room, and the alarm's going off. And there's this guy, and he was uh... They called me captain, 'cause my uniform had that bars, railroad tracks, and they can't tell the difference between Army and Navy. So yeah the guy was like, "Captain, captain!" and he was a guy, he was either from India or Nepal I forget where, but... I knew him 'cause I would just talk to those guys a lot, and he's like "come over, get in the bunker." I just remember thinking like, I'm just sick of getting into bunkers so I just kept walking. I mean you just get to the point where you get sick of it. But, that was probably foolish looking back on it, but I

did it. But yeah, that's it. We had a convoy that got hit but I was, again very fortunate that I wasn't on the convoy. So, and that convoy was going... It was going on Route Irish.

JC: I've heard of it, yeah.

[34:00]

GR: So yeah, a lot of the roads were named after college football teams, but one of the most dangerous ones was Route Irish, and it went from the FOB Unit 3 back to... I think it went to Camp Cropper. It was either Liberty or Cropper. But I mean, basically the same area. But uh... and then uh, convoy got hit, and one person died but he wasn't in my unit. One woman from my unit was severely injured, they almost had to amputate her leg but she still has her leg today, but she was out of the theater at that point. And then another one, uh... had shrapnel hit her face, and uh she was back within like five or six days. She had a concussion, like she had a scar on her forehead, but I can't believe she came back when she did. And my friend, I had a really good friend who was a prosecutor at Norfolk with me, he was from Philadelphia... We were very good friends before we went over, but he was in the Coast Guard and uh... Just you know, normally the Coast Guard, the sea services work together in terms of legal work, so it's not uncommon to have Coastguardsman and Marines with you when you're in a legal office. So he was in the Coast Guard and we went over together, and he was the head... He the officer in charge of Jittix, they were prepping the cases with the intel and giving it to us, but he and I were really good friends. He was good friends with one of the people, with the girl that had to go to Ramstein, Germany when she got hit. But he said it the worst part of the deployment, not necessarily because of the injury, said he just took the injury for granted, but he said psychologically when he left Iraq and then went to Rammstein, he said he was walking around and there was grass and people were just kind of going along on their days and he was like, "man, it's just like so intense working and going into the red zone every day and having this just happen with this convoy getting hit." And he said he just wanted to get back to Baghdad to be with all of us, and he... but he didn't talk about this until maybe just like a year ago he came to visit me, and he was just talking about it. 'Cause I never asked him, he just came back and we just went back to work, and I said well what was it like going to Rammstein, and he started telling me about it.

JC: So he was... Obviously cared about the mission and what was going on with his... with everyone back in Iraq.

GR: Oh, yeah, without a doubt. He really felt... I think he felt guilty not being in Baghdad, even though he had a purpose escorting this Airforce captain who just got hit in the... by the IED back to the hospital, he knew he had a role to play, but he still felt guilty that he wasn't with us in Baghdad. I mean that's the kind of comradery developed in the military.

JC: Yeah, yeah it's outstanding. So how'd your family... First off, were you married or are you married?

GR: No, I'm single, never been married, no kids, none.

JC: So how was your family, mom and dad or grandparents or anyone that was close to you, how did they deal with your deployment, your time over there? Were they worried?

[36:59]

GR: Of course, they were really worried. And again, I felt bad because my mom and my dad were really worried and they said it was a really tense period of time, but... to me, I was just very thankful that I got to be part of a War on Terror that... And I felt like things were coming full circle because, 9/11 happened my freshman year of college, and I just felt really drawn to going over there. I really believed in the mission of bringing democracy and rule of law to the Middle East, and I still feel like the way to solve problems is to build economies across the world, get a middle class established, and move towards democratic government. So I really do believe that, I'm not so keen on interventions as I used to be when I was younger, but back then I was... I was a big fan of nation building, which has its faults. But I truly believed in the mission, so I'm glad I got to contribute to it.

JC: Yeah, yeah, no doubt. So as far as the media goes, do you think they give an accurate portrayal of the Iraq war? Now or... or then?

GR: Not... not all the time. I remember there was an incident that had happened and I was there, I think it was the August 19<sup>th</sup> bombings, and the way it was... I'm sorry, it was in June. So we transitioned from the Green Zone to the International Zone, I remember that it was actually pretty calm, but what was portrayed on the media was that it was... the country was just falling apart. And I remember seeing the report that, he was with CNN, he was from South Africa or Australia I forget where, but I remember he was there and he was talking to a linguist. And I wanted to say something to him, like 'hey, I don't really think your report was that accurate,' but I was like this isn't the time or the place, I'm just... some captain in a dining facility or I'm some lieutenant in the dining facility, so what's it to him? So I actually didn't say anything, but I remember seeing the news story that night and actually being in Baghdad and just saying, 'that's really not what's going on,' or at least that's not what I'm seeing from my vantage point, and I'm in downtown Baghdad.

JC: Oh well yeah, that's... So how have you changed personally? Everybody has a different experience with war and the intensity, do you feel your time over there has changed you as a person, for the better or for the worst, or... any differences that you noticed in yourself?

GR: Right. Well... I, you know, I think it really improved me as a person, I don't take things for granted as much as I used to, I saw how other folks lived and... What really stays with me is talking. I got really close with a lot of the Iraqi prosecutors, I remember there was one, Mustafa, and we were talking a lot, but... I remember his sense of the future. It was very dire, very pessimistic, and... I had another friend and she had the same vantage point, and I was like, 'well I'm gonna go back and I'll probably be in the Navy for a little bit', at the time I thought I was gonna get out and be a federal prosecutor or something. I had all this to look forward to coming back home, and they were just stuck in Iraq. And their big goal was to get out, but because they had no transferable skills, being lawyers, their friends who were engineers and doctors were getting to go to Greece and eventually they were going to work their way to the United States, that was always the plan. Get into Greece, get into the EU, get into the United States or Canada.

But they didn't have that because it was so hard because they just didn't have that skillset that would translate back to the United States, so they just had a very pessimistic view. So I don't really take for granted the opportunities we have in the United States.

JC: That's... that's powerful, yeah.

GR: And by the way, I also... It also gives me a very big sense of realism, because... talking to the local Iraqis, it wasn't always... Iraq wasn't always like that. I mean when you talk to the other people in places like Iraq and Egypt, there actually was somewhat of a good economy, uh... There wasn't always a religious fanaticism that has taken place in the country. And the 50's and 60's was relatively stable, women could wear bathing suits, women could practice as they chose, it wasn't as... That religious focus that they had. And they were less than a generation away from that, so it also... I understand that the United States is much different than the Middle East, but you could see a country like Iraq and Egypt just devolve within a generation, so it makes me think that there's always a chance for the United States to devolve if we don't stay committed to our religious freedom, and liberty, rule of law, justice. I mean we're always just a generation or two away from falling from power as a nation, so that's always on my mind too. But when you tell people that, they look at you like you're crazy, but when you talk to the local Iraqis and the older guys, to them it was very real, because they saw the devolution of society within their lifetime.

[41:47]

JC: Yeah, that's a good, that's actually a very good historical perspective on Iraq, and I don't think the average American would understand that. And uh speaking of the average American, what would you tell maybe somebody not very familiar with the military or veterans, what would you tell them about our mission over there and about veterans... combat veterans, people who have been deployed. What would you tell them?

GR: Well, I would just tell them that everybody, no matter what they did had a role to play. Most of the people I was over there with were very dedicated to each other first off, and to the mission, and to the idea of helping the Iraqis, so... I've had very few negative experiences with people regarding military experience. I mean one I can count on my hand, a negative experience I've had, so I don't think our generation has that battle that the Vietnam generation had, where they came back to hostility. It was quite the opposite. It's like I said, sometimes I feel guilty when people say "thanks for your service" because for me, it was... I really enjoyed my time in the military, but uh... I guess that wasn't the case for the Vietnam era.

JC: Yeah, no you're right on point with that. So what was the adjustment like coming back to the States? Obviously everybody that goes over there has different situations and they deal with... Some people see huge amounts of combat and some people, they come back... How were you changed?

GR: Well I uh, I really don't want to overstate this because I feel like a lot of the combat vets were changed much more than I was, but... I can tell you a story. I got picked up at the... Well, our plane

landed from... We decompressed in Kuwait. I don't know if you had decompressions, I forget what it was called... de... demobilization training.

JC: Yeah, we have something like that, yeah.

[43:46]

GR: Right. And that was kind of weird, but... I remember that we were in Kuwait, and sorry, this is a long way to answer that. But I remember we were in Kuwait, and it was all the guys that were in the Central Criminal Court with me, we had our one friend Katy Ray, she was one of the only women with us, and uh... I remember that there was really nothing to do. I mean it was really bizarre, that you went from this really intense environment, and then for whatever reason the Navy thought that if you could decompress it would be good. But I remember we just sat around, and it's a bunch of Navy lawyers right, so we're all into the same things, of course law, most of us were college athletes, so sports and athletics. They were all a bunch of history nerds, right? So I remember we sat around, and we would go to the pool, I think we would play some volleyball, I think we would play Risk and things. But it was just so bizarre to go from that environment and then all of a sudden to have nothing in terms of a mission other than just to relax. And it was just really weird, and it was also weird going to... Like, walking up to just go get a Starbucks. And I remember just looking around like, 'these guys, there's just a Starbucks on their base.' It was weird, and we could get... Look, we weren't deprived at all, but I remember it was much more... It was grittier than I think, that base in Kuwait was. I think it was Camp Virginia again, I can't recall. But then our plane had a missing part, so we were delayed like a week or something. So we had all this time, just all this dead time, and uh... We had fun, but it was just this weird adjustment going from being hyperactive, hyper-focused to... You know, drinking Starbucks and playing board games with your friends. It was kind of weird. But then we get back, uh... We landed in uh, Baltimore, and we missed the connecting flight to Norfolk for whatever reason, but my parents were around the area so they came and picked me up, I think they drove a few of my friends back to Norfolk. But I remember we were in the car with, it was me and my dad and my mom, and I can't remember if we were driving from Baltimore to Norfolk or from Norfolk back to Pittsburgh, but I was in the front seat, and I kept scanning the road, and I didn't even realize I was doing it. But that's what we were doing over there. And even though that convoy that we took was relatively short every day, you still... you had to look on the road just to see if anything was out of the ordinary or to see if anybody was coming up, or to see if anybody... what the civilians were doing. And uh, it really freaked my parents out, it really did. And I remember we went to this steakhouse, and the steakhouse was one of those places where you grilled your own steak, you went up and you grilled or whatever. And we're all up there, we're grilling out steak, and I wanted to talk to my parents about something but there were a bunch of people around, so I got super close to my dad or my mom, and I was like talking to them about something, it was completely like... It wasn't private at all, but it's just because that's how it was, 'cause you don't want the people in the public when you're at the Central Criminal Court listening about your movements, what you're gonna do or what case... You really want to keep things really hush-hush. We had a big joke when I was over there about OPSEC [operational security], 'cause we were so hypervigilant operational security so we would always go OPSEC and then go "ssshhh..." It was kinda like this inside joke, but you still had that. So now, like I still don't like... and again, nothing really bad happened when I was over there but still, after being



with the local Iraqis for so long and being hypervigilant, when I'm in big crowds... I don't really like big crowds, I don't really like to have that... A lot of close, personal contact. And uh, I don't like... my staff thinks it's crazy 'cause I don't like to have... I don't like anything tweeted or put on social media with where I'm going or where I am. We do everything after it's already been done. And again, there's really no threat right now, but I still don't like my movements being public, I don't like where I am being published.

JC: Yeah, that makes sense.

GR: And I remember when I was a District Judge that, for whatever reason that was really different, because I had a really small courtroom, and I didn't really... people were coming up, so there was a lot of... I got used to it but there was a lot of anxiety with having that big, that open courtroom with all the people around, it was... it was actual very similar to the spacing in Iraq. But... But I think everybody that's been in those environments has a little bit of that, but again people with PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder], and the combat veterans are the ones that deserve the attention, not the attorneys that were over prosecuting, they're the ones that really deserve the attention and the focus with PTSD. I mean these are miniscule issues compared to what some of my colleagues were dealing with.

JC: So how do you look at the war now? We talked a little bit about then, but how do you look at it now? Was it a justified action, was it... was the time over there beneficial?

[48:31]

GR: Yeah, I, you know what, I still am conflicted about that. I feel that I still believe in the strategy in the mission of going over and trying to create a democracy in Iraq. I still, and people think I'm crazy for that, but I still think we could have done it. I still think we as a military executed it... I think that our overall strategy was not executed correctly, and that's nothing against the people that fought or were over there, I think it goes higher than that. But I think what we needed to do was we needed to take more control early on, and take control of vital industries and resources, and then taken over the law and order mission, and then slowly gave the power back to Iraqis after we established rule and order. But I remember talking to Iraqis who were there during the first invasion, they said the first three days the locals were afraid to go outside because they were so terrified of the Americans. You remember the first round in, it was this... the Seals, the Special Forces, the Marines, I mean they were the best of the best that were going in there. So they had this perception that every American was at the level of these elites, these elite soldiers, the Seals. But what we didn't do is we didn't police, so then the gangs started to form, and then you had the kidnappings, and uh... I feel like if we would have done a better job policing and taking over the power plants for example, making sure power was on, and then slowly giving power back to the Iraqis, we would have had more ability... I think we pushed democracy too soon, I think... Remember at first, we had three individuals in charge of Shi'ite, someone who was (inaudible), I think that if we would have left that in place longer and then slowly went to a democratized situation it would have been better. But when we went to open elections what happened was it threw all that power to Maliki and the Shi'ites, and uh... That was bad because you had the socioeconomic divide in Iraq, where you had 60% of the population being Shi'ites, they don't have the

wealth or the education level the Sunnis did, and then when the Sunni population, about 20% are Kurdish, 20% are Sunnis, and these are gross oversimplifications I understand that, but... What we did by moving to a democracy is we threw all that power to the Shi'ites and Iraq really became a, just an extension of the Iranian government. Some could say Maliki was a puppet of the Iranians, where if we would have held on sooner or longer rather, not handed over so soon, we may have been able to form some kind of secular-style government that wasn't really controlled by much of the Shi'ites or the Saudis that really are controlling the Sunni population. So, very longwinded answer for a short question.

JC: No, that's actually very informative 'cause a lot of people don't realize all the divide there was going on in Iraq between the different... The Shi'ites, the Sunnis, the Kurds, and even the Christian small population. Have you had any experience with the VA since you've been back, and what are your thoughts about the VA?

GR: I, so I have not had the horror story experiences that other people have had with the VAs, the VA, I just haven't. I've been happy with the treatment there, I can tell you that I'm now transitioning to civ... not civilian, but you know uh, just caregivers outside of the VA system out of a matter of convenience to me. But I've been under VA care since I got out, as a member of Iraq and Afghanistan you get five years after you get out of active duty, I departed in 2012, so I've been going to the VA up until now. But uh... I'm just now transitioning to non-VA, non-military care. But again, I had no... There were really no big issues that I had to deal with, so I... The VA serves a function, but I think that a lot of people are going elsewhere for care and treatment.

JC: Sure. So let's kind of end on what have you done since you've been back? And I know what you've done, but can you tell us what all has transpired since then?

[52:49]

GR: Sure. Well it was crazy, I was having drinks with some JAGs and their spouses in of all places New Orleans, we were there judging a Moot Corps competition, and this is when I was still in, but I remember that we were being very candid and we were all having a good time and, my friend, her husband had gone into naval justice school with me, I knew her since her husband was going to naval justice school, I had known them for a while. And he went up to go the bathroom and she said, "I'm really nervous about so-and-so because he's going to Iraq, what are your thoughts?" And I said, "Look, he's going to the Central Criminal Court of Iraq, he's going to really enjoy the mission, and I really believe that he's going to look back and really say that he's glad that he deployed." And I said... She said, she goes, "Well what do you do when you look back?" And I said, "It's weird because when I look back, I look back as if it's life before I went to Iraq, and life after Iraq." And that's not 'cause there were any huge differences or huge events that happened, it's just that's in my mind how I divide life. And since I got back from Iraq, it's just been an absolute roller coaster, largely because of my experiences in Iraq. When I got back to Norfolk, within three days I was given a... I was assigned a case from the Navy Seal, those falsely accused of detainee abuse, then I went back to Iraq to defend that Navy Seal with two other attorneys in federal court in Baghdad. So I'm one of the few people that has prosecuted in the Central Criminal Court, which is a federal system for Baghdad, or for Iraq rather, and in US federal court in Baghdad.

JC: So you went, you actually went back to Iraq?

GR: I went back, very short period of time. Three weeks. It was just for those courts martial and for some... to get some testimony and some depositions taken, but I did that, my client was fully acquitted. He was back on the battlefield in Seal Team 10 in Afghanistan, I'm not sure if he's still there or not. That happened, then I was promoted to the officer in charge [OIC] of Texas on Oklahoma for Navy Legal, and I oversaw all the defense cases for that area. And at the time there was a lack of attorneys with a lot of litigation experience, so I was assigned cases that took me to Chicago, back to Norfolk, Virginia, Pensacola, Jacksonville. So along with having cases all throughout Texas and Oklahoma, I was traveling a lot, and I was awarded a big award in Texas called the Michael Taylor Shelby Award for Ethics, dedication, and professionalism in federal practice. And I was the first active duty military member to win it, the youngest to win it, and uh... I had only been in Texas for 18 months, and normally it's for people that have practiced for twenty years, so that was a huge award, won that. Came back to the United... Came back to Pennsylvania, rather, to practice, was elected District Judge. And I feel like a lot of... a lot of the people felt that a younger person, 'cause I was 29 when I was running, I think if you were just a normal 29 year old who was running without that military experience, they wouldn't have been taking it as seriously as I was. So because of my military experience, I believe that I was viewed as someone who was much more mature and older than just an average 29 year old. Won that election, did that for a year and a half, resigned when my State Senator resigned, then I ran to take his position. And again I found myself in a selection process for the Republican party, I was one of... I think was actually the youngest, but the two youngest people, myself and another Iraq veteran, she and I were the two youngest and we did very well in that process. I was eventually chosen, but I was chosen over people who were much older than I was, and again I believe it's because of the credit that is given to our veterans in this country. And then I won the general election. And again, I think I'm taken more seriously because of my experience in Iraq and my experience in the military, and all the leadership experience you get when you're in the service. So it is uh, that's why when I look back, I almost view it as pre-Iraq life and post-Iraq life, and since Iraq it's just been an absolute roller coaster, you know things happen very quickly. But it's good. And you know, I wouldn't take it back... I wouldn't trade my time in Iraq for anything. I really think that it defined a lot of things I do as a person, the way I view things, the way I go about tasks, confidence level... I remember I was in, I just got to Harrisburg and we were in the midst of a budget crisis, and everyone was saying this was the worst it's ever been, it has to get better at some point, and I was like... I didn't even know the law when I got to Iraq, it was a different language so I'm trying to pick up another language, a whole new style of jurisprudence without juries, learning all that, and got by fine, so. The budget crisis to me wasn't that big of a crisis at all.

[57:45]

JC: [laughs] Was to some people, but yeah, that's a good perspective on it. And so now you're obviously a Pennsylvania State Senator in your first term. What district are you in?

GR: So yes, so I represent the 37<sup>th</sup> Senatorial district and it's, uh, it's like a 'C' around the city of Pittsburgh. I go from Sewickley, Sewickley Heights, Sewickley Hills, Ohio Township, a few other municipalities, across the river into the airport area, Moon, Findlay, Oakdale. And then I go into the

South Hills, Bethel Park, Upper St. Clair, Jefferson Hills, Mt. Lebanon, Whitehall are some of the bigger communities. And then I go into Washington County into Peters Township. So there's about 260,000 constituents, and I'm one of fifty state senators, and I'm the youngest state senator.

JC: In all of Pennsylvania?

GR: In all of Pennsylvania. And the next youngest is Ryan Aument, who himself is a veteran, he was in the Army, and he was a combat vet. So two youngest in the Senate are both vets.

JC: That's really awesome, wow. Well thank you so much, unless you have anything else to add I think we can probably wrap up.

GR: Yeah. Josh, thanks for having me here, I really appreciate it.

JC: Yeah, no problem. And the interview is going to end now.