

Robert Morris University Oral History Center

Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans Project



Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

WALTER ROSADO

U.S. Army Human Resources Specialist, Iraq War/

Military Contractor, Afghanistan

January 20, 2016

Rosado, Walt (1984 –), Oral History Interview, January 20, 2016.

Biographical Sketch: Walt Rosado served as a Human Resources Specialist in the United States Army from 2007 to the present. Rosado served with the 1st Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division at Camp Taji, Iraq during 2009. In 2010, Rosado worked with a civilian military contracting company in Afghanistan. Walt Rosado has since been Commissioned as an Officer in the Army Reserve.

Topics Covered in Interview:

Camp Taji

Combat Action Badge

Military Contractor

9/11

Human Resources Specialist

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JC: This interview is part of the Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans Project undertaken by the Oral History Center at Robert Morris University. I am Josh Caskey and today is January 20, 2016. I am joined by Walt Rosado. Can you please state your full name?

WR: Walter Rosado.

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

WR: You do.

JC: Let's start with a little background information. Where were you born and when were you born?

WR: I was born September 4, 1984. I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

JC: Can you tell me which branch of service you were in and the years that you have served or if you are still serving?

WR: United States Army. Initial date of enlistment was 2007 and still serving in a reserved capacity.

JC: I understand you were enlisted officer, what was your highest enlisted rank?

WR: My highest enlisted rank was corporal.

JC: What are you currently?

WR: First lieutenant.

JC: Can you us a little bit about the enlisting process, why did you want to enlist or was there anything that sticks out in your mind?

WR: I guess I would start by saying that joining the military and serving in the military is something that was very much what I wanted to do throughout my entire life. The town I grew up in, Aspinwall, was big on the Memorial Day parade ceremony and stuff like that and I was taught to have a certain reverence for Vietnam veterans especially and certainly World War II veterans. So it was just something that I was always drawn to. When I got to junior high school, I was actually in 6th grade, and I was never a good student all the way through high school. I didn't really have this click happen until I went to college. Junior high school, 6th grade, I was having a tough time and everything like that, not doing too good in school so I actually like decided to run away, join the military as a 6th grader. So I made it to a recruiting station and this guy that was there was actually a captain in the Navy, so pretty high ranking guy. He drove me home and he's like, "Hey we appreciate you but you know you're too young and I also want to let you know that the better educated you are the further you can go, the more you can serve us. You need to finish high school" is basically what he said. So I just thought that was awesome. You know, it just kind of propelled me to try to do better and all that kind of stuff. When I was in

high school, sophomore year, September 11th ... by far the defining moment of, not (0:02:59) just my life I think but a lot of people that are my age, a lot of people that served. I was in a biology class, just hanging out in school and still too young to enlist in the armed forces. I just watched all that unfold in front of me just like so many other people did. It was crazy because, you know, we were under attack and what happened right after 9/11, I think people sometimes forget it but it was really cool how everybody united. Like in my little high school people were spray painting camouflage patterns onto their trucks and there were flags everywhere and everybody was like, let's do something about this you know? They attacked us let's do something about this. So I had a good friend and me and him said, hey we're still too young, let's when we graduate from high school lets enlist in the military together. And I'm like yeah let's do it, all about it. When we got to be seniors, I thought about it again. My senior year, 2003, of high school something happened that was like really, really cool and that was that the initial invasion of Iraq, I mean I watched it on TV in a classroom in school. And I remember seeing the cameras had like a night vision filter because they were just dropping ordinance all over Iraq, and just being like this is real, this is going down. So the prime push, the invasion in Iraq was still really fresh, really new and I was very young. So when my friend Russel came to me and said hey let's, you know, let's do this we're high schools graduates let's join, I actually followed the advice of a Vietnam veteran in my hometown that um, he was a great guy. He was a police officer also, Mr. Docherty was his name, and he said to me you'd be stupid to join the military right now. And I said why? He said the Iraqis, they're a bunch of (inaudible). He's like if you enlist, he's like, the war will be over before you even graduate from basic training. He's like I promise you this. And so obviously in hindsight being what it is he was very, very wrong. But also no one in my family had gone to college before so I kinda made a promise to my mother and my grandma, said hey, I'm gonna go to college. So when I went to college my friend Russel had went to the United States Army, he enlisted. I went to college. I went to Thiel College in Greenville, PA. I got a degree in History, secondary education and um, a few weeks before I was set to graduate from Thiel ... a few weeks before I was set to graduate from Thiel, his cousin actually called me and he was killed in Iraq in an improvised explosive device. So my mindset at the time was, okay my good buddy passed away, I made this promise to my family that I was gonna get a bachelor's degree. I'm there, there's no more excuses. It's time to enlist. This is what I want to do. I didn't have any pushback from anybody or anything like that. So I went to enlist the same way probably a lot of kids did at the time. I went on the internet, I Googled a recruiter in the Pittsburgh area, I met with him. Next thing I knew I was going through the MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station] process, the whole physical and all that stuff. It was my goal I guess at the time to be a 13 Foxtrot which is a field artillery forward observer. I went through the physical process and it's pretty basic. There's not too much to it. You give blood and like, walk around in circles and stand up off your knees and stuff like that. And the recruiter, Sergeant Frye I remember him coming out and I was in this waiting room area and he's like, man we got a problem. And I'm just like what's up Sergeant what's the problem? And he's like we're having trouble putting you into the Army right now. So at the time the Army had what they called critical MOS's or jobs that you know, if you went into this job you got similar money if you did this versus that and all that stuff. So what the problem was ... was that I was

colorblind. He's like you're colorblind so you're not going to go into the field artillery. So he's like I got two critical MOS's (0:07:33) that I can get you into now and he said those two are 42 Alpha which is a human resources specialist and then an 88 Mike which was a truck driver. So, me at the time I thought what's gonna have the best potential for me getting a career when my military position ends. For that reason and that reason alone I took the human resources route and it really did serve me very well after I left the military because I ended up getting employment because of that. So I enlisted as a 42 Alpha into the (inaudible) general core. So I finished college um, I was set to go to basic training. It's kind of like, hey you can't join the field artillery but I'm gonna give you this, type of deal which Army recruiters are kinda known for doing kinda sly deals. They let me go to field artillery basic combat training in Fort Sill, Oklahoma. So I went to Oklahoma, I flew on a civilian airplane to Atlanta had a layover, ended up in Lawton [Oklahoma]. Got off the plane in Lawton and at the time the Sooners, their football team was in some in some kind of playoff, I don't even know what it was, but I got off this airport in Oklahoma and on the speakers there's all this, it's all about the U, all this crazy screaming and stuff and that's where I first saw the brown round hat of the Army Drill Sergeant. All I really knew like for real was from like movies and stuff like that and I was scared to death of drill sergeants and I still kinda am today honestly, a little bit. But um, what they did was we got on busses, we actually had to drive to the instillation and I got there. We were on this bus and like, I know you said you were a Marine, and all I know about Marine Corps boot camp comes from the media too. So like I imagine this bus pulling up and yellow footprints on the ground and all that stuff. Well none of that happened at all, in fact it was kinda like the opposite of that. So we got on this bus and there was a Drill Sergeant there and then we got to the post and we got off the bus and there was some profanity used by the Drill Sergeant sometimes but then we just basically did this administrative in processing being like, hey were here, this is our blood type, this is our sizes and stuff like that. We went into these barracks and this Drill Sergeant looked at me and a couple other guys that had been at the airport and was like, go to bed. I was like, OK. So no one told me that I wasn't in basic training yet. I actually thought that this was like day one of like, what is essentially boot camp and I was like scared to death that any second the lights would turn on and these Drill Sergeants would come in and they'd be yelling and all this stuff and just none of that happened. So it turns out what the Army uses is they have like a Reception Battalion where you go into and then basically the guys built up until you have enough guys for a basic training class. So, what their goal was, it was just so backwards. We slept probably 12 hours a day. We went to the best (inaudible) on the post. We ate steak, we ate eggs, all this like crazy stuff. We were not permitted to exercise. They were trying to basically like undo the things we had done to prepare. It was just like, nothing like what I expected and we were there for I think two or three weeks before we had an actual class. At that point I went to my battery and then we had this more traditional basic combat training, Drill Sergeant atmosphere with like really, really getting you know yelled at and all that other stuff. That first part was really just like, it just blew my mind that no one explained it to me, I'd have to go to this reception battalion, live like this and like eat and not exercise and like, they gave us a book we had to read on military knowledge and stuff like that. So it was just like a far out introduction to the military, not at all what I expected and not at all like anything I've ever

seen on TV or a documentary or anything. But I mean I understand the Army, just like the other branches, their businesses and they want to put the best out there. (0:12:29) So past that I had a traditional basic training experience. It was 10 weeks long, we did physical training, drill and ceremony, combat life saver lanes, all this stuff that you would think of in basic training I feel like we did. The one kind of wakeup call for me in basic training was ... am I okay? Like how I'm talking too? Is this what you want?

JC: Yeah, no you're good.

WR: The one kind of wakeup call, everybody that joined in the time period that I enlisted knew without a shadow of a doubt that you were going to war. You were going to Iraq or Afghanistan. It wasn't like this is a possibility. To each of us it was like a fact. Like hey, once you are a soldier this is the next logical progression, you're going to war and there was a level of excitement about that. The barracks areas at Fort Sill were divided into these kinda like housing communities if you can call it that. We called them starships. So we had um, my battery was the 1st and 79th and then the 1st and 40th and our basic training classes were like a week or two off, but we went through things together. So we were on a U.S. weapons lane which is um, you know heavy weapons, machine weapons, like a saw, .50 caliber and we actually had a recruit from the 1st and 40th, he was killed. His name was Private Fisher and a .50 caliber round killed him on the spot and a Drill Sergeant was behind it, no one knew what happened and it was this big investigation and to see a kid die like that, not at war but in training was just like, insane.

JC: And this was still in basic training?

WR: This was in basic training.

JC: This is prior to MOS school or anything.

WR: Right. Prior to AIT, yeah it was just during basic training. So when Private Fisher went the base responded to that by going into lockdown, a lockdown protocol. We weren't allowed to make any phone calls, they didn't want anybody talking to your family or a news agency and we spent the next several week with cans of blue paint painting all the inert ordinance blue because there's a color coding scheme and blue means it's a dummy rounder or an inert round. And this hadn't been done. So it was just like, you know even in training this is real and this is bad. How he died there was no honor or anything to it that we could see and then the Army's actions after that were kinda crazy as well. So that was something and then I had a basic training injury also. I fell off a tower after the lanes that we went through I was tasked with taking a push broom on top of this tower and I had this push broom and I just fell off the tower and I injured my nose and everything like that. When it was time to leave Fort Sill I was happy to go. I had had enough of it. So then I went to advanced individual training in South Carolina at Fort Jackson.

JC: And that's for your 42 Alpha AIT?

WR: Right.

JC: And what's that actually called again? The 42 Alpha? (0:15:48)

WR: It's human resources specialist

JC: Everything went good with schooling and all that and AIT, was it, how was that experience? Just briefly.

WR: AIT went great. It was actually kinda challenging at parts cause you had an actual, you had school house that you went to everyday you PT and stuff, but the difference between um, at the time Fort Sill as well as Fort Benning and Fort Knox they were all male. They hadn't done this integration that had happened yet and because of that I feel like they were maybe a little bit rougher on those of us that came from those place than they were at Fort Jackson. So Fort Jackson kinda had this reputation going into it of relaxing Jackson, you know stuff like that? That was very much true and you know the guys that came from the combat MOS basic training sites, we kinda like banded together because we looked at these, it's like, you go to McDonald's in Moon Township you go to McDonald's in Ohio it's the same Big Mac, but like with soldiers it wasn't the same think. We were just very different we felt at the time. And my younger brother, he went to basic training at Fort Jackson and there's definitely good soldiers that go there and it's not a reflection but how laid back it was ... not just the AIT but the basic training to see basic trainees smoking cigarettes and talking on cell phones. It was just like mind blowing to all of us. But yeah I got through, I got through Fort Jackson with no problems at all. It was like, having already gone through college by the time I got to that point, it was like micro college including the party scene. Like we had OPO's where we allowed to leave the post almost every weekend.

JC: What does that stand for?

WR: Off Post Overnight. It's like leave not charged. We would get hotel rooms. It was just like, it was a party more-so than ... than it should have been probably and honestly once I joined the regular force, I think it's the same thing with everything but that's really where you learn how to do your job.

JC: So when you actually went to you unit, your deployable unit, what unit was that?

WR: I was in a couple different units but the deployable unit was the 1st Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division.

JC: How long before, is that the unit you deployed with?

WR: Yes.

JC: So you got to the unit from your AIT and how long was it before you would deploy to Iraq?

WR: It was ... it was 2009 just because of the timing and the stuff like that it was less than a year. It wasn't even a full year.

JC: And where was that again? You said out of the unit you were with where were they out of?
(0:18:43)

WR: It was out of North Carolina.

JC: Fort Bragg. Okay. And so you were there about a year or so before you deployed?

WR: Less than a year probably. We got a warning order like really fast ... like I was fresh out of AIT and we got a warning order and like when you get um, I don't want to say a unit is not like combat ready but no unit is combat ready. Like there's all kinds of preparation and stuff that goes into preparing to go overseas. So we spent immediately time doing that, you know training and doing all that kind of stuff.

JC: Okay. Let's jump ahead just a little bit. So you're with this unit um, 2009. What was the process like getting overseas and then just tell me where you ended up.

WR: So like the process for getting overseas, like the physical process you mean?

JC: Yeah.

WR: We flew in a regular civilian airplane, like a uh, like you would if you were booking a flight to Florida. So we just flew in a regular airplane. It wasn't military transport, military aircraft at all. We left out of McGuire Airforce Base in New Jersey. We went up there ... it was really kinda insignificant honestly. The only thing that was maybe interesting about it I guess was that it was a post 9/11 world and we all were carrying our firearms onto this commercial aircraft. They had like ... this electric wire ties. They would have us like slide our bolt to the rear and they would like wire tie it. But besides that I mean there was no like safety precautions. We stood on a ... all of your bags and being my first deployment I took everything that they gave me. I didn't realize like you didn't need everything. You, all of your bags that the military gave you um, that weren't being stowed I guess underneath the craft and then you're carrying on stuff like that you had to stand on this big metal plate to get the weight so that the aircraft had like the appropriate weight. But it was, there was nothing really special about it. We had a layover in Germany and it was like, a couple hours of layover. Like I would say no more than five hours and uh, at that airport they had um, kinda sectioned off an area of it cause they didn't want us like interacting with the German locals. They had to keep it just basically like German people being like trying to take our money. Selling all kinds of stuff.

JC: And then where did you end up in Iraq? What camp or what region?

WR: Right. So um, so we spent some time in Kuwait prior to going into Iraq. So we spent time in Camp Buehring in Kuwait.

JC: Which is up along the border with Iraq, right? (0:21:36)

WR: Right. But I mean I couldn't have told you that. It was just, there was just nothing anywhere. So yeah, going in we went through Camp Buehring and then coming out we went through uh, Ali As Saleem which is another Kuwait base. But uh, from there we went to BIAP [Baghdad International Airport] in Baghdad and from there we went to Al Taji. So Camp Taji is huge, huge base, huge FOB [Forward Operating Base]. And then our strategy was ... we had these what we called JSS's which were like, more remote than a FOB and usually shared with like the Iraqi forces. Sometimes, rarely the leftovers of the British cause the British had already kinda went through or they were in the process of doing that when we had gone in. So what our strategy was, we had this big FOB and the FOB was pretty awesome. So we would do one week at the FOB, or Camp Taji and then me like, I know we had that ... we talked a little bit about that before like FOBs. And for me like the definition of a FOB is a little different because these little JSS's I called (inaudible) um, so two of them we were at, we were at Hor Al Bash and Istacol and if you asked me how to spell either one of those, like I'd have no idea. But we would do two or three weeks there then we'd come back and we'd do a week at the big base and the week with the big base ... at the big base was basically like, hey shower, clean your stuff, recreation, that type of thing. They had a lot of patrols in between.

JC: So what was your average, I know it changes, but what was your average day um, you know, talk a little bit about your job, what you had to do and things of that nature.

WR: So my average day um, I guess the best way I would say it is when uh, when people watch an Army commercial or something like that to go into the Army they see all this exciting stuff. They'll see like air assault missions and they'll see like, you know the Green Berets and all that craziness. But really only a very, very small percentage of people in the military do those things. Even when you look at infantry men, it's a very, you know it's a thin number of infantry men that do those things regularly. And then each infantry man requires like a huge amount of support, just logistically in order to support them. I was in an infantry regiment. I felt very fortunate to have that opportunity um, but when I talk about average day I don't want to make it seem like I'm like downplaying what myself or anybody did. But when we went to Iraq we went into Iraq very much during what was considered like a reconstruction phase. Not like combat phase. I do have a combat action badge um, but my job as far as it was dictated to me wasn't to go door to door, kicking in doors or anything like that. That's just not ... that just wasn't the case and a lot of that's due to the timing that we were there. I did go on missions regularly um, as part of my job and I think the thing that I have to like hold back when you ask that question is, when you ask me to describe an average day, I want to make it like exciting for you. So I want to talk about the missions, but the missions weren't the average day. So basically you'd have a mission run and then you'd have like two or three weeks back at the FOB, you know or not on the road, I guess I'll say it that way where you're kinda just hanging out doing nothing and you have a lot of bored guys with a lot of testosterone.

JC: What would you do in your free time? (0:25:17)

WR: Uh, pretty much like ... you name it. We'd get into trouble a lot, you know. We had a first sergeant. He was good. He tried to keep things on lockdown, but you know we were just stupid guys and I'm sure like, you know the infantry is ... it's stupid. Like um, not mentally I don't mean but like, your behavior and stuff like that. You act like a bunch of kids and you fight and you know you do these things but it's just part of the deal and there's nothing ... there's nothing like being in a regiment like that. Like it's a good thing. It's not a bad thing but uh, lots of stupid shenanigans. I mean, I know one kid ... we had regular mail. He ordered like a Batman costume and he went around like harassing MP's you know in a Batman costume. You know it was just ... anything you could do to relieve stress um ... digital media was like, kinda new and big so like ... bootleg ... movies and stuff like that um, we had medics ... the medics, I mean I don't know if I should say, if you're giving this to high school students but if every ... they had terabytes full of like pornography, the medics and like uh ... digital media was huge. You could either get bootleg media from the Iraqi nationals or contractors or, you know that sort of thing. But it was all poor quality, like some guy in a theater that type of thing. They tried to have like, USO events for us and stuff like that. I never really participated in any of that stuff. Yeah, but the average day for me uh, I was human resources like I said.

JC: What does human resources, tell us just a little bit about what that does.

WR: Yeah, so um, so the human resources in the Army is a little bit different than the human resources in the real world. The reason for that is because all of the uh, recruiting and staffing is done by recruiters, you know? So when you say human resources a lot of people think that like, hey you're hiring me or hey you're going to fire me, and in the Army during war time, you know you really gotta, you really gotta screw up to get fired and an HR guy isn't gonna do it, you know. It's gonna go through the chain of command and there's going to be counseling statements and stuff like that. But it's not really an HR job. So the biggest part of my job was actually the mail, because all that mail had to be collected at a central collection point and then it had to be driven out to the smaller JSS's ... um which is where the convoys that I participated in mostly came from. Because um ... we had to prioritize what we got to each place. So, if we had like ... and like I don't know what they're called but like an 18-wheel truck and they had this many pallets of water, well then you could only ... and this many pallets of ammunition, well then you can only fit this much, you know a small amount of mail cause mail was a luxury. So, the whole ... I had to get certified in that as part of HR but HR in general in the military is um ... all awards go through HR, all requests for leave, Red Cross messages um ... promotions, that type of thing um ... you know PT stuff ... I don't know. It's like anything administrative I'd say falls under that um, that blanket on the AG corps. And then like, the AG corps is split up too into like, paralegal also falls under that, that type of thing.

JC: Did you feel like you were used effectively during your time over there? Given what you were trained to do.

WR: No, but I didn't really want to be I guess? (laughter) I don't know if that makes sense too much sense? No, all of us you know ... all of us really wanted to be there and when you have the down

time it's like ... I think the hard, one of the most difficult thing for like an NCO to do is to try to manage down time, you know? Because if you don't it can become like an explosive (0:29:26) thing I think where it's really counterproductive to your whole mission. So when you see people in the military talk about like, hey what'd you do in Iraq, and they say oh I had a rake and I raked rocks. Like, that's not because the rocks needed to be raked it's because that's what their leadership thought needed to happen to occupy their time, you know? And like, I don't think people get that. Like um, the actual mission ... took up such a small portion of the time compared to the rest of the time. So, there was this ... it was very difficult for uh ... for our leaders to try to figure out how to mitigate that.

JC: Let's talk a little bit about your not so average days. Is there some times or some situations that stand out in your mind?

WR: I mean um ... like most of ...

JC: Like on convoys or being in villages or different towns.

WR: So like it took uh ... it took time to learn how to be deployed. Um, so what I mean by that is uh ... like just as an example um ... Camp Taji had a huge cafeteria, a DFAC [chow hall] and uh ... if a mortar came in there was like a, a weird horn that went off and then they would say, "Incoming, incoming, incoming." Um, so I remember being early in Iraq, like my initial days, and sitting in the cafeteria with a group of guys all like me, you know? Like privates, uh ... so not a lot of experience you know and hearing that, and I remember everybody like, despite being trained like trying to run outside and get in these like kinda concrete ... tubular bunker things that were for that. And while we did that during one of these times, I remember like consciously looking at the guys that had been there before and most of them were uh, were from the 25th Infantry at the time. But they had spent a long time in Iraq before us. Their deployment was I think ... I don't know exactly but I think it was like a 16 month deployment. Like it was a massive deployment ... and they're just sitting there like eating their Cheerios like, not caring and it was because ... they just didn't care. So, it didn't really take long to understand that like, if a mortar came in, which was actually a rare occurrence, you know by the time I was there um, like you really ... we didn't worry about it. Like, we had to learn that. Same with convoys um ... the few IEDs that like I personally encountered um ... it was scary as heck you know? It was horrifying. Basically, from my perspective in the armored vehicles that we had um ... ground shakes, extremely loud noise, you're scared to death, and you're sitting there because basically at that point in Iraq everything ... light infantry had gone away and everything was mechanized. When we were doing movements it was all mechanized infantry. So ... like you couldn't really react and that's I think the horrible thing about ... you know improvised explosive devices is like, when they train you to like, identify and defeat them, they're basically trying to teach you before you deploy how to be paranoid. So like, every piece of trash or anything like that could potentially be something that's going to kill you. But then when you're actually ... on an Iraqi street um, in the area we were operating in it's like ... well there's trash everywhere. Like, what am I supposed to do with this? Like, you know it doesn't make sense to be paranoid like that. So

then when something happens it's like we almost never saw it coming. Yeah uh, (0:33:19) so it was always a surprise ... it was always very loud ... and we didn't I mean, we just kind of went with the flow.

JC: While all this is going on in your ... this is obviously different than what goes on in the United States. We don't have improvised explosive devices and mortars on a regular basis or at all. How did you deal with it and how did it affect your relationship back home? You know, did your parents or siblings or friends ask you how you were doing? Or, um ... did any of the relationships suffer because of your distance? Or, how did your family deal with things?

WR: So like um ... so Camp Taji which is like the big base that we would go back to, they did have like, internet kiosks and like payphones and stuff like that. We weren't closed off from the world. I don't have Facebook anymore but I had Facebook at the time um ... we were really, really careful um, because our chain of command and our sergeant major (inaudible). So if something happened, if there was an action we all knew not to address that and honestly like uh ... my mom at the time, she was pretty sick. She had terminal cancer and uh, you know my grandma ... my brother was actually at basic training at the time so there was no communicating with him. But uh, I didn't want to worry them so my whole idea was just like hey, I'll see them when I see them, I'm here you know there's no reason to push that, and then if I was ever in a trailer and we heard someone else saying something about you know, look what I did today, we'd always kinda walk it back, correct them. Even report them cause like, it really does ... it really does endanger you I think. I mean I guess your question is like ...

JC: Just, how did it affect ... how were your relationships back home with your family?

WR: My family was good but it's like um ... it's like you're stopped in one place and the rest of the world just keeps going, and they don't care. Even if they say they care, send you a care package, at least that was my perspective. It's like hey, I can talk about what I'm doing but they don't care.

JC: Do you think they worried about you though?

WR: Oh I'm sure my family worried about me, yeah. I think any family would if your kid's going to a war um ... and then, you know, what they're getting about the war ... they're getting from TV and it's not necessarily ... how things are, and I would often tell people too like um ... so like ... Iraq is nothing like the United States, right? But, Iraq and the United States are both entire countries. So like, if uh ... if someone says like, "Oh, Iraq, this is you know the wild, wild west" and they might be talking about like one area of our operations like Sadr City. But that's like saying the United States is so dangerous, and you're talking about somebody that's living in Detroit. No disrespect meant to the people of Detroit. But like, there's good parts and there's bad parts and experiences, like I'm sure that you've, the people you've talked to ... it's like the whole gauntlet is run. Like uh ... there's people that go and they have Starbucks every single day of their deployment (laughter). That's not a lie. That's factual and uh ... so when they would get information I would feel like they were always getting like, the worst. Or like, they're getting

their own ... version of it through like a lens and I would try to kinda just keep them at peace. (0:37:01) But my family, they definitely love me. They supported me. They supported me joining the military. They've always been pro-military um ... tremendous supporters for our troops. The girl that I was dating at the time, different story. It just couldn't work and it was kinda like a ... I mean it had been lasting a while um, and there was just no way it could work and the problem was just like I said. The distance problem ... and it's better ... I feel like today it's better that it didn't work cause it wasn't meant to be, you know? And I had met somebody else, so like it's ... it all worked out how it should and I have nothing but like ... you know positive feelings towards her and everything like that but ... it's hard on the people that you leave in the United States. You want to said it's hard on me because I'm dealing with this or this or this, but uh ... it's hard on the people that you leave behind too cause they wanna care, you know? They wanna be there for you and they wanna support you and they know, or at least they think they know, that you're doing something that's difficult, even just by being away. But at the same time, like they can't slow things down to the level that you're operating at. Like, it's just ... you're just on two different wavelengths. So like ... I don't feel very bad about what happened as far as that relationship. I felt bad about the guys that had been married 20, 30 years and you saw it all the time where like all of a sudden their relationship was over and you'd say to yourself, man how could 9 months ruin a 20 year marriage? How can that even happen? But it happened and uh ... so ... yeah I don't know. I feel like I probably lucked out as far as how my family ... worked out and all that stuff.

JC: So let's fast forward a little bit more. You're returning to the States, coming back to what we would consider more of a normal ... atmosphere. What was that adjustment like? How did you feel? Just talk a little bit about getting used to things.

WR: So I guess the thing that like struck me was when I came home um ... I had a Combat Action Badge and the Army knew that, the military knew that. So in my mind, you know a lot of the guys that I came home with ... they had either a Combat Infantry Badge or a Combat Action Badge and in my mind that should signify to the military like, hey ... we need to, we need to make sure that these people are okay coming into the general population. But really ... like there was no ... that I recall, and I'm pretty sure I'm not missing anything, but there was no like psychological examination or anything like that. We came back, we went through like a medical thing where they check your teeth and your eyes and your body and all that stuff ... but there was no like ... are you okay? And like, the big benefit to it is like, we were together. So like, everyone was doing it together that had been over there, living together so that was kinda cool. But the military itself didn't do anything to like ... in my opinion make us ready. Like, when we were going over they would say hey, you can put your money into this account if you want to make some money while you're over there, but like ... there was nothing like to help you ... be back, you know? So, one of the big things I noticed I guess was um ... driving. It took me a long time to learn how to drive like a normal person. Not necessarily cause of danger or anything like that, just because the attitude and everything was so much different and I mean you can do whatever you want on the road when you have a guy with a (inaudible) right here above you,

you know? So driving was really hard um ... shopping I think I actually saved a lot of money cause when I was overseas I wasn't really spending any money so all that kinda accrued. When I came back a lot of guys went like, buck wild crazy like buying all kinds of stuff that was not necessary ... things they couldn't afford, you know? Cars and houses and stuff, but me, I was just like I've done pretty good without this stuff so I put it all kinda towards my education ... and uh ... and then I had educational benefits from that which were awesome. But it was interesting to see like um ... the local veterans that had been like before. Like how they were treating me and stuff like that. I lived next ... not next to but a few blocks away from like an American legion and I went and it's like I had no interest in it at all. Like it wasn't for me at all, like I'm like this won't do anything for me uh, I'm not interested, and then people would often ... come up to me and especially in school and they'd be like, man um ... and I'm just speaking in examples here but, "Man that Iraq War is so messed up. Can you believe we went to war for oil? And how could you be over there" and like ... and like, I don't know. People are entitled to their opinions. I don't think it's uh ... I think you should take it with a grain of salt when you're taking it from somebody that doesn't understand. I would never presume to tell a Vietnam veteran how Vietnam was an unjust war or anything like that, or you know how it sunk us into whatever. People do that like, frequently, you know? And that's kinda crazy um ...

JC: What would you tell them? If you were to engage with them, what would you tell a civilian? Some people I know wouldn't even get into it, but if you have or if you were to what would you tell them about the war?

WR: Well uh ... I don't wanna ... I don't wanna like, pretend like I'm a coward or something like that but if it's a professor I'm gonna nod my head and be like yeah, you're right sir, because you gotta get the grade and unfortunately ... um there's many institutions of higher ed that just aren't ... aren't into it. So ... but when people uh ... talk to me about what I did and all that stuff I'm like hey, I went overseas for a year with some great guys um, had some good times, some not so good times. I love every one of them. Even the ones I would fight with every ... you know. I love every one of them and uh, you know ... I don't regret it at all. I did nothing that I'm ashamed of ... and that's hard for people to hear sometimes cause they'll be like, shouldn't you be ashamed of this? Not in those words exactly but they'll be like, but what about this?

JC: If they weren't there then ... how would they know?

WR: Well I mean ... the problem is where they get the information and uh ... and just what they think. The same as I said like, when I went to basic training like this was my expectation. The expectation proved not to be the reality. But people, I see people all the time uh ... they're discussing either politics or something like that and they know definitively that they are correct and you can't uh, I think my mom used to say, you can't argue with an idiot. I don't wanna say they're idiots but you can't change somebody's mind when they have this ... these engrained attitudes inside of them and when they're trying to politicize the attitudes or uh ... soldiers are way too often like, pawns in that way and they shouldn't be. It's a tough thing to do. It's kinda a fine line because what you wanna do is say ... you're a jagoff, you know and correct them. But

if you do that it doesn't work. So what I try to do is I try to educate them in a friendly way. (0:44:36) Be like, you know what I went to Iraq with an infantry regiment as a human resources specialist ... and I'm sure you've seen a lot about um ... you know firefights on the news and I'm sure you've heard stories about you know ... naked Iraqis Abu Graib Prison. I've never even seen Abu Graib prison. I don't even know where that is, you know? When you bring it down to my level like here's some things that my regiment did that maybe you don't know. We started a school in the Saladin Province. We brought education, the most valuable thing in the world, we brought education to these people, you know? We built housing for them, you know? We um, corrected so much of their infrastructure, you know? We trained them. We were with the ... you know, Iraqi national police every day. We were teaching them how to take care of themselves so that we don't have to do this over a period of time and uh ... you know you hate to go there put you also say hey, when you say these thing and they're not based in ... fact and there are, I mean, the military is full of both liberals and conservatives. You ... it's not difficult to find two people that don't ... you know ... don't agree on something like that. But when you take these things and you use it to push an agenda ... uh ... either way you really are dishonoring the service of people who serve I think ... um ... because it's just not how it is. So whenever I see a politician, on any side, uh ... use the soldiers ... uh ... as a bargaining chip, it bothers me and I lose interest in that. And the same can be said of professors, which actually happens very often you know. Um ... and in political correctness you know ... um ... would I ... would I go back to Iraq ... uh ... yeah absolutely ... um ... especially if I was needed to. But I hate to see people say negative things about ... about the mission because really what they're saying is negative things about the troops.

JC: Um ... how do you feel you've been treated overall? As far as by the people you've come in contact, obviously people have questions and people have their beliefs, but let's rewind a little bit and look at ... um ... maybe past generations, how does your experience coming back ... um ... I don't care if it's worse or better, but just overall ... um ... idea of how you feel you've been treated since you've been back?

WR: Uh yeah. So ... so it's hard for me to compare myself to ... to myself to other generations. Um ... when I think about poor treatment, I think about the Vietnam era of you know ... Soldiers and uh ... I wasn't alive for that. I wasn't born yet. Um ... so when I hear them talk about ... you know ... being spit on and having ... you know ... all of these issues with reintegrating with society. Like I feel like, in a lot of ways they kind of ... they ... they led the way. They carried that torch and they made things better for my generation. But also when I think about like the past veterans ... um ... I feel lucky, whether I look at ... um ... you know ... Vietnam, even Desert Storm, Korea, World War II, all the way back ... um ... and I think about what they did. You know, compared to what I did. Like hey, most of the time I was riding in an armored vehicle you know, but they were having forty mile rough marches. Um ... and maybe that's me hyping up the last generation, but I feel really lucky to have served ... at the time people I did cause I don't know if I could have held up the same way in there. So I have a huge respect for them. I think they're tougher than us. They're definitely tougher than our generation, in my opinion. Um ... and that's a horrible,

horrible trend ... um ... to see this ... this softening of ... American military culture in general I think. I think it's awful. Uh ... when I came back ... um ... my homecoming wasn't like anything to write home about. Um ... when I came back to Pittsburgh, I ... uh ... I rented a car with a couple other guys who lived in Pennsylvania. Um ... we all split it and then I got dropped off at my house ... uh ... you know to see my family and stuff like that. It wasn't anything like ... um

[0:48:56]

JC: Desert Storm. Coming back from Desert Storm. I don't know if you're familiar with it. It was like parades and yellow ribbons everywhere.

WR: I mean ... uh ... not for ... not for us. No. I've seen on the news, like um ... when the local ... um ... I don't know ... Air Force, National Guard or whatever comes back. I've seen ... on TV ... like ... uh ... the refueling wing came back and there's this bi parade and stuff like that. They had a three month deployment and ... and ... I feel like that's great. That they're given that credit and stuff like that and people are recognizing it, but I didn't see it the same way. Um ... yeah not from my perspective. Um ... which is fine cause you don't ... you don't do it for that, you know. Um ... the biggest bias that I saw ... um ... was actually transitioning out of the military all together, and it was when it came time to ... uh ... to find a job. Uh ... that's where I ... uh ... I had an interview with a local bank, I won't mention the name of the bank, but it's a local bank. It's pretty reputable. Um ... and ... uh ... I had an interview for this program and I had a guy who was like a VP kinda hook up this interview and I was all excited and everything like that. I thought I was confident ... and uh ... they were going over my resume and they said to me ... they said, "So, it says you're still serving in ... in a reserve component." And I'm like, "Yeah," which all of these are illegal questions. You're not legally allowed to ask these questions at a job interview, but I'm like, "Yeah." They said, "What are your chances of going overseas again?" And I was like ... um ... I had to correct em. I said, you know, "I don't know. If I'm called I'll go. Um ... you know ... there's no current warning order." And ... uh ... they basically, the same day, the same interview, they were like, "Well, you know, we're not ... we're not really interested in somebody that's in the military at this time." And I actually walked away from it being like, "Well, I don't think I want to work for them anyways." Um ... but what that taught me ... um ... I like to learn from my mistakes, not that that was a mistake at all, um it taught me that I had to really clean up my resume and take away a lotta ... a lotta stuff off the resume. In order to make myself get a job, and I have a good job now ... um ... but in order to get that job, I had to water down certain things. So like ... um ... a Combat Action Badge ... that comes off the resume cause another veteran might respect it, somebody who's pro-military might respect it, but when you're working in education you just don't know. And you almost don't want to risk it coming up in a conversation because you don't want to have to react to that. Um ... so things like that come off um ... and then your service starts to change how ... how I describe it. Um ... so when I say, "Human Resources Specialist, United States Army" um ... it's kinda misleading on its own to say that, even though that is the MOS, but I leave off the MOS number and all that stuff because ... um ... if people think human resource specialist, United States Army, they're saying, "Well he might have worked the Army as an organization, same way that you could work for the DOD

(Department of Defense). He might not have been a Soldier.” So I really found myself ... um ... trying to ... I don’t if cover up is the right word.

[0:52:17]

JC: Tailoring your resume to what ...

WR: Yeah, because it ... it was ... I saw what was happening. I saw, “Hey, I didn’t get this job. Why didn’t I get this job?” And I thought that I recognized the trend, the thing that was happening. Even though nobody’s allowed to do that or admit that, that was what I saw was the trend, and I fixed it. And as soon as I fixed it, I got a bunch of job offers, which was pathetic. Um ... but doing that was like a huge learning experience. And that’s ... I mean, that’s discrimination. Um ... I knew I wanted to work for a university because if you work there, it’s easier to pay for it. You know, that was my only goal there. Uh ... but trying to get a job in higher education ... um ... I sent uh ... out all over the U.S. I sent out about sixty-two applications to different jobs, all different kinds of jobs. Um ... all sixty-two were rejected except for one. Um ... at Liberty University in Virginia, which is a religious institution. I didn’t except that job. Um ... when I sanitized my resume, to make the military look inconsequential ... um ... my next three applications I received interviews for. So ... um ... you ... you are discriminated against as a veteran. Uh ... I don’t ... that’s just how it is. There’s people that love it. There’s people that respect it and shake your hand and thanks for your service and all that stuff, but for me, coming back ... uh ... coming off of active duty ... you know ... active duty and everything like that, that was the hardest thing cause you need a job now. Um ... and I had to come back to Pittsburgh for family reasons, but ... uh ... but you need to make money. You have to have income and you have responsibilities. The same things that the military taught you: the responsibilities to your friends ... uh ... you know ... you have those responsibilities to your family, you know to yourself. You have to be successful ... um ... and they just kinda ... the tools are limited. They’re there and you can make em work for you, like the GI Bill, but ... uh ... I mean ... you need a ... astrophysics degree to ... to navigate it. I mean, it’s ... it’s crazy. Um ... and then you really do have to think about how you portray yourself and it’s sad. It’s horrible to have to say that, but ... uh ... um ... nobody cares, and the ones that do care, they’ll tell, it’s in a positive way, but what I found was it’s not really all the time in your life.

[0:54:34]

JC: Okay. I know you did some contracting ... um ... so you’ve ... you’ve ... you’ve gone back over to a combat zone or an area that was at least in turmoil in Afghanistan ... um ... can you just tell us, briefly ... um ... about how that experience was after coming off of being an active duty Soldier?

WR: Yeah. So ... um ... the company that I had been employed by, they had ... they rebranded themselves a few time by the time that I was employed by them, so I’ll say that they had some bad PR, as most of the private military contractors did at the time. Um ... and I came back, and just like I said, you have the same ... you have the same responsibilities that you had in the military, to your family, to being financially here and trying to pursue goals. And everybody I

know that's been in the military, they want something better for themselves. Like it's not even a question. Um ... so you're always striving for that, but you got these realities of money and ... uh ... you know ... you have to make it work. So basically, the deal was ... um ... these people were hiring. I mean, it's basically that simple. Like ... um ... the problem that I said with my resume ... um ... I was in human resources, alright. So I had these ... this skill set from the Army that I thought would be ... um ... perfect for the civilian world. I said that was my motivation for choosing that MOS. Like, hey I can't be a forward observer and ... I have this ... this skill set, I can take it somewhere else and sell it. Uh ... I couldn't sell it at all, anywhere. Um ... so then I think about ... infantry guys. And the infantry guys, they're like ... they're like my family the guys that I served with. I love em! And I think of them and I say, "Man, how lucky am I? I've got a college education." A lot of them don't you know. Um ... a lot of em would be amazing, amazing career soldiers, if they stayed their entire career ... uh ... they would ... they would be sergeant majors with no difficulty, but then the military is shrinking and it's like a mass lay off going on. Um ... so where are these guys gonna work? You know, the guys who don't have the advantages that we have, you know. And ... uh ... the PMCs, they were ... they were ... they were hiring, so basically ... um ... I applied online, over the Internet. Just like anyone else and ... uh ... I had an interview, it was down in North Carolina. I drove down to North Carolina. They were like, "Why are you here?" And I said, just like I said to you, I said, "Hey I just got out of the military. I need money. I got some stuff going on. I'm having trouble finding a job here so here's what I can do." Um ... so they divide ... they divide up their ... structure the same way the military does, but what they basically do is like cut the fat. They're ... they're saying, "Hey, the military does this, this, and this. You don't know this." So the same way that there's infantry and support, they separate it the same ... the same way, but they say that it's like ... you know ... security advisors and support. But then what they do is they tier the support to different levels. So you'll have the type of support that I did ... um ... which was largely administrative ... um ... so basically the same job that I did in the army, but for a lot more money. Um ... then you'll also have another tier where it will be like people washing cars. So like if an infantry guy comes ... and works for that company, at that time ... um ... and he doesn't cut the bill for the security positions ... um ... and they're many that don't because just competition. I mean, they can pick ... they can pick whoever they want, so they're trying to pick ... uh ... they'll be washing cars and they'll be glad to do it because of the salary. Um ... so ... the ... deployment I wasn't with a group of people. I was by myself. I got on an airplane. I had a passport. Um ... I had a ... uh ... a twic, which is a fake CAT card for ... transportation workers. Um ...

JC: Any weapons?

[0:58:39]

WR: Weapons? A AK-47, but we didn't get them until we were there. Um ... I didn't carry anything over there or anything like that. Um ... yeah we had ... we had just a basic AK. Um ... I never fired it. (laughs)

JC: Yeah?

WR: You know, it was on a sling around (inaudible) on my back the entire time. Um ... my experience in ... um ... Iraq was very different as far as the attitude and everything like that. Um ... if I got my job done it was the same essentially as a nine to five. I didn't have to do PT if I didn't want to. I didn't have to do anything, as long as my job was done adequately. Um ...

JC: Big boy rules.

WR: Pretty much yeah. And ... uh ... and that was ... it was kinda like ... it was kinda great, and if you would say ... um ... because again it is (inaudible) they'd be like, "Whoa, what about this?" And ... um ... it was ... it was a wonderful experience. I mean, there was no ... I don't think we ever got mortared when we were there. Um ... you know the only thing that was kinda crazy, and it wasn't related directly to me, was that there was ... I know maybe we haven't officially withdrawn from Afghanistan yet, but the same thing that was happening in Iraq was kinda happening in Afghanistan where like they were ... the U.S. was abandoning ... um ... you know large areas and equipment and stuff like that. Just kinda ...

JC: When were you there again? Afghanistan?

WR: 2010

JC: 2010. Okay.

WR: Yeah.

JC: So it was a pretty quick turnaround from Iraq to going over there.

WR: Yeah.

JC: If you could tell us, um ... where are you at now? I know you're still pursuing education and as far as work as well.

[1:00:18]

WR: So ... um ... I work at ... uh ... Carnegie Mellon University right now. Um ... in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Um ... I'm a global human capital management advisor, so what that means is ... um ... I deal with software implementations, so specifically financial softwares. So like the two big ones ... uh ... we recently ... uh ... implemented Work Day with is HDM software. Um ... we also deal with ADP Oracle financial. That type of stuff. Um ... I got into that because I was color blind in the Army MEPS station. Um ... I started as a benefits coordinator ... um ... at CMU ... um ... while I was ... working on my graduate degree at Duquesne. Um ...

JC: What did you get your graduate degree in?

WR: So I got ... I got a Master's of Science in Leadership.

JC: Okay.

WR: From what was then the School of Leadership and Professional Advancement. And that school has since folded into another school at Duquesne. Uh ... and right now I'm at Robert Morris ... uh ... so CMU has been pretty generous with what the GI Bill wouldn't cover to a certain extent. So ... uh ... from ... from the military ... um ... I had a really, really good career.

JC: What are you pursuing right now at Robert Morris?

WR: So ... uh ... right now I'm here. I'm in the School of Education ... um ... and I'm in the IML Ph.D. program, so Instructional Management in Leadership. Um ... so it's kinda tough ... tough to describe because in a Ph.D. program you write a dissertation and that dissertation is largely up to you, so if you wanna write a dissertation on ... on veteran services, you can do that. Um ... so it's a little bit different than just ... just majoring in something in that way. Um ... but basically there's a lot of educators, lotta teachers that are in the program, but there's also business people, military people. And ... uh ... for me it was like the next ... the next logical progression and just kill the GI Bill benefit. I don't have any kids yet or anything like that, so like the ... the post 9/11 GI Bill you can give it to your kids, but ... uh ... I don't have that need and ... uh ... I figure I'm more marketable with a doctoral degree. Um ... so if it wasn't for being colorblind at MEPS, I mean, I don't know ... it probably would've been a little bit differently for me, my story. But ... uh ... the things that the Army taught me ... um ... you know ... you were a Marine we ... we say ... uh ... or I've said in the past that like ... uh ... the one thing that the Marines kinda have that the Army is failing on a lot is just like this pride thing, where I've had so many people at a bar or something be like, "Uh, man. Why didn't you go into the Marines?" I'm like, "I don't know why." Um ... but ... uh ... it's ... uh ... I forget where I was going with that ...

JC: It's alright. It happens. (both laugh)

WR: It's interesting.

JC: It's all ... it's all good. You've just kinda given us where you're at now and where you're going.

WR: Yeah. So hopefully ... uh ... I don't know where I was going with that. I had some point, but I don't know what it was. But hopefully I'm going to continue to work in education. I wanna work with students. You know, I love working with students. Um ... you know ... uh ... school's been busy. I want to go back to coaching wrestling pretty soon, hopefully. No more nights doing studying and all that stuff. Um ... but yeah. I had a blast in the military for the most part. You know, there's some stuff that wasn't good, but you take the good with the bad. And ... uh ... it was just ... I mean ... I wouldn't have changed very much about it.

[1:03:52]

JC: Well, good. Well thank you for your service. Unless you have anything else to add, I think that pretty much wraps up.

WR: Just edit out the stuttering and stuff like that. (both laugh)

JC: It's good.

WR: I don't know what's going on. (laughs)

JC: Well thank you very much. Thanks again for your service.

WR: Thank you for your service.

JC: And ... the interview is going to stop now.

[1:04:13]