

Robert Morris University Oral History Center

Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans Project



Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

DANIEL EDWARD RYAN

Specialist, Army Infantry, Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan)

November 23, 2015

Ryan, Dan (1993 –), Oral History Interview, November 23, 2015.

Biographical Sketch: Dan Ryan was a Cavalry Infantryman, serving in Afghanistan with Assault Company, 1/8th Cav., 2nd Brigade Combat Team [BCT], 1st Cavalry Division. Ryan served as the platoon's RTO (radio operator), serving in Afghanistan's RC South region at FOB Pasab.

Topics Covered in Interview:

RC South

FOB Pasab

Improvised Explosive Devices

Fort Hood

Panjwai District

Bradley Fighting Vehicle

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GD: This interview is part of the Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans Project undertaken by the Oral History Center at Robert Morris University. I am Gabe Dachille and today is the 23rd of November 2015. I am joined by Dan Ryan. Dan, if you could please state your full name and do I have consent to interview you today?

DR: My full name is Daniel Edward Ryan and you do have my consent for the interview.

GD: We're going to start with your date and place of birth.

DR: I was born February 4th, 1993 at Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh. Grew up in Greentree.

GD: And your branch of service, years of service, and your highest rank attained.

DR: I was in the United States Army from February 2012 to April of 2015. My highest rank was Specialist, actually. I was in a team leader position, but because I didn't elect to reenlist they never promoted me.

GD: Yeah that'll happen. Your place of enlistment and the reason why.

DR: I enlisted ... you mean like in a city, like of Pittsburgh?

GD: Yeah, yeah.

DR: Yeah, I enlisted at a recruitment center right outside the University of Pittsburgh in Oakland, right across the street from The "O". I chose the Army because it just more or less worked out really. I mean like, I grew up in not in a wealthy family and I already had one sister in college here at Point Park and my parents were struggling to even pay for her to get through. They told me they'd find a way for me but you know, it ... it obviously wasn't gonna work out. It just, the whole process just kind of made sense you know, join the military, do three years of education through your service. Something I wanted to do anyway and the get GI Bill benefits afterwards.

GD: Perfect. Now I know you were born in '93. Do you remember the attacks on September 11th?

DR: Yes.

GD: Alright. Did they have any impact on your choosing to go the military at all or ...?

DR: Yes.

GD: Ok. And do you have any history of family service?

DR: Yes, yes I do. My great uncle was an infantry man in the Second World War. He was in Germany. D-Day plus three, all the way through clear end of the war. He served in the 42nd Infantry Division which is the little half rainbow patch. It's now a New York National Guard (inaudible). Significantly more badass back then (laughter) and then his brother, my grandfather, was an anti-aircraft gunner in the South Pacific from 1942 to the end of the war in '45 and he followed the 1st Marine Division through the (inaudible) and all that other fun stuff.

[0:03:02]

GD: Oh wow.

DR: Yeah. But that's the extent of that.

GD: So we already covered what attracted you to military service. So ... let's go to, what was your understanding of the Afghanistan War upon entering service?

DR: I suppose it more limited than it was anything else. I guess that, my perception of it was there's a large cultivation of really bad people in that region of the country and I wanted to go ... beat these guys you know what I mean? Basically that was the idea and that was what I thought upon entering. That's more or less what it came down to, you know. I wanted to make my way over there and get my piece of the action I guess you could say.

GD: Did it uh ... did your view and your understanding of the war change in any way from ... pre service, service, and post service?

DR: Yes, absolutely. I suppose just like any new guy you get the impression that everybody over there is bad. Every single person. They're all terrorists blah blah blah, Muslims suck, all that stuff. And then after ... I mean that was really basically my perception, my personal opinion probably up until I actually got there really. I mean, the other guys that had already deployed, they had tried to tell us you know, okay they're not all bad and stuff like that, there are good guys. But, you know, I really just kind of held out on my beliefs you know. I just thought okay, I see all this stuff on the news. These guys are all bad people. We got there and you know, we got into the villages and stuff and talked to some of these people and a majority of them just wanted to be left alone. They didn't really like us and they really didn't like the Taliban. After that I kinda got the impression okay, alright, some of these guys are actually alright. I mean, our interpreters for god's sakes you know, those guys are putting their lives on the line just as bad as we are. The Taliban find out that those interpreters are our interpreters they're gonna go chop their families heads off and stuff like that you know. So, definitely after having been there, I realized that you know they're not all bad people. But there's still a good number of bad ones floating around over there that's for sure.

GD: I hear that. Let's talk about um ... so you were an infantry man. Let's talk about your training. Start at Sand Hill.

DR: Training at Sand Hill. Yeah, I guess it starts at Day 0. I mean you basically have eight Drill Sergeants, all you know Staff Sergeant or above more or less, are there to break you down and I mean, for the first three weeks ... it's nothing but no sleep and getting the crap kicked out of you by these eight guys. Limited food, limited everything. They tell you, you know, when you can sleep, when you can eat, how much, where to move, don't move. Somebody always moves and then you open the forward leaning rest position, you know half right face, forward leaning wrist position, move. Those words are still engrained in me. I can still ... I had a Drill Sergeant, Drill

Sergeant Huffman my platoon Drill Sergeant and his battle buddy was Drill Sergeant Shannon. These are probably the two biggest badassess in the company. I got lucky I guess. Drill Sergeant Shannon competed in the best Ranger competition while I was there and Drill Sergeant Huffman, he was an E-7 up for 1st Sergeant promotion, he chose to be a Drill Sergeant just because he wanted to have the training experience that these guys just ran us into the ground the whole time we were out there. I mean, typical stuff you know. Just trying to get us to understand that we needed to listen and I guess that's really what you learn out of that. You wanna go into anything afterwards?

[0:06:45]

GD: Yeah, I wanna go into um ... where were you stationed and your training?

DR: I was stationed at Fort Hood, Texas which is in central Texas, it's dead center. It's the largest military post in the United States Army from what I understand. I got assigned to Assault Company, 1/8th Cav., 2nd Brigade Combat Team [BCT], 1st Cavalry Division. The training there ... I honestly, or lack thereof I guess you could say, it's a heavy mechanized unit. We got Bradley's [mechanized vehicle] and when I got there the guys that ... I was there with they had just comeback from Iraq five months earlier. They we part of New Dawn [Operation New Dawn was the new name when Operation Iraqi Freedom officially ended] and they were still in the, "we just got back from deployment, we're not doing anything" phase. So for like the first four months I was there we were on red cycle, which means you do details for the post. Pick up cigarette butts, cut grass, whatever. But uh ... we started doing these gunneries uh ... where you take the Brads [nickname for Bradley Fighting Vehicle] out and the Brads engage targets and then you know you do all the (inaudible) scout in the woods and we learned all our basic Soldier stuff that way. All the things they didn't teach us in basic. You know in basic they always tell you you'll learn that at your unit. You're gonna have a standard operating procedure [SOP], you're gonna learn it there. So, I guess that's what we were learning and uh ... I remember ... word come down that there was talk of an Afghanistan deployment coming down for the brigade, but it was all just rumors. Eventually it became real and my battalion was actually wasn't supposed to deploy at all. They told us that we were gonna be the rear detachment ready reserve unit. Which is just a fancy way of saying you guys aren't doing anything. A lot of people weren't happy about it and actually a lot of the guys in my company who had already deployed, they were actually kinda happy about it. But, obviously young, new guys like me who had never done it before were all crushed by it. I guess you know, word got up to the Battalion Commander and I'm sure the Battalion Commander wanted his piece of it too for his position, get those promotion points. He made us just swing a deal with the Brigade Commander where we got to go and once the thought process moved to okay we're going to Afghanistan, the training all became real. We got a new Company Commander instantly and a new 1st Sergeant as a result to some prior incidents in the company. Some Soldier incident reports you know, good times. But, the new commander helped a lot too. Captain Maury and 1st Sergeant Clark uh ... they really stepped it up. We started training like an infantry company. We were actually out there on the machine gun ranges, shooting gobs of ammo. Just so much ammo that it you

didn't even wanna shoot all of it. Got out and actually did the dismount trainers, you learned squad attack team you know, team light fire, all that stuff. We got ready to go. Ironically enough, all of our training before we were going we trained as light. Like no vehicles at all. We actually gave our Bradleys away to a whole other unit. There was nothing in our motor pool and uh ... we trained everything as light. We did all these, you know we did JRTC as light unit too. Huge movements just rucking everywhere we went but when we got to Afghanistan we actually had vehicles. I mean that pretty much covers the training on up to that point.

[0:10:02]

GD: Alright. What was life on base during this time, besides the training? Were the guys really cut and loose before they went or um ... sure there was a lot of incidents. If you could elaborate on that.

DR: Life on Fort Hood, they call it the great place and nobody knows why. It ... my feelings on Fort Hood vary really. I have to say as far as an installation is concerned, I've been to others, they have a lot to offer more so than others. We had a (inaudible). As far as, you know, amenities are concerned they had a lot. All the stuff the Army advertised as having, they had all that shit but, nobody care about that stuff. Typical Soldier stuff, if you stayed on base, if you were the guy who lived in his barracks room and stuff like that, your life sucked. But, if you were the guy you know who drove half an hour out to Austin on the weekends or stuff like that you could have a good time, but you know you have to ... you have to have responsibilities too. I mean you can't go completely loose cause some guys do. Otherwise, you know, you get in all kinds of trouble. We definitely had a couple incidents that got us a name in the company. When you said elaborate do you want me to tell you one of the stories or something like that?

GD: Uh ... no we'll skip over that. We'll go to your um ... your overall feeling of deploying. Once it started getting down to crunch time what ... describe your personal feelings about actually going over.

DR: I was ready to go. That was the whole reason why I joined the Army. If I had joined the Army and ... didn't deploy I would've reenlisted. I would've kept reenlisting until I got to go someplace. I mean, that's just how I felt. I was very motivated, like ... I can remember guys actually, like my Team Leader, crushed my soul as often as he possibly could cause I was so motivated all the time. I was the guy who loved it. Like, go ahead, make me do more pushups I don't care, you know? We got up to the field and everybody else is whining and crying and stuff like that and I'm like this isn't so bad. They just tried to drag me through the dirt over it. I mean I kept that mentality up until we got there. My only ... drawback ... the only thing that brought me down and had started to break me down prior to that was I was the platoon RTO [radio operator]. I had been the RTO for a year and I absolutely hated that job, you know. I had wanted to be a grunt rifleman like, up on the point you know, shooting it out with guys and when you're the RTO you don't get to do that you know. You're humping the radio with the LT [Lieutenant] chasing him around.

[0:12:33]

GD: So there was never a point where you started feeling nervous or ...

DR: No.

GD: So you were just gung ho the whole entire time?

DR: Absolutely. Like let's do this. I went home on leave two weeks prior to getting on the plane, said goodbye to the family, they said goodbye to me at the airport there and I got on the plane for the post and uh ... I mean that was just pretty much the gist of it right there. I mean, I was ready to go you know. Give me my weapon let's get on the plane kind of a deal.

GD: Alright. Where were you in Afghanistan?

DR: I was in RC South at FOB [Forward Operating Base] Pasab which is in the Maywand District. Or ... I'm so no, no, no. It's in the Panjwayi District. It's in the Panjwai District.

GD: Alright, and what was ... what were you guys tasked as you overall mission?

DR: Our mission statement was to facilitate ... I'm trying to remember exactly what it said but we were supposed to facilitate the free operation and the freedom maneuver on highway one, which is the main highway that runs through the country. Basically, about the time I got there a drawdown was going into effect. We have all this equipment and stuff that we're not giving to the Afghan shit that we're keeping and they need to get it out of there. Well, the south is riddled with IED's (Improvised Explosive Device). I mean there's no safe road there at all whatsoever. So, basically what we were tasked with is we needed to keep highway one open at all costs. We did route clearance up and down that road twice a week. The engineers that were tasked with doing it originally were kinda doing it by themselves. It made it a little easier on us. We were pushing off the sides of the highway into the villages trying to like, stake out and keep the Taliban occupied while the engineers could clear in and then you know, the convoys could get through. But the engineers ended up getting fucked up and they needed escorts from that point forward. So what we did was out of our three platoons ... one platoon stayed on quick reaction force of the FOB, and then the other two would go out and do missions. The ... the QRF sometimes would just do the escorts for the convoys for the engineers, but other times we'd stick a platoon with them and keep the QRF (Quick Response Force) behind. It just depended really. If you sent QRF out with the engineers it just made sense because the engineers were the ones that were gonna have the trouble, you know. Just might as well have them out there instead of waiting for three years for them to show up, you know (laughter).

GD: How long were you there?

DR: I was there for nine months. I was there from July to April of uh ... 2014.

GD: Alright. What was the comradery like while you were over there?

[0:15:13]

DR: I'd say when we first left we were really, really, really motivated. I mentioned before that my Company Commander, we got a new one. That guy ... and I'm still friends with him to this day, he was probably the only soldier I ever met that was more motivated than me originally. This guy, he was a history major out of West Point, had done a deployment as a Platoon Leader for the 101st Airborne Division he was a (inaudible, possibly rocasan) and everybody knows the rocasans are a bunch of arrogant bastards and he came down and he was immediately assigned the position as the Company Commander. He saw ... that he was gonna get assigned to what was then Alpha Company Commander and we had a reputation for being the garbage of the battalion. We had all the SIR's, all the stuff. Our old Company Commander got relieved as a result for (inaudible). The ... regardless the new commander saw us and took over and he wanted to change that and the one gift that this guy had and I mean it so crucially important regarding morale, is he really turned it around. Like I said, he had us out there training and stuff and he actually ... even if we weren't really something special he sure made us feel like we were. He always ... he had this premonition that he was gonna be like leading the 101st Airborne through Bastogne or something like that and that's the way he treated us. He'd give us these long speeches quoting all these famous quotes from previous you know ... famous quotes from other officers in the past and ... really brought us together and as a group we were really tight. We really had the opinion that we were better than everybody else and I mean we really believed it. We thought it and we proved it and that's what got us the spot that we did when we got there. Don't get me wrong, you know like ... after four months in country ... you don't have any personal time at all. You know, you just ... you're at each other's throats sometimes and there's people that on a personal level you may decide you don't like. But, you get through it, you know what I mean? You throw down for a couple minutes or something like that and you get past it, you move on. Definitely ... as the tour went on I'd say probably about month eight ... complacency really started to set in on us as a group and I definitely noticed it in myself too. Just, situational (inaudible) you get run down. There's, on the nine month tours, there's no R&R, you know like you just do it from start to finish and we went out every day. We didn't ... there wasn't a single day, well I take that back, there wasn't more than two days where we sat on the fob. Like I said, the three platoons were always rotating throughout and I mean (inaudible) spun up all the time. We're constantly going out recovering (inaudible) ... we basically go out, do missions, come back, sleep and as soon as you woke up the other platoon was back and the other platoon had come off QRF, so now we'd have to replace them and we'd have to pick up their end of the slack. And that just starts to wear on you. That's the only way I can really describe that.

GD: Alright. That pretty much hit comradery and the morale. Was the change of morale and the complacency ... did that affect your mission as far as uh ... getting into more combat or stuff like that?

DR: Absolutely. It absolutely did. We noticed like ... okay so the first three months we were there we'd been told, warned of the IEDs. They're everywhere. They said where there's one there's

two, where there's two there's four, when there's four there's eight you know and if there's that many they're everywhere. We hadn't hit any. We'd been so careful. We had, when we first got there, we had the Joint Expeditionary Team with us and uh ... those guys were a bunch of former you know, special operations guys who basically lived in country. They're a bunch of retired guys who just couldn't get enough of it. They came back and they would give you the lowdown. They basically held your hand and got you through it. And we did the whole left seat, right seat rides with the unit that we replaced and they warned us too. We did a really good job you know staying away from the roads. You don't drive on roads in Afghanistan. It's a likely avenue of approach [AOA]. It's a natural point of drift. It's where the bombs are gonna be. You wanna avoid that and at first like I said we did really well and then I remember four months into the tour we hit our first one. It was a big one. It was 135 pound bomb in a chokepoint. We were traveling at night. We had just left an OP [Observation Post] and we did 12 hours at that OP and we were moving to another one and there was all these ditches and wadis [dry river beds] we were trying to get through. Our 1st Squad, which was the favorite squad in the platoon was leading, sergeant Miller, he was a really good guy and ... there's your perfect example of complacency. They see a chokepoint, it's just an easy place to get through, it was a road and as they were driving through (explosion sound). And I watched that IED go off, I watched it. I was in the truck right behind there because I was RTO, so the LT's truck follows that one and it was a really nasty bomb. It blew the whole front of the truck off and the gunner, my buddy Vasera, he said he got the worst of it for sure. We have the chicken armor on the turret and he was the gunner and because it was at night and in these trucks you can't see shit you know? Like, it's not like driving a regular car where you can see all around you. He had a headset and he was trying to lean over the armor so he could help the driver see and when he stopped, he took the blast straight to the face and he went down into the truck and the gun came down, the 240, and just landed right on top of his head and conked him. The other guys, everybody got knocked completely out and uh ... we're all just kinda sitting there. It all happened so fast I didn't know if it was a RPG or an IED honestly. It was night, I knew we were near compounds. We tried to radio them, of course the radios were dead in the truck. Nobody would answer. My Platoon Sergeant's in the back of the formation, he wants to know what's going on and uh ... we didn't know what to tell him you know. Like, we're basically a truck full of cherries [term for new guys] you know ... up there trying to decipher what's going on and ultimately the Squad Leader came to and he had his radio on his person and he radioed back letting us know what had happened and uh ... we cleared it and we got them out of there. Everybody but the gunner was able to return to service about four days later. The gunner had, when he took the blast to the face, he had a series of blood vessels burst in his brain and he couldn't pass the MACE [Military Acute Concussion Evaluation] exam. He had a serious concussion and they immediately flew him back to Kandahar and from Kandahar to Germany and he went back to the States for the brain surgeries and everything. But, that was when we hit our first IED and that was my first inclination that okay, this is getting real. Not long after that I noticed the other platoons all of a sudden was like a landslide. IED after IED. We had killed like eight trucks in the company had been hit and all of these IEDs were between 75 to 100 pounds. Two weeks later my truck hit 90 and we were the second truck in the formation. We followed each other like ducks in a row

thinking the first truck with the mine roller is likely to be hit. Wasn't always the case, you know? Some of the IEDs we command detonated, some are pressure plate, you know, there's all different forms of ... but what we realized why this is happening. We wanted to know what's going on. We were doing so good, what the hell is happening. We realized, and we told we were warned about this by the other unit, that they would observe us at first. These guys see the patches, they know who's there. You know, they're used to seeing the first armored division patch, they know those guys have been around for a while, they know to avoid. Now all of a sudden first (inaudible) patches are in town, well let's see what these guys are about. And what happened was, as we were establishing patterns. Patterns kill. Our second platoon was getting off at the same point on the highway every single time. You know, in a one click sized area, you know what I mean? And there's only certain areas where you can get off in a big truck like that, they're top heavy and they know that. So they start putting these IEDs on that side of the road and we started hitting them and that's the complacency right there. We were establishing patterns and those patterns will get you killed. That just seemed to happen time and time again. But that covers complacency I guess.

[0:23:27]

GD: Well did hitting all of those IEDs, did that kinda bring everybody back to ... to um ... a state of alertness where you guys started spotting them after you hit that landslide? Or was it just a domino effect where, once you hit one you hit two, once you hit two you hit four?

DR: I think it ... it's hard to answer that. It's uh ... it was a perception thing. I felt ... at least up until month eight, my situational awareness was very sharp where other people's wasn't. Like my LT ... it just, it depends. You know, I don't know if it's leadership positions going to peoples heads or what, but I tried very hard to seek these things out whether it was keeping an eye on the Afghans or looking for IEDs and I did find a couple of them myself. But, an example would be like when my truck got blown up we were bordering a road. The lead truck was an E-5 with multiple tours to Iraq and Afghanistan. I remember this clearly he said over the radio, "Alright we're about", you know, we were like 500 meters from the highway, "we're gonna border this road because it's the easiest way." Now the road lays flat, it's a comfortable ride, you're not the (inaudible) by the wadis, you can do it fast. And I still remember I said to the LT I'm RTO I'm listening I said, "Why are we not by a fucking road?" you know and we need to get away from this. And 30 seconds later (explosion sound) the truck got hit and ... it seemed like some of the leaders weren't learning their lessons. I had another incident where I later became a gunner on a truck, I had been RTO for two years and as a result of people getting injured and stuff I graduated to the gunner position and ... I remember that the moon dust was so thick. We were traveling in a convoy, we were going out to do an OP in an area and the lead truck had (inaudible). He was flying. He was doing like 35 mile an hour through the desert and it's kicking up all this moon dust everywhere and we couldn't see. Well, my driver lost sight of the path of life to stay on, that's what we called it, the path of life. Driver of the lead truck is (inaudible) you know it's clear there and uh ... he lost sight of it and I saw he lost sight. I was like, stop and the LT's like nah keep going. I saw an ant trail across this road we were about to cross. An ant trail

was a signifier of an IED and I just yelled, "Fucking stop!" And he stopped cold in his tracks and I remember actually scolded the Lieutenant right there and then I didn't care. I said there's a ant trail right there, like we're gonna drive over top of that and ... like I said it's just a perception thing. I myself found that I stayed situationally aware, but other people didn't. And we had some Squad Leader who were really good. Stayed situationally aware, but other guys just eventually gave up on it and you know, as a gunner I can remember bracing myself in that turret a couple times saying hey we shouldn't go here and they're like we're doing it anyway. Like, alright, grab the bars on the side and crouch.

[0:26:22]

GD: Alight um ... you pretty much covered what an average day was like under deployment with the switching over. Let's go with um ... what'd you do in your free time?

DR: Well, what we had I guess ... like I said it seemed like we were out a lot. We didn't have too much ... are you talking about like on the FOB or just in general?

GD: Yeah.

DR: So on the FOB ... when we got there like I said it was pretty well established. We had a good chow hall. Those guys cooked for us pretty good and we were very fortunate to be on Pasab. We'd go down there, we'd try to get some good food in us. They had a couple small MWR [Moral, Welfare, and Recreation] posts in there with a ping pong table or something on it. We'd try and go in there and you know, just entertain ourselves to the best of our ability but, I'd say most of the time we found ourselves in our tents. You know we had two squads to a tent and uh ... we just talked amongst each other, clean weapons, you know guys ... movies was a big thing. You could buy the bootleg movies at the Afghan shops and stuff and guys would watch movies and if somebody got something in a care package that was entertaining or something like that we'd all mess with that and uh, get by with it. Of course everybody's spending their deployment money like oh I wanted this for so long you know, like they're gonna order it and then they send it back to the States or something. It's waiting for you when you get there kind of an idea. We played sports on like holidays and stuff, Thanksgiving and stuff. We'd have like a football game and stuff. That was on average, it was pretty dull by most people's standards I guess.

GD: Let's talk about um ... how did your deployment affect your family back home?

DR: I never really got ... too in depth with them about it honestly. I know that they were worried. I don't think my sister really grasped the concept of what it is. My sister's one of these people who hardly knows what Iraq or Afghanistan is and doesn't really particularly care to be honest but my mom and dad ... I know that they were definitely worried. My grandmother, she's lived through five or six wars by now, she understood what that meant. I know they were all worried about me, but ... outside of them being worried about me the never really discussed it I know that.

GD: Were you able to effectively communicate with them while you were over there? Like make weekly calls or ...?

[0:28:35]

DR: No, we weren't. We had ... it wasn't that we didn't necessarily have the ability all the time. There was a MWR tent that had computers and phones in it and you could buy a phone card and you could call if you wanted to. But I suppose at the time I felt like I kinda needed to separate myself from that. I needed to remain focused on the task at hand and I had a Facebook and I would just post things up there every once in a while, everybody knows I'm okay. I might message them on there. I didn't bother to try and call until we were leaving. I felt like at that point it was probably best, okay now I can you know let them know that I'm alright and I'm coming home, you know. Plus, last thing I wanted was to like be on the phone and have a mortar land outside the tent or something like that. That would send them into a spasm back in the States and my mom would be calling the White House, "I wanna know what happened to my son" (laughter).

GD: Do you feel that you were used effectively while you were over there?

DR: Yes and no. I'd say it's a little bit of both. When we were there, there came a point where especially when we started hitting all these IEDs, we really wanted to know what the hell was going on cause there was like a ... three month period where we had seen little combat at all. Like, we'd go out there and push out into these villages and we'd go seek everybody, pull the seeker of the hideout you know, you get everybody's written scans and fingerprints and that was the end of it, you know? It came to a point where even the Lieutenants sat down with the senior command and was like, why are we here? What's going on? They sat us all down and they explained to us you know, we're here to keep this highway open and that's what we're doing and I really started to question ... whether or not we were being effective up until ... the summer kicked off again, the spring. The fighting season, you know. We got there in July at the tail end of the summer when they had used up most of their money, the enemy is who I'm referencing here. The winter time comes around and it's cold and you know they're all inside. They don't wanna be outside any more than we do, plus we had thermals. We could see them. They didn't want to risk it. And then ... the spring came around and the spring's when all of a sudden they have all their money and that means they have weapons and ammunition and the ability to make these IEDs and all of a sudden, the attacks started getting personal. We weren't necessarily, we didn't have to go outside the wire to get attacked anymore. They were now attacking our fob directly, which told us granted there was not that many FOBs around, they were following us back there. They knew who was responsible for ... we were obviously, it became clear ... we were, what we did was working. We kept the highway open. There hadn't been a report of an IED on Highway 1 the whole time we were there, cause our (inaudible) was going out there and ripping them out of the ground. When they started attacking the FOB that told me hey, these guys know where the people are coming from that are limiting their advance and they're trying to cut us off at the head and it didn't work. So, at that point I realized that we

were effective. The RC Commander actually came out to our FOB after the big attack on January 20th uh ... there was a big attack on our FOB on January 20th they tried to overrun it and he came out and told us that we had seen more combat in our RC than anyone else in the RC, to include the special forces that were operating. Indigenously in the area as well and ... like I said it just all came together at the end there that it just seemed like yeah, I felt like by the time we left I felt like we had accomplished our mission.

[0:32:03]

GD: Did you guys do any kind of um ... [inaudible, possibly "aerial"] denial missions while you were over there to keep them from attacking the FOB or you guys were strictly route clearance?

DR: We did afterwards. When we first got there, of course I guess they do this on any FOB really, there's always a plan in play. The FOBs are built like mazes inside on purpose so they can count on it. They can cut one part of it off you know, hold the whole where ever the breach is to that area. After the FOB attack on January 20th, 2014 they uh ... they started having us do recon and surveillance patrols outside the FOB because the Taliban actually recorded it and put it on the internet, the attack. It was online and it still is. From that point forward, all of a sudden ... they started doing a lot more. They sent the engineers out with all the backhoes and they cut big ditches out there that the civilian people could get in because how they got in was they drove a 7,000 pound (inaudible) up to the wall of the fob and blew it. Suicide bomber. Then they all started running in through the walls. So, from that point, on that big FOB attack there uh ... they did a lot, you know. We would go out there, we would just basically drive around the fob in circles and we'd stop and sit for a little while and by that point the rules of engagement had changed. We were no longer allowed to go inside a compound. Obama and Karzai [President of Afghanistan at the time] had come together and said that we were causing too much in the way of civilian casualties or we were destroying compounds of homes and they didn't want that anymore. So, it had at that point come to a point where we were told if we were taking effective machine gun fire from a compound we couldn't return fire because we could not definitively say there were no civilians inside of that compound. At that point, I was really glad that we were towards our way out because I felt like I was in a golden gloves boxing match with my hands tied behind my back. You start to lose your confidence in ... the bigger picture and that's what happened with that.

GD: So does that go back to um ... the effectiveness of your unit um ... you did talk about the effectiveness of the job you were doing, but as far as closing with and destroying the enemy ...

DR: It was never really our mission to necessarily close quarters and kill them so much as it was to distract them I guess. Because like I said, at that point there really ... when I first got there the rules of engagement were still if you take fire return fire, close quarters and kill. But, like I said rapidly, it was like three months in, all of a sudden things had changed politically. The big political picture, Obama's plan and Karzai's plan, Karzai was getting ready to leave office. Obama had just been reelected, so now they're trying to make all these things happen. As far as

effectiveness ... towards close quarters and kill ... I guess at that point we were really choked. I still felt that we were pretty effective. The only evidence I ever saw of us not being effective was uh ... and this was towards the end of the tour too, I had noticed on the sides of the highway these big 18-wheel trucks had ... were just like sometimes in the middle of the road and sometimes they were pulled off the side of the road. They were like burned, like old trailers and everything, just burned on the side of the ground and we found out what had happened was the Taliban were targeting these vehicles cause these were the vehicles like ... it's not, it's not just Americans pulling this stuff out. We're hiring civilians in Afghanistan to drive this stuff to other fobs and the Taliban were targeting those trucks trying to burn all the supplies and stuff. That was, I would say the rules of engagement definitely ... choked it off a little bit. It did affect us in that degree negatively for sure. I suppose if we had been allowed to go out and maybe just enter and clear come of these compounds we could have stopped things like that from happening but we did the best we could with the rules they gave us, you know. That's the best way I could say that.

[0:35:50]

GD: Did or does the media give Americans an accurate portrayal of the war in Afghanistan?

DR: Yes and no. It depends. I'd say most of the time no. The media predominantly is looking for the saddest story they can possibly find. They'll manipulate your words and anything that they can to make it happen. I was ... one media representative attempted to interview me while I was there. They brought the Wounded Warrior campaign. I forget what they were. It had something to do with Wounded Warrior Project they brought over. All these guys who had lost limbs and stuff like that and they were trying to ... I guess reintegrate these guys into society. I guess part of that process was bringing these guys back to country so they could see what happened after they left. One of these reporters was listening to me talk to these guys afterwards because they had let us come into the group and talk to us. And I was talking to these guys and telling them about the stuff we had to stop IEDs and stuff and this reporter was like listening to us and I could tell he was listening to us and at the end he tried to come up and ask me a bunch of questions. And I told him, I said look, I said I'm really not interested in talking to you and I'm really not supposed to ... to begin with, because I could just tell by his demeanor that he had thought he had hooked a live one. A story. Something he could come back and tell everybody, a typical hero story or something like that. I just knew that whatever he said wasn't gonna be accurate. I didn't trust him, that's the bottom line. I didn't believe that they would do a good job. Honestly, I think it's hard for the media to let the American people know what's going on because the primary thing and all my thoughts come back to this one individual thought: the American people, who had never deployed before would never fully understand what it means to deploy because the American people who had never left the United States ... will never understand the cultural differences in between here and there. Things that are socially acceptable here are not socially acceptable there, down to the way you shake hands, whether you look somebody in the eye, things like that. It all means different things over there. So the media goes over there with the typical American perspective, sees something as being

wrong because in our society it is considered wrong and reports on it as being wrong there. You know, as a Soldier part of being a Soldier, Marine, Airman, whatever, deployed to another country is to accept some of the social norms there as something that's ok there. Even if it's something that twists you to your core, you have to get past that and you have to keep your eyes on the prize. Your mission statement, which for us, keep highway one open and do what it takes to get there. So, when it came to the media, they can't get past that. They're civilians, most of them, unless their prior service. The prior service guys, little different story. But, the typical, the average reporter just ... they don't, that doesn't even comprehend. You know, they can't even think of that. It's not like, oh ok, you know this is how it is here. I guess after you spend enough time in country you learn these things. You learn your enemy and you learn the people. It's the only way to succeed.

[0:38:55]

GD: How do you feel that the war changed you personally?

DR: Changed me a lot, I guess. Like I said, when I first joined the military I was really motivated, really wanted to do it. And then by the time I left, or when I left Afghanistan, when we got back ... I immediately was just done. I didn't want to do it anymore. I had felt like ... that was the highest point of my career. I went to Afghanistan, I worked like a dog and I mean like, and I'm not trying to take anything away from any of the other guys they worked like dogs too you know we all had our struggles but, like as RTO. When those guys come back from a mission and were sleeping I was in the motor pool working on the trucks getting ready for the next mission. I slept on mission, on the way out or something like that. I guess ... the things that I had learned about the military, some things that ... I had hoped for I guess, I didn't promise things you know that never went through, things like that I guess. I learned that there's evils that lurk in there and I didn't want to have anything to do with those evils anymore. It just made more sense to leave and it taught me a lot of life lessons quick. They say you know, I was 18 when I joined the military, they say war will make a young man a man real quick and its true because if you're gonna survive, you have to. You know, if you don't wanna get beat up by the other guys you gotta learn how to get along with them and the war itself is the same lessons. Lessons learned the hard way. To a certain degree you know they try to the whole feelings thing. Oh, we're there to help you and stuff, but ... you gotta have thick skin, you gotta learn. You know I've come back now and haven't seen or learned the things that are different on other parts of the world. I'm much more situationally aware, everywhere. Just last night I was driving down the highway, saw four or five deer in different sections of the highway. My passengers had no idea they were there and they were paying attention to the road just like me. I'm just, I'm aware of what's going on around me and there's a saying in the Army: stay alert, stay alive. Words to live by, you know. It's how I am all the time and I suppose that that's what's changed me the most. I honestly don't think that any of it was for the worst. I think that I've taken mostly good from it. Even from the bad experiences just taught me you know, no matter where you are in life you're gonna have a rough time and you gotta roll with the punches.

GD: Let's talk about returning to the States. Describe ... because you got out recently so this will probably be very good. Describe your adjustment period to civilian life and the challenges that you've encountered so far.

[0:41:35]

DR: Difficult for sure is one word I would say ... to go into it. Initially coming back from the United States, coming to the United States from Afghanistan was really hard because you always have your guard up when you're deployed. Whether you know it or not, you know? Like, you get to a point where you know, everybody's there when they first get there. Everybody's looking over their shoulders you know it's very obvious and after a while you get accustomed to that feeling and it just becomes natural. Everybody's always situationally aware, everybody. Whether you're walking to the gym, the chow hall, anything you know? We're talking to each other just like we are now but, you always have your guard up and I remember just on the flight out. We flew from Afghanistan to Romania. We were the second group of soldiers to go to the new post there and it was like, I remember landing and getting off the plane and it was a different kind of silence. It was civilized society. It wasn't, you know, it wasn't like Kandahar City where you're just waiting for somebody to shoot at you, you know cause you know there's snipers in the city or something like that. For the first time you feel like, you know this is a new place do I have to have my guard up? But it's just up and definitely when I came back my friends told me on leave they said you know, are you alright? Because you're going around you're just always kind of looking over your shoulder. You're adjusting back to the norms here. The social norms there are different like I sad and now all of a sudden it's ok to do this again. It kind of blows you away that the world kept turning here, you know, and nobody here knows the difference, any different. But you know, as somebody who was just there you know ... the difference between here and there and after having gotten out of the military, it's definitely a big difference. Oh my gosh, especially having been an infantryman. I can't speak for some of these other MOS's. The infantry is a cutthroat, politically incorrect, rough business. We tell each other how it is. I wish society was much more like that. All these hissy, prissy feelings people gotta be afraid of offending somebody "oh my God". In the infantry, you got a turn in the platoon you go up and tell him hey collectively, you're a shit bird for this reason, fix it. Do this to fix it, and you know what at first he might be a little bit insulted, but then generally speaking and having been one of these people who's been told you're a shit bird for this reason, you kind of reflect on it and you realize hey, I was a shit bird you know? (laughter) I need to fix this. And I would hear in civilian society you can't do that. I get told by my family all the time ... you know you kinda ripped into that guy a little bit, and to me I'm thinking, that was just casual conversation. That wasn't even like ... me getting mad or anything. You're just telling it how it is you know. Here you have to ease your way into things. In the infantry it's not like that you know, it takes too much time. In the military you're trying to train a large group of people to the best of your ability with a very limited amount of time and resources. They can't afford to ... on many levels not just financially, I mean for morale, for the best (inaudible) you can't afford to spend time easing your way into things. We drop people into situations and you see how they react and they learn from it and

that's how you do it. Out here it's not like that. Day by day I get better, I try to smile more and you know, try to not cuss as much or you know ... things like that. It's just, it's difficult. It's definitely a ...especially not wanting to go back to that I guess it's difficult to get back into that mode.

[0:45:12]

GD: What would you say the average American does not understand about veterans?

DR: Doesn't understand ... I would say ... I'm trying to think the best way to answer this. I would probably tie it back into what I talked about before about how like, the social norms difference. There's a list of no, no questions you don't ask veterans. Unless they volunteer information. I get guys all the time that come up to me and they find out I'm a veteran. They want to know how many confirmed kills do you have you know, all these really personal questions. I wish that they just ... to a certain degree ... understood better what it meant to have that struggle I guess to understand what it is to take another life or something like that. It's not an easy thing to wrap your head around sometimes. You know, I felt like I dealt with it pretty well. Other guys didn't you know, they ... everyone has a different perception of it. Like I said, I think that what the civilian populace doesn't understand about veterans is that they're just like people like you and me you know. They ... we all came from here and they just volunteered to serve, you know. I don't particularly like when people thank me for my service. It's a very nice gesture, they mean well, but I never know what to say to it cause I don't feel like I did anything special. I was just a guy, I was a kid who joined the Army to serve and it's what I did. Like I said, I'm probably not doing a good job answering that question um ... but I suppose ... if I had to put it into words I guess ... like I said it's just too hard. Understand that ... these are a group of people who changed their entire life to adapt to society that is completely different from our own and ... they have sacrificed a lot in doing that and it's not just the typical sacrifice you know, he left his home, he left his family behind. You change your mentality, you know? Like you're changing your psychological process of how you do things. I think that, because again, the American people ... I'm talking about people who haven't been there, they don't understand what it means in that regard to adapt to that society, that they don't have a full understanding of what it means to do that. I think that's why they ask some of the intrusive questions like that. They just don't, they can't even comprehend it because they haven't experienced it. Deployment, military experience especially deployment, is an experience to learn from and if you haven't had that experience you just can't understand it. I don't care how many books you've read about it you know, things like that. If you haven't been there and done it you'll never fully understand what it means to do that. It's not the people's fault. They ... most of them mean well and a lot of them do a lot of really nice things for veterans in the veteran community you know. They'll give you the shirt off their back uh ... but with that being said like I said, it's just because they haven't experienced it they'll never truly understand what it means to adapt to all that I guess. As confusing as that probably was you know.

GD: No that was fine. That was fine. I understood where you were coming from. You pretty much covered all of that. Now, since you have a family history of service, how do you think your war experience compares to those from past wars?

[0:49:00]

DR: Completely different. Completely different enemy. You know, World War II we were fighting the Japanese and the Germans. Those were both uniformed armies that have established tactics with ships, with all kinds of stuff. We were fighting ... although they are to a certain degree certain groups organized, you know they blend right in with the population. I would say World War II era, like those guys, they weren't just concerned with civilian casualties and stuff they had their eye on the prize. They were there to win where today, we were very worried about you know, civilian populations. We're basically trying to fight a war around them, in your neighborhood basically, you know. Like ... and these guys that we would engage you know, they would come out, shoot at you from 800 meters away or 100 meters away and they would throw their weapons down some place and then, you know, they're not wearing uniforms. They're wearing typical Afghan garb. You can't identify them and they just blend right in. So you can't shoot a guy who might have been shooting at you, you know five seconds ago, whereas you know, in a uniform military you can't do that. You know, you're wearing a Japanese uniform, you're a Japanese guy, or a German you know, we can identify you. Typically speaking from what I understand those guys didn't do tactics like that. The tactics, everything ... technology you know. The technology we have today certainly surpasses theirs. I mean those guys did the best with what they had but, you know, it's a whole different front in that regard, I suppose. That's the best way I could explain that.

GD: I like it. How do you look at the war now, compared to ... has your view changed from your hard charging, ready to go to, I've been there I've done that? How has your view of the war changed?

DR: In regards to my personal feelings about like, going back you know, part of me is like I'll go back tomorrow. If they really wanted me to I'll do it, you know. But, I suppose I value it differently being as young as I was I don't think I had an understanding of the value of what it means to be alive and I supposed that's another hard lesson learned from deployment is when you see other soldiers lose their life. It changes your perception and you realize hey, I'm not invincible. I can go down. But, the way I looked at it was you lived to fight another day, you know. Like, I tried not to spend too much time ... dwelling on something like that. So I guess having now been back, my perception ... would be, would I go back? Yes, but I would certainly be a hell of a lot more comfortable, or I'm sorry. Be a hell of a lot more careful the second time around than I was. I'm not saying I wasn't, you know I was situationally aware, trying my best when I was there. But, I suppose I value life more now and I realize there's more to it than fighting wars and things along that nature. As far as like, the current situation politically regarding these wars uh ... I feel like as a result of this administration you know, they had it coming. You know that's just me with these ISIS people and all this stuff. We created them, you know. To a certain degree

we didn't create them create them, but you know we definitely had something to do with it. There's definitely, we had adoptive strategy under one administration and then the next administration coming in had completely 180 degree flip that strategy and as a result of that we're kind of back to square one almost. Actually we're in a worse position because we tried to and we tried to establish a group of people who could sit there and maintain their own country. We basically tossed them the keys to a brand new car and they went and wrecked it right out of the gate. So now we're fighting a group of people who knows our tactics cause we fought them for 13 to 15 years on their own soil. Now they've captured uparmored vehicles and guns and all kinds of other stuff so it's going to be a lot harder. So I guess I have negative feeling towards it in that regard cause I kinda feel like ... I feel like on the Soldier level we all knew it was gonna happen. We all saw it coming but on the politician level, these damn politicians were like ignorant or something. I don't know if they just didn't understand or something so, I guess in that aspect I do have negative feeling towards it but I don't regret any of it in that regard. I have all the respect for all my fellow veterans that went before and after me.

[0:53:27]

GD: Have you been to the VA yet?

DR: Yes.

GD: Describe your experience with the VA.

DR: Showing up, if you get an appointment, you'd think you know like a regular doctor's appointment you'd be the guy at that time. They schedule like, 50 to 100 people for that same appointment. You get there and maybe they get to you. Maybe they don't. And they basically you know, like open and close shop and eventually you get tired of waiting. They were really quick to process my claim, but honestly I was never looking for financial compensation. I did the claim because I talked to a lot of old guys, vets who told me make sure you get all your injuries documented because when you get old there's things that may not hurt so bad now, they hurt you a lot more later. So, they were really quick to throw money at me, which I never even wanted and I told them I didn't want. But, they have not been quick to help me out with any of my injuries. I've got a left ankle that got crushed in the IED. They tell me in the one examination I've had which was at Fort Hood by the practitioner who's setting up your claim. He tells me he thinks I have a herniated disk in one of my lower three Lumbar that sends pain down my right leg into your sciatic nerve I guess is what it is and I asked him okay, what should I do about this? He said you should pursue that. And I was like pursue that, I was like I'm here I'm pursuing it. Can you do something for me? He's like no, I can't do it here you have to go and like I said, you send them the emails, you try and call them, you get put on hold for three hours. You just get told you can't get anywhere and ... honestly anymore if the past couple months since I've been out I just ... have put it off I guess. You know, because it's just not worth the time to go down there and fight with these people. I would rather go to my own doctor and pay them out of pocket to actually get the treatment that I need that ... go stand in line at the VA. I

mean, I guess some might be better than others but the one's I've been to it's just a lot of lines. Long time waiting and you know, I ... the more and more I see about it on the news it seems like there's somebody pocketing money or all kinds of corrupt stuff. I hope they can turn it around. I'm hoping by the time I'm an old man like my grandfather was that the VA is like the best hospital on earth. But the time being it's been kinda rough.

GD: How do you feel the way that your country has treated you in terms of your service?

[0:56:00]

DR: Very well. Too well honestly almost. You know, like I said there's a really ... the perception of soldiers today just seems to be really good and I'm happy to see that. Just about everybody regardless of what side of the political line you stand people come up and like I said, thank you for my service, people try to buy me food. People try and give me things, just really nice gestures and ... they are very supportive overall. I think that to the best of their ability, they try to accept the fact that hey you know, these people did give up a part of their life to secure the life that I have and typically the older people. I think that the younger generation doesn't understand it. Like my generation, the people you know sitting here as a 22 year old guy turning 23, my generation of people, is slowly coming into realizing hey there's something to this. These guys who join the military aren't a whole bunch of retards who couldn't get into college or something like that. There was a reason for it. Overall I'd say really good. I mean I haven't ... I haven't had anybody come up to me and give me a hard time about it let's put it that way.

GD: Is there anything else you would like to share that you would like people to know?

DR: No. Not really. I mean, the only that that comes to mind is stuff we've already harped on. Talked about just trying to understand ... the importance of the sociological or the norms in another society. Understand that what's different there ... is ok there to a certain degree. I don't know how to put it. If you're gonna try to understand war, try to understand the country it's being fought in and why. That's all I can say because that's like the number one thing that people can't understand. It's why, as a veteran, I don't try really to describe what I did or the details to people out here because nobody can understand it. You know, talking to people like all the military acronyms and things like that, you find yourself stopping trying to explain all this stuff and they still won't understand because like I said the politics of it, the norms are different you know. I would say if you're really pursuing the ability to understand what it is, if you can't physically do it, go in there and join and do it, then just try to understand what's different about the region that you're fighting in from what it is at home and that'll help you out a lot. If you can understand that group of people then you can understand the war and that's all I got for that.

GD: Alright um ... and lastly if you have any pictures or journals or maps or poetry that you wrote while you were deployed if you wish to share that just shoot it to an email with me and I'll attach it to your file and everything.

DR: Yeah absolutely.

GD: Alright and the interview will conclude now.

[0:59:03]