

Robert Morris University Oral History Center

Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans Project



Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RICK SACCONI

July 8, 2016

Saccone, Rick (1958-), Oral History Interview, July 8, 2016.

Biographical Sketch: Rick Saccone is retired from the United States Air Force (1976-1994) for just under 20 years. Saccone served as a Counter Intelligence Officer in the Air Force, Office of Special Investigations. As well as Receiving a Letter of Meritorious Service for civilian services rendered in Abu Ghraib 2004-2005.

Topics Covered in Interview:

Aircraft Mechanic

Abu Ghraib prison

criminal fraud

counterintelligence investigations

Interrogation

Spies

Forward Operating Base Marez

Mosul

Unseen War in Iraq

Insurgents in the Shadows

State Representative (39th District- PA House of Representatives)

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Transcribed by Nathaniel Malery

Edited by Adam Salinas and John McCarthy

[00:00:00]

JC: And the interview will start now. Alright let me get this first page. So this... go through the formalities here. This interview is part of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Project undertaken by the Oral History Center at Robert Morris University. I am Joshua Caskey, and today is July 8th, 2016. And I am joined by, is it okay if we call you Rick?

RS: Sure.

JC: By Rick. And can you please state your full name?

RS: My name is Rick Saccone, and I live in Elizabeth Township, Pennsylvania.

JC: Okay. And do I have your consent to interview you today and record you?

RS: Absolutely.

JC: Excellent. Well let's jump right into the interview. Alright, let's start off where were you born, and when were you born?

RS: Yeah, I was born in McKeesport Hospital in 1958, Valentine's Day 1958.

JC: Okay.

RS: So, I'm 58 years old now. And I grew up in that whole area there.

JC: Okay.

RS: And the area that I'm living in now.

JC: And then you end up joining the Air Force as an officer?

RS: Yeah, I went to Elizabeth Forward High School, joined the military right out of high school.

JC: Okay.

RS: As enlisted.

JC: Okay.

RS: And was an aircraft mechanic for about eight years, nine years. And worked on every modern fighter the Air Force had: F5s, F15s, F16s, A10s, 1-11s, F105 Thunderbolts from Vietnam, F4s, every kind of F4, and some from the other services. We even had some A4s in there, we had some from the Marines, we had some other things. I was at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada for a while in Operation Red Flag.

JC: Okay.

RS: So, we had lots of planes come in from all over. So, I was stationed in a number of different places including South Korea as an aircraft mechanic. Went to a program called Bootstrap (Military program that allows an Enlisted service member to become educationally qualified for a position as an Officer) in the military, so you could finish your bachelor's degree and go for officer's training. Did that at Weaver State University in Ogden, Utah and became an officer. And then went into the counterintelligence field; what we call Air Force OSI, Office of Special Investigations.

JC: Okay.

RS: So that's criminal fraud and counterintelligence investigations worldwide.

[00:02:08]

JC: Oh, wow. What year did you join the Air Force?

RS: 1976.

JC: So, 1976. So the Vietnam War had just wrapped up.

RS: Yeah, I was just at the end of that.

JC: Okay, and...

RS: I joined when it wasn't cool to be in the military.

JC: (laughs).

RS: Everybody was coming back, and nobody had any respect for the military, but, you know, of course I did because I come from a family of veterans.

JC: Ugh, that's unfortunate. Sure, and then you became an officer in what year?

RS: I became an officer in 1981.

JC: And then you said you did an early retirement?

RS: Yes, I retired in 19, the end of 1994.

JC: Okay.

RS: So, yeah.

JC: Wow. That's quite a long career there.

RS: Uh huh.

[00:02:47]

JC: So, let's just talk a little bit about, you talked about family service and part of the reason, I'm sure, you joined. What other reasons did you join the Air Force originally for?

RS: I mean, two reasons. Of course I love my country, and I wanted to serve my country. And two, I love airplanes, and I love the Air Force. I always wanted to be around airplanes. I thought I'd like to fly or be air crew or something like that, but I also liked working on it. When I was young, I worked on everything. I fixed my own cars, fixed everything around the house, fixed tractors, whatever we had. And I thought I'd really like to work on airplanes, but I don't have any skills, and who's going to teach me? Of course the Air Force when you come right out of high school, they say yeah we'll teach you everything.

JC: Yeah.

RS: So, it was good. I did, I got to...and I volunteered for every aircraft mechanic school there was, so, you know, that's why I got to the different airplanes because, you know, you volunteer to go a school on each airplane. So, you can, you know, learn to maintain them. So, I loved it, and I loved being at the end of the runway when those airplanes would take off, and afterburner, and your chest is just shaking, and I really enjoyed it. And I had some good assignments. I was in the Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, Las Vegas, Nevada. I was at Chanute Air Force Base, Illinois. I was in Osan Air Force Base, Korea.

JC: Okay.

RS: And Hill Air Force Base, Utah as an aircraft mechanic. So I was all around, and we had some new airplanes coming in at that time too. The F15 was coming onboard, the A10 was going through its test phases, so we helped work with the A10 test team. Now the A10, they're trying to kick it out of the Air Force, but the A10 was brand-new when I was in the service. So, we were just testing it and seeing what it could do. So I spent, you know, I joined because of those things. I loved my country, and I loved working and being around aircraft.

[00:04:31]

JC: Sure. No, that's all great reasons. So, you got out in 1994. Well, let's rewind first. You were talking a little about your family service. Talk a little bit about your relatives who served before you.

RS: Yeah, my grandfather served in World War I. I have a few memorabilia of his service there.

JC: That's so cool.

RS: He was on a machine gun crew. And my father was a D-Day veteran in World War II.

JC: Wow.

RS: He got the Bronze Star and the Croix de Guerre from actually...was awarded that in France. Fought his way through Belgium and so forth.

JC: Wow.

RS: So then I joined the military, and my two sons are both civil engineers, Air Force officers. My older son, Nick, just got a line number for major.

JC: Oh, wow.

RS: Pinning it on in October. And he's in Korea right now. He's at Taegu Air Base, Korea. Just got there like two days ago or this past week. And my other son, Matt, is in the Air National Guard out at the airport; the 171st.

JC: Okay.

RS: He's about to put on captain October 1st.

JC: Wow. So, quite a history of family service.

RS: Yes.

[00:05:35]

JC: A very patriotic family obviously. So, you get out in 1994. You retire, and 9/11 happens, was it seven years after you retired?

RS: Yes.

JC: Talk a little about what you were doing at that time and what kind of impact it had on you.

RS: So, I was teaching at the time. Well, when 9/11 actually happened, I was in North Korea. So, I had been selected to go to North Korea on a nuclear power plant project as a diplomat. And I was serving in North Korea when 9/11 happened. It was kind of scary, and I wrote a couple books about that when I came back, about my time in North Korea because I was the only American living in North Korea at the time.

JC: Oh my goodness.

RS: So being there as a diplomat, when that happened, I was watching it by a satellite television when those two planes hit the Twin Towers. I was actually working out in our, we had a little gym, little bit bigger than this room.

JC: (laughs).

RS: But we had a little place where we could work out. And I was watching it, we had a little television in the corner, and I was watching those planes hit, and I thought to myself, this is bad. This is a terrorist attack, and things started running through my mind. You know, I'm the only American here in North Korea, so America's going to strike back I'm sure. You know, America's going to strike back at Afghanistan, the Chinese might use that as a chance to hit back at Taiwan,

North Koreans might decide that's a good time to attack South Korea because, I mean, America's occupied in the Middle East.

JC: Sure.

RS: And I'll be a hostage here. And I'm the only American here. So, I started thinking, you know, your mind starts to go, run through crazy scenarios. So, I'm like okay, I'm on the East Coast of North Korea. I could jump in the Sea of Japan, try to swim down to the South.

JC: Geez.

RS: Eh, that won't work. I could try to make my way through the mountains across down to the DMZ (Korean Demilitarized Zone) and try to make it through. No, that's minefields and there...I'll never make that. I guess I'm stuck here. (laughs). But it turned out the North Koreans were not, actually the North Koreans were very kind. They were one of the first ones, if not the first ones, to submit a message to our country saying they were really sorry about what happened and regretted what was going on the world and how that happened to the United States. So, they treated me very well, and I didn't have any problems. Obviously I didn't become a hostage or anything, so...but I was worried about that in the beginning.

JC: Yeah, no sure.

RS: So, I came back from North Korea at the end of 19, actually in December of 1991, so I was in there from December of 1990 through...I'm sorry from 2001. I was in there from December of 2000 to December of 2001.

JC: Okay.

RS: I came back from North Korea right after 9/11, and I went back to teaching. I teach college at St. Vincent College.

JC: St. Vincent, okay, in Latrobe, okay.

RS: So, I went back to teaching, and then, you know, things started to go bad. You know, things weren't progressing well. We had the big scandal at Abu Ghraib prison with the interrogators and so forth. And I got a call saying hey, you know, I had been an interrogator at OSI and investigator and so forth and worked counterintelligence, so some people I knew said hey, would you like to, you know, come to Iraq and, you know, help us out over here. We need some help kind of intelligence-wise.

JC: Yeah.

RS: And especially, it was right after the scandal at Abu Ghraib prison, so all of the bad things that had happened there, they needed help. And I said, you know, talked it over with my wife, we prayed about it, and I said yeah, I would like to do that. That would be good experience. I would like to get back in the fight because, you know, I had been retired a lot of the fight, and if

feel still like I have something to contribute. Got a lot of experience, and I could help, you know, a lot of, there was a lot of younger guys in there, you know, at the time. They were working hard, they were trying their best, but they, you know, they needed some more senior guidance and experience, you know, so I got to Abu Ghraib prison in December of 2004.

JC: Okay.

RS: Right after the, right after the...well, actually first I got to Iraq. So, they didn't tell me I was going to Abu Ghraib prison. I got to Iraq, and I was, you know, waiting in Baghdad for my assignment, and they said they were, you know, just had all of this trouble at Abu Ghraib prison, and they were like would you be willing to go Abu Ghraib prison and work in the counterintelligence program there interrogating those people that were coming through there? Nobody wants to go there (laughs).

JC: Yeah.

RS: You know, they actually, no one wanted to go there. Well, that's the most famous prison on Earth, and I said yeah, I'd be glad to go there. So, I went to Abu Ghraib prison, worked there interrogating and also screening our Iraqis that were going to work within the prison system because we had, we had a lot of problems within the prison system about Iraqi corrections officers sneaking in contraband to some of the prisoners. We had been infiltrated by some of the Iraqi corrections officers weren't on our side, so we need to deal with that. And, so I was there, hadn't been there long when the chow hall in Mosul was blown up. You might remember when it hit the national, international news. Something like 60 people were killed there, of our soldiers. That's when we shared our chow hall with Iraqi soldiers at the time. And then it was chaos in Mosul. And we were still fighting to take back Mosul at the time, and it got really bad in Mosul. And again we had some real counterintelligence problems; we were being infiltrated. And they said nobody wants to go to Mosul. Do you (laughs) would you be willing to transfer up to Mosul and take over the counterintelligence operation on the, at the air base called Marez, Forward Operating Base Marez and forward operating base diamondback are kind of sister bases there in Mosul. And I said sure, you know (laughs).

JC: Yeah.

RS: You know, it's another one I'll be really in the fight because, you know, we're at the tip of the spear, we're taking back Mosul, and, you know we'll have, it'll be, you know, if you want to be in the fight, that's where to be. Place to be is at the tip of the spear. So, I went to Mosul, and when we got there, you know, that was chaos again. We didn't even have a chow hall because it had been blown up, we'd been, we had several, let's see, we had I think four thousand foreign workers on the base. Many of which weren't our friends; they were hostiles and infiltrated us and had, you know, providing information. We had to go through and find those people that were, you know, not on our side and clear up the base because there's over ten thousand people in that base too. And so we had to start the task of trying to find out who were the spies on our own base.

JC: Okay.

[00:12:23]

RS: And get rid of them and neutralize them. And then we got other people being brought into us also at the same time, so we were pretty busy.

JC: Wow.

RS: And, you know, it was 18 hour days for the longest time. And while they were building a show hall for us, and try so we could get hot food and those types of things, again. So, but it was a great experience. So, we were able to do that, you know, we went from when I got there last in Iraq in U.S. Army in safety and security of the base, of the bases all around Iraq and FOBs. We went from last since we had been hit and blown up and had a, you know, major incident there to, by the time I left, to one in Iraq.

JC: Okay.

RS: For safety and security, so it was a great accomplishment. I felt like we did a lot.

JC: Sure, absolutely.

RS: We caught a lot of bad guys, we put a lot of bad guys away, and we got rid of a lot of bad guys, sent them off to other places and so forth. So, I felt like we really did a lot, and a lot of the other operating units that were out on patrol and so forth, they would bring their, especially their own people, their interpreters and so forth, you have to be able to rely on your interpreters as you know when you're...if you can't rely on your interpreters when you're overseas in a fight, then, you know, they could be betraying you and leading you into ambushes and so forth. And so a lot of the people that we had working for us, that were interpreting for us, many of them were untrustworthy. Because we would recruit them, you know, right of the street basically.

JC: Yeah.

RS: And so a lot of...we had such a good reputation in Iraq as being able to interrogate and get to the bottom of who was a good guy and who was a bad guy. A lot of people who weren't in our Area of Operation were bringing their problems to us, to our unit, because, and it really touched my heart, and I wrote about it in my book.

[00:14:18]

JC: What is your book called?

RS: It's called *The Unseen War in Iraq*.

JC: Okay.

RS: And *Insurgents in the Shadows*. And it's really about how, and I'll tell you about this in a minute, but I really wrote this because I wanted to talk about, when I got back home from Iraq, you know, the media was really harping on course of interrogation and how it was bad and its torture and all those kinds of things. And I want to, and nobody was defending course of interrogation. People were afraid of it. And so I wrote a book describing how we interrogated people and how that wasn't torture, but it was coercive interrogation, but it wasn't torture, and why it was important that we gather information and we use coercive interrogation techniques. Why it was important to do that to gather the proper intelligence to save the lives of our men.

JC: Sure.

RS: So, we had become so good at it I think in our unit that people were bringing their people, and people would come in to me. I mean, sergeants would be driving in, you know, a convoy of Humvee's would pull up, and they'd say, "Rick, you know, we heard about you, you have a reputation here, we heard about your unit, you know, we want to make sure that the guys we have with us, you know, are, you know, on the up-and-up, and they're on our side, and they're good guys. And, you know, could you check them out for us?" And I'd be like, "Well you guys aren't even from here. You guys should be going down to your own, you know, your own area and doing that." But, you know, I'm never going to turn anybody away. I mean, if you're alright with it, I'm alright with it. So, we would take them in, and we would do it, and our base commander was fine with it too. He said we're going to help the guys that are, you know, I'm never going to turn anyone away. But it presented a real problem because, you know, I, if you make a mistake and you say and interpreter is good when he's not good, then our guys are going to be in danger. They're going to be betrayed, they could be ambushed, many of them killed. And if you say a guy is not good and he's good, then they're going to lose a valuable interpreter, and they need those interpreters because they nearly can't function on the outside well without them.

JC: Yeah.

RS: So, it really was a dilemma. You know, put a lot of pressure on me and our unit. So, we got to make sure we get this right. It's just too much, too much resting on it. And our guys, we don't want our guys to get killed. And we want them to be safe when they're out there. We want them to have the "*terps*" (interpreters) that they need to go out and interview people and get information, so that they can find the enemy and kill them outside the wire. So, when they would bring those people in, that was the hardest for me because I'm like, I mean, I'm worried enough about the people on our own base and our own units, but these are guys, they're way out there. They're way out in front, and, you know, I don't want them to be in harm's way unnecessarily. They're going to be in harm's way, but not necessarily because of people we can't trust in our own ranks.

JC: Yeah.

RS: So, that was an interesting time there too, but I felt in the end, I guess, like I said we went from last to first, and we had a secure base, and we got rid of a number of bad guys, and we caught a lot of other bad guys. And then we started branching out. We started going into the prisons and other places. The holding detention areas and helping gather information from those individuals, information that would help us find the enemy and kill them. So, it was a great experience. I was there for a year, and they asked me to stay longer. It was funny because the units were switching. They were switching over. I was scheduled to leave in December of 2005, and so the units were turning over. The units that had been there a year, it was time to go home, new units were coming in, and the advanced teams were coming in for the next unit that was going to replace the unit that I was serving with. And they were like yeah we've heard a lot about your unit, you guys are doing great stuff. And we don't know anything, you know, you start from zero basically, so the new team's coming in, they don't know any. These units are coming in, the Base Commander's coming in, and he's like, "Would you be willing to stay for at least three or four months and help train our guys, so that we can, you know, get off on the right foot, we don't have to reinvent the wheel here?"

JC: Yeah.

RS: And, I would have, I wanted to, but, as I said, I was teaching at St. Vincent College, and they had given me a leave of absence for a year. And a lot of the classes I was teaching, they had pushed them off until the next January semester. People that were ready to graduate were waiting to take my classes, and I'd promise to come back after a year. And so, I had already given them a commitment that I wouldn't be gone longer than a year.

JC: Okay.

RS: And they had made a lot of adjustments to accommodate me, so I was torn between, you know, staying and helping, staying on another three or four months, but then I'd be breaking a commitment that I, my word that I gave to the university back home and the people that are relying on me to come back home so they can graduate and take the courses I was teaching and so forth. And in the end, as much as I wanted to stay, I offered to help as much as I could with their advanced team and so forth, but I made the decision to keep my word and go back home and, you know, honor my word to the school.

JC: Okay.

RS: ...where I was teaching. So I came back in late December of 2005.

[00:19:29]

JC: Okay. So I don't know if you're at liberty to talk about any techniques or interrogations, but if you can talk a little bit about basic terms, what kind of techniques were you using?

RS: So, I talk about, I don't talk about techniques that I used.

JC: Okay.

RS: Because, again, I was trying to defend the techniques that were being used at the time. So, I mean it starts from the very simple things, all of which I believe have been done away with since then. It starts with the very lowest thing of, you know, yelling at a, raising your voice at a detainee, which now I understand they don't even do, to physical types of things where, you know, shaking or grabbing someone or a backhanded slap or ruses to scare them or, you know, those types of things. They're meant, there are numbers, there are scores of techniques that you can use depending on how you judge that person and what you think it would take to break him. I talk about an individual...not everybody you bring in there is a terrorist, not everybody you bring in there is a terrorist.

JC: Sure.

RS: I mean they could be captured doing something terrorist-like. I always use, I use the example in the book about, you know, basically a shepherd they brought in. The guy was tearing down the perimeter fences on the air base, and they also, some, one of our patrols caught him what looked like was planting an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) on the side of a road. And so, they pick the guy up, they bring him back in, you know, try to find out what's going on. Well, this guy isn't a hardened terrorist, you know, he's shepherd that some insurgence basically said, "hey, I'll give you, you know, a hundred Dinar if you go over and put this, dig a hole and put this in the road for me," right? So, it's not going to take much to break that guy and get the truth out of him as it's going to be to break a hardened terrorist, right?

JC: Yeah.

RS: So, a technique for that guy might be just scaring him.

JC: Okay.

RS: And in that case, you just, for an example, I use the book, I just, you know, I just told him what it was like at Abu Ghraib prison. And it's a simple shepherd, he's got a small family, he's just trying to make life. You know, he lives with nothing. A dollar a day or whatever. And I said, you know, something along the lines of, you know, if we don't get the truth and I don't believe you're being truthful and we don't get the truth, I'm shortening this...

JC: Sure.

RS: But you're going to have to go down to Abu Ghraib prison, and, you know, you've heard about Abu Ghraib prison, and he's like yeah, yeah. His eyes are getting big. I said, "Well, do you know what it's like in Abu Ghraib prison?" And he'd be like no. And I'd say, "you know, there's a big room, bigger, maybe twice the size of this, you know, maybe 30 guys to a room there. You know, any many of those guys haven't seen a women for, you know, years. And you'll be the new guy. And when they turn the lights out, you'll be the woman."

JC: (laughs).

RS: And he's like oh my, he just got really scared. And he, you know, he just started telling me everything. (Imitating a scared confession). And so my point is it doesn't, a guy like that is not a hardened terrorist. You don't have to beat him up, you don't have to, you know, you don't have to do certain...you just might have to just give him the reality of what the world he's facing is, and he's going to start talking. So, you judge everybody, and you assess them and decide what is this person's breaking point? What do I have to do to tell me the truth? And of course you're have to be able to cooperate that, so, you know, because people, you know, one of the big arguments about coercive interrogation is well they'll lie. And I say of course. You know, if you beat me I'll confess to killing Lincoln.

JC: Yeah, sure.

RS: There's certain, you know, you have to be able to draw information out of people that you can cooperate. And you have to start getting information that, getting yeses from them that, once you can cooperate those, you intersperse those with things that you know and things that you don't know that you can make sure the person is telling you the truth. It's not just you blindly listening to someone. Just like I said, if you threaten me, I'm pretty weak. If you threaten me with, you know, electrocuting my soft areas, I'll tell you I killed, I'll admit it, I killed Abraham Lincoln; I was there.

JC: Sure.

RS: I shot him right in the head. So, you know, you want to be able to make sure you're getting information that's factual, information that you can go out and verify, and there are various steps to doing that. And, you know, it all comes from assessment of the person you're dealing with and what you know about him, what you can know about him, what you can know from interviewing other people, what you can know the patrol that brought him in, and then deciding through step-by-step what it's going to take, and when I say "to break him," it means to get him to start being truthful and opening up and telling you what you need to know.

JC: Yeah.

RS: That's the process basically in a nutshell. It's much more complicated than that, but...

JC: Yeah?

RS: Yeah, but that's basically the process.

[00:24:32]

JC: So how regular were the interrogations? Were you constantly interrogating people?

RS: It was constant. It was just one after the other. We were always backed up.

JC: Okay. So you didn't have, as far as free time goes, you probably didn't have a whole lot of free time over there.

RS: I really didn't. I mean we tried, you know, we would take, you know, take some time to go to lunch, and we'd take a break to go work out once in a while, go to the gym. You got to get away from it.

JC: Were you at a FOB? Is that what you were at?

RS: I was at FOB Marez, yeah.

JC: That's what you said, FOB Marez, yeah.

RS: FOB Marez and Diamondback were side-by-side sisters on the air base. It was Mosul Air Base there. That was our forward air base.

JC: Okay.

RS: So, that's where all the supplies and things would come into Iraq, not all, Not all of them but a lot of supplies would come in there too. So, it was a big airbase.

JC: Okay.

RS: And it had a large perimeter, which we couldn't protect. So we had, we dealt with the Peshmerga to help us protect the perimeter. We didn't have enough guys to protect that perimeter. I forget how many square miles that base is. So, on of the perimeter we would have a lot of "Pesh" guys out there, the Peshmerga army, interspersed with some of us and interspersed with some other things.

JC: Okay.

RS: Mines and so forth, so if someone hit it, we'd know someone was out there. We could rush a quick reaction force over there because people would try and penetrate the base. It was so big, you know, people would try to sneak in and penetrate us and get at us, so...

JC: Yeah.

RS: It was like that at the prison too, Abu Ghraib, but there was high walls there very, I think it was 26-foot high walls something, I can't remember now, but I wrote about it in my book. So they would actually attack the base, and they would, you know, try to scale the walls, but we had Marines on the perimeter there. We had some Army, but we had Marines on the perimeter in most of the towers with 50 caliber machine guns, so they would pick off. And they would try to ram with the car bombs, vehicle-born IEDs, they would try to ram the walls and blow a hole in the wall so they could get in. And they mortared us there every day.

JC: Okay.

RS: At Abu Ghraib. It was, I think in November just before I got there they had mortared every day. And then in December when I got there, we were mortared almost every day.

JC: Okay.

RS: You know (laughs).

[00:26:42]

JC: When was the actual scandal? When did it come about?

RS: It was like the year. The whole year before that was when...

JC: So the whole year before that, and then when did the scandal actually like news broke?

RS: The scandal broke like in, I think it was in 2004. It was winding down by the time I got there, and it was already in the cleanup phases. Like okay we're going to change what we're doing here.

JC: Okay, how'd that affect your job? Or did it affect your job?

RS: It did because there were different restrictions put on, you know, what interrogators and what people could do. Some of the techniques they could use and some of the techniques they couldn't use. That's when it started to really take shape at Abu Ghraib.

JC: Okay.

RS: I mean you can't do this, you can't do that. And then it just kept going on after I left, they kept just, you know, now, you know, I hadn't been down at Guantanamo, maybe you were there, but I mean people that I know that were there would say, you know, now it's like sitting in a La-Z-Boy with iced teas talking to your counterpart there or your detainee and trying to get information. I mean it's just unbelievable change, and then I attribute that to the reason why we don't have the kind of intelligence we used to get.

JC: Okay, yeah.

RS: Because we're not using the techniques that we used to be able to use, which many people would call torture, which I talk about in my book is absolutely not torture. It's not torture to use a ruse to scare someone. It's not torture to shake someone. It's not torture to make someone stand on one leg or kneel down for 30 minutes. It's not torture to change their sleeping patterns or keep them up late. So, is it torture if I keep you up passed 10 o'clock? What about midnight, is it torture now? I am torturing you because I'm keeping you up questioning you a little late? I'm up too. You know, am I torturing myself if I'm questioning you? Do I have to stop questioning you at eight p.m. so you can get sleep? You know, these are the kinds of things they changed along the way. Oh, you can't question a guy more than so many hours, you can't keep him up late, you can't vary his understanding of night and day and his various meals or, you know, any of those types of things. So, they changed all of those types of things.

JC: Yeah.

RS: You know, after, mostly after I was gone. Starting when I was there, but after I was gone, they changed all the rules about what you can do, what you can say. It got pretty, you know, I don't even know how they do it today, which is probably why they don't do it.

[00:29:20]

JC: So is this, do you see a problem then with politicians getting involved in interrogation processes?

RS: Yeah, I see a problem with people not understanding and not being able, not being willing to defend out techniques for gathering intelligence when they were very effective. And we have certain people that defend them.

JC: Sure.

RS: Defend those techniques, but we have a lot of people that were afraid to defend them and just give in. The media would exaggerate or say certain things then they would just cower to them, and that's why I wrote the book.

JC: Okay.

RS: So they say hey look, this is the reasoning behind why we used some of those techniques, and maybe you don't like all of them, but certainly many of them were effective and certainly they're not torture. Torture is defined in the book as defined in the Geneva Convention and so forth is lasting physical or psychological effect that cannot be reversed on someone like chopping off their fingers or something like that. That's torture. We didn't do anything like that, but scaring a person or making them uncomfortable or, you know, is that torture? No, it's not torture. It's coercive, but it's not torture. And nobody seemed to making that distinction. And so, many of those techniques were done away with even though they're not torture and they're effective. So, and I wrote a book about some of those experiences and why it was important and some of the things that happened and some of the good things that happened and some of the lives that were saved by being able to gather that kind of intelligence.

[00:31:01]

JC: Do you think the media had a major role then in some of the changes that have come since then?

RS: Yeah, absolutely. Because they distort things, and they don't understand things, and they exaggerate, and if nobody from the other side stands against it, then, you know, we lose the public relations battle.

JC: Yeah.

RS: We lost the public relations battle when it comes to coercive interrogation.

JC: Now what about the Iraq War as a whole. How do you think the media portrayed, the portrayal of the war both early on and maybe even how they talk about it now? How do you think...

RS: Same thing. I mean they're still doing the same thing, and I still see, I still hear people mouthing the same talking points. We killed millions of Iraqis and we did this and that. You know, it's just nonsense. I mean the people we liberated in Iraq. People would grab our hands and kiss my hand and, you know, just thank us for getting them out from under Saddam Hussein.

JC: Yeah.

RS: And I know many, many comrades and colleagues, you know, had the same experience where people appreciate it, the Iraqis appreciate it, us coming. Of course our opponents didn't, the insurgents and all those. Yeah, so if you interview them, yeah, they're going to say, you know, we're coming in there to dominate their country and so forth and all that stuff you hear on the media. But the media would pick up their story, but not pick up our story. And, you know, I just thought that was, it was unfair, and they're still doing it; the media does it all the time.

[00:32:38]

JC: What was it like being a guy that had been in the military for 20 years and going over and working with the military as a civilian? What was that like?

RS: It was great because, for me, I was older. I was the oldest one there.

JC: Yeah.

RS: And, you know, I was the old man, you know, and everybody knew me. I think everybody knew me on a first-name basis, and it was really, it was nice...I'm surrounded by military people. There weren't that many of us, civilians, there, but I could use my experience and my knowledge to impart it and to train others that were coming up, the younger guys that were coming up behind me. And supervise and do these things, and I could do it with a lot more freedom than if you're in the military bureaucracy. Because you know when you're in the bureaucracy, you're pigeonholed in certain ways.

JC: Yeah.

RS: You're stuck with that. But when you're there as a civilian as I was, I had more rein to do the things that we needed to do. Of course we still had to go through the base commander and our head of security operations there, so, but he was really good. He was a National Guard person. He was a homicide detective from Phoenix, so he was, you know, he was really good about police work and knew about subject interviews, what we call police work subject interviews or interrogating or interviewing suspects and so forth. So, he was very good about that. Major White, I think he's a colonel now, but at that time he was a major. And, you know, it was good

working with them. They were the best, I mean, they were just, they wanted...everyone there was mission driven, everybody there wanted to get the job done, everybody there, you know, do what you have to do to get the job done no matter how many hours it takes, no matter how much energy it takes.

JC: Sure.

RS: We got to get the job done because lives are at stake. And it was a great environment. The time actually went pretty fast.

JC: Okay.

RS: The year went by fast. I was exhausted when I came back. I think I lost 30 pounds.

JC: Wow.

RS: You know when I came back, I was like a shadow of myself when I showed up at the airport. When my whole family picked me up, they were like whoa. I had lost a lot of weight.

JC: Yeah.

RS: You know, from working hard and in a hot environment. I had lost a lot of weight, but, you know what, I was in good spirits.

JC: Yeah.

RS: Because I felt like we really accomplished something.

[00:35:05]

JC: Sure. How did your family, your wife and your children, how do you think it affected them and how did it affect you as well while you were over there...stress?

RS: You know mainly, being a military family, they were pretty much used to my whole career of me being away a lot.

JC: Okay.

RS: TDYs (Temporary Duty Assignment) and...

JC: Yeah.

RS: And, you know, assignments away from home. It's hard on a family though. My wife's a pretty good trooper. She's pretty strong, and my sons were pretty strong. I mean I know it affected them. They missed their dad and...

JC: How old were they at the time?

RS: So, they were in high school.

JC: Okay.

RS: At the time I went over there. And...but they'd grown up in the military environment, so...

JC: Sure.

RS: I don't want to say they were used to it. It was hard on them. It's hard on every military family when you're broken up and you're away and you're deployed somewhere, but I think it also made us stronger. And we would try...we didn't have all the stuff you have now. We didn't have, you know, the ability to communicate like that, but...

JC: Yeah.

RS: But we had, we could communicate, so at that time we had, we had a phone room set up where you could go down, and there were like 20 phones in this room. You could, everybody could get 15 minutes you could call home. On the department defense line, and then they would hook you up to the civilian line in the states, so, you know, every, I don't know, couple days I could go down to the phone room, and I would call back and try to talk to my family, and, you know, we didn't have the ability to do the skyping and all that then.

JC: Yeah.

RS: Yeah, all that stuff, which, you know, now, it would make it nice. I mean, my son's in Korea. I talk to him more via our phone, we can, you know, video call each other now. I talk to him like, I can talk to him almost every day.

JC: Yeah.

RS: And of course we couldn't do that when I was in Iraq. We didn't have all of that, but we could call. I mean it was such a long line of people waiting you got 15 minutes. So, you know, there was a sergeant in there making sure everybody stayed to their 15 minutes, and, you know, you're getting to talk to your family for 15 minutes every other day or whenever, you know, whenever there was availability. But, so I tried to keep in contact with them. Of course we still wrote letters then. I would send letters home or I could send cassette tapes home or something. It seems like it wasn't that long ago, but the technology has changed that much.

JC: Sure, it's changed a lot, yeah.

RS: Just in the time that, since I was there. It's only, you know 11 years ago?

JC: Yeah.

RS: 12 years ago?

JC: Yeah.

RS: And, you know, what they have now compared to what we had then is so much better now.

[00:37:27}

JC: Sure. So thinking of your year over in Iraq, is there any memorable things, this can be positive or negative, if you were to think of maybe one or two things when you think of your time over there, what pops into your head?

RS: Yeah, I think of the good things I was able to do. I think of the lives I believe I saved by catching bad guys that were out to kill us. That just always kept me going, you know. I know...it's hard to count the number of people that you're sure were saved by what we were doing there. So, that was very rewarding for me, and I'll, you know, take that to my grave. I know, and I know those people appreciate it in those units. So when we were able to catch someone among them that wasn't on their side that they knew, man this could have been, you know, this could have been a bad thing for me.

JC: Yeah.

RS: So, I think that was really rewarding. When I left even as a civilian, of course the regiment, the regimental commander, you know, coined me, and they gave me a Letter of Meritorious Service because they couldn't give me a Meritorious Service Medal because I wasn't in the military now, so they wrote me a Letter of Meritorious Service. The equivalent of a Meritorious Service Medal, but it's not, it wasn't a military medal, so it was a civilian kind of thing. You know, thanking me for what I did there. I mean those are things that I'll, that I cherish, that, you know...

JC: Yeah.

RS: We did something really positive, and we were recognized for it. The negative things, there were lots of negative things. I mean, there were lots of people that got away that, you know, they were really close. We were really close to catching, but we didn't catch, and they were able to slip away.

JC: Yeah.

RS: And, you know, I don't know what happened from that. Maybe somebody lost their life because we didn't get a bad guy that we should have.

JC: Yeah.

RS: And, you know, I think about that sometimes, but we did our best. And, you know, overall it was a very, very rewarding experience. And I got to, I got to actually polish my skills and pass them on to younger people. Who now hopefully are doing a great job somewhere else, and

maybe I taught them, maybe the old man taught me something that they can use in their career. They're probably moved up the ranks now, and they're more senior.

JC: Okay.

RS: And, you know, I'm sure that the...well some of them still do contact me, so I know they're doing well, and, you know, appreciate what they learned while I was there.

[00:40:03]

JC: So, what's it like or what was it like for you adjusting from a combat zone for a year where you're getting mortared, where you're, you know, IED threats, you're dealing with insurgents on a regular basis or people who are possibly insurgents, what was it like returning to the states back to your family, and were you changed personally at all?

RS: Yeah, you know, I think I...because I had a whole career in the military I was used to...being in Korea, you know, we were dealing with the North Korean threat a lot of the times. It was the same kind of thing. Infiltrators coming down from the north and trying to catch those people and find ways to catch them and those type of things. And so we weren't in that, you know, it wasn't a combat zone, but we were still in a, area of danger. So when I came back, I mean there was always, there's always some adjusting, but I think I adjusted pretty well in a few months. It was funny, after I came back, I had been back from Iraq I think two weeks. I was riding my motorcycle, and it was funny because I came to an intersection, and it just so happened my pastor was sitting at another intersection, sitting at one side of it, and I was coming down this road, and a car pulled right in front of me. And I had to...I almost hit the back of his car. I tried to lay it down, and, you know, it was a very dangerous situation.

JC: Yeah.

RS: And it was almost an accident, and I was just about to lay it down, and I was able to right the bike and I pulled off to the side of the road. My pastor, who saw it all, he pulled over, he's like, "you alright," and I'm like, "yeah, I just survived a year in Iraq, I come home here, and I almost get killed a quarter mile from my house on my motorcycle." You know I was like, you know, what's that all about, you know, what's going on in the world, you know. It's more danger here a quarter mile from my home than, you know, than I had in Iraq for a year. But, no, there was minimal adjustment. I think I was able to adjust, it was just being...it was good to be home with my family again.

JC: Sure.

RS: And spend time with them and, you know, get back to a normal life and get back to teaching college and doing those type of things.

[00:42:09]

JC: So I'm not sure if you've had any experience with the VA or not, but what are your thoughts about the VA, have you had any experience with using them for medical care?

RS: Well I, you know, I can't use the VA even though I'm retired because you have to, you can only use the VA if you have a service-connected disability.

JC: Okay, yeah.

RS: So, I can't...I tried to go down when I came, I didn't even know it when I retired, I'm like...when I first retired I went down to try to use the VA, and they're like you can't use the VA. You have to...

JC: So you don't have experience with them personally.

RS: Not directly, but I'm on the veteran affairs committee in (inaudible).

JC: Oh, okay.

RS: So, I mean we deal with the problems the veterans have with the system.

JC: Sure.

RS: So, we've, you know, I've heard the complaints from many of my constituents. Veterans who tell us about the problems they're having with the VA, so those problems are real, and we, you know, have to address them. It's a federal issue, not a state issue.

JC: Yeah.

RS: But I still hear the problems that are veterans are having because I deal with veterans. I'm very close to the veterans in my community. We have, you know, hundreds of veterans. We have our veterans picnic coming up. You should come to it this year.

JC: Yeah.

RS: August 6th.

JC: Okay.

RS: It's at Broughton Fire Hall in South Park. It starts promptly at 1:00, so we ask you to be there a little bit before then because we post the colors, and we have a, we have a honor guard, and we have patriotic music, we'll have a general officer there to greet the troops. This year will be General Hilty.

JC: Okay.

RS: We have our local talent. They'll be singing. We usually, we've, in the past, we've had like Miss Pennsylvania or something. Last year we had Rocky Bleier come from the Steelers.

JC: Okay.

RS: We'll have, so we'll have celebrity, we'll have, you know, a nice picnic lunch for veterans. And it's grown every year since I've done it. Started off we had 102 I think the first year. Last year was my 4th one, and we had 340.

JC: Oh, wow.

RS: So, it keeps growing every year. So...

JC: That's a lot.

RS: Stop by if you have a chance.

JC: Appreciate that, yeah.

RS: And it's a good chance to just walk around and meet your fellow veterans of all ages, of all wars eras, and they've got a lot of great stories too.

JC: Sure, I'm sure.

RS: It's a fun time. It's a good time to just mingle with other veterans.

JC: Absolutely.

RS: So we do that every year. So, you know, and we have a veterans service officer there every year at that, at that picnic to explain to veterans their benefits and so forth.

JC: Okay.

RS: I know last year we were able to help about 30 veterans who didn't even know they had benefits that were due them, but when they started asking questions of our veterans service officer, he was able to say, "hey, did you know you got...we have this program, or this program, or this program."

JC: Yeah. A lot of people don't know that those benefits are out there.

RS: They don't know they have them. Yeah, they really don't. And that veterans service officer is in my office the first Monday of every month, so people in my district know, veterans, that they can come and talk to a veterans service officer since he's the expert on all those benefits, and he can get them, he can help them with everything from getting a copy of their DD form 214...

JC: Yeah.

RS: To, you know, getting medical benefits or whatever it is they need, so we're very active in my district to helping veterans.

[00:45:10]

JC: That's very important. So let's close with, basically, you've been back 2005 'til now. I know a little bit about it, but can you tell us what you've been doing?

RS: So, I teach, I still teach at St. Vincent. I was fulltime faculty there, and I teach a class, classes in international relations, which is what my Ph.D. is in.

JC: Okay.

RS: And I teach a class on global terrorism in the spring, and I still do teach those classes. I just teach one class a semester now because this is a fulltime job being a representative. But I don't want to give up that teaching because, you know, it gives me a connection with the young people, and it gives me a chance to keep honed in my area of expertise, so I usually teach international relations in the fall, and I teach global terrorism in the spring.

JC: Oh, wow.

RS: So, very popular course, that global terrorism course. And that, you know, forces me to keep up with what's going on in the world of global terrorism and so forth. So I like to stay abreast of that.

JC: Yeah. And you're a state representative since 2011.

RS: Since, yeah, elected in 2010.

JC: Okay.

RS: And, yeah, I've been a state representative since then.

JC: And your district?

RS: My district is, well we got the 39th District is, straddles two counties. The southern portion of Allegheny County and the northern portion of Washington County.

JC: Okay.

RS: About 12 municipalities, that part of Bethal Park, South Park, Jefferson Hills, Elizabeth Township where I live, Elizabeth Borough, Forward Township, down into Washington County, Nottingham, all the way down to Interstate 70 where (inaudible) is, Somerset Township, Union Township, Finleyville, those area. That's my district.

JC: Excellent.

RS: Very diverse area. Those suburban and rural areas.

JC: Yeah, I bet.

RS: They're great people, really great people and a lot of veterans.

JC: Oh wow, I bet, yeah. Well, thank you so much for your service...

RS: Thank you.

JC: to this country and to this state as well, and thank you for doing the interview. The interview will end now.

[00:47:04]