

Robert Morris University Oral History Center

Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans Project



Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

Jonathan Edison Vasquez

Combat Engineer, Marines, Iraq War

September 9, 2015

IAVP 2

Vasquez, Jonathan E. (1985 –), Oral History Interview, September 9, 2015.

Audio and Video Recording (ca. ?? min.)

Biographical Sketch:

Jonathan Vasquez was a Combat Engineer in the United States Marine Corps. He was born in Santa Ana, El Salvador in 1985 and served over four years in the military starting in December 2004 until August 2009. He did his basic training at Camp Lejeune and was later stationed as a Reservist out of Lynchburg, Virginia, C co 4th Combat Engineer BN 4th Marine Div. He was a part of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2006 until 2007 and was stationed in the Western area of Al Anbar Province covering the areas of Haditha, Barwana, Al Quiem and Rawa.

Topics Covered in Interview:

- Camaraderie
- IED's
- Movies Watched in Combat
- Homelessness

Interviewed by Joshua Caskey

Transcribed by Caleb Smith

Edited by

JC: Okay, we are ready to start now. This interview is part of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Project undertaken by the oral history center at Robert Morris University. I am Josh Caskey, and today is September 9, 2015. I am joined by Johnny Vasquez. Can you please state your full name?

JV: Johnathan Edison Vasquez.

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

JV: Yes.

JC: We'll start with your date and place of birth. Where were you born and when were you born?

JV: I was born in Santa Anna, El Salvador April 23, 1985.

JC: And, also, what branch of service were you in? What were your years of service and your rank when you got out?

JV: I was in the Marine Corps. I was in the Marine Reserves. In 2004, was when I joined and when I got out I was a Lance Corporal Grade [E3].

JC: Where did you enlist from? And, what was your reason?

JV: I enlisted out of MEPS in Richmond, Virginia. And my reasons for enlisting?

JC: Yeah

JV: Why I signed up? I was going to college in Lynchburg, Virginia at the time, and I had wanted to join the service ever since 9/11 happened, but I was still in high school... March 11, 2004 [inaudible] Spain encountered a similar terrorist attack, not quite to the extreme of here on 9/11, but... terrorists targeted public transportation trains in Spain, and that hit more home to me because I was raised in Spain. I took those trains and I remember just wanting to be a part of a group of people that were going to put an end to men who would do something like that, harming innocent civilians. So, after three semesters at a very conservative, Christian College I didn't know really if I wanted to keep going to school, and out of the blue I just decided, okay it's time; I wanted to go do something different other than school, and I... I just as... ever since Afghanistan and Iraq started I just felt a desire to be there. And, finally, the desire was so great that I decided to enlist in November of 2004. Yeah.

JC: And you said you were born in Spain? Were you a naturalized citizen? Were you born a U.S. citizen?

JV: I was born in El Salvador and then we moved to Spain when I was eight years old. And I became naturalized because my mother, she's an American citizen, and so because she is an American citizen, and my father was not, he eventually got his citizenship, but I, because of my mom became naturalized as an American citizen.

JC: Did you have any history of family service?

JV: In my mother's side... her uncle was in World War Two... was a bomber, a plane bomber over in Europe, and I know somewhere in her side there's people who were in the Civil War and the Revolutionary War. On my dad's side, however, there are just other cousins, like me, who signed up and were in Iraq or Afghanistan. And, my father's brothers and sisters also migrated to the United States... and so yeah, a lot of my cousins joined the service... some before me and some after me, but no... no one on my mom's side has joined this conflict.

JC: Other than 9/11 itself, obviously that was a big reason why you joined. Was there anything else that attracted you to military service?

JV: I remember being in 8th grade and I saw Saving Private Ryan for the first time. I thought just, man that's so horrible, imagining like, that's what those men had to endure, but it was the sacrifice that I saw those men do, and that movie made me go. You know? Research more about World War Two and D-Day and the Nazis and all of that, and I guess what stuck out to me was men who were willing to sacrifice their very lives to fight... evil, and that was something that stuck with me. So I kind of saw that growing up. I always envisioned that that's kind of like what... what the military would be like, you know? If there was an evil in the world, the United States would be there to combat that evil for the sake of many... keeping many safe, and the good of many.

JC: So, we're going to switch gears a little bit here. Now that we have got all of your basic information on why you served, or why you joined we're going to jump into your tour in Iraq. Tours or tour in Iraq?

JV: Tour.

JC: Tour in Iraq. So what was your understanding basically of the Iraq War when you came in? and did that change?

JV: When I got there, what was my understanding?

JC: Before you came in, and also when you deployed to Iraq. You can talk about either or both.

JV: Well I... I was under the impression in the beginning that it was... there was a dictator, Saddam Hussein, who was this ruthless guy, who was oppressing many people...and was also a possible, potential threat to the United States. And, that was like my first impression, and once I got in... then it was more so, like before going there, and I was already in the military, and I knew that there was... there were Al-Qaeda terrorists and other insurgents shooting and harming Americans, civilians... it was my understanding that America wanted to help Iraq build a democracy, as a country to have the freedoms that we enjoyed, after Saddam Hussein. And I... I believed that to be a noble... noble cause. You know, these people deserve to have the freedoms that we enjoy here in America and in the western society. Getting there, I wouldn't say like that my views really changed when I got there. It wasn't what I... I didn't really see how we were... no I take that back, I mean... I saw it after a few months of being there, but when I first got there I couldn't understand, how is this helping democracy in Iraq? So, I would say... I mean, was part of the question like, what after now? How do I see it, or...

JC: We can talk more about it at the end about how you feel, I know that it does change from the time before you get there till while you're there. But we'll eventually discuss how you feel about it now.

JV: Okay. I'll say like, while I was there, it did change. It had its... you know, from being like okay, yes democracy or doing good to... there was a lot of late nights wondering, are we doing good? You know, cause I... I was only seeing what was in front of me. I wasn't seeing the big picture when I was over there. So, I would say yeah, it did change.

JC: If you could, talk a little bit about the Marine Corps. Basically, any training you had prior to going to Iraq. Or, just life on the base, or maybe things that you enjoyed or didn't enjoy.

JV: I absolutely loved the Marine Corps. I loved from Paris Island it was... from the drill instructors... the drill instructors I hated the most were the ones I loved the most or respected the most because I knew that I was getting the training. You know, I was... they were teaching me how to think in chaotic situations and how to act in a calm manner while there would be crazy, loud noises going on and stress. I've taken that with me to this very day. Training wise, I received, after Paris Island, I went to Marine Combat Training... MCT and then Combat Engineer School, and all of that was in Lejeune. And, then I got some Desert Warfare Training out in Twenty-Nine Palms, prior to the deployment, and in between there I was in the Marine Reserves, so we were stationed... the unit was out of Lynchburg, Virginia, but we... we got activated shortly after I... about a year after I had enlisted. And, so we spent some time out in Twenty-Nine Palms getting ready. We did a lot of demolition, explosive training, crew weapons training, and I was chosen to be the, out of my squad, the machine gunner. On foot patrol, I trained with the SAW, and then while on the turret, using a 240, and... so I got training with that, and that's pretty much... also we received training... not me particularly, but a lot of our unit... our squad was assigned to do route clearance, to search for IED's, so we had to learn... I had to learn what kind of signs to look for... for IED's on the road. And there were others who learned how to operate certain vehicles to help find that as well. I didn't though.

JC: You talked a little bit about your drill instructors and you also went on to Marine Combat Training, did any of them serve in Iraq prior to this? Did they talk about it at all?

JV: Yeah. Yeah a lot of them did, actually. My senior drill instructor did. One of the other DI's did. And, they were just talking about the importance of... I mean, seeing how they carried themselves, and knowing that they had gone through boot camp like I did, and that they had already served and that they had come back... the way they talked was like, it's not if you go to Iraq, it when you go to Iraq, and... so it was like, at that time, it was certain, if you're in the Marines you are absolutely going to Iraq. It's not a matter of if, it's just when. And, it became more of a reality to me, hearing them say, like, you know, this is why it is important, that you guys understand what discipline means. This is why it is important that you guys follow directions; this is why it's important that you understand that you're only as strong as your weakest link because, you know, one thing going wrong means a loss of lives. And, so they were teaching us the importance of... of keeping each other alive, and that played a huge role later on for me in Iraq. You know, remembering those words, and I do remember one guy I asked at the rifle range. I asked him, I was like, "You were in Iraq, did you remember anything about Paris Island?"

you know cause I'm a recruit and I wanted to know if it was worth it, and he said not really, no not really. And, I mean, that was his opinion, but I remembered some things when I was in Iraq... from boot camp. So, yeah.

JC: And then, the overall feeling of deploying... Were you scared, excited, nervous?

JV: I was extremely... I was really excited. I... I was excited and as it was getting closer I was getting nervous, but also... I kind of wanted to leave because just my life wasn't really in the best of shape. I was living with this girl... it wasn't a healthy relationship. My own family... I don't think they were in the country, they were in Spain, and a funny story is, I... my ride... I was living in Pennsylvania, and I was supposed to get driven down to Lynchburg... June 1st. After June 1st, if you weren't there you were a deserter. And my ride ended up getting really drunk, as did I, and I missed the June 1st date and I was like, oh my gosh! Right then and there I was like, I'm a deserter; I'm going to get in so much trouble. And I'm expecting the worst, and I'm... I'm freaking out, and I'm like, am supposed to go on the run now? What if they're trying to get me, like oh my goodness, and I... called my First Sergeant and he was like, just come on down, just come on down... you know, you're good. I was about... my brothers welcomed me with open arms, you know? They knew I wasn't trying to like leave or anything like that, but my CO did give me a week restriction at the barracks for that, which was okay; I could live with that. But I was... I wanted to be there. I wanted to be there.

JC: Can you talk a little bit about, maybe your way over to Iraq? And then, where did you end up, and what was your basic mission?

JV: So, we flew out of California on a commercial airline to, I think it was Boston, and then from Boston we flew to Frankfurt, Germany. Then Germany to Kuwait. And.... From all the way up till we got to Kuwait it was like a commercial airline plane, and it was a long flight, and we all had our M16's on us and I just thought how funny it looked, you know, we're all sitting in an airplane that looks like an airplane that people travel on, with rifles... and it was just funny. We didn't have ammo on us, we had to put certain locks and securities on them, but... yeah, it was exciting. I mean i... I'd been flying a lot in my life so it wasn't any different for me, except for our destination. And then once we got to Kuwait we stayed there for about two days till we hopped on a C-130 and flew right into Al-Assad airbase in Iraq. And... that was fun. A lot of guys threw up. I didn't though for the record; I did not throw up. And yeah, once we got out there, it was just so crazy; I'll never forget stepping off of the C-130 having all of our gear on, and then seeing guys that I'm walking past, like finishing their tour, and getting on the C-130 to go to Kuwait. And I just... I was just looking at their faces, and... you know, some were smiling and joking, others were just kind of straight-faced, others, I mean there wasn't just like one face on everybody, you know? But, I just thought that that was so interesting how it was like, okay it's a turn around. And... our mission for my squad, because my unit, half of them went up to [Al-Quam] and stayed there, and they were attached to 34 out of the 7th combat, regimental team. That's what we were a part of too but we were assigned, instead, to do route clearance, so my squad... we were chosen to basically clear the paths that the roads that the convoys would be taking from Al-Assad to [Al-Quam], [Rowa], Haditha, sometimes to Fallujah. A lot of back-country roads. If we knew guys were going to be on them, and specifically Iraqis going to boot camp, we would clear... we would drive, like... we'd be 10 hours ahead of

them, going at 10mph, looking IED's and making sure that the roads were clear for those who were going to be using them after us. So it wasn't just for American soldiers and convoys, it was for guy who were, Iraqis, who were going to recruit training for the IA.

JC: I'm sure there is all kinds of stuff that happened during your deployment, some good, some bad, probably a lot of boredom as well. I'm just interested in knowing... anything, any instances or situations that stick out to you that have, kind of, left an imprint on your mind?

JV: [Sigh] Yeah... so when you're... my personally... what I did in all of this, I was in the first vehicle, I was in the front vehicle and I was in the turret, and I had to provide front security for the convoy. Also, looking for IED's, and we would drive down the middle of the road because that... the odds were in our favor, most of the time, because a lot of the IED's were usually planted on the shoulders, cause it was harder to dig up on the pavement. So, it was very, very stressful, and I didn't really realize it when I was there, but I had, like this whole thing I had to do when... when we were being faced with oncoming traffic. And, by this time, when I got there, it was like... it was in 2006, the summer of 2006, and we had rules of engagement that required us to, if we saw a vehicle from like 500 meters away I had to wave this flag, I had to keep this flag on me. And if it kept on coming, I had to shoot a flare at it. Any kind of flare, it didn't matter what color. And if they hadn't pulled over yet, because the goal was for them to pull over on the road, then I had to fire a warning shot, and if they still hadn't pulled over, I had to fire in their grill, and then if they still didn't, fire to kill. And, some guys would pull over right away, as soon as they would see us. Others would just be stubborn and wait to the last possible minute, and there were several times where I remember... I thought I was going to have to light up a car with a family in it because the guy... just was just... and I could see how angry he was, he was just trying to get as close as he could because they know the drill there. A lot of them knew the drill there... and, you know, my desire... and honestly, like, I did not want to hurt anybody. I had been exposed to Arab culture at a young age, growing up in Spain, I went to Morocco a lot, you know, and I had that advantage over a lot of guys in my unit who hadn't had that exposure to that kind of culture. But, there was that, along with, you know, okay there's the threat of IED's and... we... we all got blown up, probably at least once, while we were over there, and by the grace of God, no one in my unit was killed, we had injuries, Purple Hearts, but no one was killed. I was in two IED explosions. One was in October of 2006 and the other one was in May of 2007. And, those were experiences that have... really effected my life. It used to be a negative thing, and, you know, now it's a positive thing... I see it as a positive thing. There was... we weren't even looking for IED's, we were just driving by, and I was on a 7-ton, that was a vehicle that we used, it was a 7-ton, so when I'm in the turret, basically where my head is, I'm like twenty feet off of the ground, from where my head is to... to the ground. And I just remember hearing this huge, it was like two metal beams hitting one another at, like a thousand miles per hour, and I remember just being throw against the side of my turret, and then I just stayed, like, I didn't know what to do, I just stayed, like down. I was like what the heck, and I was trying... and I knew right away it was an IED explosion, and I'm looking at my A driver, Sergeant Miller, and he was good, and like he was asking me if I was good, and I'm like, yeah I'm good. He... the window of his area, it had broken through like every single glass pane, except I guess the last one. It was crazy like it was just... the brunt of it got where he was by the window, but he was okay, but then he said I had something on my helmet, and I remember, once

everything was cleared, my helmet, basically Kevlar... a piece of shrapnel had gone straight through it, and it was crazy. It was like right here, and we were trying to like... I just... I mean... that's when I... when it kind of started to hit me like, man, you know life is really fragile, like life is really fragile... like I... but I didn't spend too much time thinking about that, you know, I was more angry over anything else because that was the first time anyone had ever tried to kill me, and that was a weird feeling. You know, there was like... at first it was like disbelief and then it was anger. And, the second time, I don't really remember much of the explosion because I... it was really big and I got knocked out, and I just remember waking up, and the vehicle was in flames and I couldn't move... after a couple seconds I was able to finally move and my sergeant was calling my name and we were able to exit the vehicle. So that, you know... even though they were things that were out of my control... it still really hurt my confidence in myself because I felt responsible, in that, I thought I should have been able to spot these things before they happened... so those are... not that I feel that way anymore. And also, seeing my other friends get blown up, I mean, there's just that uncertainty where it's just like you are waiting; you're running to see if they are alright; you are waiting and you don't know if they are alright. We didn't really have... I mean... all of the encounters that we had with the enemy... like, I can't say that I know for a fact that I killed some, I don't know... I don't know. We got shot at, we shot back, but I... it wasn't... most of the time we didn't see anyone. Most of the time they were already gone after they attacked us. Most of the time it was just... and that's what was frustrating for me, you know, it just felt like we were fighting a ghost sometimes, and... you know, we weren't really a lot in urban areas, this was all like in the country for the most part, 90% of our deployment was in the country. And I would say one other... one other thing that really that stuck out for me that I think about a lot was our in Haditha. We were doing a push. There's these towns along the Euphrates River; Haditha, [Barwana], and I think it was [Hoquanea]. And... there were like a lot of guys... a lot of marines were getting killed here. Mostly from sniper fire. I mean there was talk like that they were like [Chechnian] snipers, but I never saw them, and I don't know how true those were, but I remember how gunners were just being targeted left and right. And... we were providing security for a general who needed to investigate four marines who had raped and killed a family... and... it wasn't what the general was doing, but I have to say like... and he just... that was the first time where, I think... most of the time I was over there I was like okay with looking at possible bombs right in the face or, you know, realizing that anything could blow up any second, but like... just being around an environment like that... it... it was very different for me, and knowing guys who had gotten shot before... that also like... I was experiencing new sensations, new feelings, and that's what I remember most about like in Haditha. Like it was the first time I began to feel anger over... over loss in the war... it was anger at the enemy, like I began to take things personally from them. So those were a few things, I would say.

JC: So, you talked a little bit about how it was starting to change you, or to change your... maybe not necessarily your opinion but your overall attitude. What about like your guys around you? Did it change them? And, how was your comradery during deployment?

JV: We had great comradery. We had awesome comradery. And... you know, there was maybe like one guy who was... who was always the one who was late, always the one that was getting in trouble, you know? He was the one that we would call the "shit bag", but, you know, we would all take a bullet for

him. Otherwise, you know, we were all very united. And, I think that's why they chose my squad. I'm not trying to say that my squad was better than the other squads in our unit, but we had... we were more like friends and brothers than we were, like enemies, you know? We never really got into like a fist fight. Any one of us on the squad just... we loved each other, and I really can't say what that was. I know we all kind of shared a common faith; we all kind of took our faith in God seriously, but I know a lot of Marines did too over there, but... I do remember talking to my one buddy... probably my... the guy who like... I consider my best friend when I was over there. He was a gunner as well, and he was just like... he was very scared. I remember one night when we had to go out the next day... he was terrified, you know, and we were able to talk about that, you know. I was like, you're scared; I'm scared, you know, what are we going to do about it? It was just kind of like we were... in being open with one another, we were able to also reassure one another, so I mean, there was bonds and friendships that were created that I haven't found anywhere else but when I was over there.

JC: So, did you feel like you were being used effectively over there?

JV: Oh, absolutely. If people ask me, "Did you make a difference in this world?" I can say without a doubt, "yes".

JV: did you get... I'm sure you had some sort of free time during your route clearances or pushes or patrols... if so, can you talk a little bit about what you did, or like, maybe good memories?

JV: Yeah, I had my mom mail my guitar over there, and I would play my guitar, and we would all like, kind of sit around and just listen to music and... you know, I would play songs that maybe some of us all knew; I would play music that I had written. We would have... we weren't allowed to have alcohol over there, but we had a lot of... like American Legion groups or biker groups that were supportive of veterans mail us liquor in mouthwash bottles, and... with the seal still like taped on there to pass like inspection or customs, and so, you know, on special nights when we didn't have to get up early the next morning, if it was a rough day, you know, we would just sip on that... yeah, it was important for all of us to have that time of rest and blowing steam off because that was part of how effective we were as being a team. You know, when we were constantly out there, with very little time... you could always tell like usually on the first day that we would have off after being out there for like maybe two weeks we didn't really hang out with each other. We just rested. That's all we did. We just rested. And then we would start... we'd feel... at least for me, I would feel like, okay I can handle being around these guys right now. So, yeah there's music and you know... just sometimes when we would just have down time when we were outside of the wire, you just sometimes... just talk about random things. We read books. We would carry portable DVD players on us and... somehow, one time all we had was this movie called *Mean Girls* with Lindsay Lohan, *Brokeback Mountain*, and I don't know how those were the only two selections. I don't even know how *Brokeback Mountain* even got into one of those selections, but we watched them to pass the time.... Yeah, so, I mean things like that I guess.

JC: During your time over in Iraq, how was your family affected, or any relationships with family, friends, loved ones?

JV: What sticks out is my family. My mom; she was very worried. I mean, she would watch the news, and I had to tell her not to watch the news because, you know, I think she kind of went through like, a depression when I was over there. And, you know, every kind of base had some form of like, an internet. And so, when I could I would write her, I would email her. Very rarely would I use the phone to call her... but I was really bad at, like staying in touch with my family when I was over there. They wrote me letters all of the time. I was just really bad at writing letters back. But I do remember making an effort to assure my mom that I was okay, and just to like trust God and to not watch the news, believe everything you hear on the news. So, I mean, I know that when I was over there my family was sacrificing piece of mind, a part of their heart... they were sacrificing as well; it wasn't just... it's not just those in the service sacrificing, you know, it's the families behind them too.

JC: And speaking of the news, as far as the media goes, do you think that the media has given Americans an accurate portrayal of the war in Iraq?

JV: I mean all I can think of is what I saw and what I experienced. I remember we were in this town called [Hahit], and I believe it was... what's his name? The guy that got busted for that scandal with that woman, he used to be in charge of the whole thing in Iraq... Petraeus, yeah. Petraeus was coming into town and he was going to announce how that town had become safer, and I just remember we had to do a clear through the town before he landed, looking for... you know we went with some Infantry guys, but we also had to look for IED's, and that's why they wanted us to come along. And, I just remember us getting shot at, and just... you know... I mean you can just feel when you walk into a place how it just doesn't... you know... it's not safe, it doesn't... you know, after a while you know like, okay yeah, but then... this one... it just didn't seem like... it was what they were making it seem, I guess. And like after we did that, you know, there was like... there were... there was the media and cameras, I remember. And I just thought like... I didn't stick around to see if he was going to say if it was safe or not, even though that is what I was told he was going to say, because it was just like, "No wait, man, we got shot at today. I almost lost a good buddy of mine." Thankfully nothing happened but it's just like... I just thought that it was something to appease the masses. That's my experience. That's all I have to say on that, you know? I don't really have much other than that.

JC: So, can you talk a little bit about how the war has changed you personally, maybe from the time you got back, and even how that's progressed now?

JV: By the time I got back I was ready to go do it again... yeah... and... I didn't like how I didn't have like a set role every day like I did over there. I didn't like how... it didn't seem... life didn't seem as serious anymore over here. Like over there it was like, you mess up, someone dies. Here, I didn't have that kind of... I didn't have that looking me in the face, and... I just was not happy. I was not happy with life here, and how like... I didn't understand that life does go on without you, and there is no way that anyone else can understand that. But I was kind of bitter about it. I came straight home because, you know it was a reserve unit so we just... we got out and I went home for a few months, and I was away from all of the guys that I was deployed with because I was the only one who lived in Pennsylvania. And right off the bat, I mean, I just started... I was not comfortable so I used... I used a lot of alcohol, I used whatever I could get my hands on just to keep me stable. I mean, three weeks after I got back I got a DUI. And...

that was... that should have been a wakeup call for me, but it wasn't. And... I was... I was just not satisfied, and what is weird is I was satisfied over in Iraq. I was satisfied because I was with guys I loved. I was satisfied because I knew my purpose, and I felt like I was a part of something bigger than just me. And all of that I didn't really have, and it's unique because I know a lot of guys, when they come back... active duty guys, for example, you have time off and then you go back to the barracks and you are with your guys, you know, but I didn't really have that, and I think things could have been a lot different, had I, maybe reached out to my... to the guys in my unit and been like "hey, you know, I'm having a hard time here.", but I thought that if I did that, that would be a sign of weakness, and... they actually came up and checked on me a couple times because they heard that I wasn't doing good. I started struggling with really bad depression, and all I wanted to do was just stay in and be able to go on the next deployment, which would have been the following year because we got back the summer of '07, and by November of 2007 I was just drinking so much, and... I didn't know what certain symptoms were, in terms of like, I didn't know, like okay this is... this is anxiety or maybe this is a panic attack or tats what you call a trigger, you know, this whole thing about Post-Traumatic Stress... I didn't know anything about that. And I thought like you had to be in something like Vietnam scenario to have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, you know, I didn't really see how that could apply to me. I ended up getting diagnosed with it in November of 2007, after being back for like four months, and they made me go through this program at the VA. It was a three month long inpatient program. My views of the war at the time were just... I wasn't thinking about the war. I just wanted to use... I wanted to get out of where I was at and go to something. The war had become like very comforting to me in a weird way. It was for selfish reasons though. Long story short, I get medically discharged, and that kind of made me upset about a lot of things, but... I started feeling resentment in regards to the war. I started not thinking that there was a difference that had been made, and that was... that had to do, though, with my own personal struggles. The way I felt about myself reflected the way I felt about the war, and while I know there is a lot that, maybe could have been better, could have been avoided, I look back on it today and I know that lives were saved, and I know that I was a part of saving, not just American lives, but Iraqi lives. I was part of saving Iraqis, who were trying to make their country better, and so, that's what I rest my conscience and my faith on. That... that right there.

JC: So, have you made any progress in the adjustment period from then till now?

JV: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I... once I finally got my head outta my butt and realized that a way of honoring my brothers, who.... My brothers in arms who had served, and those who came back and those who didn't come back... a way of honoring them is living a life... that speaks and attests to that kind of courage that they had, and...while we might not have agreed with why we went over there 100%, we could agree on one thing, and that was that we love one another as brother, you know? We were brothers and... I got the help I needed, and it was a long journey but I got it and that adjustment period...not a day goes by without it... that I won't see something that I... takes me back there, you know, I... I see... especially like, my driving is still not the same. Like, my wife, she makes fun of me about it, and that's... you know... I've learned to laugh about it, but like I still hate driving close to the shoulders. Like I can't, and I don't even realize that I'm doing it. I just tend to always drive closer to the middle, and... she understands about that, but I would say that compared to how I was before, there has

been much progress, and for the better. I'm married, I'm going to school... but it took time. It took about... for me it took about five... seven years, seven years after I got back to really fully say "yes, now I've adjusted".

JC: As far as the American peoples understanding about veterans and about the war, do you think they have any misconceptions, or what do you think they feel? Maybe about you as a veteran or about, maybe just the war, or both.

JV: I feel like everyone is supposed to say... it feels like they have to say thank you for your service, you know, and I appreciate people who are grateful. But, a lot of times it just seems like, for most people that's where it ends... and as veterans, we don't do things to receive gratification or thanks, you know, but we also don't like being put in a box. We don't like being labeled, we don't like being... assumed that people know what they are talking about when they talk on our behalf. So, I feel like, while there is... there are people there who have good intentions to want to show the veteran that they matter and that they are grateful, there still is... I do feel like there is a misconception... and I'm not blaming movies, I'm not blaming Hollywood, I'm not blaming the media, I just think that we as veterans naturally gravitate towards other veterans to talk about our experiences. Because there is no way that someone who isn't a veteran can understand... It took me a long time to be able to talk to my wife about some things, and even now, like... I can't say that I have told her every single detail, and I might not ever. But she understands that who I am today is who she knows, and that's what I think... that's what is cool about where I am right now, it's like I'm okay with who I am today, and... I'm okay with telling people about my experiences because... I don't want to be understood, but I do want people to know, hey... for any other veteran, this is what they might be feeling when you say something like that, because of A, B, and C, you know... I think that's why most veteran organizations, or organizations that are out there helping veterans, are run by veterans, as opposed to non-veterans because veterans understand veterans, you know? But, I think there is progress... I think there is progress coming along.

JC: What about your medical care? Whether it be in the civilian sector or at the VA. How has that been?

JV: Well, I've had... I mean, I've had... they've helped me out a lot. Honestly, from when I was homeless, they gave me a place to stay four months, the program, the domiciliary at the VA. They helped me out with, you know... substance abuse treatment, they helped me out with... getting the medical that I needed... while not perfect, I didn't really seek out any other medical... any other medical avenues because it was free. So, why would I want to, you know? I hear people complaining a lot about it, and they have every right to, and I have stuff to complain about it too, but overall, like they've really, really helped me. I mean, I'm not just saying that, like they have. They just have, you know? And maybe its because my... the care that I needed for hasn't really been that complicated, but it's been... it's really helped me out. So, yeah.

JC: You mentioned your time of being homeless. Is this something you have seen as a problem for other Iraq or Afghanistan veterans?

JV: Yeah. I've seen a lot of them homeless, and only... I know for myself... because I chose not to get treatment and chose to self-medicate for myself... the reason for that was because I thought for the

longest time that... I was just weak, and it was my problem, and I was kind of ashamed about it. Those are my reasons that led me to being homeless, but, I mean, I can't say why other veterans are homeless... I see a lot of veterans that are homeless, and my heart goes out to them. And there is some who I've talked to that don't want to have anything to do with the VA... for negative experiences or negative thing, but I mean, I think... I mean, could the government or others be doing more. I mean, I think of organizations like VLP, here in Pittsburgh, they helped me out for two years, and they did a fantastic job, you know, they really, really helped me out. And I just, you know, we as veterans. We're not... we're not... it's not foreign to us, the concept of hard work, and I do believe that some veterans want to work hard, but they just lack certain means to achieve that, whether it be the right kind of medication, or the home environment, and so those are definitely issues that need to be continued to be addressed. We can't just, you know we don't like... as veterans we don't like leaving anyone behind, and I think the nation is getting better at that though.

JC: And lastly, do you have any photographs or journals, maps, home movies, or even some poetry you may have written that you would like to share at a later date?

JV: I have a few pictures, sure I wouldn't mind sharing. I don't know what happened to my journals... but yeah ill forward out some videos, sure.

JC: Excellent. Well, thank you very much for your time. This concludes our interview.