

Robert Morris University Oral History Center

Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans Project



Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

Micah Nathaniel Stoke

Infantry, Army, Iraq War, Afghanistan War

February 9, 2016

IAVP 2

Stoke, Micah N. (1982 –), Oral History Interview, February 9, 2016.

Audio and Video Recording (ca. 51 min.)

Biographical Sketch: Micah Stoke served in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and is currently on Active Duty in the United States Army as Recruiter. During his time in Iraq, Stoke served as an 11 Bravo Infantryman operating south of Baghdad. Micah Stoke reclassified Military Occupational Specialties to 25 Sierra which is a Silent Communication Operator Maintainer where he once again deployed, this time to Afghanistan. Micah Stoke is currently a Sergeant in the Army and has served since 2006.

Topics Covered in Interview:

Silent Communication Operator Maintainer

Baumholder, Germany

Space and Missile Defense Command

Kandahar

Bagram

11 Bravo

25 Sierra

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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 ... February 9, 2016. I am joined by Micah Stoke. Micah if you could please state your full name and whether or not I have your consent to interview you today?

MS: Yes. It's Micah Nathaniel Stoke, and yes.

GD: Alright. ... Alright. Let's start with your ... date and place of birth.

MS: Uh August 13, 1982. Um ... (inaudible) Idaho.

GD: Wow. Alright. Your branch of service, years of service, and rank.

MS: Uh ... Army. Nine years, ten months, fourteen days. Um ... and I'm a Sergeant.

GD: Okay. You're place of enlistment and why you decided to enlist.

MS: Place of enlistment was called Columbus, Ohio. I joined a Columbus MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station]. And ... uh ... the housing market collapsed and I built new homes at that time ... uh in Columbus, Ohio and I had no more homes to build. My dad was in so ... something I was planning on doing. I just put it off for a while.

GD: Alright. Was ... uh ... what was the impact of 9/11 on you?

MS: Uh ... 9/11 was huge. I'm surprised I didn't join right afterwards. However, I was making money hand-over-fist and ... uh ... housing market in ... uh ... Columbus ... um ... it was big. Uh ... you know you see the patriotism all over the TV after 9/11 happened. It was like a big drive and I think that's what eventually pushed me over the hill a couple years later to actually join.

GD: Okay. And you said your father was in. Uh ... was he also in the Army or ...

MS: So he was Army. Twenty-six years combined reserve and active. Infantry. Got out. Went to school. Became an officer and did about sixteen years as a administrative guy ... at a reserve unit in Columbus, Ohio.

GD: Alright. I know you talked about the ... the collapse of the housing market ... uh ... pushing you towards military service. Uh ... was there anything else that attracted you, besides just the need for a job at the time?

[0:02:22]

MS: Oh no, no. So it was a need for a job and also ... like I knew it was something I was going to do because my dad did it and I say everyone ... I all my friends all have that little piece inside that thinks they need to serve their country. I had that as well. I just ... because I was making such good money ... um ... I just kept pushing it off. Like, "Oh, I'll join next year or I'll join next year or

I'll join next year." And then I was going to join when I was 18 (inaudible) and everything. It was just something I just kept pushing away and pushing away. So ...

GD: Alright. Um ... now I know that you ... you joined a little bit later. What ... what year did you?

MS: 2006

GD: 2006. Alright. Uh ... what was your own understanding of the Iraq/Afghanistan Wars upon entering service?

MS: So my own understanding as far as ... uh ... like what the war was about? So that's a ... so that's one that always ... people ask that question all the time, right? They go, "Well, what did you think do you think you were doing over there?" Like to me, it was never about what I was doing over there. It was just about my service if that makes sense. And I always looked ... I always explained to my friends who were like, "Oh we're over here and this is all over oil," and you know, "George Bush is the devil." I was like I always looked at ... I did a lotta research on Iraq and like Saddam Hussein and I always looked at the military as like an older brother and if somebody's getting bullied or a populace is getting bullied by a guy like Saddam Hussein and we have the ability and the capability ... uh ... to do something about it then we can. So to me it was about removing Saddam Hussein out of power and trying to, although not very successful, establishing a centralized government in Iraq.

GD: Uh ... did your understanding of the war change in any way after you joined?

MS: Well yes and no. Yes, you know, I was there and saw things first hand, but no. I like to me it wasn't ... like I said it's never about ... it's like ... I'm serving my country and my country or the military I joined told me to go and do this and that's what I'm there to do.

GD: Okay. Um ... alright. Discuss your branch ... uh ... your training. So basically let's go over ... uh ... the jobs you held ...

MS: Okay.

GD: in the military and ... the training that you received for those jobs.

MS: So I joined as a infantryman. Uh ... an 11 Bravo in '06. Went to ... uh ... basic training and ... uh ... AIT, Advanced Individual Training. So they call O-Set one unit station training. So basically, I never basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia. Uh ... lovely place. Really hot and swampy. Uh ... I went June, July, August, so ... you know ... it was a ... it was a ... just lovely and warm. Almost like a beach like setting (laughs). Uh ... no. It was hot and humid and probably like one of the worst places I've ever been in my life. Um ... sand everywhere. Got bit by red ants every single day. Um ... I did fourteen weeks and some days. Um ... received all my ... uh ... instructors role. Combat hardened infantry guys that had done at least two tours each ... um ... after that later on in my career I changed over and became a 25 Sierra, which is Silent Communication Operator Maintainer. I did nine and a half months at Fort Warden, Georgia. Complete opposite of what

the infantry was like. It was like ... uh ... almost like a college campus setting. I just showed up to class, did my work, went home. All PT was on my own. Physical training was on my own. You know I ... uh ... ever since I was a reclass and not a private, obviously all privates had to go to ... uh ... PT formation, but they left me alone. Did nine months there. Absolutely loved it. You know, first time I had got treated like an adult in my military career.

[0:06:10]

GD: Um ... let's go ... uh ... average life on base. Uh ... what did you do for fun?

MS: Life on base ... uh ... when I was deployed or life here in the States?

GD: Here in the States.

MS: Uh ... so my first duty station was Baumholder, Germany. Um ... so I ... uh ... there wasn't a lot to do ... on base. I ... everything I did was off base. Um ... the first thing I did was bought a car when I got there. I was married. I got married two days after I had graduated basic training. Uh ... we were engaged prior to going and I realized I couldn't take her with me if she was my fiancé. I could only take her with me if she was my wife. Um ... literally every day or every four day weekend I was off base. Um ... in Germany, the facilities aren't that great. There was like a bowling alley and a movie theater that plays a movie once a week, a gas station, and a do-it-yourself repair shop (laughs). And there was an entire brigade combat team on a base smaller than this campus, so ... get off base as much as possible when you're stationed overseas. That's what I did. Travel a lot. All over Europe. All over Europe. And I never would have done that. I'd never been outside the country until I joined the army.

GD: Alright. Let's go ... uh ... now we're gonna split this kinda in two. One for when you were in Iraq. One for while you were in Afghanistan. Uh ... so we're gonna hit multiple questions multiple times. Uh ... now let's go ... uh ... what was your overall feeling of deploying for your first time?

[0:07:48]

MS: First time? Overall feeling? Like excitement. Hundred percent excitement. Like, from the minute ... so I was older when I joined. I was twenty-four years old. So like the mental games that they play at basic training, like I could just see what they were doing and just went along with the flow. Um ... but you're trained for a specific purpose in infantry, which is to point and shoot. Um ... and so like I was like I finally, finally get to do. So our deployment got pushed off a year. Uh ... when I landed ... uh ... in Germany, I was supposed to go ... I was part of ... uh ... what'd ya call that ... uh ... rear detachment. Hated it. I absolutely hated it. And but we trained and trained and trained. They were like, "Okay you're going to go back and fill these guys." Well their orders got cut short. They came back early, so I didn't get to go with the first group. And then our next deployment order was ... uh ... ten months and then it got pushed out to almost a year and a half later. So all that we did was train, and so I just wanted to go do my job at that point. So it was just excitement. I was ready to go by the time I deployed to Iraq.

GD: Okay. Alright. Um ... now hitting Iraq, where were you in country and what was your mission?

MS: So where I was in country was all over the place. Uh ... south of Baghdad mostly. About a hundred clicks. I cannot remember the name of the ... the like ... whatever you wanna call it ... province or region. Um ... we established a COP [Combat Outpost] when I got there. When the Chinook landed to drop us off at our base, it was literally sand, six burnt out buildings, a couple pyramid looking bunkers from the old ... it was an old Iraqi airfield, um ... and a roll of concertina wire, about three clicks long. Um ... so when we first got there, all that we were doing was establishing a COP. Um ... and then from there, I went to ... uh ... it was COP Meade at the time, but now it's FOB Meade. Um ... and then from there, I went to Falcon. From Falcon, I got assigned ... assigned to a ... uh ... National Police Training Team. Um ... and I got assigned ... it was like ... 3 E7s, a Lieutenant Colonel, four Majors, and then all ... uh ... (inaudible). You know just to drive em around from place to place and take em around. So I was all over the place in Iraq. Mostly ... almost all of my time was south of Baghdad though.

GD: Okay. What year was this?

MS: Uh ... that woulda been '0 ... early '07.

GD: Okay. Alright.

MS: Actually ... late '07. Sorry.

GD: Alright. So you're overall mission was ... uh ... was a MIT team was to train the local nationals to be able to defend themselves or ...

MS: Yeah. So that's ... so they had ... they had different ... there was MITs and DIPITs and all that that was there so many different branches of the Iraqi Army and police its minding numbing, but all that ... the assigned mission of those teams was to go in and coordinate with the ... Ir ... the you know the indigenous populaces version of the army or the police or the national guard, and train them on how to establish a combat unit or a police team and how to run logistics, operations, how to train their soldiers. They even did like a ... um ... in the Army we have like a ... you know training for every rank you move up in, primary leadership development course, which is now warrior leader course and advanced ... we even established those types of schools for those units in Iraq.

[0:11:16]

GD: Alright. Uh ... how long were you in Iraq?

MS: Uh ... fourteen months, two days.

GD: Alright. Um ...

MS: (inaudible) extra pay

GD: (laughs) Alright. What was comradery like?

MS: It was great. Absolutely phenomenal. Uh ... the guys I served with in Iraq are as close to me, if not closer, than most of my family members. I still keep in contact with a good seven or eight of them today.

GD: Uh ... was it a combat heavy tour or was it ... I know you were focusing more on ... on training ... so uh ...

MS: So I was part of the search. The area they put us in was where all the guys that liked to ... you know ... plant roadside bombs ... you know teach little kids how to blow themselves up ... they all did their dirty work in Baghdad, but lived in my AO (area of operation). So we did a mostly police action. Um ... we kicked down a lotta doors. Lotta doors, but they never wanted to ... um ... start a fight in their own back yard. Um ... we actually recovered ... at the time, it's been out done, it was the third largest cache of weapons found in theater to date. I think it ended up being seven or eight when it was all said and done. Just massive amounts of weapons: mortars, EFPs, especially foreign projectiles, C4, HME ... like we literally, with my hands ... on my hands and knees, digging this stuff out of the ground cause we couldn't get the engineers to support us.

GD: Of course.

MS: Yeah. They're a bunch of assholes (both laugh). And then, right? This is the best part. I love this story. Um ... we found it. We were driving. We're on patrol ... um ... a dude comes runnin out that didn't like a ... a ... sheik ... shake?

GD: Sheik

MS: Yeah. And was like, "Hey. My sheik, he didn't pay me last week. I'm going to tell you were some stuff is." So we stop our patrol, get out of our cars, within five minutes found like eighteen mortars. So we ... you know we bring in our metal detectors, we pan the area, (inaudible). Uh ... we were there three days. I forget where I was going with this story. Oh ... yeah I totally forgot ... (some mumbling). Oh, engineers! They show up day three after every piece of munition has been uncovered, right? How's on the newspaper a week later? Is it us? No, absolutely not! It's like whatever engineer company, you know 317th Engineer Company uncovers large cache found southern province of Iraq (both laugh).

GD: That's typical (laughs). Alright. Um ... how was the morale ... uh ... of the troops that you were over there with?

[0:13:51]

MS: So when you send an infantry unit to ... Iraq for fourteen month and they get shot at several times, but never get to shoot back to Rules of Engagement, it goes from good to really bad. Um ... like Jarhead is how I explained my experience in Iraq. I joined the infantry to do a purpose. I never actually got to do that, so it was like ... it was completely frustrating. Like, we did ... there's

a you know ... I always talk uh ... what's that ... Austin Powers, "Dad I got a gun in my room. He's right here. I'm gonna go get it. Let's go shoot em right now." That's how I felt all the time cause the horrible people, we get the rap sheets out or whatever my Lieutenant would brief us, "We're gonna go arrest this guy. You know, he's training eleven to twelve year olds how to kill, you know throw grenades at you know troops in uh Sadr City. He lives just down the street." And instead of just going in, you know a hard entry, we go knock on his door. So ... it was just completely frustrating.

GD: So was this a major issue ... um ... with the morale changing from good to bad? Uh ... obviously it is a major issue, but how was it a major issue and did it affect ... uh ... your overall mission posture or ... um ... basically how you guys interacted throughout the tour? Did people get testy or ...

MS: Oh yeah. Abs ... abs ... I would think that you'd find that on any tour when you start to get into the later months of it, as the beginning was like time away from family. You know, being in the hot sun every day. That ... that all has a factor into it. And then the frustration of not actually being able to do your job is an added ... um ... you know ... it's just an added thing to that, but right around the time I was really getting frustrated is right around the time they transferred me to the the, NPA team, the National Police Training team. And that was like a good ... like I could focus my energy on that way more than my time kicking in doors because like I knew ... like I had a job, yes it wasn't to ... you know ... pull the trigger, but like (stuttering) here's your mission today, you're going to go do this, you're going to train these guys on this. And it was a sense of accomplishment that you didn't receive from all the other stuff that we did.

GD: That's good. Um ... now since you were, as you put it, a serf ... um ... with the Majors, Lieutenants, and E7s ... um ... did you find that information was getting disseminated to you as to the ... the purpose ... um ... the purpose of your mission and and, the point of of, you being over there?

MS: I would say ... yes. Absolutely. Um ... way more than it was when I was with my regular line unit ... um ... for the previous part of the deployment. Um ... (chuckles) most of the guys in my ... that were assigned to this NPA team with all these Majors and stuff were a buncha you know idiots. Like normally when a tasker comes down ... um ... their like they don't want to give up good Soldiers. Well, myself and my squad leader hated each other's guts ... um ... I'll just say he was just a dumb person. And I was smarter than him and he couldn't stand that fact, so he got rid of me as soon as he could. Um ... and when I went to this NPA team ... uh ... they you know liked me so like I ... I could sit in on any meeting that they had. You know no problem. They were always ... you know ... it was great. I loved it. It was like I finally got to see the piece of the puzzle that I wasn't able to see, you know, as a serf on a line unit. I was their serf, but I was like their trusted, respected serf, so I got ... I got to sit in on all the meetings. I knew everything that was going on. Um ... it was awesome. I loved it.

[0:17:26]

GD: Alright. Uh ...

MS: Got away from my squad leader too. (laughs) Can't stand that guy.

GD: What was an average day like ... uh ... during deployment?

MS: Uh ... so the first half of my deployment, average day was ... uh ... there was no average day. (laughs) Uh ... so it it, it all when day-to-day. You know, you get the mission. You know, your Lieutenant's up in the TOC [Tactical Operations Center] talking to the company. Commanders talking to the Battalion Commander at Fort Meade or ... uh ... Kalsu. Um ... we'd get like a mission and then it all ... it all ... so we ... you know three platoons and then a ... a ... uh ... Head Quarters Platoon. Um ... so if a mission came down and it was your platoon's time to take it, you took it. If a mission didn't come down ... um ... there was a lot of lifting at the gym involved. Uh ... somebody got (inaudible). I don't know. Some Lieutenant Colonel came up to visit our base and saw that we didn't have any gym equipment. Two days later, a ... uh ... a long pack came down and dropped off weights for us, which was a huge stress reliever. When you're overseas and don't have any ... anywhere to put your energy towards, that ... that was ... uh ... that was great. Um ... but really it changed. We ... right around the time we got there, they ... they transitioned to ... um ... third, I don't know their proper term, they were ... they were from Africa. They did all of our security, so I didn't have to sit in a guard tower. Um ... so like I really ... only for a solid three-month block of my fourteen months did I have to pull guard tower duty. But so the platoon that was on guard tower duty, they were taken off patrols. Um ... and ... uh ... so it was either we're going on a security, or presence patrol as they like to call it, just as an excuse to get outside the wire and get your face seen to keep insurgency down. Like okay we're just gonna ... here's our route. We'd just drive around. If we saw people walking out in the village or market place ... uh ... we'd hop out and ... uh ... shake hands and ... you know talk to the sheik and ... I always we always bought food. I loved the food while I was over there. It's delicious. Um ... but that was it. Like, unless a concrete mission came down the pipe, like, "Hey, here's this bad guy. Here's what he's doing. Go out and go get em."

GD: Alright. We kinda hit the ... uh ... what you did free time. Um ... how bout ... uh ... talking to your family. Communications with back home.

[0:19:35]

MS: Oh horrible. Uh ... so my wife was pregnant when I left. Um ... she had the baby three days after I set foot in Iraq. Uh ... I didn't find out til five days later. Um ... Red Cross message had to be sent out. We had no established communications at our ... we established a COP. Later on, we were able to get ... uh ... SPAWAR computers I think is what they called em.

GD: Mmhm

MS: Is that ... yeah SPAWAR computers. And so ... but then it was one phone, six computers for an entire company of infantry guys. So you'd come off patrol and there's the cooks and the guys

who sat and talk headquarters on these computers, not givin em up. So then they ... there was several fist fights over this. It was awesome. Um ... cause we won all of them. Um ... but then finally the company commander came out with like a rule. You had fifteen minutes per day ... uh ... to either use the phone or computer. And then, as we got more computers and more phones, that time ... there was no fist fights anymore cause there was enough for everybody.

GD: Okay. So I guess we kinda hit the ... uh ... how your deployment affected your family back home. (both laugh) Alright. Let's go on to ... um ... your second tour. Uh ... let's hit Afghanistan. So you were a 25 Sierra ... um ... how long before your second tour did you change over from an 11 Bravo to a 25 Sierra?

MS: So, I did about just under four years ... like three years and some change ... uh ... I actually reclassified to become a 25 Sierra ... in Iraq. Excuse me. And it was a couple months after that ... after coming back from Iraq that I ... um ... uh ... out processed. Went to Fort Gordon and retrained. So from Fort Gordon I went ... uh ... to Fort Meade, Maryland for two years. Uh ... I just worked like a horrendous job where you sit in a comms closet and ... there's no windows. And then from there, I went to Peterson Airforce base with Space and Missile Defense Command for Space Battalion, 2nd Space Company. And ... um ... so I wanna say four years I was a 25 Sierra ... maybe ... maybe three years and some change.

GD: Okay. That was before you deployed?

MS: Yes. Before I deployed.

GD: Alright. Um ... now the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan obviously were ... were and are different ... um ... did you have a different understanding of the Afghanistan War as opposed to the Iraq War before deploying?

MS: So like the same could be said about my ... the Af ... Afghanistan as Iraq. Um ... just it was like not my co ... not my place to question why I was there. It was just my job and that's what I was there to do. Um ... I love history and all that. I did a lot of research on Afghanistan and Iraq during my time there. I was afforded a lot more time in Afghanistan. I worked twelve hour shifts. Uh ... so ... um ... again, like it was just my duty. Like a lot of people joined and you hear complaining or getting political, but like I was just there to do a job and I went there to and did that job.

GD: Okay. Um ... let's go with ... uh ... did you have a different feeling of deploying ... uh ... to Afghanistan than you did ... to Iraq?

[0:22:43]

MS: So ... excitement was still there. Um ... the ... the mission set for what I was gonna be doing in Afghanistan ... is ... uh ... an impactful ... um ... one. Um ... I would be assigned to division headquarters wherever I went ... um ... and so like ... there's just a feeling of excitement. I actually ... like being on the other side of the ... uh ... looking glass ... you know from an infantry guy on the ground to now somebody assigned ... you know ... to a division headquarters. Um ... I

had two different perspectives on it and it was a ... it was awesome. (stuttering) Like being able to do it one time as a grunt, an infantry guy, and then being able to do it from somebody who sits in division headquarters and can see the whole picture as opposed to just your little slice of pie. I absolutely loved that. I wouldn't trade my infantry experience for anything because without that experience I ... you know a lotta times I would write a ... I would write a ... like a missions ... I can't remember what they call that ... I just was able to use my experience to turn that into missions for the stuff that I did. Obviously I can't talk about it. It's all classified, but I ... first-hand experience. You know. I could read a ... (sighs) (inaudible)

GD: Op order

MS: It's not op order ... oh well. Anyways, it's like you write up to purpose a mission and then it goes through division headquarters: the S3, the or yeah ... no the three then the two. Then it gets approved and sent down to a battalion. The battalion assigns it to a unit. It's the starting of a mission. Um ... I was actually able to read it and like I'd see some of these Majors would put down just some of the most ridiculous bullshit you'd ever see in your life on paper. I'm like no grunt on the ground is actually going to do that. You need to get rid of that. I was able actually to ... to write some of those. See it go through the approval process, get approved, see a unit go out and conduct that mission, and then a success story ... storyboard. Everything is power point when you get up to division. Everything. (inaudible) I hate Power Point. But then just to be able to sit in a room and see a success storyboard on a mission I had a hand in planning. It was cool.

GD: Alright. Um ... now I know you said that you were all over the place ... uh ... prior to the interview, but where were you in country ... um ... and obviously we can't talk too much about your mission, but we hit pretty much the main important point of it. So where were you in country?

MS: So Kandahar ... uh ... for the first ... um ... I can't I can't remember. So I was only I was only in Afghanistan for ten months and some change. I wan ... so ... if I split it in half, I say I did five months in ... um ... Kandahar, five months in Bagram up at division ... uh ... headquarters up there. Got go all over there. It was awesome.

GD: Alright. Uh ... did you see did you notice ... uh ... and this is kinda cool to hit on ... uh ... uh ... was there a difference in the comradery between when you were ... uh ... in Iraq as opposed to Afghanistan?

[0:25:35]

MS: Absolutely. Um ... so you go from a ... a ... a ... comradery driven type of unit and job to a more political aspect of things. So friendships aren't just made off the basis of "we're all in this together." They're made off of what can you do for me or what can I do for you. Um ... I'm a pretty ... I was gonna use a big word, but I don't know, amicable? No. Yeah, no. I'm a likeable guy. Say it. Say you're a guy with a college degree. I don't.

GD: It's alright go ahead. (both laugh)

MS: Uh ... I'm likeable and ... uh ... so I got along well with other people. However, and but I could see the relationships around me and like okay like this Major is working this Staff Sergeant, not because he likes me but for a purpose. Or, you know, this Major is working this ... uh ... Lieutenant and that Lieutenant's an idiot, but he's working im for a certain purpose. Or, you know, so on and so forth. Very much more political. I was on a very small team. Its known as an Army Space Support Team. Um ... there's ... uh ... there were a Major, a Captain, a Staff Sergeant, and then two Buck Sergeants or E5s. Um ... and like the the ... our group was good. You know. We all got along well. But then again, just like Iraq, uh ... towards the end of the tour ... uh ... the ... you know ... you can feel the tension between people and you can really start to see like ... uh ... people's feelings coming out as like I don't really like this person. I'm just tolerating this person to make my life easier.

GD: Alright. Um ... now is there a difference in the morale ... um... throughout the time of your tour in Afghanistan or was it pretty much the same?

MS: So my morale was pretty much ... uh ... the same. I did go through some ... a little bitta issues back on the home front while I was there, and that put me in a little bit of a downwards spiril ... spiral. Um ... but I was able to work through those being ... you know ... half a world away. So that was like a sense of accomplishment cause most guys you talk to when they're deployed and they start to have problems at home come home from a deployment to divorce paperwork. I was able to work through them and if I was in the infantry I'd probably be divorced right now. I had access to a phone and a computer 24/7. Um ... it was our phone. Our six man team, we had our own phone hooked up to ... um ... I provided the the satellite communications, so I had my own phone. So ... um ... I feel bad for the grunts. (laughs) But actually I reclassified because there was one time I set up for a three month stretch with guard tower. I was sitting in a guard tower and I was talking to my buddy and I was like, "Look there's a buncha idiots in the infantry. Um ... there's a dude somewhere in an air conditioned room eating Ramen noodles outta his microwave like surfing the Internet getting paid exactly the same amount of money that we're getting paid." So I just went out and found that job. (both laugh)

GD: Alright. So what was ... uh ... what was an average day like under your deployment in Afghanistan?

[0:28:30]

MS: So in Afghanistan, that's easy. Um ... minus all the stuff I can't talk about ... uh ... it was a twelve hour shifts every day. Um ... I was part of a ... uh ... tr ... what do you ... what do you call that ... a mobile training team. Um ... so like I said I gotta fly all over the place. So when I wasn't traveling out to different FOBs (Forward Operating Bases) or COPs to give a block of instruction on the programs that I worked with ... um ... I would wake up ... uh ... go to the chow hall. Go to work. Log into my three or four computers that I had to log into. So there's like the ... the NIPRnet, the SIPRnet ... uh ... and then there's a couple others I don't know if I'm allowed to talk about em.

And then ... um ... you had your one that was like across ... purple ... I just remember colors. I can't even remember the names of em. But so basically, it was just level of access. So NIPRnet was common Internet. SIPRnet was secret Internet for U.S. service personnel. The other two were top secret ... um ... computers. And the third one was like the ... it's the one they give across ... oh ... uh ... Coalition Forces. So like anyone ... so obviously most ... most of what we did, didn't go on that. I would just use that to send emails to like ... the ... the Romanians or the ... you know, "Hey. We need this from you. Come meet us here at this time and place." So ...

GD: Okay ...

MS: And that was it, man. That's ... chow hall and then after my twelve hour shift, I did a lotta work. I did a lot of work while I was there. Um ... but ... monitoring ... uh ... slides. I attended a ton of meetings at the division level, but then I would get off work. Uh ... I got ... and I'd go straight to the gym and being on Kandahar and Bagram and Kabul and places like that. Always a great gym around. So ... just like Iraq. That was like a big stress reliever for me. You're always in the best shape of your life if you a POG [Personnel Other than a Grunt]. (laughs) Grunts not so much.

GD: Alright. Um ... I wanna hit the ... uh ... I wanna hit the technology ... uh ... between your your ... obviously it's a huge difference ... uh ... but even social media wise ... um ... between Iraq and Afghanistan and the way it allowed you to communicate with your family members back home.

MS: Oh. So ... Facebook and social media was in its infancy when I was ... uh ... in Iraq. I actually didn't have a Facebook page until I actually got to Falcon where I was able to like have a computer in my room cause all the barracks there their hard barracks. Concrete barracks and they weren't all wired for Internet. Um ... so ... but then the difference, the main difference, wasn't so much social media and that. So my time in Afghanistan obviously everything I did was of a complete and sensitive nature. I didn't post a single thing into any social media site while I was in Afghanistan. All my communication was direct line communication. Either a person to person email or a person to person phone call. Um ... never did I post anything online, but then again you see a lotta people that do. The difference being as that like we ... I got maybe fifteen different briefs on the danger of social media and I actually had restrictions on what I could and couldn't do. So I just said "Eh. I'm not gonna do it," and just stayed off Facebook. I did troll or creep on Facebook, but I never actually posted anything myself.

GD: Right. Right.

MS: You know a good way that ... that's a good point. So a good way for me to actually see pictures of my kids or my wife ... um ... I wouldn't post or comment, but I'd just log on and look at what's going on back home, you know. And then like I saw something I'd want to talk about I'd just hop on my phone and call call the wife up. Like, "Oh, I see you went to Bob Evans today." (both laugh)

[0:32:08]

GD: I could use some Bob Evans.

MS: Yeah. The chow wasn't bad in Afghanistan though.

GD: Did you feel that were ... uh ... being used effectively in Afghanistan?

MS: In Afghanistan, absolutely. Hundred percent effectively. Um ... yeah. Yes.

GD: I know we can't talk too much about all that.

MS: Yeah. Correct. (laughs)

GD: So ... uh ... the whole Afghanistan part of the interview is ... uh ... somewhat redacted.

MS: Yes.

GD: Um ... now we're going to go past the ... um ... tours and we're gonna hits some ... some points on the homefront.

MS: Okay.

GD: Um ... do you believe that the ... the media ... uh ... gives Americans an accurate portrayal of ... of the wars?

[0:32:50]

MS: Oh absolutely not. Um ... violence and sex sells. Uh ... so that's what you see on the news and in the media. Um ... sometimes you'll have a like ... like I ... I follow media. Not all of them. Um ... it's just so funny to be part of something and then come home and watch it on the news and know how different what you're watching is from what you were a part of. Um ... it's amazing how the media can twist and contort stories to fit maybe something ... you know ... like ... I can't ... I'm not allowed to talk politics, but like the current election. Uh ... like its always funny. You see like a story come out right around election times or but when I say that violence and sex sells, like there's always a negative connotation to war. Obviously, people go and they die and mothers and fathers lose sons and daughters, which is never a good thing. Um ... I did some research on this though ... uh ... during the time I was in Iraq. You were actually more likely to be injured in a motor vehicle accident in the state of Ohio than you were ... uh ... in Iraq at the time I was there during the search. Um ... that's a verifiable ... I believe a verifiable fact. I did my own research so you knows the sources I pulled. You know. I tend to stay away from anything wiki cause its user updated. Um ... but like if you knew that fact, and then you sat down and watched the news, you were believe that I was lying to you at that point. Um ... because all that you see are like four dead in Iraq after during roadside bomb blast, right? You don't see how many people died in traffic accidents in the state of Ohio, right? Because that ... I mean that's a story ... um ... soldiers dying in Iraq versus ... you know ... what's going on in the United States. Like nobody would like ... "Oh okay. People died in a car accident in Ohio. No big deal." You know? One sells one doesn't. One makes a headline. An American flag F-16 flying over it. You know,

“Coming up next ... “right? But ... very disproportionate to like what actually goes on in the stories that are reported in the media, in my own opinion obviously.

[0:34:53]

GD: Right. Right. Um ... now how do you think that that your experiences overseas ... uh ... changed you personally?

MS: I’m gonna go out and say that they didn’t change me personally. Um ... I’ve always been like very set in my ways, if that makes sense. Uh ... get line ... uh ... Edge of Darkness, it’s a movie with Mel Gibson, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen it ... um ... he goes to talk to some I can’t even remember the guy. He was in like politics and the guy was like, “Yeah I was in, you know, Vietnam. You know, how was it for you over there?” And you know obviously that guy was a POG, like in the rear with the gear, and I Mel Gibson had ... was like a heavy weapons platoon leader during his time. He’s like, “I always looked at war as like you’re more of what you were coming out of it.” So if you either ... you entered it and you had some problems or some difficulties, maybe those were compounded and brought to the surface, but if you’re like a steadfast person, right, all that you did was just solidify what you already believe in. And that’s kinda my my view point on it. I know it’s not a popular one.

GD: It was eloquently put. Alright ... um ... now you did redeploy twice obviously ... um ... returning to the states ... uh ... if you could hit both separately, what was the climate ... uh ... and how did you feel and readjustment back to life on base.

MS: So comin back from Iraq ... uh ... I came back to Germany. Uh ... it’s a drunken haze. (chuckles) Uh ... obviously everyone gets piled into tents. You get your mandatory reintegration process. They gave us like half days we only worked four hours a day. You know and this is like earlier, not early in the war, but earlier on where like certain things like identifying like ... you know ... PTSD and things like that weren’t really taken effect yet. Um ... so they just crammed a buncha guys that just got back from a fourteen month tour in a tent for seven straight days and then said, “You’re done.” Um ... for me, personally adjusting, I had a kid in the home when I left. Um ... so it was more like getting to know my daughter at that point, even though she was just a ... you know ... a little thing. Like that was an adjustment for me and my wife, who was the leader of the household during the time that I was going, did everything. You know just readjusting and settling into a new normal, right? A new normal being. We have a kid now and daddy’s home and he pays the bills and does things like that. You know, but never ... I didn’t have any reintegration, as the Army calls it, issues. Um ... I just kinda settled back in my own way, you know. It was it was good. A lotta off time. I think for the next three months I worked maybe ten hours ... um ... especially since I was reclassing. They all called me a traitor. Um ... my first sergeant said, “I don’t even want to see you in my formations anymore,” which was absolutely fine with me. Like I literally did nothing. Just hung out with my wife and kid, and that that actually kind of made the process even easier for me. You know (mumbling) get otta here, POG. (both laugh)

[0:38:10]

GD: Alright. Now Afghanistan. Was there a difference ... uh ...

MS: So Afghanistan I wasn't outside the wire and I ... we had already talked about like the constant communication I was able to have with my wife and kids ... um ... during that time. Uh ... the one thing that was ... uh ... a little rough I had to go on R&R. (Burps) Excuse me. Um ... while I was in Afghanistan and everything was fine when I went home on R&R. Um ... but when I got back, my ... so I had a son between the two deployments ... um ... my son didn't want anything to do with me. Uh ... let's he's four ... he was two and a half, three years old at the time. He wouldn't even look at me. That was just for like four hours. So I get home, he won't look at me, he won't talk to me. Um ... I go lay down and take a nap and I wake back up and it's like I had never left. Um ... there was a little bit more of a readjustment coming back from Afghanistan. My wife actually went through like a life style change. Uh ... she started working out. Lost a buncha weight. She's ... she's like a fitness instructor now at a gym in Pittsburgh. Um ... but so she developed a little bit more sense of like ... um ... independence when I was gone. And that's ... I talked about the issues that I had when I was deployed. And that just (stutters) it's a natural thing. You know you've relied on someone for so long and then you see you find independence. Um ... you ... you know ... tend to push back against certain things, but I mean, we worked through it while I was deployed and when I came back. It was a little bit longer of a readjustment period cause she had like a new schedule at the gym and I had work, but it ... I'd say three weeks and then it was like I never left again.

GD: Alright. Um ... what does the average American understand about veterans?

MS: Uh ... just about everything? (laughs) Uh ... so I'm a recruiter now and I talk to a lotta people that ... I'm the only person that they know or see in a uniform and like every like the number one question is did you kill anybody. Like that's the number one question. So to me like that just is proof that people just watch the news and all that they think of is killing, right? Cause like the Army is very large and the infantry is a very small portion of that, even though it's the center of the Army. Um ... it takes a lot of support to support the infantry. And ... uh ... everyone that assumes that you went to Iraq and Afghanistan and shot somebody. Biggest misconception out there in the world I think. And so to me, going back to that media thing, that's like where they get it from. They watch the news or they see the newspaper or they see a post on social media ... um ... which is probably clickbait and a not valid story first off. Um ... but they they see that and so their perception of you is that you shoot people when that is totally, even as an infantryman person I never shot anybody. So it's just not the case.

GD: Alright. Um ... did you feel that ... uh ... how do you think that your war experience compares to that ... uh ... or those of past wars?

[0:41:25]

MS: That's a tough one. Um ... (laughs) I very ... I have a lot of opinion on this. Um ... just look at casualty rate between Iraq and Afghanistan and ... um ... let's say Vietnam, World War I, World War II, Revolutionary, or Civil War. Um ... look at loss of life ... um ... but I hate talking about that for the simple fact that ... like if I ... that's a tough one. Does that makes sense? Because I'm not trying ... cause ... I lost friends in these wars. You know people that I went to basic training with. Um ... literally fourteen days after leaving basic training you know got hit ... like they get sent to their unit in ... like myself I was Route D they get issued a weapon and they went straight to Afghanistan. You know fourteen days after graduating basic training they get hit an RPG in the side of their vehicle and die. So I don't want to diminish that, but at the same time some of these guys were exposed to way more than what people today is exposed to. Uh ... and that's just to me that's technology and the movement forward. Um ... earlier on in Iraq and Afghanistan there was a lot more ... you know ... invasionary force obviously, a lot more. But it's moved way much I mean we're in giant armored vehicles and as roadside bombs get bigger and better so do the armored vehicles that we travel in. Uh ... air strikes, drone strikes I mean it's like a video game nowadays. Um ... taking ... and it's great, in my opinion, cause the when you can remove people, you're always gonna need boots on the ground. Always. That's a given and you can't go to war without boots on the ground, but the more you can remove someone from harm's way the better, in my opinion. Right ... um ... a lotta people are like, "It's not personal." Yeah you don't want it to be personal. Cause if I could just drop death on you from above instead of, you know, sending out sixteen guys I would rather do that. Risk versus reward type of thing. But like Vietnam, World War II all that you gotta do is look at casualty rates and life expectancy of Soldiers from the different conflicts to know that these ones were just to me they're not wars, they were military conflicts in the Middle East, if that makes sense.

GD: It does. Um ... now I'm gonna go a little off script here and I wanna talk about your transition to ... uh ... your role as a 79 or ... what is it ... 79 Romeo.

MS: Yeah. I'm detailed. I'm not a full blown recruiter.

GD: Now the questions I wanna ask are gonna be basically interaction with civilians ... uh ... being away from ... from a military instillation and being surrounded ... uh ... by civilians in a civilian area where you are ... it's not a military town.

[0:44:08]

MS: I talk about this daily. (laughs) It's ... it's insane. It's absolutely insane. Um ... being, just like you said, being in a military town everyone is used to seeing someone in a uniform. So ... a little humor ... I get hit on more now than I have in my entire life. So being outside of a military instillation, you know, that's people see guys in uniform all the time. No big deal. I come to Pittsburgh and on a daily basis in uniform I'm hit on. Uh ... its insane. Like me and my wife joke around about it all the time. I'm like, "I should just drop the anchor. You're holding me back babe." Um ... but it's ... and it's ... I get ... I have not had a negative experience yet. Granted I've only been a recruiter for three months. Uh ... people hold the door open for me. I get my meals

paid for, which I personally like ... I appreciate it. A hundred percent. Love it. Thank you. Got it. But I always ... the way I was raised I always feel like I should pay for my own meal and pay my own way. So like on one part of it I'm like I love it on the other part I'm like, "Eh," cause I always ... I don't know. I feel bad. That's just how my dad raised me. You pay your own way through. But so my experience outside a military instillation, obviously you're away from the support channel that comes with being in a major military instillation. Um ... they have us support nowadays, like I talked about reintegration, things are a lot better now as like you know different problems have arisen and been identified. Um ... but the support channel ... uh ... lotta people when they get on recruiting they ... it's kinda like they were in a protected environment and now they're in an exposed environment. And a lotta guys have ... uh ... problems dealing with that change. Since I was a little bit older when I joined, I paid my own bills. You know had my own rent. Didn't have to report to a first (inaudible) platoon (inaudible) you know. Um ... I ... I knew more of what to expect than some of these guys who joined the Army when they were eighteen, do eight or nine year and become recruiters, and now they're outside the base for the first time in their lives, and they don't ... a lot of em you know have a rough transition into recruiting. For me, it was a little bit easier, but yeah.

GD: Alright. Um ... There are a lotta questions here about the ... uh ... VA ... uh ... you obviously don't have any experiences yet with the VA hospitals ... um ... so I wanna go more to how you've found ... um ... the ... the transition from that safety net of ... um ... military ... um ... health care on base to having to deal with own things here.

MS: So it's a little bit difficult. So you have to like ... you go from Tri-Care Prime to Tri-Care Prime Remote. You have to find your own doctor, which on a regular instillation, no one has to do. Your doctor's your doctor. You're assigned a doctor. Um ... I had to look up online. Go through like ... and then like ... do some Google searches on some of the doc ... excuse me. I'm sorry ... indigestion (mumbling then chuckles). Uh ... you have to go online. You have to find ... you know ... you have to find your own doctor. Find your own dentist. Um ... they try and make it like an easy transition. However, it's the handheld concept. A lotta people have had their hands held for a long time as a ... you know ... and now they have to actually go out and do this on their own. It was actually difficult for me cause like I'm not gonna go receive medical care from just anybody. So I had to do a lotta research on it and find out. It took me about four hours and then I found a doctor online. I will touch on the ... the ... the ... uh ... the VA. My dad just had hip replacement surgery at the VA in Dayton, and it's like ... one of the saddest, best places I've ever been. Like, I walked the hallways when I was goin to see im. I saw him the day he got his hip replaced. And you see vets from ... you know ... World War II, Vietnam, Desert Storm ... um ... Iraq, Afghanistan ... um ... wondering the hallways, and like I bumped into a few of em who had like the unit patch I had been in or been assigned to or attached to and I'd talk and swap stories. And that was great. Like you kinda feel a little bit of comradery, but (stuttering) when I say sad, to see the amount of people in that hospital was mind numbing. Uh ... I just hanging out in the lobby ... uh ... fifteen to twenty guys wondering the hallways like a hundred. Uh ... outside smoking with their oxygen tanks maybe another ten or fifteen. Um ... but ... uh ... my dad has

had a pretty good experience with the VA. Um ... he he's had just a slew of medical problems since he got out, and he's had them all taken care of, you know. So ...

[0:48:45]

GD: Alright. Um ... how do you feel that your ... that your country has treated you in terms of your service? (short pause) That's being out of uniform ... um ... interacting with the community ... uh ... cause obviously being a recruiter ...

MS: Yeah. Uh ... I don't know. I never really thought about that one. Uh ... I've ... so I've yet to meet, like you'll hear stories, but I've yet, personally, to meet that person who is completely disgusted with a soldier and what the military represents. Um ... every once in a while you'll ... uh ... as a recruiter ... um ... you'll run into people that like they you need something from them and they see you coming and they just like you can see their composure change, but then they put on a fake smile and do whatever you need. Like, my country has ... uh ... that's a hard question to answer. I don't really know how my country has treated me.

GD: It's kinda hard that the fact that you're still in.

MS: True.

GD: So it's kinda hard to ... to answer, so we'll just kinda go over that. Do you have anything else to add that you would like to add that maybe we didn't hit on that would be important for people to know?

MS: Um ... don't always believe the news media. I'm sure I went over that when I was talking about it. A hundred percent. Um ... and ... uh ... just I think the biggest thing so ... myself, something that I do ... um ... what's that place where you get cheap beer called? The VFW. I always go to the VFW and buy a rounda drinks back home. Um ... and there's a couple guys that have never served and they'll go to the VFW and drop thirty or forty bucks on the bar to see all those old timers' faces light up, you know when someone comes in and does that ... uh ... just ... uh ... treat vets right. I hate ... I can't stand ... uh ... I don't know if you're away like the like the homeless population of the vets. It's absolutely mind numbing. Um ... and like ... (stuttering) so that then again goes into another issue, right? There's so many programs out there for veterans. Um ... then why do we have such a high homeless veteran population? To me like ... I don't know ... is it is it people that want help and the people that don't want help don't. I don't know. I don't know the answer to that one, but it's pretty mind numbing to see when you look at the numbers of homeless vets and vets that need assistance and, you know, was it something during their wartime service that caused that issue? I don't know, but ... uh ... I never give em money when you see em with a sign on the side. I will go buy em food though. So ...

[0:51:13]

GD: Alright. Um ... if you have any photographs, journals, maps, home movies, or poetry that you have written while you were deployed ... uh ... that you wish to share ... uh ... you can email Josh or myself.

MS: Okay.

GD: Uh ... we share the same email, so ... um ...

MS: Unfortunately, I've lost like ninety percent of all my photos. It's on a crashed hard drive.

GD: Yeah. That that happens to most of us.

MS: I wasn't a Facebook guy so I don't have them.

GD: Right. Right.

MS: I wish I did. (both laugh)

GD: Alright with that ... uh ... the interview will end ... now.

[0:51:49]