

Robert Morris University Oral History Center

Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans Project



Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

PETER LAHODA

Mortarman, US Army

June 14, 2016

PETER LAHODA (1984 –), Oral History Interview, June 14, 2016.

Biographical Sketch: Peter Lahoda served in the United States Army deploying to Iraq twice. Peters' first deployment was with the 1st Cavalry Division out of Ft. Hood, Texas from Oct., 2006 to Jan., 2008. Then again while under Inactive Ready Reserve status with the Tennessee National Guard, 278 Armored Cavalry Unit from Jan., 2010 to Aug., 2010. Peters' role in the 1st Cav. was a Mortar Man (11C), which lead him to participating in operations in northwest Baghdad, Iraq. Peters' Recall to the 278 ACU broadened his experience in the region by pushing north into Tikrit operating in and out of the surrounding outposts.

Topics Covered in Interview:

9/11

U.S. Army, 1st Cavalry, Mechanized Infantry Division

Pre-surge, Surge, Post-surge of Falluja, Sunni Awakening

Mortarman (11C)

RAO was areas of Khadra & America

Al-Qaeda Shi'ite Defects- Sunni Muslim Militia

12 Hour Patrols, Maintenance, Cordon & Search, Hard & Soft Knocks

U.S. Tennessee National Guard, 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment

Tikrit, Iraq

Forward Operating Base Spiker

Convoy Security, Logistical Transportation, Quick Reaction Force, Training Iraqi Forces,

Route Irish

IED's, VBIED's, Small Arm's Fire, Mortar Fire, Hit & Run Tactics

Mass Casualty

Interviewed by Joshua Caskey

Transcribed by John Cummings and Adam Salinas

Edited by Adam Salinas and John McCarthy

[00:00:00]

JC: The interview is going to be now. This interview is part of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veteran Project undertaken by the Oral History Center at Robert Morris University. I am Josh Caskey, and today is June 14, 2016. And I am joined by Peter. So Peter, Pete or Peter?

PL: Peter's fine.

JC: Okay. Can you state your full name?

PL: It's Peter Fitzgerald Lahoda.

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

PL: Yes.

JC: Excellent. And you have elected to offer us, obviously, use your name, so let's go ahead and start.

PL: Okay.

JC: Alright, when were you born?

PL: December 31, 1984.

JC: Okay, so that...you're almost...

PL: 31 years old.

JC: 31, okay. And where were you born?

PL: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

JC: So you're a local guy. Okay, cool.

PL: Local guy.

JC: And did you join out of Pittsburgh?

PL: I did. I joined out of the Oakland MEP station.

JC: Okay

PL: Our MEPS, our recruiting station's right on Forbes.

JC: Okay, and when you joined, did you join, what did you join? What branch, active...

PL: Army infantry.

JC: Okay, Army infantry.

PL: Active duty.

JC: Active duty, okay. And what years did you end up serving? Including like reserve time, and if it was reserve, you know, when was that.

PL: So, '05 was when I enlisted, May of 2005.

JC: Okay.

PL: And I got out of my active duty tour...I think August 2008. So I did a little over three year contract.

JC: Did you deploy to Iraq during that time?

PL: Yeah, I deployed to Iraq from October 2006 to January 2008.

JC: Oh wow, that's a long deployment.

PL: Yeah, 15 month deployment.

JC: Oh wow. And then...and then did you do time in the reserve as well?

PL: Right, and then I got out of the military, was going back to the University of Pittsburgh for school, and I was involuntary recalled for IRR. So, I was sent to Tennessee National Guard unit, which I had no affiliation to.

JC: Oh goodness.

PL: Sent from...so there was a train up, it was like January 2010 to August 2010 is when I got back from Iraq and was, I guess, redeployed back to the States.

JC: Oh wow. Well that's interesting to be recalled. A lot of people don't understand that you can get out and still be, have a contract on...

PL: Right, well I mean, so officially you sign... any contract you sign enlisted is really an eight year contract. So, I did three years active duty, but your...because of that, the delta, you get five years of inactive ready reserve.

JC: Okay.

PL: So, they can recall you in any state of emergency, which...

JC: Which they did with you (laughs).

PL: Yeah.

[00:02:29]

JC: So, you already said where you enlisted out of. What interested you about the military or the Army?

PL: I think it was just something that was generational to me. Like it was, this was something, you know...I actually didn't go right out of high school. I went, I was two years of college, and I know a lot of my friends were deploying, and while I was in school, you know my guys or friends were serving in either the Army or Air Force or Marines in, you know, active duty roles or in Iraq theater. So, it felt like something that, you know, I just...I felt obligated. And once it got in my mind, it was something that just...there was no going back, so...

JC: Yeah.

PL: So, you know, I think my sophomore year of college, you know, I had a buddy come back maybe early in the fall, and then kind of just stuck with me, and then I think I joined officially in December for like a late or, you know, pre-enlist or whatever to ship off in May so...

JC: Okay, like delayed entry program.

PL: Delayed entry, yeah.

JC: Okay.

PL: But that was kind of, kind of an obligation I guess.

[00:03:31]

JC: Yeah. What about 9/11 did that, how did that impact you...in your decision possibly?

PL: You know, so it was, you know, that was...I was probably a sophomore or junior in high school or maybe a freshman in 2001. So, it definitely had a big influence, but to me it was more of...you know I didn't directly tie Iraq or the Iraq theater to 9/11, but it was more of just a comradery of, you know, my generation going to the war as opposed to direct influence of 9/11 and getting out to the Afghanistan theater.

JC: Yeah.

PL: Stuff like that, so...

JC: Okay. And then did you have any history of family service?

PL: Yeah, my, both grandfathers...

JC: World War II or...?

PL: World War II.

JC: Okay.

PL: And my dad's dad is an infantry guy, and that's kind of why I chose that route. He was 82nd in talked highly of that, that stuff... even though, didn't end up in 82nd.

JC: Okay.

PL: (laughs).

[00:04:26]

JC: Well, that's cool, that's really cool. What else attracted you to the military?

PL: Partly the adventure, you know wanting to be in the front lines and wanting to be, you know, part of that. And, you know, that's really my key interest...

JC: Yeah. So you served two tours...

PL: Two tours.

JC: ...in Iraq...

PL: Right.

JC: And one was with a regular active...what was the first unit you were with?

PL: First Calvary. So, I was enlisted in the First Calvary division of Fort Hood, Texas.

JC: Okay, and then you were recalled IRR 2010.

PL: Right.

JC: With the Tennessee National Guard.

PL: Yeah, Eastern Tennessee National Guard...

JC: Oh wow.

PL: I think there were 278 ACR, Armored Calvary Regimen, so they were...mostly a scout, you know, CAV scouts and tankers and...

[00:05:13]

JC: Okay. So, we'll talk in general about your...we won't split the deployments up. I'll let you do that on your own.

PL: Okay, okay.

JC: When I, we talk about certain questions you can compare and contrast if you'd like. Especially, considering you were with an active duty unit and a National Guard unit.

PL: Right.

JC: So, go on into your first deployment. What was your understanding of the war in Iraq?

PL: You know, it was definitely, they were...by the time I got a theater in 2006, you know late 2006, they definitely had some, you know, I think they went in as a...it went in as a conventional war, you know army verse army kind of thing.

JC: Sure.

PL: And I think they started realizing some of the, you know, this was more of a counter insurgency operation. So they started, you know, incorporating some of that into our training. So, I was actually a mortar guy, so 11 Charlie was what I was in, indirect infantrymen. But they knew there wasn't going to be a lot of use for mortar, so we were just incorporated into our line companies, 11 normal infantry companies. So we did our close combat...

JC: Okay.

PL: And all of our stuff and...

JC: I was just going to ask you what did you specialize, I know you learn probably all of the mortar systems...

PL: Right.

JC: Did you...which ones did you end up using?

PL: Well, we were a...first cavalry's a mechanize infantry division.

JC: Okay.

PL: Or mechanize division, so we were actually at the 120 millimeters...

JC: Those the big ones.

PL: Right, the big guns, so...

JC: Okay.

PL: Just because we actually had armored tracks that carried them as opposed to some of the light infantry units used 81s or 60 millimeters; the smaller stuff, so...

JC: So, you were with a line company then.

PL: Right. So, we were mechanizing...so we were training Bradley's, which was kind of the, the infantry vehicle so...

JC: Okay.

PL: Bradley armored fighting vehicles.

[00:06:55]

JC: What was your feeling about that? Like, you know, is that what you want...is that what you wanted to do or is that kind of like I wanted to be a straight-leg unit?

PL: I wanted to be more of a straight-leg unit, but I mean we adapted to mechanizing, and when we got to Iraq it was all kind of thrown out the window. We were all given HMMWV's and kind of, you know, we took over for cavalry...or for fourth ID, which was a, you know, mechanize infantry division, but, you know...the third ID group that replaced us was a light infantry, but we were all doing the same thing. It was pretty much, you know, you're given...you have six HMMWV's for a platoon, then you're all in the same vehicle, so it didn't really matter light or mechanical when you got over. They were all pretty much wheeled infantry at that time I guess.

[00:07:36]

JC: Okay. So if you could talk a little bit about maybe leading up to both deployments. I know you could probably talk about them separately because yours are definitely different types of units. And basically...you talked a little bit about training, but a little more about the training, life on base, and the feeling of deploying.

PL: Yeah Fort Hood was...I think it's one of the largest bases just, as far as training on the ground. So it's out of, you know, about 45 minutes outside of Austin, Texas.

JC: Killeen, Texas, is that where...

PL: Killeen, yeah.

JC: Okay.

PL: Yeah, Killeen is the actual city. But it's, you know...a lot of the training was incorporating...it was kind of moving from, you know, training up on your conventional infantry roles to actually incorporating some of the, you know, the cultural awareness, the close-quarter combat training, some of the, you know, just I guess...combat outpost support type items and, you know, actually wheeled vehicle support. So, you know, I was a HMMWV, I was a 240 gunner on a HMMWV, so kind of incorporating that training to our Fort Hood lifestyle and getting that stuff. So, you know, I enjoyed it, you know, a lot of field training, a lot of good times, a lot of comradery with an infantry platoon, a lot of craziness (laughs).

JC: (laughs) definitely.

PL: Yeah, a lot of partying, a lot of that stuff, but yeah.

JC: Were you nervous either time or both times while deploying?

PL: Yeah, absolutely. I mean there was just a sense of we don't know what we're doing, don't know if we're coming back type of thing. And, you know, with Fort Hood you historically all had fourth ID and first cavalry, so it was kind of like one of those units were always deployed. So, you know, while you're back at Fort Hood, you might be supporting some of the funerals or some of the support of, you know, fourth ID guys that might be going through stuff in theater. And then, you know, fourth ID kind of switched with 1st Cavs. So, you're kind of always, you feel like you're always have like a foot in Iraq even when you're not in garrison because you're tied at that Fort Hood location.

JC: Absolutely.

PL: Yeah, so...

JC: And that keeps it, I'm sure that kept it like the reality of war was right in your face every day.

PL: Oh, absolutely. Because when you're in process in the Fort Hood, you're in process, and that's just everybody coming to Fort Hood. So, you know, there's guys that you're meeting in process and the other two weeks they're in country pretty much, or processing for in-country stuff, so while you're just of kind of getting into your unit. So, I had a full, I can't do that math, but I had probably like a full year at Fort Hood before I deployed.

JC: Okay.

PL: Some of the guys I processed with were meeting their units in country already and kind of, so...

[00:10:15]

JC: Okay. So, let's break it down real quick as far as your first deployment. Where did you end up at?

PL: So we were in northwest Baghdad. We kind of moved...RAO consisted of an area called the Khadra and Ameria.

JC: Okay.

PL: All in northwest Baghdad. We, you know, we started off as working out of a huge FOB, FOB Victory, which is...it's not the green zone FOB, it's kind of by the Baghdad airport. So, I think there's like three FOBs that are incorporated to just one massive FOB, so Victory, Liberty, Striker, but it's pretty much a city, you know, a U.S. built city of just an army group. So, we started out in there. We replace 4th ID in country who's also stationed in Fort Hood.

JC: Okay.

PL: And we started off just doing patrols out of, you know, the forward operating bases. And then we do some, you know, 12 hours of patrol a day, come back into country, doing kind of maintenance or refit you need to do, and then...and start some operations out of there whether

it be, you know, a cordon and search or if it's a hard knock or soft knock. We would do those out of the FOBs. Then by December time frame, we actually transitioned to kind of more of a counter insurgency, where we actually...we actually started occupying little out-posts, so we kind of got outside of this huge FOB and doing operations out of that to actually living in a...police stations. The first one we took over was a police station, and then we moved into like an old bombing shelter that we took over, and we'd operate at a little out-post. So, we were, you know, we were the only platoon in a place, so we did all the defense, all the offense, all of the operations out of just little out-posts jointly with Iraqi forces. So, a big transition from...and it was kind of in the time frame...the history of the war was, we got there, it was kind of pre-surged. We were still in this kind of reactive, you know, send these missions out there, get blown up or have some kind of intelligent mission approach, but not really directed that well to the shift of actually the surge, where we're pretty much in that neighborhood 24/7. We're, you know, we're part of that. We're organic to that neighborhood, where, you know, civilians even came into for medical support to our little out-post. We did all our defense, you know even when we're on the defense, we are kind of on our offense because we're securing that little neighborhood. Just because we don't have the infrastructure the larger, the larger forward operating bases were we had to play a very offensive security role. So, we had to have roving patrols just around of our out-post because, you know, we're just a tiny, little building in the middle of northwest Baghdad, so...

JC: Oh, wow, yeah.

PL: We kind of shifted during the surge to that stuff, that...living in little combat out-posts and doing our operations out of there jointly, which, you know, at first, it was, it definitely was a peak in, you know, May, when it started coming into the spring months, and we were in the outpost. It definitely was a peak in violence in that area, and it was...you definitely noticed that...

JC: This was May of 2007.

PL: It would be May in 2007. Yeah, saw a peak in violence and a lot more active. And then, you know, we definitely saw a lot of improvement especially when, I guess you know, us being in that area, and then also other operations going on or intelligence operations, or I don't know what's going on, but we started seeing a lot. Since we were in a Sunni, Sunni Muslim area, we saw actually some of the Sunni Muslim militias that kind of broke off from AQI or Al-Qaeda Iraq. They actually broke off from that and actually joining our forces. So, we actually started working with not just Iraqi military, which is primarily Shi'ite in this area but actually Sunni militias. And we definitely saw like a vast improvement, and there was three months of intense fighting in that area, but after that, I mean, in joining those forces with the, the Sunni militias and breaking them, breaking off from AQI, the end of my tour, you know, I'd say September on to January, it was, you know, you start seeing it as almost like a stable country where, you know, where we're in the markets, and we're not as defended up. So, it was definitely a pre-shift. You saw down to like the pre-surge surge and post-surge just on the one deployment.

JC: Yeah, and this is like what they, you guys were calling the Sunni Awakening.

PL: Yeah, exactly, absolutely. So that kind of started, and, you know, by Fallujah and kind of...

JC: Anbar Province.

PL: Anbar Province, but because northwest Baghdad is a primarily Sunni area, it's kind of, they still refer to it as kind of the Sunni Triangle, which touched into Baghdad from the Anbar Province. So, you definitely saw, I mean we just had Sunni leadership step up and say, you know, we're breaking away from AQI. They're, you know, obviously there's a lot of, you know, they're attacks took a lot of innocent people's lives as well, and we definitely saw that shift. So, we all of that kind of in that one deployment, so it was really interesting to be a part of, and, you know, specifically we worked with Abu Ali, which is, you know, Abu just means like the father Abu or whatever, but he was kind of a...he was an ex-intelligence officer for the Iraqi Army under Saddam. He kind of rose up as a leader in this neighborhood, Ameria, and he rose up before us, and they were...they were a lot better and more well-equipped and better trained than some of the Iraqi forces that we'd been fighting alongside since the entire war, so just because they move with a purpose, and they had a sense of securing their own people within their own neighborhood. It was a lot more effective than anything we've ever done previously, so it was very cool to go on a raid with them and actually have good intelligence to work with, and, you know, we were actually capturing bad guys. As opposed to, we would do raids twice, three times a week, and we would just, I felt like we would capture the same old lady like she would just move house to house, and we'd just capture her just because of the intelligence we were getting was...

JC: So, it was effective...

PL: Yeah, everything was really effective.

JC: That's great, that's good.

[00:16:33]

PL: So, we would have our Bradley's back, and we'd have like a, you know, just a team of Sunni militia guys just, just all on our Bradley moving to the next house to do a raid on it. It was just, it was an exciting time.

JC: Yeah, I bet. So, when you went back with the East Tennessee National Guard in 2010.

PL: Right.

JC: Where did you end up at?

PL: Tikrit, so Saddam's...

JC: So, north. 60 miles north, correct?

PL: Yup. And it's FOB Spiker, I think was the...

JC: Spiker, okay.

PL: It was actual, or Forward Operating Base. I think they called it COB Copper.

JC: Okay. Compare and contrast, maybe start by telling us what was kind of your mission. What were you doing, what were the type of patrols you were doing, and then compare and contrast generally...

PL: So I think with the active duty infantry unit we were a little more trust, a little more well-trained. And, you know, that was kind of our job, so we were...we did a lot of, you know actual offensive operations and counter insurgents. With the National Guard unit, we were kind of set up as a convoy security unit, so essentially we would just transport logistics from Tikrit to other combat outposts whether it be U.S. convoys like with U.S. soldiers and just logistics or if it's, you know, actually Iraqi Nationals or third party nationals (Inaudible)...oil going from one outpost to another. So, we would do maybe, you know, five or six trucks pulling security for maybe 32 or 40, you know, logistics trucks.

JC: Okay.

PL: That was our primary role, and also some QRF, so some quick reacting force. So, if there was any, you know, platoon cut or somebody's cut out in the middle between outposts, we would react to those if we were on that force. But definitely a shift in...I guess the intensity, I guess from...

JC: So, less intense your second time, and the war is starting to wind down...

PL: Absolutely.

JC: And things are getting more secure.

PL: And its two-fold, and they were already, I mean, they were talking pull-out, and we were already kind of getting away from, even with the active duty forces, we were getting away from like, you know, I guess offensive operations. We were kind of more just on the defense.

JC: Okay.

PL: Working with Iraqi forces and doing the training as opposed to actual any operations, I guess, so...

JC: Okay.

PL: So, it was two-fold. I was being, I guess, a National Guard unit, and also being in a slower time in Iraq or less intense time in Iraq, so...

[00:19:02]

JC: Can you compare and contrast between your, your time with the active duty unit in '06 to '08 and your National Guard unit in 2010? Mainly just like the comradery, the morale, you know, during the deployment.

PL: Yeah, I mean the comradery for me was 100 percent different because it was an active duty. It's a...I had a year in Texas just training with these guys in field exercises, in rotational exercises in Fort Irwin, California getting trained up. So, I mean I've lived with these guys, I've partied with these guys, I've...you know, know everything about these guys, and I know they have my back, and I got their back and do anything for them. And I, you know, and then serve, you know, another 15 months with them in-country and then a little bit post-after, you know, before my contract was up. But, you know, just being...and those guys are from all over from, you know, Puerto Rico, New York City, everywhere. You definitely, you know, start understanding a strength in diversity because you always knew that, you know, if I don't know how to do this, you know, this guy might have done this in a past life or previous life. You're pulling from all these different, you know, people geographically and ethnically, and, you know, it's very cool. Then, you transfer to Eastern Tennessee National Guard unit, and I'm a Pittsburgh Yinzer going, being thrown into like an Appalachia, kind of country town. And they're all pretty tight. They're tight because they knew each other outside of the military, they knew each other growing up, they knew...you know there's family within those units, so...

JC: Sure.

PL: But all were great guys. All treated me with respect, and I kind of...

JC: Did they accept in right away?

PL: Yeah, absolutely. Well, not right away. I felt like there were some period, but maybe two weeks, I mean because I had met them in-country, so that's the one thing. I didn't train with these guys pre-Iraq. I was...they kind of pulled all the IRR soldiers, and they trained them. We sent them back to retraining for Fort Benning because that was infantry. So I did retraining for a month in Fort Benning...

JC: Okay.

PL: And then they shipped me off to Camp Shelby in Mississippi just to do some kind of refreshers on convoy security and some Iraq deployment specific stuff. And that's just a pool of IRR guys. And then we're sent in-country to our units, so the guys I served with were already in-country for I think three to four months when I'm coming to them, and, you know, the Southside guy coming for this Eastern Tennessee clique. But everybody treated me with respect, and they were good guys, but it was definitely a different feeling then have the comradery.

[00:21:39]

JC: Did they...what rank were you in the second deployment?

PL: I was E-4.

JC: E-4...specialist?

PL: Specialist, yeah.

JC: And what were you the first deployment?

PL: I was...I got out as an E-4, so I probably made my E-4 rank at the end of my deployment there or...

JC: The first deployment?

PL: Yeah, the first deployment.

JC: Okay, okay. Did they...did the second deployment, did the National Guard guys kind of rely on you at all, having...the fact that you had prior combat experience and intense combat experience, I would imagine...

PL: Yeah, absolutely, I mean it was a different role, so I was, I was already, you know, I was immediately thrust into, you know, the gunner just because I, that was what I...I was a 240 gunner both dismounted and mounted in my first tour. So, I had the experience. So, I was immediately thrust into the gunner position, which was a need for them. And they relied on just some of the infantry stuff that they maybe didn't go through for because they were all Cav scouts and operations. It really wasn't called upon that much. We really didn't besides I think, you know, a couple IEDs on a convoy and some small, small, small arms fire.

JC: Okay. Things were winding down.

PL: Yeah, absolutely.

JC: Okay.

PL: Yeah, so.

[00:22:49]

JC: Well then let's jump right into the combat stuff.

PL: Right.

JC: And you can refer to either deployment. Sounds like the first deployment for you was obviously, probably a lot more intense, but let's talk a little bit about, you know, daily life and situations that may have come up, things that stick out to you, how you reacted, how you dealt with it.

PL: I think that the stuff that, for whatever reason, sticks out to me the most is just, you know, getting into country. When we're first into country, they do things they call left seat, right seat rides, which is supposed to be your transition period with the unit you're replacing. So, you

know, our first left seat, right seat ride with fourth ID we were split up into two; so, half my team went with half of fourth ID and other half went to other half of fourth ID team for patrol. And I think our first instances, we came into a fire fight where we were, you know, where they were attacking an Iraqi police base. So, we were called into a fire fight, you know, I think that one immediately quelled. They were kind of already gone by the time we got there, but there was some Iraqi forces killed in that fight. So, that was our first day there, and along with that it was...we were on a dismounted patrol route. We got out of our HMMVEE's and were at some, just some alleyway, and this is our first day there and we're just on a dismounted patrol, and we got hit by an IED, parked IEDs because we thought we had some...we saw where the triggerman was (inaudible) on some dismounted patrol. And then we immediately get mortar fire, and we have 60-millimeter mortar land like in 10 meters of our patrol.

JC: Oh, wow.

PL: Complete dud, nothing happened...

JC: Okay.

PL: So, it was like welcome to the country...

JC: Yeah, absolutely.

PL: Having said this is our first time out in the....

JC: This is in December timeframe?

PL: This would be...I guess, yeah, by the time...we probably..., this is probably November timeframe.

JC: Okay, November, okay.

PL: Right, and things were kind of winding down. They had an intense summer, fourth ID, because I think when you're hitting the late summer, you're hitting like Ramadan, you're hitting like some peaks in the war.

JC: Yeah.

PL: But they were just kind of winding down from that, but it was still pretty, pretty intense situation. But, I mean, until we got into an outpost role, we were still very reactive. I mean we were...the enemy was engaged in us and withdrawing, and we were just, you know, we were being hit by IEDs, we were getting into some small firearms, which were engaged by the enemy, but they had kind of some plan of, you know, leaving...

JC: Like hit-and-run tactics.

PL: Yeah, pretty hit-and-run tactics. And it stayed that way, you know, we had one longer fire fight I can remember was in an area called Odle, which was part of our...

JC: How do you spell that?

PL: I think it's O-D-L-E.

JC: Okay.

PL: I believe so (laughs).

JC: No, that's fine.

PL: Right, but...and that was always a cool area. I liked that area a lot because it was...because we were in Baghdad, it's pretty, you know, densely populated, houses are all over, but Odle was...just looked like something like you picture out of like an Eastern European like warzone. Where it's kind of spread out like half the houses are bombed out...

JC: Yeah.

PL: There's some fields, and I think that one always stuck out to me because it was like our first kind of longer fire fight, and, you know, we were there, we were hearing, you know, some engagements from, you know, they had some potshots at our HMMVEE. But we're trying to like maneuver around to see where we're actually taking fire from. Because, I don't know, the battle sounds are very confusing. I think they just echo off buildings, so you think you're going to the right place, and then you end up and you're like you need to go back this way. So, there's finally we identified where we were getting the...we were receiving fire across this huge, plush green field, which, we didn't know at the time, that's a big red flag in our active. If it's a plush green field, it's probably like water because, you know, it's the desert, so we, you know, actually my...I'm the second HMMVEE, and I think I...for whatever reason, our first HMMVEE got turned around (inaudible). They were still going through like their four-point turn, and we pull up, and we engaged this guy at the...I ... a 240 gun, I engage this guy at the rooftop, and then we start like a bounding tactic, and then our third Hum V just gets stuck in the middle of the field. So, then we're dismounted, we're going through a fire fight, and we're trying to get this guy towed out of this field at the same time. So, that's kind of my first, that's like one of the big memories was just like a...

[00:27:11]

JC: What's that feel, like adrenaline feel, was there adrenaline feeling or...

PL: Oh, it feels, I mean, it feels great at the time definitely because you're kind of...there's a lot of fire power and three HMMVEE with 240s going at it just full-born.

JC: Yeah.

PL: But, and luckily nobody was injured in that one, so that was, that was an exciting one, I guess.

JC: Yeah.

PL: But, that was nice because it was engaged fire fight, and you felt like you had some power. Ninety percent of the time in Iraq you feel powerless because it's an IED, and somebody thought they might have saw a triggerman, but that guy's probably not the triggerman, you know, they're long gone. They're not staying around, so it was nice to be in an actual, I don't know, to feel like you have some power over the situation as opposed to just being a hit-and-run tactics like you said before, so...

JC: What kind of IED's were they using over there?

PL: They were using whole range, so I mean it started off as just kind of small, maybe mortars or 155 rounds that they, you know, they either put in so they have vehicle-born IED's that have in a back of the trunk of VBED's or they're just kind of misplaced, and they were trying to trigger it from their ways. We had a lot of technology that prevented from them using remote...

JC: Like frequency jammers...

PL: Right, frequency jammers, so it seemed like they adapted that, so they went for like more old school tactics. So we had, you know, we had to look for pressure plates. So if it was like a speed bump, maybe it really wasn't a speed bump, it was really kind of...

JC: Did that pick up more as well your second deployment? You were saying that there wasn't as many IED's, but the pressure plates since you guys used jammers?

PL: Yeah, I believe. I think they kind of continued with that technology. I guess kind of reverting back to either hard wires or pressure plates and stuff like that. Because...just because they kind of adapted to our technology. And one of the more scarier things that, you know, we didn't get hit with, we got hit with a lot of bad stuff, but they started kind of going in the, I don't want to call them armor piercing, but they had like, you know, shape charges. I forget what those are called, but those were the ones that we had to be on the lookout for because we had...we were, our AO was right along Route Irish, which was a major route to the green zone, to other outposts. So, that's where they would...there's more of those like, you know, I guess better know, more frequently travelled highways is where you saw some of that technology. But we had...I think the one thing that got our battalion real bad was just anti-tanks. We had some of our mass-cal (mass casualty) situations, where like the double-stacked, anti-tank mine-up.

JC: Yeah.

PL: We had five guys burn alive in the back of a Bradley. That was probably our biggest Mass-Cal (mass casualty) situation.

[00:29:49]

JC: Wow, how did everybody react to that?

PL: That was a hard one just because they, you know, just the comradery and the guys and the medic involved and even the translator that we lost was, you know, kind of close to everybody. So it wasn't my platoon that was out alpha company. That was...

JC: Okay, but it still is your...

PL: Yeah.

JC: These are people that are your brothers and...

PL: Right, and these are guys that we shared our outpost with because, again, we were...we were kind of a mobile platoon. We were kind of sent out to either Alpha of our Bravo Company because we were a mortar platoon, but we're not doing any mortar, so we were attached to alpha company, attached to bravo company as well. So, you know, we shared out outposts with them.

JC: Yeah.

PL: And it'd just be crazy. It'd be, I remember, you know, we, either we were on QRF (quick reaction force) or alpha, a platoon from alpha company was in QRF. And we would have rooftop security over our little outpost just because we had to stay on the offense. We had four, four-man, you know, we'd man the roof and then we'd have a roving security in the HMMWV, and, you know, you send an alpha company platoon out for, there'd be some kind of action, they'd go on their QRF and you just see a huge explosion and you're thinking ah you know, it's them. Sometimes they come back, and it's just...you know sometimes the bigger explosions are actually the less damaging. They just come back with like a messed up radiator, and sometimes the low key ones are the ones that do the most damage, so it's...

[00:31:10]

JC: How do you...how did you rebound from when these major incidents happen especially mass casualties? How did you and your guys do? You know, explain to somebody who doesn't understand what it's like to be in combat and put your life on the line every day. How do you get back out there and do it?

PL: You just draw on each other. I mean that's really the power of, you know, that diversity and strength. I mean there's...there's always one person that...you know, like, and I consider myself mentally tough and I can do it, but, you know, there's always someone there who can pick you up. Whether it's me at one point or another guy there, but I think you just kind of...you react by getting closer, getting more dependent upon each other, and, you know, just trying to make a difference or, so...

JC: So, kind of like a traditional family in a sense. There's always somebody that has to be the strong person.

PL: Absolutely, yeah. And that's what's nice about having, I think, again that diversity, it's nice just because some people just handle situations a lot better. So I know my moments weren't really the combat moments. My stuff that got to me was like the just drawn out like, you know, I'm living in an outpost, I'm doing two, you know, dismounted patrols a day, a mounted patrol today, and then in my free time I'm building defensive positions. You know, like and I'm hauling sandbags...

[00:32:32]

JC: Yeah, yeah. That's actually was...that's good because that's kind of what I wanted to ask more of, and you can start with, you know, what you're talking about, your first deployment as well. Explain, if you can, what...there's no such thing as average obviously in combat, but what is the average day? What kind of rotations were you doing?

PL: Right.

JC: And what were you doing?

PL: Yeah, I mean that's...it was, I mean, it was a good mix. I think you had, you always had your standard patrol. So maybe you had a, you know, at an outpost you had...because you were always taking over...the outpost it always seemed like you're always building up your defensive position no matter what because you're taking it from like a building, and you're building it to, to be, I guess, more standalone daily, so...

JC: Like a fortified castle.

PL: Right. So, every day it's...you do your, kind of your patrols... because that's an important part of the defense is doing your patrols because the last thing you want is to be, you know, a little house in the middle of a neighborhood, and all your neighbors are getting ready to kill you. You know, so you have to be out there engaged in your community, making sure you're, you know, you're checking out houses three blocks away, making sure there's no...there's not like, you know, 70 AQI guys ready to go on offense. So, you know, so your daily patrols, whether mounted, dismounted, you're engaging, you know, civilians are doing...I mean sometimes we're just handing out food. You know, boxes with rice and some other food and water supplies to people.

JC: So you're helping people too. You're not just out there killing bad guys.

PL: Yeah, absolutely. We're doing, I forget what we called those, those humanity, you know, patrols or whatever.

JC: Yeah.

PL: And then you're doing, you know, you're always scouting for just more intelligence. What seems awry in this situation? Is this, you know, this building that was not abandoned before has a family gone on there, or something? Is that...

JC: Yeah.

PL: So you're always looking for intelligence. And then you had your mounted patrols, and you had your refit, you're getting logistics because you're trying to keep this little, little post alive. And then you're back, and you're either burning, you know, shit, or you gotta, you gotta, you gotta burn barrels, and you gotta build your defensive position. So you're just always working, and your...

[00:34:35]

JC: And then did you guys have like a watch rotation as well?

PL: Absolutely, yeah. So then you'd do like a usually a four hour, a four to eight hour shift on watch rotation as well. So that's, that's easy. That roving...the first combat outpost we were at my first tour was, that was a roving, two roving HMMWV's and then four guys on a...on the roof...

JC: Okay, roof.

PL: We had four kind of built-up security positions with just 240, 240 millimeters and 240 (inaudible) as well.

JC: Yeah, I know what you meant, yeah, yup.

PL: And then...and then the other outpost we had actually kind of like a watchtower. We had two roving HMMWV's. So you had a shift in those as well, too. So, and those would be two guys in a truck as opposed to like a full...if we were doing a convoy, you'd have two dismounts, a driver, your TC, your track commander, truck commanders, and a gunner.

JC: Okay.

PL: But for the roving you just have a gunner and a driver. And those would be two of those on shift kind of going around just making sure there's no, you know, built-up offensive things ready to...

[00:35:36]

JC: Sure. What size element lived at the combat outpost?

PL: We had just a platoon.

JC: Platoon, okay. Now approximately how many for like your two?

PL: We had like 15 guys. And then we had Iraqi forces as well, so we have like three or four Iraqi...

JC: Oh, 15 guys for...that's a small platoon.

PL: Yeah, absolutely.

JC: But you're Bradley unit you said.

PL: Yeah.

JC: But you were in HMMWV's.

PL: Right we were in HMMWV's, so

JC: Okay. Because I'm thinking platoon I'm thinking 50-some guys.

PL: No, no.

JC: Okay.

PL: Yeah. And I say we were augmented, so we were probably up to like 22, 24 people.

JC: Plus you said the Iraqis as well.

PL: Right, plus Iraqi forces.

JC: Iraqi police or Iraqi army?

PL: We had the Iraqi army with us. There was Iraqi National Police too in our AO, and we'd do a lot of joint patrols with them, but the guys in our outpost were Iraqi Army. And I think we did have, because it became like a dispatch center too, so we also had Iraqi national police. That was just one or two guys that was on some kind of, their radio or whatever so they could kind of keep... work cooperative with U.S forces and the Iraqi army as well.

JC: How'd you work with them? Like was it an easy relationship, was it hard, were they...were they good, were they lazy? What, you know, what was the situation?

PL: For the most part the guys that we worked with were pretty good. They were...they definitely...they're, you know, it's definitely a culture. I think a lot of us, you know, we misinterpreted stuff as lazy or misinterpreted stuff as undisciplined, but it's really a cultural awareness type of thing. I mean, you know, there's no such thing as a schedule (laughs). You know, we try to do... hey, we're going to do a joint raid at three o'clock, and they show up at like six o'clock, but that's, it's kind of a cultural thing that we took as laziness or took as undisciplined, but...

JC: Yeah.

PL: It's just a different sense there, so...you know, we did build trust. You know, I know we didn't have any incidents of, you know, I guess, blue on blue or anything where they're attacking us, so that's, but they're...you know just, you know, because you get your, your briefs, and you do hear

about that stuff going on in-country. So you're always kind of on your P's and Q's just to be careful how much you actually trust them and let them into your, your group and what not.

JC: Yeah.

PL: But luckily we didn't have any incidents. I think when we started working with the Sunni militia though, I mean that was definitely a trust just because we saw the effect as they were working with...

JC: Yeah.

PL: And just they were more disciplined and, I think, better prepared. We definitely, we definitely built up a trust with them. You know, we were going to, at the end the, at the end of my tour, we were going to like weddings. You know, like there'd be like a big Iraqi wedding, and then my commander would be invited to the wedding, so we'd like pull up, and they're just be dancing. You know like...it was definitely a shift, so...

[00:38:24]

JC: When you had free time, which probably wasn't a whole lot, but when you did, had free time, what did you do?

PL: Just movies, really. And it was really limited. It was, you know, so originally when we were outside that, that huge fort operating base, I mean that was nice. That's what we thought our deployment was going to be like. It was kind of like, hey you do patrols, and then you have this city where they have a massive cafeteria that has a guy that cuts fruit for you 24 hours. And then, you know, like they have a, essentially a Walmart reserved for PX, and they had a Burger King and Popeye's. You know like there's stuff to do, and they had little, you know, Iraqi, they had like an Iraqi, I don't know like a.... I forget what they call it, but bazaar.

JC: Bazaar, yeah.

PL: Yeah, but and that's the stuff you can do when you're at the outpost, I mean at the fort operating base. But when you move to the outpost, I mean, there's...you have no freedom to go outside those walls if you're off. And you're really, off-time was spent sleeping or watching a movie or...

JC: What was the hot movie at the time? Did you guys watch a lot of...

PL: That's one thing beautiful about Iraq; you got so many bootlegs. I think I watched about a gazillion movies.

JC: Like anything stick out?

PL: *Superbad*, I think was...that was probably the funniest movie I've ever seen, or maybe it was just, it was a relief from some of the stuff going on.

JC: A lot of good quotes as well, I'm sure with guys.

PL: Right, oh yeah. Yeah.

[00:39:40]

JC: So, between the two deployments, each time, were you used effectively you think? To your full potential or do you feel like your hands were tied?

PL: I think my first deployment was, that's where we saw that shift I think at first. We were always, you know it seemed like that surge was...we were definitely.... And that sort of was, I felt like was a very good, effective use of us because we were, we were being proactive, we were engaging these people, we weren't just...we kind of adopted that, their tactics. Iraqis came to those tactics, and AQI came to those tactics of hit-and-run because they knew we were just going to be out there for four hour patrol, and then we were going back to our FOB. You know, so we weren't, you know, I guess from a, normal operations, yes, I guess, offensively we took it over, but there was no way...there was no way to maintain it if we weren't living there. So going to the surge and adopting some of the just standard counter insurgency tactics that's been around for 40 years, using those in the surge, I think that was a very effective use of us. But pre-that I just felt like, you know, leadership, or some-.... we just, you know, it wasn't like counter insurgency warfare was developed in Iraq. I mean it was back in Vietnam, it was in Algeria, it was, you know....to maintain those positions, you know you have to put some kind of presence, and those were tactics used, again, through those wars. So, I felt like the first four months or whatever of my deployment there was kind of...it was not, it was very ineffective at a certain time. It was really just, it was almost just setting us up for failure. Just go out there, take some hot shots, and then go back. But what are we actually gaining, what's the end goal? That wasn't really established there. We were still, kind of maybe just recovering from an unplanned, or, you know, a misplanned venture in Iraq that we didn't really establish it until the surge. And then the surge you could just see it paid for the dividends, the actual planned operation, so...

[00:41:41]

JC: Do you feel like the training that you had prior to your deployments prepared you for any situations and anything like pop out as far as an example of how training kicked in?

PL: Yeah, I mean, absolutely. So we started doing a lot of, you know, just like IED awareness in a different, in ways those are...you can identify these. And I definitely think, you know, I can't think of a specific one. I know a couple other gunners had some identification of IED's that just kind of, this is...this is, you know, this seems out of sorts (inaudible), so that helps. And I think some of the training I got, not in-country, but in Kuwait, some of the best training ever. I mean, so when you're, when you're in Fort Hood, it still is a very controlled training environment. There's not a lot of live fires, so, you know, you're trusted to a point, but when you're in the United States, it's still safety first. So, you know, you're still keeping your rifles down range, you're still practicing discipline, like that. When you go to Kuwait, it was...we got, you know, we

got the shoothouse, so we got live fire, close-quarter combats, you know, exercise. And that kind of, that kind makes it more real, and you get a lot more comfortable there. And then as a 240 gunner, I got, I got like a, just a four-hour course, so just, you know, of...okay, here's what the 240 training you did in the States is, but this is actually what you need to know in-country. You know what kind of, what clips should you have, what kind of rounds should you have, you know 100 round, you know, safety, backup, whatever like that, and here's, here's how you're going to shoot a 240 in-country. You know, there was literally however you shoot it is how you shoot it. You're never going to have that perfect situation where you're on your bipod setup, you're behind the defensive position. It's hey shoot from the hip, shoot from the shoulder for a 240, which is, you don't do in-country ever, but, I mean, you don't do in the States for training.

JC: Sure.

PL: But you get that kind of actual, hey combat's...you got to be ready for anything.

JC: Unpredictable.

PL: You might be shooting from the back of your, you know...

JC: Sure, yeah.

PL: Your shoulder, but yeah. That kind of training was very useful.

[00:43:45]

JC: During your time in your deployments over there, did you ever run into any, I'm sure you did, or work with defense contractors, civilians, and if so, what was the experience like? Any positives, negatives?

PL: Yeah, I mean there's a couple of both. I think negatives, I think there, you know, a couple private security firms; I did kind of convoy security. So, you started building up kind of a respect for your AO, especially when you started living there, your area of operations, so...

JC: Yep.

PL: Not like you were very close with the people, but you felt like, you know, you knew there was people there that wanted change. And, so when, you know, you'd have private firms come in, and I think they were just, maybe shoot first or kind of be on the aggressive end, and it kind of upset people, and you know you had to deal with the circumstances for that because all they saw was just a foreign body. They didn't distinguish between, oh, you know, that was a contractor versus this guy that's trying to live in our area operations. You know, the U.S. Forces trying...so, there was that, but we also had...was also had like a kind of ex-FBI kind of intelligence guy that was a contractor embedded into our unit. And he was very...he understood the culture sensitivities, and he was, you know, he was able to, to get a lot of good information I think and build, forge, relationships on the kind of the Sunni awakening and stuff.

JC: Okay.

PL: And that's pretty much my sense for contractors.

[00:45:14]

JC: Yeah. During your times on deployment, were you...are you married or have kids?

PL: Yeah, I was married. So, my first deployment, you know, I got married just before I deployed.

JC: Okay.

PL: And then my second tour I was, I had a six month old.

JC: Oh, wow. So explain how that was, how...how you dealt with, were you able to communicate, you know, how did they handle it? As well as parents as well.

PL: Yeah, in the first tour it was, you know, I spent probably, you know, since being married, I probably spent more time away from my first tour than being with her, so it wasn't hard, I mean, I love my wife, still with her. But...

JC: Yeah.

PL: It wasn't hard because I was kind of, that was what we were used to. We were just young, and we weren't, we didn't spend a lot of time with each other, so that was okay. I mean we would communicate when we lived on the fort operating base. They had phones that we could call from. When we moved to the outpost, it became a little more difficult. You had to actually try to talk Iraqi army guys into getting you cellphones and to buy you like Iraqi plans to call them, and you, I probably talked to her for 15 minutes once a week and...

JC: Yeah. How'd she deal with it?

PL: She did good with it. I mean she was in school at the time, so she was in school and working, so she just kept busy.

JC: Busy.

PL: Yeah.

JC: How'd you deal with it? Both times, especially once you had a kid as well.

PL: Having a kid, that was just hard. That was, having a six month old, and just...more communication with my second deployment there you were able to do Skype and have video conferences, so to see my six month old who didn't even really like recognize me because...

JC: Yeah, probably recognized your voice, or yeah.

PL: Right, a little bit, but, yeah, it's just misses, you know, his first birthday party, I missed all that stuff. That sucked, but that was...yeah, I mean, it was easier to communicate, but it almost made it harder because you knew all the stuff that you were missing.

JC: That's what I was going to ask, yeah. Did it make it harder when you were able to communicate?

PL: Oh, absolutely, yeah.

JC: Like focus-wise.

PL: Right, yeah.

JC: Okay.

PL: Yeah, absolutely. It was harder to focus, and you know what you're missing a lot more once you're able to communicate with them and see them and stuff like that, and they're getting bigger by the day, so...

JC: Sure.

PL: Yeah.

[00:47:25]

JC: So thinking about all your time overseas over in Iraq, anything that sticks out, maybe one or two things, it could be anything, it could be positive experiences, funny experiences, or horrible experiences or just things that stick out in your mind.

PL: I think the, the one experience that I, I don't know I always try to see it as positive and stuff, was...it was just one of the fire fights we were in. I just always thought it was pretty comedic because, you know, we came in with all of this training, it was closer to our starting country in our first deployment, and you think you're so well-trained, you think you're prepared for anything, and I think we were going to a fire fight and...so we, again, it was a similar situation to the other one, we took potshots, and we did like a, it was the opposite direction, so we all tried to turn our HMMWV's. So, of course like, you know, if you're just watching this from some space you're probably laughing (inaudible).

JC: Yeah.

PL: So we took like 40 point turns to get our Hum Vs back around. So that probably took like a half an hour right. And then my truck takes lead, and my driver's like, he's like six foot five, so his head's on the, you know, his head's at the roof, and so he can only see really this way, like he can't see up at all. So, I'm the gunner, and he hits just a little hanging tree, and pretty much just spins my turret. Like I spin probably like eight times just like that (laughs). And then my turret breaks because it's on some kind of chain thing, so that's completely gone. So now it's like it

just, it's like a, you know, 120-pound turret that you can't turn, so we finally get up to this place where we're getting fire, and I'm like kicking my driver's head to kind of push my turret back into position because it just 120 pounds, and not movin. It doesn't have any crank or anything, so I'm like, you know, pushing that and trying to engage this guy, and I'm just thinking like I'd love to see that. You know like you think you're really good...

JC: You'd love to see some video of that I'm sure, yeah.

PL: And in your mind you're like, you know, we're just going to engage, we're just going to go, and again and I did all this training for 240s, and you're taught like, you know, three to six round bursts or whatever you're taught, and I'm just going. I'm just holding this trigger down going a hundred miles because it's just, all that stuff goes out the window. It's still effective, but it's like geez.

JC: Yeah, yeah.

PL: I'd had love to see that, it a been comedic gold.

[00:49:46]

JC: That's good, that's good stuff. So let's shift gears a little bit and talk about the media. Do you think that the media during this timeframe gave Americans an accurate portrayal of the war?

PL: I'm not too sure. I mean I didn't really have...when I was in-country, I didn't really know too much what the media was going over. I think, you know, just kind of hearing it secondhand from my, you know, family that might have been paying attention.

JC: Yeah, that's usually how most people find out, yeah.

PL: You know, it's not like they...some of the media outlets did try to focus it on, you know, the specifics of, okay they're shifting to this surge or shifting to this you know...

JC: Big picture.

PL: Big picture. And it's having some good...good results. And maybe there was a lack of media attention. You know, I don't know. I didn't have too much awareness of the media. I felt like, I mean, it was good to hear secondhand. My uncle was saying so like, you know, were you part of this surge or were you part of, you know, did you live at outposts like that...

JC: Did you realize like how big the surge was going to be then?

PL: No, I had no idea. To us, it was just like okay, you're moving out of this luxurious fort operating base to these shitty outposts. This is...I didn't know that was like an offensive like that was a strategy kind of thing, but it does make sense, and you did see the benefit. But when you're living in it, you're just like okay this is...

JC: Yeah, from like a historical perspective in Vietnam it's like the tent offensive or the Vietnamization.

PL: Right, yeah, absolutely.

JC: You know, did they know, you know, the long-lasting effects or how we talked about. You didn't know either, right?

PL: Didn't know at all. And it was really cool, you know, going back into school, and I actually took like a, you know I'm an engineer, but I took like a political science course. It focused on like global security, but it was cool to dig up some of the papers. And some of the papers were written by my lieutenant colonel over our battalion...

JC: Oh, wow.

PL: It was like, you know, applying, applying, you know, standard counter insurgent operations to Iraq War. And you could definitely see, you know, these strategies were in place forever, and then applying them, and like, you know, I was part of that, you know, I was part of that surge where, you know, we're trying to embrace the community, we're trying to, you know, win hearts over minds or whatever. You know, I'm actually part of that. And I was thinking, you know, it was just a small, really, really small piece, but you could see when you put a team of people together like that...

JC: Important.

PL: Yeah.

JC: All pieces are very important.

PL: Right.

[00:52:15]

JC: What about now as far as media goes? There's a lot of negative attention on the Iraq War still today by a lot of people. What do you think about that? What would you say to them?

PL: You know I'm...I don't have my mind made up. I think, I really think we went into Iraq underprepared. Like I really...I don't know if it was the right decision. I'm not one hundred percent against it. It seems like they've, you know, uncovered some, and maybe there was weapons of mass destruction, whatever. I mean, but to me, I just felt like we were very slow to change our, our tactics in Iraq, and that's where...

JC: Like strategy (inaudible).

PL: Like strategy, and I feel like we were slow to react to that, and that bothers me. But other than that I don't have one stance on Iraq or...

JC: Okay.

PL: And it's, and it is heartbreaking to see the current state in Iraq, and just see...and just to see Iraqi forces give up so much space. And you can see where...and I can kind of definitely see where, you know, where you have Iraqi national forces, which are primarily Shiite, and they're in Sunni areas. You can kind of...I understand how they give up so much ground, you know. Because they're not fighting for it. And you see the effect on the... because we worked with Pesh market for a little bit, and, you know, having some pride in what you do is crucial to being a soldier. I mean if it's, if it's just pay you'll see is, you'll see Iraqi forces just leave all their, you know, HMMWVs, leave all their stuff and space and just retire.

JC: Sure.

PL: Retreat, so...and it's just heartbreaking to see how much ground they've given up, but it's good to see, you know, the Kurdish and the Pesh market and then some of the Sunni forces step back in because you know how effective they can be, and it does give you hope that, you know, they can deal with Isis in Iraq, so...

[00:54:11]

JC: Do you feel that, for Iraq as a whole, do you feel like the people there identify as Iraqi now or are they still identifying as, by sect? Meaning Shiite, Sunni, Kurdish.

PL: Yeah, I still...I think there's a little bit of nationalism. I think, you know, I think they still have a long way to go. I think they still identify...there's so much mistrust built in between those groups that their problems be, but...yeah, I don't know. I hope that they're moving to more national views, and it's nice to see something that they could strive...I know when we were leaving, Iraq soccer club won maybe like Asia Cup or something, they did something; it was cool to see all sides of that, you know, celebrate one thing, so...but I still think there's a lot of mistrust in those groups, but...but hopefully getting the right leaders understand, embracing that. And you'll see like, you know, I think...

JC: Yeah?

PL: Yeah.

[00:55:16]

JC: So, you've obviously returned to the States twice, two separate deployments. What was the climate like back home, and how'd you feel? We can talk about it as a whole or both times.

PL: Right, I think it getting back it was...so in my first deployment, I was still in the Army, so it's not like I'm just, you know, just becoming a civilian, so you have that time to debrief and be with, you know, the people you serve with. So you can, I think you can kind of, you know, get over some issues or whatever with them and work through that stuff. But yeah as far as climate

goes, you know, I obviously...I think there's some guilt there because, you know, I think America was a lot more embracing of our generation of veterans, and you hear about, you know, veterans of Vietnam War where them coming back to completely anti-war and not embracing their veterans. So, you know, I always felt very acknowledged, kind of maybe too acknowledged, and yeah that's it.

[00:56:22]

JC: Yeah. So how have...seems like everybody has changed whether it be for the positive or the negative from their experiences in combat. How has it affected you, have you changed personally, and how have you adjusted to civilian life, or any challenges?

PL: Yeah, I guess the primary thing is just humbled. I mean I've been humbled to serve with guys who have obviously given it all to their country, serving with people who are still doing it. Like, you know, I couldn't imagine...even you at 13 years or something like that. That just seems nuts to me. It's like, you know, it was a great experience. It's just very tiring. It's just humbling to work with guys that can still put in that ton of effort and obviously the guys that didn't come back and gave it all. So, that's my biggest thing. I'm just grateful for, you know, grateful for my time and service, grateful that I'm here, grateful to serve with the guys that I did. I think it was a great experience, but that's all I can...

JC: What's it like adjusting though as far as like you're in an active combat zone. Especially you're saying your first tour probably was probably even more intense by far. You know explain for somebody who doesn't understand what it's like coming back and having to deal with things. Some people are affected by it and some people are less affected.

PL: Yeah, I think I was less. I mean I still had all the issues of just, you know, it's hard to get a full eight hours of sleep. I still can't get a full eight hours of sleep just because I'm reprogrammed to, you know, to kind of be on alert. And just the first couple months just there is not rest. There's an anxiety just that just does not go away. It's just you're always anxious for, you know, something's going to happen, or, you know, when you're driving, you're thinking of the worst, and when you're trying to sleep, you're thinking, you're waking up in the middle of the night for no reason. I think my wife said I'd wake up two, three times a night just, and I wouldn't even be aware of that, but I mean the anxiety goes away I think for me. And I don't know what it is. I think it's different people have different views on what they experience. Like I was just I was related to one of my buddies that are struggling a lot more than me with just the, you know. And not me at all, but, you know, he's struggling with the PTSD, and I started think about well, you know, I served with him, he was like my best buddy, what did he go through that I didn't go through that's affecting him? I just...it's just different lenses, you know. Like now I'm thinking about stuff, well this situation, you know, I'm up here in the gunner seat looking at this, and then he's, you know, applying some, you know, he's holding on the leg of this guy who was our first causality in the war. I mean like yeah we were there in that situation, but he's, you know, he's...

JC: Different lens.

PL: Different lens, and...

JC: You think maybe situations prior to combat can shape somebody to be more, what's the word I'm looking for, like PTS, could be...it could more easily affect them because of maybe things that they've had in the past. Maybe nothing has to do with the military at all.

PL: Yeah, I think there's part of that. I mean I...it's hard for me to go that route completely because I don't want to discredit. I know there's some definite veterans that are going through problems that are probably, definitely come from the Iraq War, but I agree with you, too. I think it's definitely pre-war, especially the time that I went in. I feel like there was not a lot of criteria to get in. I think there, you know, not that there was shady business going on, but they bent a lot of the rules. They need bodies, and a lot of the guys could not get in nowadays because they don't need the bodies, you know. But before it was...and they'll be the first to admit to be like, you know, they had to do this kind of waiver, this kind of waiver, mental health waiver, and I'm like, well you can start out seeing those guys are kind of predispositioned to get PTSD before they even join the Army because the same process the Army applies to weed those out they were kind of letting in. So, there's definitely a lot of that too, but...

[01:00:26]

JC: Sure. As far as the American people go, what maybe misconceptions or what don't they understand about veterans of our generation, post-9/11 combat veterans?

PL: I don't know that's a hard one.

JC: Or maybe what don't they understand about the war or maybe even about what we can offer in the job force.

PL: Right, yeah I think we're...

JC: What would you tell them about veterans? Like the people you served with?

PL: I would tell them that they're kind of their own subset. I think people want to always generalize stuff, so we're in the same generation as millennials. And then there's so many, you know, ideas of what a millennial is, and everybody think millennial is kind of like not engaged and maybe not that quick to go, not lazy, but, you know, something like that. But, you know, this same generation, you have some guys that have done amazing things in the forces. So I just, you know...

JC: And you're probably only one percent of the millennials.

PL: Yeah, but that same, I guess, population, you know, were the same people that did this stuff. I mean, I guess what I'm just saying I guess there's more for this generation to offer and...

JC: Sure.

PL: Yeah, just an open mind, I guess.

JC: Don't you think it's probably every generation has done this to the generation below them maybe?

PL: Yeah.

JC: They try to make them out to be maybe not hardworking or...

PL: Right.

JC: What do you think?

PL: No, I probably agree. I probably said the same thing about, you know, the Generation X, and we're just the latest generation to say that they don't work as hard, and they're not, you know...and everybody always thinks that everybody's getting softer, and you know. But it's just different, it's not different. It's not that we're all soft now, we all have to wear helmets everywhere we go, and...

[01:02:19]

JC: So, knowing what you know about past wars, whether that's a little bit or a lot, maybe compare and contrast some similarities and some differences.

PL: I mean we already talked...one difference I think, you know, obviously I, you always have to...just any time you hear about...it breaks your heart to any time you hear about a veteran coming home and not being embraced by, you know, just to hear what the Vietnam veterans did, it just...it drives you crazy. But, you know, similarities, you know, just even in the strategies of the war, you saw a lot of, you know, kind of read up on a lot of the Vietnam strategies and stuff like that, and it seems like we did a lot of the similar counter insurgency, you know. Even though it was a different part of the world, it was very similar. You're trying to, you know, there's an enemy within the population you're trying to protect and serve. So it's...you definitely have a lot of parallels to the Vietnam War I guess in that aspect where, you know, you have to at the same time try to weed out an enemy within the population that you're trying to protect, so it's kind of a very hard ask I guess.

JC: Sure.

PL: But, I mean, I guess...I would nowhere near compare my experience to Vietnam veterans or World War II. I just think that, you know, the Army and the military looks out for us a lot more than they did back then. They're more sensitive to causality or loss of life, so they wouldn't allow for so many of offenses I think that we had, which is kind of scary, I mean, you got to...you got to be willing to make sacrifices for a greater good, so sometimes you can lose a war by not being able to do, you know...

JC: Scared to lose people.

PL: Yeah, scared to lose people.

JC: Scared to lose, yeah.

PL: Right, so. I guess it's just a different world I guess we live in, so...

[01:04:22]

JC: Sure. Have you had any experience with medical care at the VA or using VA benefits whatsoever, and if so, what has your experience been like.

PL: Oh, absolutely. So, when I got out of school actually, or when I got out of my first tour and my second tour because I was actually working. I worked in University of Pittsburgh Veteran Services for education benefits, so...

JC: Oh, okay.

PL: And that was, and that was good. It was transitioning from it from their chapter 30, which was just kind of a certain fixed portion of your tuition a month to the chapter 33 of the post-9/11 GI bill, which was, you know, if it was yellow ribbon school they matched one hundred percent of your tuition.

JC: Just like Robert Morris does.

PL: Yup, and then they give you a stipend to live. So, it's...it's just another dramatic change from other generations. I mean they're really setting those veterans up for success I guess through education and stuff like that, so it's nice to be a part of that, you know, and getting these guys transitioned from the military to college and to degrees. And I will say it's not, you know, maybe they need to make it a little more flexible because not every veteran's cut out for college, especially the guys, like again we were talking about the standards we were kind of living in, some of those guys have no business in college. It doesn't mean they can't be successful...

JC: Yeah, maybe a trade school or something.

PL: Yeah, exactly. A different path or something, but it's definitely a very...I've been very impressed with the VA, and I've done, I've gone...I haven't gone to the VA hospital really at all besides a couple vaccines or something like that.

JC: Okay, so you don't have a whole lot of experience.

PL: No, but I will say that I have a buddy that, you know, despite all the bad press the VA gets, he has always been impressed with their level of service, especially the Pittsburgh VA hospital and stuff like that, just...

JC: Okay.

PL: He says it's some of the best doctors he's ever seen through the VA, so...

JC: Interesting.

PL: They definitely stepped up. Even though they get a lot of bad press.

JC: I think everybody has a different perspective.

PL: Right, yeah.

JC: Some people have pre-perceived notions as well.

PL: Yeah, absolutely. And again it takes one person that's having a bad day at the VA hospital for somebody else to get a bad perception of them, so right... Yeah.

JC: And there's, you have to separate, I guess as well, doctors and administration and, you know, people. Sometimes people have problems with one side and not the other maybe?

PL: And they generalize it as a whole.

JC: And generalize it as a whole.

PL: The VA, absolutely.

JC: Is that correct?

PL: Yeah, absolutely.

[01:06:49]

JC: Okay. And, you know, last question really. Since you've been out, you got out on 2010 was, you were done?

PL: Right.

JC: And were you still on the IRR?

PL: I think so. So, I think I officially got out my...I think in 2012 I got my actual, what do you call that, the...

JC: DD214?

PL: Well I got my DD...

JC: Or your honorable...

PL: Honorable discharge.

JC: ...discharge.

PL: Yeah, so that's when I actually officially got that, so that was my (inaudible).

JC: So what have you been doing since you've got back from your last tour then? What are you doing now? Well, all of it wrapped in one I guess.

PL: Yeah, so I finished school. I'm a father of three boys.

JC: What'd you go to school for?

PL: Electrical engineering.

JC: Yeah, you've said that. And where'd you go?

PL: University of Pittsburgh.

JC: Oh, okay. And you're a father of three. What are their ages?

PL: I got a six, a five, and a one year old.

JC: Wow.

PL: Yeah, so I'm coaching tee ball pretty much every day.

JC: Yeah.

PL: And I'm a manager of engineering and services at Rolls Royce so...

JC: Oh, goodness.

PL: We do a lot of, we support the nuclear utilities like client commercial, nuclear reactors so...

JC: Wow.

PL: So, it's good.

JC: That's impressive.

PL: And I owe a lot of that through the, to the VA benefits.

JC: So you used your VA benefits to finish school. You said you had gone to school prior.

PL: Right, and I need it because I had, you know, I had a kid when I was, I mean, I've been married for four years we had our first son. I'm going to school, you know, so I was able to, you know, buy a home through VA loan, and, you know, my wife was working, but I couldn't have done that without the stipend and stuff like that, so I'm very appreciative of the benefits that the country set up for the veterans so...

JC: That's good.

PL: Yeah.

JC: Well, if you don't have anything else, I just want to thank you for your service.

PL: No, no thank you, man.

JC: Thank you for the interview.

PL: This is a good project. This is cool. This is...

JC: Yeah, it is. Thank you very much. The interview will end now.

[01:08:40]