

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOSEPH R. DILLENBURG
Helicopter Crew Member, Army, Iraq War
2007

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Dillenburg, Joseph R., (1977-). Oral History Interview, 2007.

User Copy: 4 sound cassettes (ca. 197 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 4 sound cassettes (ca. 197 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Military papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Joseph R. Dillenburg, a Shawano, Wisconsin native, discusses his service in Alaska, Europe, Kuwait, and Iraq, detailing ten years of personal growth and experiences as part of a Chinook flight crew, serving as a flight engineer and a crew chief. After some enlistment confusion, he adapted quickly to military life, coming from a large family; he did find co-ed Basic Training at Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri) a little odd, and touches on the roles females were playing in Army aviation, ranging from their ability to “*do the job*” to issues of homosexuality (both male and female). First stationed at Fort Campbell (Kentucky) with the 101st Airborne Division, he indicates the three different levels of aircraft maintenance and the purpose of each. Dillenburg balances his discussion with both work and leisure experiences, including some of the rites of passage and the roles alcohol may or may not play in the military; he also speaks about the educational opportunities offered both while in the military and after the military. Dillenburg describes in some detail his almost-normal life while stationed in Alaska. Also, his fascination with history is woven nicely throughout the interview: from his mention of his Grandfather’s reluctance to share his WWII experience, to Dillenburg’s acquaintanceship with Jason Wainwright (grandson of Jonathan M. Wainwright, Bataan March in the Philippines fame), the spot where Will Rodgers and Wiley Post crashed and died, eating at Pepe’s North of the Border in Alaska (“the farthest north Mexican restaurant in the world”), trips to Paris, Versailles, and Normandy, and his own transition into the annals of history. Assigned to F Company in the 159th Aviation Regiment, he talks about living near Würzburg (Germany) and interactions with German civilians. He details some of the brutality and some of the foolishness of life in a combat zone, talks about Operation Essential Harvest in the Balkans and the beginning of the Iraq War, and mentions his part in a beach flyover and the rescue of Jessica Lynch. He describes the personal impact of the switch to Euros from Deutsch-Marks and the delivery of pallets full of millions of US Dollars when he was in Iraq, relating a story of just what a \$1,000,000.00 looks like. He describes, too, his reaction to the events in New York City on September 11th 2001. He reports on modifications in the Chinook, necessary in Kuwait and Iraq, and changes in the Chinook engine technology, which were more than a minor adjustment. He discusses his operations out of Kuwait, including his first mission, a troop insertion at Objective Rams (Iraq), and his last mission, transporting the remains of recovered American POWs from Tallil (Iraq) to Camp Doha (Kuwait). He offers some insight into the philosophical and psychological distinction between combat veterans and rear echelon troops. Dillenburg characterizes Christmas away from home as not too melancholy and homecoming to Ramstein (Germany) as nothing special to

celebrate. He describes with some detail the grand gala celebration for and dignitaries at the 60th Anniversary of D-Day at Normandy and feeling bad for Vladimir Putin from Russia, who didn't have a helicopter. He describes cleaning up the Chinooks for return to the States as massive, and the time before actual separation from service as frustrating, depressing and awful. Dillenburg provides a detailed sketch of his return to the US and his first confrontation with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), knowing after a particular mission that something in him had *changed*; he remained in denial while still in Germany, found himself somewhat lost for nearly a year after returning home, and, finally, taking the first steps to begin his recovery. He details some of the treatment, new skills he has learned, and the relative ease he found finding help from the Veterans' Administration.

Interviewed by John McNally, 2007

Transcribed by John P. Danish and Joseph R Dillenburg, 2008

Reviewed and corrected by Channing Welch, 2010

Abstract written by John P. Danish

Interview Transcript:

John: Hi, this is an interview with Joseph Dillenburg who served with the 101st Airborne Division as well as in Alaska and V Corps in Europe through part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. This interview is being conducted at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum on 12 November 2007, and I am John McNally. Welcome, Joe. How are you doing?

Joe: Good, thanks. Hi, John.

John: Tell me a little bit about your background experiences before entering the Army.

Joe: I was born in Shawano, Wisconsin, about thirty minutes west of Green Bay. I'm the fourth of nine children. I have three older sisters, three younger sisters, and two younger brothers. I grew up in Shawano the whole time, went to Sacred Heart School for first through eighth grade and then Shawano High School. I graduated in 1995, just kind of a brainy, geeky kid; not much [laughs] special going on.

John: Okay, why did you decide to enter the Army?

Joe: I'm not sure exactly. It just seemed like something to do. I mean, it's not something anyone expected of me or that I had always thought about the Army. My grandfather on my mother's side was in World War II in the 75th Division. So I grew up thinking about that. He never talked about it, but we always new Grandpa was in the war. So it kinda fascinated me, I guess because he didn't talk about it. Through school I always read about history and liked, read about wars and World War II especially. But I wasn't really an athletic or a, anything like that. As it got time to, I got tired of school, I guess, mainly. It got time to graduate from high school and look towards college I thought, "You know, I'd rather do something else." And then started thinking about the military more and it just seemed right. Just kind of like a vocation or calling or something.

John: What were the reactions of your parents or your family?

Joe: Um, not real happy. It's kinda—it went—I got in a roundabout way that really—My dad, he didn't really say too much. My mom was pretty upset about it, because I actually joined when I was a junior in high school. A recruiter came to ask me to join the Reserves and got to talking, and he wound up asking me—You know, I was seventeen, so he had to ask my parents' permission and stuff, and he got the forms signed by telling my mom, "Well, I'm taking him down to Milwaukee, we're gonna look at some films and see if the Army's for him." Well, I came back enlisted in the Army Reserve, and this really upset my mom. This was only the

beginning of the problems. I mean, I have quite the recruiter story. Anyway, this guy's name was Tom Wilson, and we found out later that he was actually a Regular Army recruiter, but he was about to retire, and so to get his gold badge, he needed one more guy. I had pretty high test scores on the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] and stuff, so he needed one more, you know, good score for his record before he got out of recruiting, and so they sent him at me. He was pretty anxious to get me signed up so he did some things that maybe weren't quite aboveboard. And that upset my mother quite a bit. And that was just the beginning of it because then the next year, senior year, I was kinda thinking more that I didn't, wasn't ready to go to college, wanted to do something else, and another recruiter, this guy was a lot better, his name was Craig C. Lynne, but he was a Regular Army recruiter, and he wasn't supposed to come after someone that was already in the Reserves, but he did talk to me, and I agreed to go Active Duty and then signed my contract for Active Duty. And then it kinda caused trouble because the Reserves didn't want to let me go, and because he wasn't really supposed to talk to me, and this kinda upset--So the Reserves came back and said, "No you got to do your Reserves, six years in the Reserves first, then you can go Active Duty." And then this really upset my mom because now it's kinda misled or lied to twice.

John: Right.

Joe: And this had about six months of going back and forth between. A lot of this happened behind my back. I really didn't know there was a problem. I thought I was just going to Active Duty, but there was quite a argument between the Reserves and Regular Army and what, who was gonna get me and what I was going to have to do first. Apparently for this like last half of my senior year, my mom was on the phone nearly every day with majors and colonels and generals, saying, "Well, this is what happened. This is what you promised him. This is what he's getting." And, you know, the Army's not used to being told [both laugh] by a little Midwestern mother of nine what they should be doing, but in the end, she won.

John: Really?

Joe: And most of this story I didn't find out until a couple of years later, but in the end, the second guy, the second recruiter, Craig Lynne, he went through a lot on my behalf, working with my mom. And I'm kinda sorry I didn't keep in touch with him. But it was a pretty long, arduous road to get to Active Duty, but once I did it turned out well. So--

John: And you didn't find out about this until years afterwards?

Joe: Yeah, I mean it was like three or four years later that me and my mom were talking something, and all this came up about how difficult it was for me to actually go active duty and all the stuff that she went through.

John: Holy cow.

Joe: And we didn't quite go to the congressman, my sister Jenny's godfather is Toby Roth, the former Congressman from Wisconsin. So we almost went to him, but his staff said, "You know, they say they won't hold it against you if you go, but it will." if they had to invoke the power of a Congressman to get something done. But [we] didn't have to go that far. [laughs]

John: That's good. Someone entering the Army, having to resort to congressmen already is—

Joe: Yeah, not the way you want to start things off.

John: Yeah, no, not generally. So you graduated from high school when?

Joe: May of 1995.

John: Did you go from there to Basic Training?

Joe: I actually went to Basic Training cause I had joined the Reserves under the Split-Option. So I went to Basic Training in 1994 between my junior and senior year of high school, so when I was seventeen.

John: How was that? How was Basic Training?

Joe: It was interesting. A little more, in some ways it was more than I expected; in some ways, it was less. It wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be. It was pretty—I think it was tough, but not as tough. I didn't think that, you know, I was a hundred and thirty pounds, skinny, little seventeen year old. I didn't think I should get through Basic Training. I thought that was something that turned you into a soldier and so big, but I made it through. Kind of low P.T. [Physical Training] scores and did good on the academics and stuff, but it was tough. And then, being away from home, you know, got to me. It was a little different cause I was—they had just started the co-ed Basic Training. I was in an all-male company, but we lived on the second floors of two buildings, and in my building, we were on the second floor, all males below and above us, was all females. And then, like across the quad was the first mixed male and female Basic Training companies.

John: In the same floor then?

Joe: Yeah, they were all in the same company. I'm not sure how they lived in the buildings, but they were all in the same company together, males and females. So that was, it was odd. Here we were an all-male company, so we weren't supposed to talk to any females at all, and then, you know, a hundred yards away is mixed males and females in the same unit. They're going through together and battle buddies and it was just kinda odd. I remember a few times I like—or one time I was in the chow hall, and there was a girl sitting—You know, it's wherever there is an open seat, and one of the females from another company sat down next to me, and she was like all upset, kind of whispering low. She had to go to the gas chamber the next day and she wanted to know what it was about. And we had been strictly told, "Don't talk to any females, don't talk to them." And I'm sitting there and kind of whispering to her, saying, "Don't worry. It's all right. I already went. It's not so bad. Your nose will run a lot, but you'll be fine." And as I do that, I see the guy across from me just—his face turns white, and he's just kind of staring, and I know there's a drill sergeant over my shoulder. [both laugh] I half turn my head, and he leans down and says something to me. So I get out. I finish eating quick and have to run outside, and then he gets me in front of the whole company and says, "What are you doing talking to a female?" I had to drop and do push-ups there in front of everybody. It wasn't that great. It did make my reputation among the other guys go up, that I would sit [both laugh] and talk to a female in front of that drill sergeant.

John: Of course they probably assumed that you knew the drill sergeant was behind you the whole time and were just kind of bucking the system?

Joe: I don't know [laughs].

John: Did you see any complications in the company that did go co-ed?

Joe: I didn't have a lot of interaction with them, but they seemed to have a better time [laughs].

John: What parts of Basic Training did you think were--you said overall it was easier because you were a hundred thirty-five pounds and you made it through, easy in that sense?

Joe: It seemed like it should have been more demanding physically and mentally. I mean, that they should have been pushing harder, you know. And I don't know if that was just my perception from watching movies growing up or whatever, but—

John: Did you grow up in a farming community?

- Joe: Ah, pretty much rural. I mean, I lived about a mile out of town. We weren't on a farm, but we had quite a few. Farming, logging—
- John: Okay, because I come from a family of seven so, I don't know if it's just growing up in a large family that, I don't know, you tend to work hard and work together pretty well.
- Joe: Yeah. And that could be it, too. It was just I'm used to, you know, I was already used to being part of a team, kind of pulling my weight and sacrificing myself for others.
- John: You ever seen the movie *The D.I., The Drill Instructor*?
- Joe: I don't think so.
- John: It's like an old 1950s movie, but it's the typical Marine—Where was your Basic Training?
- Joe: Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. I was in Echo Company, 2-10 Infantry.
- John: Did you make a lot of good friends there?
- Joe: Not really that I kept up with. I mean, they were pretty good. I mean, my battle buddy was Kurt Wally. He was from Stephenson, Michigan. I mean, I met him at MEPS [Military Enlistment Processing Station] and went all the way. We were battle buddies in Basic Training and stuff, but we didn't really keep in contact after that. He kind of annoyed me [laughs].
- John: What would you do in your free time?
- Joe: Ah, let's see, I read. Well, no, I didn't, cause we didn't have books; didn't have much free time that I remember. I mean, shining boots and making sure everything was in shape, I wrote letters home, and to a couple girls in my class, and that was about it.
- John: How long did it last?
- Joe: It was like eight weeks or something. I think I left home on June 4th, and I got back on July 28th; so it went pretty quick.
- John: And then you had to shift from that back into senior year of high school.
- Joe: Yeah, yeah, and then--.
- John: Was that a change?

Joe: Back to work. Ah, a little different. No too—I guess I was a little more outgoing then. I had a little more confidence. I had been pretty quiet and reserved in school, and then I was senior class president my senior year and stuff; got out a little more.

John: Okay, so then you graduated in '95, your first assignment after that?

Joe: Graduated in '95 and then, because under the Split Option you go to Basic Training one year and AIT [Advanced Individual Training] the next, I had just been to Basic Training, I hadn't been to AIT yet. So the next, my date to start AIT was in November. November 7th was when I had to go on active duty. So I had from when I graduated in May until November; I just stayed around home, and worked. And I had stopped going to Reserve drill. Just kind of hung out and waited for it to start, and then 7th of November I went to MEPS and then on to Fort Jackson for processing. And I spent about a week at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and then went to Fort Eustis, Virginia, for AIT.

John: What does MEPS stand for?

Joe: MEPS is the Military Enlistment Processing Station. The one for Wisconsin and the U.P. is in Milwaukee. It's basically in the Federal Building. They do the physicals there and sign contracts, and they have the, what do you call it, career counselors there to help you pick an MOS [Military Occupational Specialty], and stuff.

John: Do they provide transportation from there down to Fort Jackson then?

Joe: Yeah, yeah. The recruiter came and picked me up and took me to Milwaukee. Yeah, with military, like, from home, they come and pick you up, and take you to Milwaukee, and then do the processing there. You stay overnight, and then do the processing in the morning, and then they take you to the airport, or give you a voucher for a cab ride to the airport, and a ticket to where ever you're going.

John: What was AIT like at Fort Eustis?

Joe: Ah, it was a pretty good time. I was in Charlie Company, 1st of the 222nd Aviation Battalion. It was the Charlie Rock. It was the company for Chinooks and Blackhawk mechanics. 67U [uniform] was what I was, my MOS for Chinooks and 67T [67 Tango] is Blackhawk mechanics. So, it was pretty-- [laughs] went all right.

John: How long was it?

- Joe: Got used to that; it was like three months. I started in November, my class started, I think, November 16th and I graduated like March 22nd. So like, three months, I mean with breaks in there for Christmas and Thanksgiving.
- John: And you, because of your high test scores you were able to be qualified into 67U then?
- Joe: Yeah, yeah, I guess. I'm not sure how that all works out, but I had a higher GT score, General Technical score on the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocation Aptitude Battery], I think that's what it is. But, yeah. Then it was a tougher job to get into. Now, it's a little different, but yeah, you had to have a high GT score, and then it was six-year commitment, right off the bat, because of all the training involved and the time it took.
- John: Did you like it?
- Joe: Yeah, I enjoyed it right away. Started out with what they call "front load," where they taught us how to read the manuals and how to fill out the forms. So we spent about a week doing that before we even touched a helicopter. The first day, we went on a tour and they're like, "Well, you all wanna go? I'm sure you've all already seen a Chinook." And I actually had no idea what a Chinook was. It wasn't until I got to AIT at Fort Eustis that I knew what a Chinook helicopter was and that's what I was gonna be working on. I just knew I wanted to get into aviation somehow, and they said, "Well, helicopter repairer." "All right, I'll take that." [John laughs] So then I got to see my Chinook for the first time. [laughs] And then I knew what it was. I knew I had seen pictures of it then. It's like, "Oh, that's a Chinook. It's that big thing that looks like a school bus with fans on top."
- John: But you weren't about to let everyone know that you hadn't seen one at that time?
- Joe: Oh no, I played it cool. I said, "Oh yeah, sure I've seen it. I don't need to go on it and look at it." [both laugh]
- John: Yeah, it's the same way in any Army training, I think.
- Joe: Yeah, eventually you get over that, but—
- John: But eventually, you know you're gonna see it too, so why bring it up now, just a waste of time.
- Joe: Yeah.

John: You finished training there and you went to your first assignment?

Joe: Yeah, I went from there to Fort Campbell, Kentucky and the 101st Airborne Division. There I was in Alpha Company, 8th of the 101st Aviation, which was the 8th Battalion. There was what, nine battalions of aviation there, because they need a lot of helicopters to move a whole Division. But 8th Battalion, that I was put to, was the Intermediate Maintenance Unit, which is the Army has three levels of aircraft maintenance. You've got Unit Maintenance. That's the companies that actually fly the helicopters, and there's certain maintenance they do there. Mostly when it breaks, you take the part off, and put a new one on, and then go fly. Then Intermediate Level; that I was at. There was a little more in depth stuff that takes longer. So when it's too difficult to fix, takes too long at the unit level, they send it to Intermediate Maintenance and then. So, I wasn't actually flying there, but just getting to know a lot of parts, and a lot of stuff; difficult problems. And we did what's called "phase maintenance," where every two hundred hours the Chinook has to be, basically, overhauled, where you go through it from tires to rotors, front to back, do inspections on every component, every part, and then fix everything you find that's wrong. And then, lubricate everything, and that kind of thing. So we did a lot of that. And then, the third level is Depot Level. That's where they do really in depth overhauls, where they rebuild transmissions and stuff like that. That's at Corpus Christi, Texas. But I was at AVIM [Aviation Intermediate Maintenance] to begin with and got to do a lot of phase maintenances, overhauling and it was neat for me. It turned out to be good for me. I mean I wanted to go straight to flying and be able to get up in the air, but I wound up learning a lot in AVIM working, get to see all kinds of problems that weren't normal. You know, not the everyday stuff, we got to see the big problems when stuff really broke bad. [both laugh] You learn how things work that way.

John: What was the environment and that like? This was your first Army assignment now, you're in an Army unit, what were your impressions and--

Joe: It seemed really chaotic at first, and it only got more chaotic. I mean, you get to see some patterns in how it works, but, you know there's so many people doing so much in a unit. Everybody's running this way and that. I kind of fell into it pretty good. I mean, I was used to following orders by this time and just keep my mouth shut and watch what's going on. That was fun. In the training environment I was really out of my element. I just got always on edge and stuff. I started to get more relaxed as I got into this, make friends. That time at Campbell, actually I think I grew more as a person than I did, you know, my whole teenage years because I finally started making friends and feeling part of the group and stuff. But the work was hard, yeah, long hours. It seemed to be lots of stupid stuff,

the same old Army, you know, hurry up and wait, and get this done now because we're not gonna need it for two months. [laughs]

John: I know that all too well. Did you live on post?

Joe: Yeah. I lived in the barracks there. At this time, I didn't have a car or anything. So I lived on, oh I forget the name. Oh, I guess, it was C Street, but it's right near the airfield at Fort Campbell. It was actually not the greatest barracks, kinda run-down. It was actually, they had been built for the Air Force in like the '60s, and the Air Force had condemned them in the '70s. So the Army got them and they had just been renovated the year I got there. They had just put phones in the year before I got there. So this was 1996, so up until 1995, they only had one pay phone in a building where two hundred people were living, or a hundred and fifty. So they had finally put phones in every room right before I got there; still communal showers and bathrooms, two men to a room. And I was moved into a room directly over the boiler so it was always hot. [laughs] That was a great plus, especially during the summer in Kentucky when it's hot and humid to begin with.

John: It sounds enjoyable. So who did you make friends with?

Joe: Pretty much the first day I got there, my roommate was an interesting guy. I mean, I didn't really make friends with him, but he was my roommate, and we got along. He took me down the hall to introduce me to some other guys that were older. My first meeting of them was--the one guy, Stephen Rogers, he was an OH-58 Kiowa helicopter mechanic, and so they were sitting in their room drinking, and we came, knocked on the door, and said hello, and he stands up. He is a former Marine. He just starts, he's crazy to begin with, he starts yelling at me and stuff, "What are you doing here? You're gonna get killed?" And I didn't know what to do, I mean, I wasn't really afraid of him, but I'm like, "What?" Yeah, I have trouble meeting people to begin with, so when the guy first starts up, and starts yelling at you—And I could tell he was--, I mean, there was something in his eye. I could tell he was fooling around, but you know? So I basically fell to the floor, and curled up in the fetal position, and grabbed his leg, and said, "No don't kill me, please don't kill me!" And that kinda broke the ice. [both laugh] And then, there was another few guys in there. That was Stephen's room, and his roommate was Jesse Baker who is a good friend of mine. He was a chemical guy, and Dave Kenderdine, another Chinook guy. Ah, who else was there? That was kind of the core group and, from there, it kinda spread outwards till there was probably about ten of us from a couple different companies that were just pretty tight and hung out at night. Since I was still under age I got to be the driver. [laughs]

- John: You didn't do any drinking while you were under twenty-one?
- Joe: Oh yeah, yeah, but not when we went out, in the barracks. Yeah, it wasn't worth the risk to me. It's not that important to me, going out, trying to have a fake ID and trying to sneak in anywhere, so I just stayed; did my drinking in the barracks. We did a lot, most of the partying there anyway. I had a pretty big group of friends so we just called everybody over, and everyone would bring their case or twelve-pack, and, you'll have a barbecue out back or something.
- John: How long did you spend at Fort Campbell?
- Joe: Two years. I was there until May or April of 1998, May, April, something like that.
- John: And did you go on any deployments there?
- Joe: Didn't have any deployments. The biggest one I went on was to National Training Center at Fort Irwin. I went there for a month in '96, no '97, like November of '97. That was fun. That was my twenty-first birthday was like on Saturday, and then we had to be at the hanger at midnight or 1:00 in the morning on Sunday to get on the plane to go to California for a month. So my twenty-first birthday wasn't much of a party. [both laugh] Then I made it to the plane and got out there to play in the sandbox for a while.
- John: I've been there once, NTC. Great time.
- Joe: Yeah, there wasn't a lot for me to do there because we were a maintenance unit. We didn't do maneuvers or anything. It was just kinda go out in the middle of nowhere and set up your tent and—
- John: Get the MOPP [Mission Oriented Protective Posture] gear, get the NBC [Nuclear, Biological, Chemical] alarm and then have to—
- Joe: Yeah. Play with the MOPP gear and dig your fighting positions. Then we had--I forget who we were under, but our commander at the time out there was a female, and I don't mean to put down female commanders. I had some good ones, but this one had a feeling that we were gonna be attacked. So we were out in our foxholes, all night, one night because she had a feeling that they were gonna probe us or something [laughs]. I mean, okay, there's space for that in Intelligence, for gut instinct, but I'm not sure if that was it.
- John: How were your commanders overall?

- Joe: Fort Campbell was pretty good. I had a good time there. Then I was lower enlisted, I didn't have much contact with them, and just because we were maintenance, it was pretty much just everything I needed to know happened in my platoon. Just my platoon leader, or my squad leader, or my platoon sergeant were pretty much all I talked to. Above that, I didn't have much contact with the officers, but it went pretty well for me. They helped me out pretty much. I mean, I got some college courses approved so I got out of work early to go take college classes and stuff. It was a pretty good environment.
- John: And the Army paid for those college courses?
- Joe: Yeah. I think the tuition assistance was like 75% or something at that time. So it wasn't bad.
- John: Nice, and you left in '98 then?
- Joe: Yup, I got orders to go to Alaska. So I left Fort Campbell, I think the end of April cause I left like, that year Fort Campbell and Clarkesville, Kentucky, got hit by big tornados. A tornado hit downtown Clarkesville, which is the town just outside of Fort Campbell, and it was that weekend that was my last weekend there, and then I left. And then, I had a month of leave and time to drive up to Alaska.
- John: Did you go home during this time, during your leave time?
- Joe: Yup, cause I bought a truck in January from a guy I worked with so I could drive up to Alaska and take all my stuff. So I loaded all my stuff in the truck and drove home for a couple weeks, had a nice visit. That was the nice thing about Campbell was that like on a long weekend I could drive home, it was close enough. That was the last time that happened.
- John: Who were you with in Alaska, what unit?
- Joe: I was in Bravo Company, 4th of the 123rd Aviation, which was, I think, the major command. They're part of USARAK [United States Army Alaska]. There wasn't really a brigade or anything. They were just, the Battalion was directly under USARAK, and that was under PACOM, Pacific Command.
- John: Okay, what fort were you with there, then?
- Joe: That was at Fort Wainwright in Fairbanks.
- John: How long were you there?

Joe: Three years.

John: What was it like there?

Joe: Ah, that was a lot of fun. It was a neat place. You know, cause you're isolated. You get to make your own fun. I liked history, and it was neat there that the airfield there was built for World War II and the Lend-Lease Program. It was called Ladd Field then. So the hangar I worked in for three years was actually built in 1941 for the Lend-Lease Program. They would fly airplanes up from the States and then in this hangar they would--The hangar had doors down the middle, and had two sides. The airplanes would come in one side, and get checks done on them, and they were turned over to the Soviets on the other side of the hangar, and then flown to the Eastern Front to fight World War II.

John: Really?

Joe: So that was the hanger I got to work in.

John: That's pretty cool, actually.

Joe: Yeah.

John: All the history right there.

Joe: Yeah. And it even—and that was just that, and then it was named after Jonathan M. Wainwright who was a General who was in the Philippines when MacArthur left. So he was in the Bataan Death March and all that. So they had a copy, he got a personal copy of the Japanese surrender, and that was on display in the headquarters building. And then his grandson, Jason Wainwright, came to work and was in my platoon in Alaska.

John: Were you friends with him?

Joe: Yeah, yeah, he was in my platoon. I flew with him, had a good time with him. Now he's a Chinook pilot in Hawaii.

John: Did he tell you stories?

Joe: A little bit, not too--I don't think he knew too many. I didn't really press him on it. He went to a lot of dinners and stuff when he first got there. Always got invited to go meet the base commander and stuff because of who he was, his name was and stuff, but we didn't talk about it. Mostly we just talked about normal Army stuff. [laughs]

John: You were a Corporal by this time?

Joe: I was a Specialist.

John: Okay.

Joe: I think so.

John: Did you get to go on flights while you were there?

Joe: Yeah. I started out in maintenance there, basically doing the same thing I had been doing in AVIM, doing phase maintenance and stuff like that, and then after about a year, I got moved over to Flight Platoon. There's not really any set career path to go to fly in Aviation, you know, but it was just kinda--I said I wanted to fly, and when it came time they needed people in Flight Platoon, so they picked me. So I started learning how to be a Crew Chief.

John: What does that entail?

Joe: Basically you take ownership of the airplane. The Chinook has, most aircraft have a Crew Chief who kinda owns it and takes care of it. The Chinook is bigger and more complex so it has two crew members assigned to it; a Flight Engineer and a Crew Chief, and the Crew Chief is the junior one. You had to learn how to wash the windows, and keep the tires full of air, and make sure everything is--Do a lot of the grunt work, cleaning it, doing the inspections. You need to do a daily inspection every day to see what's broke and to fix it, that kind of thing. And then learning the flight stuff; during start-up and shut-down you're outside always checking the engines for leaks and making sure no one is around, gonna walk into the helicopter, hit it or get hit by it, that kind of thing. A Chinook is big so the pilots can't see all around them. They can pretty much only see in front of them so you have the Crew Chief and Flight Engineer are always looking out the sides and the back to watch out for other aircraft, or **[End of Tape One, Side A]** obstacles, or what have you. And then, the Crew Chief and Flight Engineer take care of the passengers or cargo we have; make sure--learn how to tie stuff down, strap it down.

John: So what was flying like in Alaska?

Joe: [Laughs] It was a lot of fun. Pretty much the whole state is federally owned so you can go anywhere, I think. Fort Wainwright, actually, is just huge. The garrison is small, but land-wise it's huge so we could go just about anywhere and just go out in the flats, in the bush, and fly around. Learned how to fly on glaciers, had special training for that and, up in the mountains, to do pinnacle landings; land just two wheels on the side of a

cliff and stuff like that, and get to see—Go just go anywhere you want. You have to fly a certain amount every month, and the helicopters have to be flown, so they stay in good shape. So when there's no missions you know, there's not a lot of stuff to do. You just plan flights to go "Hey, I want to go out here and look at this mountain, or I want to go see what this river is like." There aren't many places left where you can fly like that, where we could actually get down. And I had, thankfully, really skilled pilots. A lot people go up, like Alaska so much when they're in the Army, they stay there. So we had some like Vietnam pilots that were still up there flying. They really knew what they were doing so we could do cool stuff like get down in valleys and fly nap-of-the-earth, terrain flights, come up and over trees, and swooping all around. [NoE, nap-of-the-earth, are very low altitude flights following the profile of the earth's surface.] It was pretty interesting. And learning NVG [Night Vision Goggles] flights were cool cause you'd see the Northern Lights, the Aurora Borealis really well through the NVGs. It was always bright and to see all the snow. It was something different working in the snow, too. Just learning how to fly in that, because when it's cold the snow is real light and powdery, and it blows up so much so you have to be careful when you're landing that you can still see in taking off and seeing all that.

- John: When you planned these flights did you guys ever go out just like a little campout, or something like that, or stay overnight?
- Joe: Not really, not when I was there. They had done it in the past where they would do float trips for survival training. They would fly out, everybody would take the survival rafts that they had, and then fly out and spend about a week floating down a river. And then somebody would fly out and pick them up again. We pretty much camped out anywhere we went. The great thing about being on a Chinook is that it's huge. You can take anything you want with you. So when we'd go to the field we always had all kinds of cook stoves and coolers and food and lawn furniture and stuff. That's one of best things about being a Chinook helicopter guy is that you can take--You've got all kinds of room to take stuff with you, and you don't have to carry it. It just sits in the helicopter.
- John: I envy you. I was infantry, [Joe laughs] only what you could carry on your back.
- Joe: Yup, not me. Helicopter, a little bit better, yeah.
- John: What was free time like?
- Joe: Free time was pretty neat. Up there in garrison it's pretty much a 9 to 5 job so you have the rest of the days and weekends. I had good friends, we'd go out. I bought a snowmobile when I was there; so in the winter,

I'd go snowmobiling. And then later on, I bought a four-wheeler too so I could ride around in the summer, go hunting up in the woods, went camping pretty often. We would just go, get a bunch of us together on a Thursday or a Friday. We're getting off, and say, "Hey, let's go camping this weekend." So we'd go fill up the coolers and just drive out in the middle of the bush somewhere. There's a lot o--we were right by Chena Recreation Area, which was all full of campsites, and you don't have to register or anything. We'd just go out there till we found one we liked and pull off the highway and sit there.

John: Nice.

Joe: Camp for the weekend. And Fairbanks is an interesting place because you kinda gotta make your own fun. It's pretty isolated, so you get together with friends, make friends, do stuff, make up stuff to do. Yeah. We used to go out on the Tanana Flats, on the south side of Fairbanks up on the river. It's just a big mud flat, kinda sandy. They used to do all kinds of stuff out there. We'd take the four-wheelers out and tear it up because it's the flood plain where the river floods in the spring, and then the rest of the year it's pretty dry and sandy. So you go out there. For a while it seemed like they were burning a car every weekend cause even the local kids, that was where they hung out, too. So they'd go out, take old beater cars and run 'em around in the dirt. And then when they wouldn't work anymore they'd set them on fire. So you'd go stand around the burning car, and that was your Saturday night. [both laugh.]

John: Roast marshmallows—

Joe: Yeah.

John: Off the burning tires or something.

Joe: [Laughs] Yeah. I wouldn't go that far, but yeah.

John: Any memorable experiences while you were up there?

Joe: Well the one time, it was 2000. I went on a trip. We were going, it was basically just for fun, the commander wanted to go on a longer trip. So we flew up to, from Fairbanks up to, first we went to Deadhorse, which is where all the oil fields are, to look around there, and then Prudhoe Bay, looked around the oil fields. We were gonna stay there overnight, that was the plan, but when we got there we decided not to because there is nothing there [laughs]. It's just, basically, barracks for the oil company workers and stuff, not a lot to do. So we flew over to Barrow, which is the northernmost point in the U.S. and Alaska. That was a little neater. That's a native village, and, you know, a lot of outsiders live there, or

whites, whatever you want to call it. And that was an interesting place, and we spent a couple days there. We, like, went out, talked to the search and rescue pilot there, the North Slope Borough Search and Rescue. They had a couple of Hueys, well, they were Bell 214STs. They were actually built in the late '70s, early '80s, for export to Iran, but when the Shah was overthrown they were used for something else. They're like a Huey, but it's got two engines, and it had a bigger interior. And so the two they used for search and rescue up there, I think he said, one had been in Japan as a sightseeing helicopter on Mount Fuji before they bought it and converted it to search and rescue, and I forget what the other one was. But this guy was an old pilot. His name was Ray Poss [known for his rooftop rescue work in the 1980 Las Vegas MGM Grand fire] and he had done all kinds of things. He was one of the pioneers of using helicopters to chase tunas into tuna nets. They do that off of tuna boats. They'll have a helicopter that'll go out and find the schools of tuna and chase 'em towards the nets. So he took us for a ride in the search and rescue helicopter. So we were looking at all the neat, gee-whiz stuff he had, cause it was all NVG capable which you don't really see in a civilian helicopter, and they had all kinds of bells and whistles on it. Well, he flew us out to the point, the actual Point Barrow. Normally to go there you have to go with a tour group because it's native lands owned by the Inuit, the native Alaskans. You're only allowed to go there if you're in one of their tours. And they have special licensed ones, but because we were in a helicopter we just flew out there and walked around. But it's like sacred to them, and part of their tourist money is by taking tours out there. So flew out there and looked around. Then he flew us, oh, out to a couple miles west of town to the spot where Will Rodgers and Wiley Post had crashed and died.

John: Really?

Joe: So, yeah, to the monuments out there by the river. They've are kind of defaced there. They have new ones that they built in town that they can take care of because the ones that are built out where the actual crash happened—it's kinda in the middle of nowhere, and the natives tend to use that as a place to go and like all teenagers that's where they would go, and, you know, drink and deface the monuments and stuff. If no one's around to see it, that's kinda what happens. But, it was neat to be out there and see that. One of the nice aviation stories that I got was to go out and see that. Then we flew back to town. And we went to the Mexican restaurant there, Pepe's North of the Border, "the Farthest North Mexican Restaurant in the World." [both laugh]

John: Was it any good?

Joe: Yeah, it was pretty good. Nice lady, and we all signed their guest book and stuff, kind of a crazy lady that just wanted to move to Alaska. You

run a lot of weird people like that. They just wanted to go to Alaska and do something, and they wind up just—

John: Staying and living.

Joe: Yeah, yeah. And then another good trip was, a couple times, down to--I always liked to go to Talkeetna, Alaska which is right by the base of Mount McKinley, and it's where the Park Service has their base for the climbers. Pretty much all the climbers come into Talkeetna, and that's where they hire their pilots to fly 'em up onto the mountain. So you get to talk to all the bush pilots that fly on Mount McKinley. And my unit operated the High Altitude Rescue Team. So every spring they would go down there. I wasn't on it, but I went along a couple times. They'd go down there for two weeks of training at high altitudes. And the Chinook's not pressurized so they have to take supplemental oxygen. They take a big bottle with hoses that go up to the cockpit for the pilots, and then the Crew Chief and Flight Engineer have walk-around bottles that they strap on their side, and then put their oxygen mask on. So they learn how to fly above--normally you can't go above 10,000 feet because the air is too thin, but for the High Altitude Rescue Team they go up as high like 21,000 feet. And I think they have one of the highest rescues they did there was at 19,000 feet, landing the helicopter on the side of the mountain and then taking off again. It gets difficult because you have to have enough power. The air is thin so you don't produce as much lift, you have to have more power, and they would actually have to get going forward and fall off the edge of a cliff before they'd get enough speed get lift.

John: Really? Were you ever on one of those flights when they had to do that?

Joe: No, I was never up that high. The highest I ever went was about 8,500, flying up in the mountains. And I got to do my first airshow down at Anchorage at Elmendorf Air Force Base there. That was pretty fun. Half of a display, we did. The Air Force dropped big pallets out of an aircraft, and then we came in with Howitzers slung underneath and dropped them off and then landed and dropped off troops out the back as part of the big display. And then we had a static display there too, where we stood around and let everyone walk through the Chinook and told them about it. I always liked that.

John: Pretty cool. How many shows did you get to do?

Joe: I just got to do the one there. And then towards the end there, I was— where was it, 2000, I went to--it was time to re-enlist, so I re-enlisted to go to Europe. And then I got to do the ceremony up on a mountain top. We flew out just to the middle of nowhere, picked a mountain top that looked good, and landed on it. So that's where I took my oath again and stuff. Oh,

there was another time—a good trip was--there was a lot of TDY [Temporary Duty] trips up there, and they were always fun. There was one we did, went to, I think it was 2000 we went to Sitka, Alaska to train on deck landings on the USS Comstock [LSD-45], a LSD [Dock Landing Ship]. So we learned to land the Chinooks on the back of a ship. That was a good trip, a lot of fun, a lot of drinking, and carousing, and I don't think the town of Sitka ever wants the military to come back [both laugh]. As I remember, we went one place and, like basically, drank 'em out of beer. We were drinking Foster's Oil Cans, the big, like, twenty-ounce aluminum cans of beer. We drank all of them, and then we left. And we had a Chrysler minivan. I think we had fifteen guys in the minivan. It was just scraping on the ground. [both laugh]

John: You guys, where would you stay when you were there then?

Joe: In Sitka, we stayed at the National Guard Armory. We took our stuff down there, and cots, slept on cots there. Like when we went to Talkeetna, we would usually get hotels. There's like two hotels there, or three hotels. We'd rotate between them, trying to give everybody a little business.

John: Would you guys pull, I mean between you and your friends, pull pranks on each other?

Joe: Ah, a little bit, not too much. None that I can think of, so they must not have been very good. [both laugh] None that I'd like to talk about now. [both laugh] I don't think the statute of limitations is run out on that, so I'll be quiet.

John: Oh, this is all confidential; I didn't tell you that?

Joe: Oh yeah, yeah, well—

John: Do you want to--

Joe: Not so much pranks, but we were just crazy, I remember people dancing. I had a thing, for a while, where I would get drunk, and jump on a table, and pull my pants down, and dance. So, that happened a couple of times.

John: In bars?

Joe: Bars, barracks, homes, whatever. [laughs]

John: It was your skill?

Joe: Yeah, that's what I was good at. I remember at Sitka one of the guys wound up going home with somebody and then came back. Then we got

up in the morning and there was a rather large pair of panties hanging from the armory's flagpole. [John laughs] The joke was on him, though, because he left his dog tags and had to go back there and get 'em the next morning before we left [laughs]. Oh, what was it?

John: Ouch.

Joe: Yeah, I remember a couple of people being sick before we even started flying that day. [laughs]

John: When did you leave Alaska then?

Joe: I left Alaska in May of 2001 to go to Germany. Again, I took a month leave and drove back down to Wisconsin. So, that was the third time I drove the Alaska Highway. The second time went up there and coming down—I came down once in the middle because my friend got, ah, kicked out of the Army because of drunk driving, which was kind of screwy. Because, I know, this was like his first or second, and I know people who got three or four and never got—the Army's not real evenhanded when it comes to drunk driving. Sometimes people get a slap on the wrist, some people get thrown out of the Army, some people go to jail. There's not-- just depends on who they are and who their commander is and whether or not someone wants to send a message at that time. But anyway, so he got kicked out. So I drove back down with him, and then the third time, I drove back down my brother flew up and drove back down with me.

John: When you were in Alaska, would you go home for holidays?

Joe: I went home for Christmas, about once a year while I was up there. I went home, I think, when my sister got married. I came home for that. I came home for Christmas one of the years, so--.

John: Okay. When heading to Germany, where did you leave from? How did you get there?

Joe: I left right from Green Bay, just went to the airport, got on the plane, and left. Some of my stuff had already been shipped from Alaska, so it was just a matter of getting on the plane and going.

John: What unit were you assigned with in Europe?

Joe: I was assigned to F Company 159th Aviation, which is part of 12 Brigade under 5th Corps. That was, I was proud to do it, that was a pretty well known unit. It was the only--they recently, or just a few years before, closed the other Chinook units in Europe. So, "Big Windy," was the only--

F Company was called “Big Windy.” They were the only unit, Chinook unit, in all of Europe and Africa. That was basically their area of coverage.

John: Pretty wide area—

Joe: Yeah.

John: A wide area of responsibility then.

Joe: Yeah, yeah.

John: Your first time in Europe?

Joe: Yeah, well, no. I had gone on a trip in high school for French class. I’d taken a two-week trip to England and France. So I’d been to Europe before, but it was [my] first time living there, so it was pretty neat.

John: What was that like? What were your impressions?

Joe: Ah, I liked Germany, at first. It was a little getting used to, ah, just you know, a different culture: different way it worked, different looking toilets. [laughs] It took a little getting used to, but I liked it.

John: How were the toilets different?

Joe: They have, well, my buddy called it “the inspection shelf.” The German toilets they’re not really a bowl of water; it’s kind of like a flat shelf and then it drops down to the drain. So, basically, what you leave there kinda sits on top so you can inspect it, I guess, but when you flush it, it washes down. But that’s what is a common conception, that Germans are a little scatologically-inclined. [both laugh] So, it kind of fit right in with my expectations, I guess. [both laugh]

John: Did you see anything else that proved that the impression that you had of the German people?

Joe: Well, ah, not really. They’re pretty friendly. I got along good and felt welcome and glad to be there. I mean, I’m of German descent myself so that was one of the reasons I wanted to go there and get to see and to experience German culture.

John: Did you get to go out often?

Joe: Yeah, well, pretty often. I lived on post, but went off, go downtown. I lived just outside of Wurzburg, Germany. So, we could go downtown pretty much anytime. Made a few German friends, and had a lot of friends

with some of the civilian contractors that were Americans, but they lived in the villages and stuff. So, I had German friends so, got out much as we could, not as much as I'd have liked. But I didn't pick up much German. I'm not fluent at it. I picked up some, you know, enough to go to restaurants, and bars, and ride the train. I wish I'd gotten fluent at it; just didn't have the time. I mean I lived on base so I was always speaking English. It would have been nicer if I'd have lived off-post, where I'd been, you know, kinda immersed in it.

John: You were there when they switched from the Deutsche mark to the euro?

Joe: Yeah, yeah. That was kind of interesting, you know, big change for them, making of the European Union instead of the separate countries and stuff. Hurt us cause it went from being four Deutsche marks to the dollar to two euros. They said none of the prices were supposed to go up, but they all did because, when they rounded to convert from Deutsche marks to euros, they all raised their prices so the cost of living kinda went up. But it was easier traveling than having all the different, because I had gone on trips to Italy and Austria before that and always having to change money and getting different stuff. I mean, it was nice to have the same currency everywhere, especially when we were traveling.

John: Did the Army increase their basic allowance for subsistence?

Joe: Yeah, yeah.

John: To account for that?

Joe: EAS [End of Active Service] and COLA went up, but, you know, not as fast as the other stuff.

John: The locals jacked up their prices.

Joe: Yeah, yeah.

John: Ah, did you go outside of Germany, too, while visiting?

Joe: Yeah, I took a trip to, ah, went a couple of times to Austria, skiing. Had a couple of buddies that liked to ski and snowboard so, when we'd have a long weekend, we'd drive down to Garmisch where the Army has their rec center. Then, a few times, we'd go down to Austria. We'd go down to Zell am See in the mountains of Kitzsteinhorn and Schmittenhöhe. Another time, we went to Ischgl, which is down on the Swiss border. That was a neat place cause they had like three mountain tops there that you could go down into the valleys. And you could go up one and ski down into Switzerland, and then take the gondola back up into Austria.

John: Beautiful snow conditions?

Joe: Yeah, usually pretty good. Usually, early season, the place we'd go is Kitzsteinhorn and Zell am See because that's on a glacier, that's at like 8,000 feet above sea level to start with so it's always got snow up there. And that was fun because you'd take the big gondola up. They used to have a train that went through the mountain, but in 2000 that caught on fire, and a whole bunch of people died in there. I wasn't in Germany yet, but my friends, that I went skiing with, had been there that weekend that the train caught fire. But they were there the day before, and then they moved to the other hill the day the train caught fire.

John: Pretty lucky then.

Joe: Yeah, yeah. There were a few Americans, I think, died in that. A couple got out.

John: And your responsibilities in Europe were, I mean, you were still, you were a crew chief?

Joe: Yeah, I started out as a crew chief when I got there in June, but I was getting close to—they had thought about signing me off as a flight engineer when I was in Alaska, but they said, "You know, it'll look funny if we sign you off flight engineer and then send you somewhere else. They'll kinda question it." I said, "Well." They said, "Just kind of go there and prove yourself. I'm sure they'll sign you off." So that's what wound up happening is I went there as a crew chief, and I had some friends there who had been in Alaska and gone to Germany before me. So they had talked to the platoon sergeants there about me and said, "You know, he's a good guy; he's real smart." "You know, whatever, whatever," they said. I don't know, I'm guessing. I'm hoping they said, "He was good looking, very handsome, intelligent, brave, you know, all that." Whatever they said, it worked because I got into Flight Platoon right away and, through that summer, flew around a little bit. And then in August, they were sent to Kosovo and Macedonia because from 1995 until 2001, the spring, that unit had almost constantly been in the Balkans. At first it was the whole unit, I don't know, in 1995 when the U.S. first went into Croatia and they bridged the Sava River. That was the Chinooks from Big Windy that flew in the bridge sections to build the first bridge to get the U.S. troops into the former Yugoslavia, and then they stayed there. They moved from there to Albania for a while. And then they were in Hungary, and then Albania, and then Macedonia. And then most of the unit came back, but for like five and a half, six years, three out of the—what did they have, eighteen, yeah, three out of the eighteen aircraft were always in Macedonia and Kosovo, and like a third of the unit. So, when I

got there in June of 2001 they had just come back and had been relieved by the 101st, but it was the first time in, I think, six years that the whole unit had actually been in Germany. That was in June, and then in August, three of us get sent back to help out because there was two things going on. There was NATO's Operation Harvest, which was--or we called it Operation Harvest. The NATO thing was Operation Essential Harvest and it was the ethnic Albanians from Kosovo were going across the border into Macedonia, and they wanted to stop them from destabilizing the government there so they were disarming 'em. That was, the harvest was taking all of the weapons away from these Albanians that were moving into Macedonia. So, the 101st Birds who were there were doing that. And the main mission there was to get, resupply all of the bases in Kosovo, the big Camp Bondsteel, and then a whole bunch of satellite bases and stuff. So we went there and picked up that job, which was made harder at the time because with all these Albanians coming over the Macedonians had closed the border between Macedonia and Kosovo so all the supplies had to go. I think they came off the ship like in Albania, and then they came by train to Macedonia, and then we flew them into Kosovo. Normally, they would go by truck or rail all the way up to the big Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo, but that wasn't an option because the highway was closed and blocked off. So we spent about a month following stuff from Macedonia into Kosovo to keep the bases supplied. We'd do that three trips a day each time taking up a twenty-foot Conex shipping container thing and then bringing an empty one back and just doing that about three trips a day; three aircraft, three trips, so--

John: You would sling load them underneath?

Joe: Yup. Plus, we would load the internal with passengers and whatever other cargo.

John: You did that for a month, little over a month then?

Joe: Yeah. I think, I can't remember when we got there. We got there in August and we left there in September. I know I was there for September 11th, 2001. I was in Macedonia watching it on TV, yeah.

John: What was your reaction?

Joe: It was--I remember sitting in a—I was praying the Rosary for a while, watching that cause I remember, vividly, the first bombing. Was it in '93? When they said how—cause I was telling everybody how long it took them to get everybody out of that building then. I thought for sure that there would be like 10-12,000 people dead because I know each building had 10,000 people working in it and, in '93, it took something like three hours to get everyone out. And here they fell in like an hour so I thought

the loss--I was surprised that the loss of life was a lot less than what I thought it would be. I remember praying the Rosary, and then--we were all kind of on edge because we were in, you know, Yugoslavia. That the Balkans area has a high population of Muslims so we didn't really know if we should be on guard or what. We all kinda got pretty tense after that. Normally we had a good rapport. People would go out into the community all the time so it kind of changed after that.

John: You returned back to Germany soon after?

Joe: Yeah. The border got opened up, or tensions eased between them so the border opened up and they didn't need us, so we flew back to Germany.

John: Okay. You were there, also, during the 60th Anniversary of D-Day?

Joe: Yeah. That was in 2004. It was after going to Iraq, but yeah, we went to—in 2002, I'd gone to Normandy because President Bush visited on Memorial Day. And usually when the President visits Europe, the Chinooks of Big Windy go to a haul position—the President flies in his Marine Corps helicopter, Marine One, and then the Chinooks go to take all the other straphangers that come with him, all the White House staff, Secret Service, and press. They fly in Big Windy Chinooks. So we got to go to do that. That was a nice trip because we went to Paris first and spent like five days in Paris and, basically, there was just planning on going on so all us enlisted and stuff just had five days in Paris on the government's dime. So we went out every day and went to the museums and everything and sampled the French food, and wine, and beer, and that.

John: Where did you stay when you were there?

Joe: Um, I can't remember the name of the hotel, but it was right downtown. It was about three or four blocks from the Eiffel Tower.

John: Nice.

Joe: Yeah, I could find it. I'm trying to remember the name of the Metro station it was by, but I could find it on a map. I know I could walk back there again.

John: Pretty nice digs, then?

Joe: Yeah, it was nice. And I had a good time cause I had been there before when I was in high school so I was able to show everybody around and help lead some sightseeing.

John: Where did you go? What did you look at?

- Joe: Ah, I remember going to Versailles. I had been there in high school and I wanted to go back again, cause I loved it so much, and look around the gardens and stuff. So, I went back there and [to] Montmartre, which is the hill on the north side of Paris where they've got the big Sacré Cœur church.
- John: Okay.
- Joe: I like that cause when I went in '95, it was all grey from years of pollution. Then in 2002 when I went back, it had been cleaned so it was all glittering white again. That was really neat to see. And then, near that, there's like a square where there's a whole bunch of artists. So I went there and friends had caricatures done by the artists there in chalk and charcoal. That was neat. And, of course, the Louvre and Notre Dame and all that.
- John: Okay, well, let's go back then to—try to do it chronologically, I guess.
- Joe: Okay, that was in 2002.
- John: That was 2002, the 60th Anniversary?
- Joe: No, that was Memorial Day.
- John: When you returned from the Balkans?
- Joe: Yeah. This was the first time I went to Paris, to Normandy, was in 2002 for Memorial Day because the President visited. And then, so after Paris, we moved up to Normandy, to the airport at Caen-Carpiquet, which was—Caen—this airport in this town was the British target. They were supposed land there to take it on D-Day. It wound up taking a month to get there, but they were supposed to liberate it on D-Day. We landed at the airport there, and then we had a hotel in Lisieux. And so, we spent a couple days practicing the Marine Corps helicopter through there. So we did all the run-throughs the day before and then we flew the day of the mission. Air Force One landed. It wasn't the big one, the 747, that's too big to land there. So they flew the 747 to Paris, I think, And then, everyone got into this smaller plane. I'm not sure what it was, 707, or something. **[End of Tape 1, Side B]** And that one flew I, and that landed. And the President--there's a lot of rules and stuff that goes on with that. We can't have any of our engines running or blades turning while the President is outside, so we always had to leave places after him and get there before him. So when Air Force One landed, he went and got into Marine One and took off. And then all the reporters, and White House staff, and Secret Service got on our Chinooks and we started up and flew off. I think we first to, ah, [pause in recording]—along the cove. We went to Sainte-Mere-Eglise,

dropped the people off in Sainte-Mere-Eglise, which was the first town liberated by the 82nd, by the Airborne Troops, the night of D-Day. Anyway, we dropped them off. We went and landed in the cow field and just hung out there for like forty-five minutes while the President gave his speech and stuff. And we were just playing around, and there were some French gendarmes there on dirty bikes, basically to guard us. So talking with them, communicating as best we can, showing them the airplane, and then they're like, "You want to ride the motorcycles?" Our pilots let us cause they were worried we'd get hurt. [laughs] So then we did that. We went and got the signal the President left. We started up and flew back over and picked up all the passengers, and then flew to Colleville, the American Cemetery at Omaha Beach and then set down there again, let everyone off. And the President gave the intended speech, left a wreath at the statute there, at the monuments there, looked around, and then we flew them back to the airport, and they left. It was a lot of fun and a great honor. We take a lot of pride in that. We go all out. We had VIP kits made up a few years ago because they do this a lot. So we had plush carpet on the ramp. The Chinook is normally a pretty utilitarian thing. It's got a aluminum, an extruded aluminum floor and just vinyl seats, or, you know, canvas seats to sit on, and not much to look at. So for the VIP stuff like this, we have carpet that we put down, and we cover the seats with the nice vinyl, and put padding on 'em and stuff. We really go out and really take pride in it, in doin' that.

John: Do passengers comment? Do they appreciate it?

Joe: Well, most of the time they don't have time to stick around because we're getting them on and off in a hurry, but the second time I was there in 2004, I had the Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Meyers, on board and he said it was really nice, so that made it worthwhile.

John: Yeah, definitely.

Joe: And the day after that, we had time yet so we went sightseeing the day after and I went to Normandy and saw the cemetery at Omaha Beach and all that.

John: This was in 2002?

Joe: Mmm, yeah.

John: Your impressions?

Joe: That was, it's hard to talk about it, you know. It moves you so much. And to see all these rows, row, after row, the names of all the missing and just

how huge this thing was. It's hard to fathom how big it was and how that many people can get killed in a single day.

John: After that, in 2002, what did you do next?

Joe: What was next? The next was--

John: The international incident in Italy?

Joe: Yeah, yeah. In August, again, or in the spring time, the 101st left Macedonia and Kosovo, and we took it over again; sent in three aircraft down there at a time. In July, they were doing a practice with some special operations troops where they do what's called a fast-rope. We have like a two-inch diameter rope that they drop out of the back of the Chinook and, to insert the guys; they slide down it, kind of like a fire pole, and they were doing that at Camp Bondsteel, practicing, and the pilots weren't high enough. And basically, you come in really fast and then you flare up. The front of the air freight goes up to slow you down, and then you level out, and drop the ropes, and they slide down. Well, they came in too low and, when the pilot pulled back on the stick to bring the nose of the airplane up, the tail end slammed into the ground and caused a lot of damage. And then they hit the ground, and then the shock had broken part of the rotor blades, so they hit the aircraft. No one was killed, people were bumps and bruises, but it wrecked the airplane pretty good. So then in August I was on a mission to take a replacement one down there because they still needed three aircraft down there. So, it was my helicopter, the one we were dropping off--the two Chinooks, and then we brought a Blackhawk along, too; so we could come back, because to fly over water, you need two helicopters. So we were going down. We were going to go down through the German Alps, through Austria, down to Italy, then down the east coast of Italy 'til you get down to near the boot. And then you cross over the Aegean Sea to over Albania and into Kosovo. Well, we started that; we got a late start because something was broke. And we made it as far as Aviano, Italy, the American airbase there, stayed over night there. Then the next morning, we started out going down the coast of Italy, and this was the same thing I'd done the year before when I went and come back. And it's the same thing they'd been doing for five, six years when going from Germany to Italy, deploying helicopters. And then you fly along the coast, you know, usually around a couple hundred feet. The Chinook, like I said, it's not pressurized. It doesn't normally fly very high. So that's what we would do and, as we flew down the coast, we didn't really see anything was wrong. We had a good day. It was a beautiful day, like in the 90s. The sun was shining so we'd fly along, look at all the sights, and we'd go along all the beaches full of people, and we'd wave and stuff. And we were down around a hundred feet or so, going about a hundred miles an hour, and just waving, you know, watching all the people go by,

putting on a good show like you want to do. So we got down there, re-fueled, flew across the Aegean and into Kosovo. When we get there, we get told that they're saying that we flew really low on a beach in Italy and blew over furniture and umbrellas and injured like two dozen people, and this was all of a sudden reported in all these Italian papers, and there's a big stink being made about it. The U.S. Ambassador to Italy was demanding a big investigation and we were immediately grounded, not allowed to fly. So we've got two helicopters that we're supposed to be taking back to Germany that can't get back there. We sat there for about a week while they were figuring out what was going on. And then, we got put on a Air Force C-130 and flew back to Ramstein, Germany, and then got driven back home to Eibelstadt, and that started about--this was September so this was like five months of, you know, being grounded, not being able to fly, and investigation going on, and it got made into—really, really blown out of proportion. The main thing, the problem that it was about was a few years earlier, I don't know if you remember, a U.S. Navy jet had been flying in the Italian Alps.

John: And clipped a cable.

Joe: And had clipped the cable on a gondola at a ski resort, and about twenty-two people died when the gondola fell. So, the Italians were pretty sensitive about American aircraft. Well, some of them were anyway. So, apparently there'd been a rule passed that U.S. aircraft weren't supposed to fly below a thousand feet. Well, we'd been flying at a hundred feet and cleared there by Italian air traffic controllers, and where they wrote this rule down wasn't anywhere that anyone ever looked when they were planning flights.

John: Okay.

Joe: So, we didn't know about it, and the air traffic controllers didn't know about it, or didn't say anything about it. So technically, we were doing something wrong, but--the long and the short of it is. As far as I know, they never found anyone who was injured or anybody who witnessed it. It was just somebody started this rumor and it got blown way big. Like a couple of weeks after, there was already a previously scheduled visit where the Italian President, or Prime Minister, came to Washington and talked with President Bush and stuff. I don't know if it came up or not. I didn't hear anything about it. But then, going through this whole investigation was a pain for me because here I was grounded so I couldn't do my job. I felt really bad. And then they had the investigation. Part of it took place on our airfield, but we weren't allowed to take part. They had brought beach sand, chairs, and umbrellas up from Italy to Germany to test out how much rotor wash it would take to blow them over. So they set it

up out on the airfield, and then they had two Chinooks and a Blackhawk flying by it over and over again at different speeds and different altitudes, and they said, some of the guys, some of my friends that were there during this said that they never even got the stuff to move until they hovered a Chinook over it at eighty feet and then umbrellas blew over. And the investigators cheered because they had finally made stuff move. [John laughs] So yeah, I mean, a lot of it was just--I didn't like the way it was handled.

John: A lot of political BS?

Joe: Yeah.

John: Were the investigators Italian? American?

Joe: No, it was investigated by, ah, the main one was, I want to say he was a major from the Southern European Task Force. He was a OH-58 pilot [Kiowa Helicopter pilot], who was stationed in Italy.

John: How did it, I mean, you were grounded and the crews were grounded. You guys would talk about this, the fact--

Joe: Yeah. I mean, we were just trying to go on. My platoon leader, Lieutenant Colbert, was my pilot that day so he was grounded, too.

John: Matt Colbert?

Joe: No, C. Paul Colbert, and so he was one of my pilots and then another one of my pilots was actually my company commander so he was grounded, too, because he was the pilot of the other aircraft. And it was a mess, and I didn't--The commander didn't want to rock the boat and didn't want to go and ask what's going on. So I would go to him and ask what's going on, and he couldn't tell me, and then I would get mad, and then he would get mad, and--

John: What were you, rank-wise?

Joe: A sergeant.

John: Okay. Who was your commander there?

Joe: Major Nicholas Anthony.

John: So, you were grounded for five months. Could you leave the area?

- Joe: Yeah, I just couldn't do flight duties. I still did everything else normally. It was just—they said it wasn't punitive; it wasn't a punishment. It was just, you know, administrative because of the investigation going on. But in the mean time, I was a flight engineer and I got a school slot for the flight engineers' instructor course at Fort Rucker, but you have to be able to fly. So it turns out that things weren't exactly done by the book in this investigation because I got sent to Fort Rucker and there was nothing in my records that said I wasn't supposed to be flying, that I was under investigation. So, I wound up going to that school and becoming a flight engineer instructor so that I would be able to train people to be flight engineers and you have annual certifications and tests you have to take. So, I would be administering those tests to people.
- John: So that's a move in the right direction--
- Joe: Yeah.
- John: Right?
- Joe: Yeah. I mean, basically, that's moving up in the career path. So I was excited about that and wanted to do that, but I still felt bad cause of all this other stuff going on. That was in November of 2002 that I went there to Fort Rucker TDY [temporary duty] for the course.
- John: Did you like the guys you were working with?
- Joe: Yeah. Oh, yeah, I had a great group of guys there. We all got along pretty good, a little bit of rivalry between the two flight platoons, but you always have that. You need that competition, healthy competition, to keep things going.
- John: Are there women in the platoons?
- Joe: Yes, not many. There are not many women in aviation, but they're starting to get more. We had one crew chief, a female crew chief, in the other platoon. Then we had more in maintenance and, of course, in the other platoons: the petroleum, fuel oil petroleum, oil and lubricant, the fuel handlers, quite a few females there, and the normal places like supply and the medics, and stuff like that.
- John: Did that affect things?
- Joe: Not really, I mean, I never saw it as a problem. I mean, the biggest problem I saw with women doing stuff is that they have lower physical standards to be in the Army, but when they do the same job as a man, they really should be able to do it. I mean, because you figure a tool box, the

standard tool box we're given weighs about, you know, forty pounds. And if you can't lift that up, I don't know, you shouldn't really have the job, I guess. You know, I mean that's what bothers me the most is that to do the same job, there's different standards. If you're a male or a female, you know.

John: Did other guys resent that?

Joe: There's nothing really spoken about it. I mean, it shows up now and then. You know, people complain, well you know when you have to go help someone that you think should be able to do the job on their own and you know you could do it on your own. Sometimes you'd get upset about that, but for the most part it's pretty good.

John: Any favoritism, by commanders?

Joe: Not really. I mean, you get some just on the basic male/female dynamic. It's with a lot of guys--it's in your nature to want to help the female do her job. So that kinda happens sometimes. But for the most part, I don't think it's a problem. I just wish that the standards were more equitable. I have no problem with women doing the job, but as long as they're capable of it, you know. If I've gotta carry a hundred pounds, then so do you. If I've gotta run two miles, then so do you, you know.

John: Mm hmm.

Joe: I don't think--I think that having the physical standards is different more of a—you know, is what I mean to say.

John: I think you said it before.

Joe: It's--I think it's unfairly treating them cause it's giving them an advantage, you know, that just based on their gender, you know.

John: Um, did you experience or did you see homosexuals in the Army?

Joe: Ah—

John: I don't want to say experienced, but-- [both laugh]

Joe: Not any males that I know of. I mean there was rumors and stuff, but my commander, one of my commanders, when I was in Alaska, was a lesbian and she wound up quitting, or resigning her commission, because of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy [DADT}. Her name was Lissa V. Young, and she was one of the best commanders I had. She really listened to the troops. She really knew what was going on. She knew how to command,

but she wound up not making Colonel or Lieutenant Colonel because she was a lesbian. And we all kind of knew it. No one really talked about it, but we all kind of knew it. I mean, you know, hush, hush, every once in a while, “Hey, you know, she’s—“ But it didn’t really make a day-to-day difference in anything. And, like I said, she was a really good commander, and I was sad, when I heard that she got out because of this; that she was basically forced out.

John: Yeah, cause you can’t stay in the Army too long if you’re not being promoted.

Joe: Yeah.

John: Unless for medical reasons. Ah, so you went to the school. You came back in 2003 after the school?

Joe: Yeah, while I was at school at Fort Rucker, the unit got orders to Kuwait in February. So I finished up the school in January and got back, and then, by that time, the investigation into the incident had been completed. I didn’t actually get told, “Well, here’s what happened.” I got called before the Battalion commander and he basically gave me a letter, and told me that it’s my responsibility to report any wrongdoing I see. There was no mention in it of the actual incident, and I was never actually told how the incident report came out or what the findings were. It was just that, “Here’s this letter. Now you’re okay to go fly.” Which always kind of bothered me because it was a full-bird colonel that told me I was grounded. He gave me a signed letter from him saying, “Don’t fly until further notice.” And then the most I got was a lieutenant colonel, telling me to tell people when I see something’s not being done right. So, I was a little--

John: If you don’t even know the result of the investigation, which could have indicated everything as being all right anyways?

Joe: Yeah, so, but I basically forgot about it and threw it aside because we were getting ready to deploy to war. So it was basically just kind of ended. That’s the view I had of it, is that they needed us to fly, so the investigation just kind of ended.

John: Oh, yeah, that’s interesting. Yeah, you know, coincidence?

Joe: Yeah. So, I get back to Germany and we’re just getting ready. I had like a day. We were loading up the Conex’s [container express] and putting them on trucks to be shipped out. I had a day. They said, “Well, if you want to put anything in the Conex, you gotta pack it now.” So, I had to--didn’t really know how to pack for war; didn’t have much time, [both laugh] so I

started throwin' all kinds of stuff in a trunk and in a duffle bag and wound up taking it with me. So I had like my personal sleeping bag, and I had a Monopoly board, and Scrabble, and a game of Twister, which I probably didn't need to take to war, but it seemed like when I'm packing up to go somewhere for a year, it seemed like that was the stuff to take.

John: A game of Twister?

Joe: Yeah, it did come in handy, though, because that vinyl sheet. I wound up using it to cover stuff up, to keep it from getting wet and dirty.

John: Oh, really?

Joe: Yeah. [laughs] But then I got my checkride for flight engineer instructor there, and because I--so I got that done, and within--we had a week that we started ferrying the helicopters to Antwerp, Belgium, where they were put on the ship to be sent to Kuwait. That was like around the 20th / 25th of January. So we went back, and going through all the pre-deployment processing, and taking classes, and getting our shots, and the hoof stuff. So I had gotten a small pox vaccination, and started an anthrax series, and I forget what else we got, taught how to use the--take the Cipro [ciprofloxacin hydrochloride], the antibiotics for anthrax and, ah, I think we started--no, we didn't start on the malaria pills until we actually got there.

John: So, you didn't ride on the ship with the helicopters?

Joe: No, we sent like two guys on the ship just to take care, cause they were all shrink-wrapped in plastic and stuff, and they took about three weeks to get there. So, we went back to Germany and started doing all this deployment paperwork and stuff. And then, on the 8th of February was when we were actually set to deploy. So on the 8th of February, we drew weapons. We were told like on the 4th or 5th that we were leaving on the 8th. And this time the Commander was still Major Anthony. He was also a Baptist minister. And they told us not to drink. They forbid us from drinking. I did anyway. [both laugh] Went out, got drunk for a few nights, hung out, and like a Friday night went and got drunk and then got up the next day. We were leaving at 8 o'clock at night was when we were having weapons draw and to go to the hangar to get to leave. So we did that, and my platoon sergeant knew about me drinking, and stuff. She wasn't too happy, but I was there. Wasn't much they could say, I was there. So that was one of my things I started to learn is when I could get away with stuff.

John: What were your feelings at the point?

- Joe: Oh, just kind of excited and nervous, you know, waitin' to see what happens. I felt pretty good, like I was trained, that I knew what was going to happen. It was a little different, you know, just kind of apprehensive and excited, just wanted to go. Go do it, been training to do my job for so long, and I wanted to show that I could do it and actually pull it off. But it eventually--didn't take too long, so you just--you get to feel tired because, like I said, it was at 8:00 o'clock at night we started weapons draw. At 10:00 o'clock, I think, we had our formation at the hangar. Then we did a few more paperwork. Then we sat around until like 1:00 in the morning. Then the buses took us to Ramstein. You know, that's like a two-and-a-half-hour drive from where I was at Eibelstadt. So we got there and then sat around more, waitin' for the plane. Then we'd get on, had a chartered Delta airliner that we went and got on for something like a long flight to Kuwait. So I know we stayed on that plane for a long, oh quite a while because we had to fly down like over Egypt and then south of Saudi Arabia or something.
- John: Really?
- Joe: Yeah, it was somewhere. We had to go at least south of Israel. We couldn't fly over Israel or somewhere we couldn't fly over. We had to go down to get to Kuwait. That was a long time cramped in cause everybody's got rucksacks and weapons, and you know, I think, everybody had like a rucksack and another carryon or something. And I was just all cramped in there and sitting around waiting. It wasn't a bad flight, though, I mean as far as being on the airliner goes because we got to take weapons with us, you know. You didn't usually get to carry a gun on an airplane. [laughs]
- John: That's kind of fun.
- Joe: Until everybody's trying to figure out where to put 'em and-- [both laugh]
- John: What did you do once you got to Kuwait then?
- Joe: Ah, let's see, it was fun going in. Like thirty/forty-five minutes out, they said, "All right, we have to close all of the window shades and turn all the lights out." So, you're in this airplane that's completely dark. We go and landed into Kuwait City. I guess they were worried about it being visible to the Iraqis or something. That was one of their precautions, is that they had to be completely blacked out. We landed at, ah, around midnight in Kuwait City. And then we got on some buses and went to what I guess was later called Camp Wolf. But we piled in an old tent to wait for more buses for a few hours, and then we got on, like it was about 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning, we got on some buses and taken to Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, which was moved into a warehouse there. Arifjan was still under

construction. Basically, it had two sides to it. One half was all warehouses, and one half was like barracks and stuff.

John: Okay.

Joe: Before the war, it was getting built to be the new U.S. Garrison in Kuwait. Since the Gulf War in '91, the US Garrison had been at the port, at a place called Camp Doha, which was the port facility that the U.S. had taken over in '91; but now they were getting ready to move to this new Camp Arifjan. But it still wasn't finished being constructed. All the warehouses had been done. That was where they stored all the prepositioned equipment.

John: Okay.

Joe: And, as they moved all the tanks and stuff out, we moved in with our cots to live in the warehouses. We were there for a couple of weeks; we waited, I think, three or four days for the ship to get in with our helicopters, and then we would shuttle back and forth from Camp Arifjan to the port to get the helicopters off the boat. And they were taken apart and shrink-wrapped, so we had to take the shrink-wrap off. We had to reinstall the blades, had to reinstall antennas and stuff, basically all the stuff that poked out we had to take off to put the shrink-wrap on, and now we had to put it all back on. And because we were going to be in the sand we put-- cause the sand abrades the blades. The blades are made of titanium and nickel on the outside so we had to cover that up so it wouldn't get worn away. In the past, they'd always used paint, but they had come up with this new stuff, like a rubberized tape that they were using then so we had to put all this rubber tape on the blades to absorb the punishment from all the sand and dust. So, we had to do that before we put them on the helicopters. That took us about a week or so to get all the helicopters put together and then flown back to Camp Arifjan. And once we had them all there it was another couple of days, and then we moved to another place. It was an old Kuwaiti Army base. I think it was the 35th, ah, we called it the 35th Kuwaiti. I think, it was the 35th Kuwaiti Infantry or Armor Regiments' Headquarters, but this is—and we moved into some old, disused barracks there that were, you know, doors were broken, windows were broken, and it hadn't been used in awhile. All the toilets were broken, showers barely worked so--And we stayed there until April. So we were there--this was about two weeks before the war actually started; the beginning of March we moved in there.

John: What did you do for showers and toilets?

Joe: We just, for toilets we had port-a-potties outside, um, and the toilets they did have there were the "Eastern Style," basically just a trough on the floor with foot marks on either side that you squat over, nice squatters. But the

plumbing didn't work for them. The showers, some of them worked, some of them didn't. So, we had, we could use the showers, but there wasn't much hot water. Their hot water system, I guess, consisted of a tank on the roof that the sun would heat the water.

John: Okay.

Joe: So we used that. But then for, for a—we had port-a-potties outside for when we had to make deposits [laughs].

John: So, was that a local Kuwaiti company that serviced those?

Joe: Yes, it was. They had somebody come in and service them, and then like, for meals we had MREs [Meals Ready to Eat] and they had the MKT, the Mobile Kitchen Trailer set up so we had T-rations [hot meal; thermostabilized rations] for that.

John: For breakfast and dinner or what?

Joe: Yeah, pretty much, and then MREs for lunch. As towards the end when we were there we started getting some A-rations [meal prepared with fresh, refrigerated, or frozen food] to get local food and stuff.

John: You spent two weeks preparing, planning?

Joe: Yeah, that was a lot of—there was a lot of training because everyone had to get certified to fly in the sand and dust. So, I was busy training, me and the other instructors, we were taking everyone out and practicing landing in the desert with all the sand blowing up, and which surprisingly enough my time in Alaska had prepared me for because it was the same procedure for landing in blowing snow as it is for landing in sand and dust. So, I knew something about that.

John: That's pretty interesting actually. Did the tape on the blades, did it work?

Joe: Yeah, it works pretty good. It wears out eventually.

John: Okay.

Joe: And it took a little getting used to 'cause it—I mean about every time they'd do a phase, every couple hundred hours, we'd have to replace it and patch it a little bit. It worked pretty good, saved a lot of money on blades, I guess.

John: That's—that's good.

Joe: So we did that, practiced in the air. As it came down towards time to start we had a couple missions come down. One was, they needed for the start of the war they had a couple mission planned for us. One was a “Fat Cow” or refueling operation where we put—we have extra tanks, fuel tanks, we can put inside the helicopters, three 800 gallon tanks so it could take extra fuel. And two aircraft, four, I think, two or four aircraft were going to do that for the Apaches. They were going to have to take these—they basically turned these into flying gas stations. They fly ‘em, and they’ll fill one up with rockets and ammunition and then two others up with these fuel tanks. They call it a “Fat Cow” mission. They fly ‘em up further into Iraq, and then set up basically a gas station and rearming point because the attack helicopters, the Apaches, don’t have as long a range as the Chinook does. So we basically extend their range by bringing more rockets and more fuel for them to rearm and refuel deep inside. So we had one part of our unit was set up to do that for the beginning of the war, and this was like supposed to be for the first night, and then another group of, I think, four or five airplanes were sent were sent to work with, ah—what do you call it? UAV [Unmanned Aerial Vehicles] Unit with the Army’s Hunter UAVs. And they were gonna take and put the UAVs inside the Chinook and their control trailers and all that and fly these forward so that there would be a reconnaissance UAVs over the forward lines. So that was set up, and then the group I was in, we had two helicopters. We were tasked out to, ah, what was it? 3rd Infantry Division—**[End of Tape 2, Side A]** was it 3rd? Yeah, 3rd ID for, ah, long range reconnaissance. So the night before the war we were supposed to insert reconnaissance troops about two-hundred-and-fifty miles deep in Iraq, and that’s what we wound up doing. That’s what I wound up the first night of the war. It was supposed to happen before the war started, but the Iraqis wound up—they wound up—the war started like two days earlier than it was actually scheduled to.

John: Oh, really?

Joe: Yeah, because some of the Iraqis in the southern part started firing missiles over the border and stuff.

John: Okay. Just a—I think [Approx. 5 sec. pause in recording] So you’re talking about the war beginning two days early?

Joe: Ah, yeah, I guess it was—we were scheduled, I think, to start on the 22nd because my first mission was supposed to happen on the 21st, the night of the 21st to put reconnaissance elements in for the, ah, 3rd Infantry Division across the border. But apparently some of the Iraqi units along the border got jittery on the 18th or 19th. Then they kinda started some stuff, and then they sent troops right across the border to stop that because it was threatening Kuwait. They were firing missiles into Kuwait and stuff, so, but then the actual planned operations didn’t start until the 22nd.

- John: Okay, so how did that affect your mission, and what did you do—your unit do in response then?
- Joe: Um, it was, still went all pretty much according to the plan for us. I think some of the “Fat Cow” missions, the refueling mission, went off a little early because they were using the Apaches to stop these Iraqis to stop near the border. But ours went pretty much smoothly. We went on the 20th over from our base at 35th to Camp Virginia which was headquarters of the 3rd Infantry Division. And then we—the 20th we ran a—the night of the 20th we did a practice run with the LRTs guys (??), the long range reconnaissance teams or something. I don’t know. I forget exactly what they were called, but they—so, we did, a—in the Kuwaiti desert we did a couple, we flew around in circles and then dropped them off and just practiced them getting off the helicopter and stuff, and then went back and got some sleep and did it for real the 21st.
- John: What were, I guess, feelings or expectations when you did this?
- Joe: It was pretty, pretty apprehensive about it, and excited to do it. I mean, this isn’t something that Chinook units are really supposed to do—a line unit, you’re only where—don’t really have any armor. We’re made to haul cargo and passengers, mostly behind the lines going two hundred miles deep into Iraq, you know, across the forward line of troops was not something we were really meant to do. There are special operations units that do that. This is like a special operations unit kind of mission, not really what we were normally trained for, but we were pretty confident we could pull it off. We just, you know, there’s always that this isn’t right kinda thing. I know I can do it, but I shouldn’t have to [laughs].
- John: You felt prepared though?
- Joe: Yeah, I mean, we had practiced pretty good, and we had—I guess, I didn’t feel prepared, but I felt we could do it. I mean, there was a lot of stuff that I didn’t think was right. One of the things, right in the fall of 2002 we had gotten all new engines on our helicopters. We went from the old T-55-L712s to T-55-GA714s, which was a whole—we went from basically like a carburetor to a fuel injection, electronic transmission, or it’s—we went from the old analog system to computerized engine controls.
- John: Okay.
- Joe: And had to relearn everything so we were still new on that. Ah, some of our defensive counter measures were brand new. We had, we used to have one flare dispenser bucket that shot one type of flare, and then they installed right before we left a system called ALE-47 which fired three—it

was basically four times bigger. Instead of thirty flares, we now had a hundred and twenty, and there were three different kinds, and it's programmable for different threats, but we didn't have any training on it. And we didn't have any of the maintenance manuals to fix it. So when we were in Kuwait, getting ready to start, we were practicing using it, and it wasn't—we'd gone through all the tests, and it wasn't working right, and it wasn't working right, and we didn't have the books to fix it, and like it's supposed to have three different kinds of flares. We only had one kind, the old M-206s, and then the two new kinds the M-211 and 212. One they said they weren't going to give us because it was—it would spontaneously combust. They had problems with it just catching fire. Basically the 206 was a regular bright flare, and then these two, one was an infrared, and one is super bright.

John: Okay.

Joe: And then they couldn't get it to us because the only place they were was in a warehouse in, I think, it was Maryland, and that had collapsed because of a snowstorm. So they had to dig them out of the rubble to ship 'em to us. And there was, when they installed them, there's a little pin that goes on the back of the flare dispenser bucket, but it's hard to describe. I don't know. It's pretty technical [laughs], but, anyway, there was piece missing so they weren't working right, and it took us about two weeks to figure this out and then had to call back to Germany to the civilians that installed it and get them to send us a little baggie of these pins that were sitting in their desks that they forgot to install. So, it would work, it would do the test correctly, but it wouldn't operate correctly without these pins. So, we had finally gotten that straightened out, and we had it installed correctly, but we still didn't exactly know how to use them or how to fix them. So, I mean, it was a lot of little things like that—that it was the same with like our, ah, our NBC gear, our MOPP gear, the chemical protective suits. We got brand new ones, a brand new type when we got to Kuwait. So we had spent years training how to put these things on in a hurry with one kind of suit, and then when we actually get in trouble where there might be chemical agents used we got a whole new kind of suit with different buttons and snaps and everything. So we had to try to in like a week completely learn this new stuff that's supposed to be incredibly vital to saving our lives. They waited until we got there to give it to us. It was a big, seemed like a long list of things like that, that at the last minute everything changed, and we were dealing with a completely new stuff after all the years of training, but so, there was that kind of apprehension in our minds when we were going through it, but, you know, this is all—we're gonna do it 'cause we have to do it, but it's not like [laughs]—I'm prepared to do it in that I know it has to be done, but not that I think I have, I know everything I need to know and have everything I need to have. It's like, it's time to go, I'm going.

John: Right. Stop throwing new equipment in my face. I'll make do with the old, just for the sake of comfort.

Joe: Yeah, you know, people make fun of—I think it was Rumsfeld or Cheney that said, “You go with the Army you got, not the one you want.” Well, people made fun of ‘em for saying that, but that’s what it is. When it’s time to go you can’t wait until you have everything perfect, you know. The mission is supposed to leave at 20:00 [8:00 P.M.], so, it does.

John: Yeah, and there are setbacks in getting new equipment right before you’re going in, too, because you’re not used to it, you’re not used to training with it.

Joe: Yeah.

John: And, yeah, it just causes more problems. We had the same deal. We would, we actually put some of our new equipment just away in boxes ‘cause we didn’t want to deal with it right before doing a mission. It doesn’t make sense.

Joe: Mm hmm.

John: So, how did that first mission go then?

Joe: It went pretty good. It was, ah, another thing that was different in training, we always, if it was a night mission, we took off, I think, about 8:00 o’clock at night, 20:00, and it was dark. There was no moon or anything. Normally, in training, because of the risk issue, you don’t fly unless you’ve got the moon out or a certain amount of illumination at night. Well, that went out the window in Iraq. It was, the darker it was, the better we liked it. So, this was, it was really dark, I mean, you had some starlight, but the moon wasn’t up yet so we just went with it. That took a while getting used to, ‘cause the night-vision goggles just amplify the light that’s there. I mean, if there’s no light they still don’t work. So, it took a little getting used to, a little harder to see, make out what we were looking at, but thankfully then we didn’t have any lights on so the dark helped us, kept us hidden. Ah, not that we needed it so much. Our route stayed pretty much in the western desert, away from all the cities and stuff. Most of them are on the eastern part, along the rivers. We stayed out in the southwest in the desert. So, it went pretty good.

John: You were on the flight as Crew Chief?

Joe: Yeah, I was a Flight Engineer. I was on the tail on the ramp of the helicopter, basically, manning machine gun and watching behind us. And

then we had two helicopters. One, the other one had, what was it? Twelve guys, two teams of six, and then we had one team of six. And we had, 'cause we were going so deep, both helicopters had the 1,000 gallons of fuel in the regular tanks, and we each had another two 800 gallon tanks inside. So, we each had about 2,600 gallons of fuel, which would give us about five hours. So we went—I was on the ramp. Basically it sits level, and I straddled the machine gun and just keep an eye behind us for what's going on and at the same time I've got the maintenance panel in back that has hydraulic pressures and monitors the engines and transmission. So, every once and a while I have to check that and tell the pilots, you know, everything's okay or what's going on. And just keeping the passengers informed, what's going on. It was a lot of just staring out into the black and hoping I didn't see anything.

John: And at that point you'd rather not see anything, right?

Joe: Yeah.

John: What happened next, after you—

Joe: It was pretty quiet. It was about a two-and-a-half, two-hour, two-and-a-half hour flight to where we were going, and it was a place that was at that time called Objective Rams. Ah, there was like an airfield that they were gonna use for the UAVs, and basically these guys were supposed to set up some hide sights and then watch and be able to report what was going on because the mechanized infantry, 3rd Infantry Division, was going to come up through the desert, and this was their first objective, was this airfield and like a road junction. So, these guys were going to make sure that was all good, and we got up there about a-quarter-after-ten, 10:30 p.m. We did our one insert at the same time as the other helicopter did their first, and we were a couple of miles apart, and then we took off, and we circled while they did their second insertion, and we kind of made—circled, a big circle for a couple of minutes until we got confirmation from the guys on the ground that they were all right and everything was going okay. We didn't have to immediately extract them, and then we kinda turn around and headed back to Kuwait. So, another two hours in the dark—

John: Do you know—

Joe: At that time the moon was coming up about that time, about 10:30, so it was getting a lot easier to see.

John: How high above the ground were you flying?

Joe: We were about, between fifty and two hundred feet. Typically we would fly during the day at fifty feet and at night under goggles about two

hundred or two hundred and fifty, just so we had a little cushion. But we were probably a little lower than that, around a hundred, two hundred feet.

John: And that was on the 21st, you said?

Joe: Yeah, that would have been. I think that was. I mean, I didn't really pay any attention to the calendar at that point. I think it was Friday the 21st. That's what I got in my journal, so.

John: How did the missions change once the invasion actually kicked off?

Joe: Ah, the first day or so was pretty quiet, and then they started needing re-supply, so then it got a lot heavier. We took a lot of water and a lot of ammunition. We had about three days, three, four days, when they were around this Objective Rams fighting that we were—it was after they had taken it, 'cause that's where we were taking the stuff as they were pushing from there. That was going to be like the log [logistics] base for the push to Baghdad [Iraq]. So, we wound up taking a lot of stuff to there over the next couple of days. I can remember taking 155-Howitzer shells, you know, like ten or twelve pallets of them, you know, like ten- fifteen-thousand pounds of these things and flying them up, and then that wasn't so bad. The worst was the other guys who had to carry powder bags, the actual propellant that goes in there. So, they're basically turning their helicopter into a huge bomb. If something hit them, they'd go up. A lot of what was it? 25mm ammunition for the Bradley Fighting Vehicles, not as much small arms, it was mostly all this bigger stuff. And then MREs and water, quite a bit of that. We did a lot of that at night and keep going up and just through. Ah, maybe it was about a week, I guess, just back and forth, every night, taking stuff up there, and I don't know if this was to LZ Rams, or Objective Rams, it was later called LZ Bushmaster or somethin' Bushmaster was its name, but the objectives all had football team names. Like ours was Rams; there was an objective Packers and Lions and stuff for the initial—all the initial phase lines and objectives were named after NFL football teams.

John: What were you doing in between missions at this point, or how would you relax?

Joe: Um—

John: Or did you relax?

Joe: Not too much, because, every time we flew a mission something would break. So when you get back it was basically go to sleep, get as much sleep as you can, then get up and start fixing things because at this point we were still, you know, not used to this operation, working this much or

this fast, and helicopters always break anyway so that you are constantly fixing things. We had a few, we had to replace landing gear because we'd land hard. And there was always something to do; there wasn't a lot of down time at this point. And then it was to start loading up the trucks 'cause we were going to move into Iraq. So we had to pack everything up, still doing missions every day, but packing our own stuff up and loading the trucks and getting them ready and then still didn't know where we were going, just knew that they were going to convoy out, and the—so, eventually that did happen. The convoys left. Most of our unit left in trucks with the equipment, and then the flight crews stayed behind, and we did, pulled missions for about two more days from Kuwait without—with everyone else on the road heading north.

John: Where did they—you eventually establish then?

Joe: We eventually went to, ah, I guess I should back up. This was toward the end of March, beginning of April, and then we eventually went to Tallil [Iraq] on—the T-A-L-L-I-L. It's an airbase in southwest Iraq. That was on, I think, the 3rd or 4th of April, but I wanted to go back, 'cause like the last mission I pulled out of Kuwait was on the 2nd. I got up at like 4:30, four-thirty in the morning or four, something like that. We had switched to doing days because it was easier, and there wasn't so much enemy activity so we didn't really worry about it. But we had, well, I guess that's not true because we had switched to days. We had one group that was, this was a couple days earlier, was supporting, what was it? Eleventh Regiment Infantry—or Eleventh Aviation Regiment, the attack guys, the Apaches, and they were moving them up to Tallil, and it was a flight of three aircraft with slingloads underneath, ISU-90 shipping containers. And they made the mistake of flying directly over a truckload of people. I guess we were still naïve at that point. We didn't—there really, I mean, for the invasion there wasn't really this insurgency. We were looking for you know, regular army troops down there. But they saw, they flew over this truck and all of sudden all of these guys jumped out of it and started shooting at 'em, and it was almost thankful that they had the slingloads on because they took, these shipping containers under the helicopters, took a lot of the, most of the rounds and stuff.

John: Hmm.

Joe: They had one that was like—it took a couple of RPGs [rocket propelled grenades] and was completely destroyed.

John: The shipping container?

Joe: Yeah.

John: Oh.

Joe: So, they punched—they basically punched that stuff off and just left it and took off. And they kind of got split up. One had a problem with part of its rotor—its flight control system, and it made a precautionary landing at this LZ Rams or near it, and they were on the ground there for a couple of days. We didn't know, I mean, there was chaos back in Kuwait because we knew we'd lost an aircraft, but we didn't know if we'd "lost them, lost them" like they had crashed or shot down or what. It took a while to figure this out.

John: And the radios were down, or this was just line-of-sight with those?

Joe: It's just line-of-sight. We have high frequency radios that were supposed to—they're able to talk basically around the world, but we never got enough training on them. The pilots just didn't know how to use 'em. And when we did try it usually didn't work. So, we were relying on, you know, the basic system of everybody else relaying stuff. So, that one made a precautionary landing. Another one actually had, it got hit by—a AK-47 round went up into the, you know, pilot in the cockpit and went through the electrical panel up there and basically shorted out everything on the right side of the aircraft. So, they killed one engine. They only had one engine, and a lot of the flight controls were messed up or out of—it's redundant so they still had enough to fly, but they had a problem there. And another AK-47 round through the tail and bounced off a piece of structure and hit one of the passengers in the cheek. So he was bleeding in back and then an RPG—this is, still amazes me, went through the skin on the back. It went up like in the cargo door in the back that was open and then from the inside of the helicopter out through the skin and then bounced off a rotor blade and never exploded. If it had it would have been the end of them.

John: Yeah.

Joe: But, so they were lucky in some ways. They called that aircraft "Lucky 9-9" after that.

John: Geez! [laughs]

Joe: Yeah. [laughs] It was lucky 'cause later on that same aircraft when we were, this was, I think, in June or July when we were up in Balad [Iraq] was in a hangar or basically a big tent, getting an overhaul, and a mortar round came in and hit a toolbox right next to it [laughs] and exploded. And that actually threw like shrapnel and tools through it. So, it had all these holes in it. It had been shot down, and then shot again on the ground [both laugh].

- John: By a mortar round.
- Joe: Yeah. So, it was “Lucky 9-9.” But, ah, back to the end of March when this happened, and then the third aircraft, I think, turned around and came back to Kuwait. So we eventually found out what happened, but it took a couple of days for them to all get back. That was kind of scary. That was a big deal at the time, our biggest, you know, our biggest problem of the invasion or whatever you call it.
- John: You learned something, too, at that point? Not to—
- Joe: Yeah.
- John: Not to trust any of the locals.
- Joe: Yeah, we learned pretty much to avoid anybody that kinda knew what we were capable of, so.
- John: Yeah.
- Joe: It was a pretty good test. And then my last mission out of Kuwait was on the 2nd. I guess the convoy hadn't left yet; or no, maybe the convoy left that day because I got up at around four in the morning, and they said we were going to pick up the POWs, and I know from the first Gulf War, I had friends that do that, did that then. They would just pack ‘em all in the helicopter and bring ‘em back to Kuwait for interrogation or whatever. But, so, we went out there, and we're getting ready, and they keep talking, and I realized that we we're not going to pick up Iraqis, we we're going to pick up American POWs, and it was actually ones that had been killed and recovered. And it was still a little fuzzy at that time what it was. And we got up there, so then I kinda really changed my idea of what we were doing, you know. I was cool, we were going to get Iraqis, whatever, we can do that, and then all of a sudden it's we're going to get bodies. So, that wasn't—that could change the tone of things.
- John: American bodies?
- Joe: Yeah. So we went; we were going about an hour, hour-and-a-half, into Iraq to Tallil, and that had pretty much just been taken over. There was a few air special operations helicopters there, and the Air Force had just gotten there, and there was like a couple of companies of infantry guarding the place. So, we got there, and basically there's no one around. It hasn't been set up yet. There's no like air traffic control to talk to. There's like one combat control or somethin' that brought us in and didn't know where to put us. So, we kinda parked in the middle, and then we're

like, “Now where do we go?” We knew we were there to pick up bodies, but we didn’t—nothing was set up so we didn’t really know who to talk to or where to go. Finally, some like Air Force guy came up on a four-wheeler, and the pilots talked to him, and he went off, and eventually we see the truck coming towards us, a “deuce-and-a-half,” [2 ½ ton cargo truck] and there was a couple, some medics in there, a guy and two girls and, you know, it didn’t—wasn’t a happy meeting. I mean, by this time it’s about 95-100 degrees. And so they backed the truck up to my helicopter and throw the tarp up; and it’s just stacked with body bags. I’d never—not expecting that at all, and nothing you could do. I mean, the truck looks, a deuce-and-a-half isn’t that big, but it looked like a semi-trailer long. It’s normally like fifteen feet; it looked like fifty, and they’re just stacked up. So, we started pulling ‘em out, and I had planned to put them on the floor ‘cause that’s just what you do, and then my pilot said, “No, we have to put them on the seats ‘cause it’s disrespectful.” It’s like, I didn’t want to argue, but I didn’t think that was right either. So, anyway, we started taking ‘em off, and putting ‘em on the seats, and strapping ‘em down, and it was—they had been buried, killed like a week before and buried, and it was just, the smell was awful, and some of the bags, they weren’t full. I mean, it wasn’t like, full bodies. Some, I mean, the bags are like seven feet long, and some of them you could have folded ‘em in half. They were just half of it was empty, and, yeah, and like these little women medics were able to lift up one of these bags by themselves and stuff. It was just, it was awful and I kept going. So, we took six and put them on my helicopter, and then they moved the truck over to the other helicopter and put six more on there. And then we basically just kinda got ready. I mean, we were still, we all had on our, like I say, it was like 100 degrees, we had on our MOPP suits, or what they call the JLIST [Joint Lightweight Integrated Suit Technology] because we were going, we were within the [John coughs] arc of Iraqi artillery and rockets.

John: Okay.

Joe: So, we were still being careful with that. We were basically at MOPP2, you know, ready to put all the stuff on, our masks and everything if we had to. I’m thankful I had my chemical gloves on at least, so, the rubber gloves, so. Then we’re getting ready and deciding what’s going on. I was the Flight Engineer, and I had my two Crew Chiefs, Aaron Schwab and Nelson Chanquin, and they were like asking the question, “Well, who’s going to ride in back with the bodies?” Because we had, ah, one of the 800 gallon fuel tanks in. So it basically separated the cargo area from the front where the two gunners were and then the space in back where the bodies were and where someone had to ride on the ramp. So, I said, “I’ll do the ramp,” and that was a long flight home, you know, ‘cause it’s hot and these, the smell is awful, and it’s comin’ through the helicopter, and, basically all comin’ right at me. And, so, we get back to Camp Doha,

Kuwait and set down there to, to deliver 'em to Graves Registration or Mortuary Affairs, however you call it. And, of course, they weren't there so we just kind of closed up the helicopter, and sit there in the shade underneath it waiting. The pilots went off to coordinate, to figure out what's going on. Ah, eventually they come, and it's like a PFC and a specialist in a big refrigerator truck. So, we start going to unload, and they opened the doors, and they hadn't turned the refrigeration on so it just smells awful back there. It's hot, and there's blood stains on the floor of it, and, I don't know how, or what this truck, I mean, it was obvious that this is what it was for.

John: Mm hmm.

Joe: I don't know how, it just—they didn't clean it or whatever; but it was—it smelled as bad or worse than the bodies. And then they had—they have rules when you're—how to treat bodies, you know. Up in Tallil we were still in combat—we were, you know, right in the combat zone so it was just do what you have to get 'em, you know, be as respectful as you can. Then all of a sudden we're back in Doha, which is in the rear, and suddenly we're in the world where we have to do everything according to these protocols, and so you can't just pick up a bag and carry it. It has to be on a stretcher. Well, they brought one stretcher. So then we start this ritual of one at a time, going in the helicopter, putting a bag on the stretcher, carrying it to the truck, carrying it all the way up to the front of the truck and laying it down, and so had to repeat this over and over again instead of just hurry it up get it done. I mean, and it's bright daylight. Anybody can see all this stuff, and I just wanted to get it over with, that's all. It seemed to take forever to do all that. And then as we're unloading them my Crew Chief noticed that one of the bags that are on my helicopter was leaking this liquid all over. So, then we had to try and clean that up. We were getting everything, bleach and water that we had, trying to clean that up. And then the pilots decide that we're going to go to Burger King or wherever. I just wanted to get back to the 35th and, you know, get this day over with, but they want to go to the mall. So, then we go—in a matter of hours we're goin' from picking up bodies in a combat zone, you know, within reach of the Iraqis artillery to going to this mall they have in the rear with Burger King and Starbucks and Baskin Robbins and all these reps, all these, you know, people that are gonna stay in Kuwait the whole time. They're never gonna see combat, that have no idea. We're filthy, we're sweating, and it just pissed me off and just made me so sad. I just wanted to get out of there. Eventually, we did. We got back in the helicopters and flew 'em back to the 35th and I got out the pressure washer and stuff and did my best to hose down the helicopter, get it clean, and then put 'em away for the night. And then went back to the barracks we were in. I went up on the roof and took all my stuff and hung it out to dry

and air it out and just kind of sat up there for an hour or so by myself. And then kind went to bed. The next day we moved up to Tallil. So—

John: So, you felt a little animosity towards the people in Kuwait that would never see?

Joe: Yeah, that they had no idea what was going on, and they're getting all their medals and stuff for being there—and just that I had to deal with all that in one day, you know.

John: Yeah.

Joe: I mean—

John: That's, yeah, I was the same way. Even in Afghanistan the people that stay on the bases [**End of Tape 2, Side B**] at Bagram or Kabul that never go out on patrols, they're enforcing these petty little regulations—

Joe: Mm hmm.

John: Like wearing Kevlar when driving a vehicle in a secure area.

Joe: Yeah.

John: The MPs, you guys are idiots, you know.

Joe: Yeah.

John: Don't you know what's going on?

Joe: That was another thing, when you got to Doha you had to put your weapon away. You couldn't walk around Doha with a weapon. We had to secure 'em in a lockbox at the airfield.

John: Yeah.

Joe: I mean, we're in a theater of war, and I can't carry my sidearm? I don't know what; I don't know what they were thinking. Nobody on Doha even carried a weapon.

John: Yeah.

Joe: It's just so crazy and stupid.

John: Yeah, I know the feeling.

- Joe: So then we moved up to Tallil, which was the old airbase, ah, [Approx. 4 sec pause in recording] yeah, Tallil Airbase in southwestern Iraq. It's just southwest of, Nasiriyah, Al Nasiriyah, however you say that. It was an old Soviet-style Iraqi base, so, and we wound up on the south side of the—it had double runways. We were on the south side where there was basically nothing built up. Most of the—all the buildings were on the north side. There were a couple old ruins of hangars. After a while we recognized it from some of the smart bomb videos that we'd seen of the first Gulf War. We recognized the hangars.
- John: Really?
- Joe: Yeah [laughs]. So, hey! Didn't we see it—after we were flying around and looking at 'em from above, it's like, "Hey! I saw that!" [John laughs] You see the big holes in the roof and stuff. So, apparently it had been abandoned for twelve years or so. I thought that was neat. It was next to, ah, Ziggurat, an ancient temple and the ruins of the ancient city of Ur. I think it's spelled U-R, but it's where, ah, Abraham was born, from the Bible.
- John: Really?
- Joe: So, from there we were doing the same kind of missions. We'd fly to Kuwait and pick up supplies and bring 'em up to Bushmaster and, you know, extra troops and stuff like that. So, we were going back and forth, pretty much every day. And then, they started moving forward, and we started going, doing missions to Baghdad International [Airport] when they took that. And, so, we were there for about two weeks. It felt like two months, but it was only about two weeks that we were actually there. And then around Easter my helicopter was due for an overhaul so I went with it back to Kuwait to the maintenance unit there. So, I spent about ten days there. In the meantime the unit moved from Tallil to north of Baghdad, a place called Balad Southeast. On American maps it's called Balad Southeast. So, what they did was, when they didn't know the name of a base, they'd name it according to the city nearest it and the direction it is from that. So, Balad Southeast is southeast of the city of Balad. So, 'cause you hear a lot of these, like Samarra East and a couple other ones.
- John: Ah, that makes sense.
- Joe: So, it was just basically—we didn't know what they called them so we gave them our own names, and that got shortened basically to Balad. So, generally when you hear Army people saying Balad they mean the airbase, not the city.
- John: I didn't know that. That's pretty interesting.

Joe: Yeah. That was another thing. I saw some reporter saying they didn't understand why all the Army people always put the, what is it? The "AI" or the "On" on the front of everything. So, well, that's what's on our maps. So, if we want people to understand what we're talking about we say what's on the map. That got to be a problem though, too, 'cause, as things got a little more settled the—all the units would name their own bases. Like, you know, there was one Al Taqaddum Airbase in Fallujah. We called it TQ, but then when 82nd moved in there they named it FOB [Forward Operating Base] Ridgeway. And then the same with other, some other little bases around there. So we had one name for it, and the unit living there had another name, and then maybe the higher-ups might have a third name. So we would pick up passengers, and they'd say, "We need to go to this place," and then we're trying to figure out where that is, because people are using different names for everything [John laughs]. So, that was, that was—led to some confusion. But usually, we had it planned out ahead of time. We knew what bases we were going to. So, we just had to say, "Well, out of the three, which one is the one you wanted?" [both laugh] Yeah. And, so, after about—yeah, I did about ten days in Kuwait, and we loaded up and had another aircraft. I waited another couple days for another aircraft to get done with its overhaul. And then we went up to Balad, which is about, yeah, about sixty miles? Fifty, sixty miles north of Baghdad. So, we had to get all the way up there. So that's quite a while. Then we would stop either at Tallil to refuel—at this point all of the helicopters were flying with the normal 1,000 gallons, built in tanks, and an 800 gallon tank inside. So, it limited the amount we could carry, but we needed the range because we were going so far. Because pretty much, the supply lines, they seemed to end at Kuwait. And if you wanted anything you had to go back and get it.

John: Hmm.

Joe: I know that was one of the pains we had. Because basically they expected you to come pick this stuff up within twenty-four hours or forty-eight hours or when it came in.

John: In Kuwait?

Joe: Yeah. And we were stationed up in Iraq. And I don't know how some of the like non-aviation units got anything. Because we would order stuff and it would come in, and we'd get down to Kuwait, and they'd say, "Well, we gave it—you weren't here. You didn't pick it up so we gave it away." They had like a big yard of stuff, and if it sat for more than twenty-four hours or forty-eight hours they'd just put a tag on it that anyone could come in and claim it. So, we lost—like a, the John Deere Gators. We had

ordered like eight of them, and they came in, and we never got 'em, because they only went as far as Kuwait. They were never delivered to us.

John: Once again, that rear guard mentality.

Joe: Yeah.

John: Of not understanding.

Joe: Yeah. I don't know how this was all set up or how the logistics was done, but it was just insane. Because that was pretty much the whole year that we were there, we were doing this kind of thing for other units, going back to Kuwait and getting stuff for 'em that they just weren't getting.

John: That's gotta be frustrating as heck.

Joe: Yeah, yeah. Especially when there's all these things that would make your life—'cause we'd be parked, you know, sometimes three-quarters of a mile, the helicopters were three-quarters of a mile from where we live or where the supply section is, where we have the parts. So, without some kind of vehicle to get back and forth, I mean, for our platoon of eight aircraft and thirty-two guys we had one Humvee. That was our only vehicle. And to take care of eight aircraft that are all flying on different schedules and everybody that's got to go back, you know, to do everything during the day was just insane.

John: You probably saw those same Gators being driven around Kuwait by some other people.

Joe: Yeah, yeah, pretty much.

John: Some people that happened to be standing there right at twenty-four hours and one minute and knew the system and knew that they were gonna get tagged and—

Joe: So, it was another—of the people that stayed behind in Kuwait getting anything they wanted, and the guys that were up front doing the work were getting screwed. But, I digress. I made it, so.

John: No, that's important, though.

Joe: Yeah, yeah. So, at Balad it was kind of the same set up with the old Iraqi airbase, and again we were on the south side where there was nothing, and all the buildings and all the built up stuff was on the north side. So, we wound up being about two miles away 'cause you had to go around the perimeter from everything that got built up. So, at first it was pretty

austere. We had pit latrines and the same thing at Tallil with pit latrines, and the urine tubes we'd bury them in the ground. Ah, no showers, no laundry facilities. Food was still, ah, T-rats or MREs. It just kept like, going on like that. Water, we drank a lot of—most of the drinking water was mostly bottled water. We would get some—they started to purify some, and as time went on they purified more and more, but then we'd have to drive to the water point with our five gallon cans and pick it up. We had two "Water Buffalos," the 400 gallon trailers, and one was—belonged to the mess section, kitchen. So, that was theirs for cooking and stuff. And then the other one normally stayed over by the maintenance platoons and the shop platoons where most of the company was part of that. And the flight platoons, we just kind of took care of ourselves with our five-gallon cans. We set up our tents. We had—for our platoon we had five tents. For the two flight platoons, they kind of worked closely together. They're two platoons, but we kind of worked as one, lived together, 'cause we were all the flight guys, kinda. You get that separation in aviation units whereas you've got a flight and then the ground crews and stuff, so. We kind of separate ourselves 'cause, you know, we're the ship; we're what's important.

John: Right.

Joe: So, they can just go with themselves [both laugh]. We're the reason—these two platoons were the reason the company exists. The rest of you are just there to support us. But we set up five tents. And we, the guys that had first got there were pretty good at scrounging. They went and got a lot of stuff. They found a whole bunch of like brick pavers, patio brick kinda things, and, you know, whatever they could steal or acquire, find. So, we actually had a kind of like a brick patio, and then we had our five tents built off of that. So, we had a nice, relatively clean, common area to hang out in.

John: Mm hmm.

Joe: We took one of the rain flies [an umbrella-like tent part] between the tents so we had a kind of an awning to sit under, and three of the tents were framed tents. These are ones that have a big metal frame that's sectional, and then you spread the canvas over it, and they're actually modular. You could make one basically as long as you want by just keep adding sections on. And then the tents that I was in, there were two of them. They were called DRASH Tents. They're relatively new. DRASH stands for Deployable Rapid Assembly Shelter. The whole tent is in one, and you kind of pull on the edges, and it unfolds and stands up. They go up quick, but they're really bulky because it's a—like a twenty-five foot long tent. When you fold it up it's about seven feet high and kinda in a—it looks like a giant burrito, basically. It's like seven feet high and like eight feet

around, takes six guys to pick it up and carry it, but it assembles really quick.

John: What would you do for showers and—

Joe: Ah, we had a GP Small [tent] we set up, and then we kind of used these gravel and paving bricks to make it so that it would drain pretty good. We put it on a little slope so that the water would kind of drain away. And then we had like Australian showers that we would just fill up with the water cans. And we had several guys that had thought ahead, and they bought like solar camping showers.

John: So we'd fill them with water and set them out in the sun, and then it was kind of a race to see who'd get 'em first, so we'd get to shower with warm water instead of cold. [John laughs] But even the stuff in the—any water you left sitting out during the day warmed up pretty good. So—

John: Yeah.

Joe: It wasn't too bad. And then eventually somebody went on a—'cause we were always going back and forth to Kuwait, somebody bought a little washing machine down there. I remember it. It was just like one my grandma had in her apartment. It's just, it's got two little bowls, one for washing and then like the dryer one's just basically spins. There's no heat or anything. They're only like a foot wide. So you could wash like three or four pair of shorts [John laughs], and then that was just—we built a little shed for that, and that would just drain out onto the ground. So you'd have to dump water in from a bucket, fill it up, and then it would drain out on the ground by itself, and we jerry-rigged. I know I was always real careful walking to it, 'cause of the electrical cord jerry-rigged up to the generator to power it. [John laughs] We had problems with the generators, too, because half of our—having been stationed in Germany, some of our equipment ran on 110 [volts], the regular Army stuff, and then some ran on 220 volt for in Germany. So, for a while we had a problem with the pilots. Like we'd have the generator running on 110, and the pilots would decide they wanted to use their German TV or whatever and would switch the generator over to 220 and would fry like our printer that we needed for doing paperwork. And so, we settled that rather quickly and got everything down to 110, I think, yeah, just stopped using all the European stuff.

John: Okay.

Joe: But, that was a headache for a while. So, then we were running off of basically 60K generators and, like I said, no water, and then that steadily

improved as time went on. We got—they replaced our normal Army generators with commercial, ah, industrial generators.

John: The 100-kilowatt?

Joe: Yeah, that are made to run all the time. So, we got that set up. Unfortunately, it was set up right near my tent. So, for the rest—the next eight months I had a generator about thirty feet away, running constantly, which I guess isn't so bad 'cause I was on an airfield with helicopters and jets landing all the time anyway. I learned to sleep, pretty much. I mean I was a heavy sleeper already, but I [both laugh] learned—you learn to like while you're asleep, to distinguish between sounds that are just noise and ones that are like mortars coming in. Those wake you up, but a C-5 Galaxy [large transport plane] landing wouldn't [both laugh].

John: So you were there for eight months?

Joe: Yeah, we got there end of April, beginning of May, and we stayed there until we left, until we were basically redeploying back to Germany. We stayed there until January, end of January.

John: What kind of—or what took place then during those eight months?

Joe: Ah, things settled down, because, ah, Balad got renamed LSA [Logistics Support Area] Anaconda, and it was basically—it became a big supply base, and they started flying stuff in. So, our job became, for the most part, flying stuff out of there to other units around. We had kind of the everyday stuff that was called the—we did a Fourth ID resupply where we'd go north to Tikrit [Iraq], which the Fourth Infantry Division was based at. We would take stuff from Balad to Tikrit right outside of—this was Saddam's hometown so it was all built up with palaces and stuff, and it was neat to see 'cause we'd fly up along the river, I think it's the Tigris, yeah, the Tigris. Basically we were right near the Tigris so we would fly pretty much along the Tigris all the way up to Tikrit, past Samarra, up to Tikrit and then drop stuff off there, and they had renamed that, his big palace there, Iron Horse Palace for the 4th Infantry Division. So, we did that one, and then we would go—to the northeast of that was an airbase that was named Camp Speicher, after the Air Force pilot that's still missing from the First Gulf War, and that was just outside of Tikrit. We would take stuff up there and then generally back down, and we had another one that was the 82nd Airborne Gold Ring [route] that would go down around Baghdad, or it would go from, from, Balad to Fallujah and then sometimes to Ar Ramadi and then to another base called Saint Mere and then to Baghdad, then back to Fallujah and then back to Balad. We would do that pretty much every day for about six, seven months. That was a—and then lots of other missions in between. We did some where—we did ones we called

the “Money Trains,” which was after they started getting the CPA, the Coalition Provision Authority, started getting money and stuff going again.

John: Okay.

Joe: And they had the interim government, the Governing Council, whatever, in order to pay like the Iraqi services. They’d take money from the Central Bank in Baghdad and fly it out to the other towns like Mosul and Tikrit and Baqubah and other places. It was all—mostly US dollars—

John: Really?

Joe: What they were getting paid in. So, you know, every couple weeks or so we’d pull one of these missions where we’d go to Baghdad and load up sometimes millions of dollars in cash and then fly it out to the different cities. The biggest one I did was—I think it was like forty million US and four-hundred million Iraqi dinar. And the Iraqi dinar came in basically burlap sacks. They just stacked the money in these burlap sacks, and you’d throw it over your shoulder and go put it on the airplane. All the U.S. currency was like brand new. It came in wrapped in plastic; all the bundles of money wrapped in plastic with Bureau of Engraving and Printing on the plastic.

John: So, how much, what does forty million dollars look like for size-wise?

Joe: I’ve got a video of it. We would stack it up, and it would probably be about three feet high, like two-and-a-half, three feet high and like five feet on a side. But like you’d get a brick of hundred-dollar bills that was—you could hold it in your hand. You’d have a million dollars cash in your hand. So, I guess I’ve got something to judge it against when I see these movies and they have a briefcase full of money [both laugh]. Now, I know what it actually looks like in real life. Those ones were kind of fun, and we would do—and then usually on a mission like that, you would have—sometimes, I had like an actual member of the Iraqi, the new Iraqi government, the Governing Council, the interim government and get to meet translators and stuff. We had one woman who came along one time. She was actually from Oregon, but she was Lebanese. I think she was born in Lebanon and lived in Oregon, and then she was working for the U.S. government as an Arabic translator.

John: Really?

Joe: Yeah. So, that was kind of neat, meeting some people like that.

- John: What other, besides like the money routes, what other memorable experiences do you remember?
- Joe: Um, I know in the first days it was a lot—to haul a lot of trucks, a lot of SUVs, the Mitsubishi Pajeros and Chevy Jimmys, GMC Jimmys, Chevy Blazers, those kinds of things ‘cause all the civilian contractors and a lot of the higher military officials had those. So, we drove those SUVs inside the helicopter and strap them down. I got a couple of pictures of me leaning on like, you know, SUVs, driven inside. It was kinda fun to just land and unhook all the chains and drive ‘em out while the helicopter is still running.
- John: [laughs] Right.
- Joe: Those were always exciting and fun. And I remember one time taking like a whole bunch of satellite TV equipment out to a base so that they could set up their own TV sets. I did a—in July did a recovery. It was a—I forget what the name of the organization is, but their job was to recover Iraqi equipment and bring it back to the States so it can be used in training and can be, you know, broken down or reverse engineered or whatever, you know, learn about it.
- John: Mm hmm.
- Joe: So they had identified—they wanted a Mi-17 helicopter, which is a Russian-made cargo helicopter basically. So I did a mission with them where we went out to Baghdad and did some planning with them and then the next morning we flew out to the middle of this—in the middle of Iraq. It was pretty close to the Tigris River, like halfway in between Baghdad and Balad. And there was one, you know, palm grove, and so we set down, and we had some infantry guys for security. And we had a recovery team with generic, universal slings to hook onto this thing and pick it up. So, they went off and rigged it up, and then my helicopter, I got to hover over it and dropped a line down, and they hooked on to this helicopter, and then we picked it up out of the trees. The first time it got hung up on the trees. So, I set it down and released it. And then the sling like the line that we used to pick it up, got caught in the trees. So the engineers we had with us went and used explosives to blow the trees over so we could get this thing out better. So then the second time we did that, went and picked it up, and as we were picking it up, there was one helicopter on the ground for all the security people and the hookup team. We picked it up, and as we were picking it up, it was heavier than we’d planned on it being. And so it was a little bit of struggle, and as we got it about to the top of the treetop level an RPG was fired from the south. Luckily it went over the top of the other helicopter and exploded in the trees. So, then they had a little firefight down there while we were taking off, and that was hard

because I'm hearing over the radio was them screaming and saying, you know, "What's going on?" And that, and I know they're getting shot at, but there's nothing we can do because we've got this seventeen-thousand pound dead weight under us. All we could do was just keep flying towards Baghdad to deliver this thing. But it worked out all right. None of 'em, nobody got hurt on the ground. They all quick ran back to the helicopter and took off. And the only—was we thought everything was fine, well, nobody got hurt. We thought we got away without a scratch, and then like three days later we were looking at that helicopter and found one little nick on an antenna. So, it had gotten hit by one bullet, just nicked the antenna [John laughs]. So, the guys that were shooting at us weren't very good. They couldn't hit a fifty foot long helicopter [John laughs]. But, so, then we were flying—I was, back to my helicopter with the "Hip" underneath, or yeah, whatever it is. It's the same helicopter the Mi-8 and the Mi-17 "Hip." The Mi-8 is the one that stayed in only for Russia, and the Mi-17 was the export one.

John: Okay. This the one—and it's basically the equivalent of—it carries the same as the Chinook does, but it's only—

Joe: Pretty close. It's kinda—

John: It's a single, single blade, though, I believe, right?

Joe: Ah, yeah, it's only got—it's a single rotor. It's kinda like a—the [CH-]53 that the Marine Corps has or the H-3 that the Air Force uses for search and rescue, the "Jolly Green Giant" or the "Sea King." So, we're flying that back and struggling with it because it's heavy and it wants to fly on its own 'cause its tail—it's hard to say—it wants to turn basically the whole time—

John: Mm hmm.

Joe: Because of the way the aerodynamics and the way it's built. So, we were always fighting it. We could pretty much only turn left. We couldn't go to the right, so we made a big circle back to Baghdad and set it down, and at that time they had Australians running the tower in Baghdad. So they thought it was pretty neat. They wanted us to fly past the tower so they could take pictures [both laugh]. So we got that down, and that was a big rush to get that done with, to recover this thing. And then we got to look around at some of the other stuff they had. They had a couple of Bo-105s, which is a West German-made helicopter that the Iraqis had—

John: Huh!

- Joe: And there was, ah—oh, they had a bunch of ZSU [Soviet] anti-aircraft guns and T-72 [Soviet] tanks and [Soviet] Scud launchers. They had a big yard full of this stuff that was all getting shipped back to the U.S. for museums and like for places like the National Training Center at Fort Irwin or JRTC, the Joint Readiness Training Center, at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Then the OPFORs [opposing forces]—or actually they fix those things up of the opposing forces that we train against actually use Soviet-made equipment. I mean, so, kinda what we would actually get to see what you would really see in combat flying at you. That was pretty neat.
- John: That was pretty neat.
- Joe: Mm hmm. Oh, what else was there?
- John: Any people stick out in your mind?
- Joe: Um, I think it was in October, I did a Congressional junket tour that was there. We picked them up at Baghdad International and flew them to Babylon. Then they did a tour of Babylon because Saddam really liked history, but he kinda put his own spin on it. So that it like at Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, that I talked about before, he had rebuilt part of it the way he wanted it, or thought it should look, and then, I actually got to tour that one time. I climbed up on the ziggurat [terraced step pyramid] and went down in all these ruins and stuff. At this time there was no security over it. Later on, there was this big deal, internationally, that these archaeological sites weren't being protected and stuff like that. But, it was neat, and then, like Babylon, he had rebuilt a lot of it and like a lot of the bricks said, "Built by Saddam" and stuff. He was a big ego one. So, they went and toured that, and then we took them to LZ Washington, and what they call now the Green Zone. I think we just called it CPA at that time, Coalition Provision Authority. That was the headquarters, later became known as the Green Zone. So, and dropped them off there, and I think, later on, we took them back to the airport. Also, the one mission we did with Saddam's sons after they—they were killed in a firefight, and then their bodies were put on display in Baghdad so that everyone could see that they were dead. And then we went to Baghdad, myself and another aircraft, or my aircraft and another one, we went there and picked up the caskets. They were being returned to the family in Tikrit.
- John: Okay.
- Joe: So we picked them up in Baghdad and loaded them on the helicopter and flew 'em up to Tikrit and then gave 'em there. It was funny. As we were waiting in Baghdad, we had loaded 'em up and sitting there, and kind when the Iraqi guys went around the corner we started kicking the coffins.

My buddy got up on top of Uday's, yeah, Uday's coffin and did a little jig, [both laugh], danced on it. So, then we took 'em and delivered them up to Tikrit, or to that Camp Speicher. And they put them on a truck or ambulance and drove 'em out and buried them somewhere up there. That one was interesting. Um, a couple others—went to, took some prisoners to Abu-Ghraib once. I didn't actually land. We had two helicopters, and they were on the other helicopter. So we circled while they landed in the yard at Abu-Ghraib and dropped 'em off.

John: Any other incidents of being fired at in the air by RPGs or small arms?

Joe: Not that I noticed. Actually, the first night, I might have been. I never saw anything, but the first insertion night, the first night of the war.

John: Mm hmm.

Joe: But, like a day or two later, we were talking about it, and one of the guys on the other helicopter starts talking about, "Oh, there were all those big flashes of smoke right behind your helicopter. Didn't you see them? It was like they were following you, and getting closer to you." I never saw anything but he, apparently, saw something like flak or something being fired at me, so, and then—I never, I suppose there was people shooting at me; it was hard to tell. Ah, we flew mostly in the day, so you didn't really see muzzle flashes or anything. A few other guys I know did, and they fired back. I was a little scared about it. You know, just, I wanted to be sure what I was shooting at.

Joe: They kinda, ya know, they gave all these cards with the rules of engagement, you know, what you can shoot at, what you can't, you know, what to be sure, and I didn't want to, you know, piss people off or hit or kill any civilians. I wanted to know. And we were flying at night, and a lot of times things would look like muzzle flashes like they had, ah, like diesel engines and generators to pump water out of the streams and rivers for irrigation. Well, they didn't have any **[End of Tape 3, Side A]** real exhaust on them so when the—you would see a flash from the backfiring as they were running, and in the dark it would look like muzzle flash so sometimes you'd shoot at them and then realize it wasn't someone shooting at you, and it was just tough to know what was what. Most of the time it didn't really matter 'cause we were flying a hundred miles an hour. By the time you realized someone was shooting at you, you were gone.

John: Yeah, it's true.

Joe: So, that was pretty much it. And then some of the big events was in July—we lost an aircraft. They were gone down to—they'd gone down to, I think, Tallil from Balad, they and were on their way back. They were at a

place just south of Baghdad called [Camp] Dogwood which was a gas station for helicopters, basically a FARP [Forward Arming and Refueling Point]. So, they were there and refueling. It was really a dusty place and nasty, and I think one had already refueled and the pilots had talked to some people there that wanted a ride. So they took off, flying a little circle, fly around a little, and give these guys a ride, and when they went to land—[Approx. 4 sec. pause in recording]

John: As the helicopter was landing?

Joe: Yeah, it was, it was they browned out, basically couldn't see anything. The pilots didn't know where they were at, and the back end hit really hard, and it kinda bounced up and then the forward blades hit the ground and flipped the helicopter over and ripped it apart basically. So, it wound up on its side, and one of the passengers, the guys that was getting a ride got a broken leg. Everyone else just kinda got bumps and bruises. So, thankfully no one got killed. But then, so, that was our only aircraft loss. And so the whole year we didn't lose anybody to—no one died, so.

John: That was fortunate.

Joe: That was about the worst loss we had and then our one in—around the first of November we had one that was shot down, not from our unit but from a different unit that was stationed at Balad with us. It was the Illinois—Iowa National Guard, what was it? F-Company 109th Aviation, and they had aircraft—like that day they drew the 82nd Gold Ring, where we go to Fallujah and Baghdad and all that, and coming out of Fallujah, they got shot down, shot at, with missiles, and one took the missile, and I think it was like twenty people were killed in that one.

John: What was it like spending Christmas over there?

Joe: Ah, it was a little—it wasn't too bad. By then things were pretty routine and calmed down, and we knew what we were doing, and we were happy to have fun. We had a little Christmas party, and we had skits and stuff. Each platoon put on a little skit for everyone else, and some of the people that played guitar would go out and sing and stuff so it was pretty good. I mean, it wasn't [laughs]—it was about as good as you could expect, I guess, you know. It wasn't too melancholy or anything like that. I mean, we really didn't want to be there, but we made the best of it and had fun.

John: What were your feelings like when you heard you'd be coming home in January?

Joe: Ah, yeah. We went—pretty skeptical about it. We knew how fast things change so we prepared for it, knowing that things would change at any

minute. We were pretty certain it would happen when they started bringing all the shipping containers to us to load up. We started loading all our stuff up and cleaning it, and it was going straight from Balad basically by line-haul, by truck, to Kuwait and going on a ship. So, they have customs right there, the MP Customs Officers inspecting the stuff right there, which always seemed weird to me, that part of the job with the Military Police is to be the Customs Officers of the Army, to make sure we weren't taking contraband and stuff back. So, they were going through all of our stuff, and we were washing it, and this went through. This was about after Christmas, just after Christmas, around New Year's we started cleaning it up and taking tents down and packing everything away. So the mood kinda got a little lighter. And we were—it's like, well, this is probably for real then, 'cause we need this stuff [John laughs], and we're packing it up. We're gonna go. So, that went on for a couple of weeks it took us to dig stuff out and clean it up 'cause we had things buried and covered in dirt, and like all around our tents we had built sandbag walls about three feet high to protect from mortars. So, we had to take all them off, and to get—'cause they were built right on top of the fringes of the tent and everything to hold them down.

John: Okay.

Joe: So it was a lot of work getting everything done up, and then—but the whole time that we're packing everything up we're still doing missions 'cause we still did missions right up till the last day we left. So, you're always scrambling to make sure you've got everything you need to still work while putting away everything else. But eventually we got that done, I think it was the 22nd of January. Like the trucks pretty much left with everything on the 21st, and the helicopters we stayed until the 22nd and packed everything up and flew down to Camp Udairi [renamed Camp Buehring] in northern Kuwait which had been—it had been since the first Gulf War basically a firing range and stuff, and then in the buildup to the Iraq War they had made it into a base. They put in a runway and parking for all the helicopters, and it was a fairly substantial base at that time. And then I think we were there three or four days, waiting for our turn at the wash rack and the port. Basically waiting until we could get to, ah, Camp Doha so the wash rack there to clean helicopters 'cause, you know, same thing Customs and Agriculture and going back to Germany they had to be pretty much spotless, had to get all the Iraqi crud off and dirt, and make sure there was no grenades and ammunition [both laugh] left in corners 'cause basically through the whole year that stuff just gets thrown around.

John: Right.

Joe: Well, here's—here's a dozen grenades to put on your helicopter in case you need them. So they just get stuck in corners, here and there, and the

same with belts and ammunition for the machine guns and stuff. It's like well, I'll put this here in case I need it, and just, you know, behind soundproofing and back in corners, you know, wherever you could fit stuff, there was stuff. So, you'd find all kinds of things when you go to [John laughs]—one of my favorites was always like a soda cans—people would stick up 'em behind the soundproofing on ledges. And from the vibration it slowly wears away so eventually you can't read it, and if it goes long enough it actually wears through the aluminum.

John: Really?

Joe: The thing explodes [John laughs] and one time, I found a old desiccated orange. I mean, it was about the size of golf ball, [John laughs], but you could tell it had once been an orange. But it had spent so much time up here in the helicopter, you know, with the sun beating on the outside it had just dried out down to this tiny little thing. That was another thing, we always stored food all around the helicopter 'cause you never knew when you were gonna get to eat. So, you'd get your M&Ms out of your, ah, MRE, and you don't want to eat 'em right now so you'd stick 'em up behind here and Chex Mix and cans of soda and bags of chips wherever you can put 'em. Found all that stuff again when we were cleaning up the helicopters at the end [John laughs]. Then you gotta figure out what to do with it, especially if it's ammunition. So, we had—a big amnesty box going down the line and picking up everything that was left. So, we got 'em cleaned and put back together and flew 'em to the port and then break 'em down and take the blades off. This was—took about three or four days to get them all over there, take the blades off, pack 'em all inside, and then do the shrink-wrapping again on the outside to put 'em back on the ship to go back to Germany.

John: Was your unit doing any post-deployment briefings at this point?

Joe: Ah, yeah, a little bit; not too much. Before we had left Balad in Iraq we had done like medical surveys and stuff. They'd hand these like PDAs [personal digital assistant]. We had just gotten the new, ah, Common Access Card IDs that have the computer chip in.

John: Okay.

Joe: And we were supposed to put 'em in these things and fill out these medical questionnaires of, you know, were you hurt? Were you exposed to this kind of smoke? Did you see bodies? Was someone you know killed? That kind of thing. So, we did that before we left Balad, and that was about it for in Iraq. And once we got back to Germany, then we had like a week of that kind of stuff.

- John: When for you did it sink in, I guess, that you were actually leaving the combat zone?
- Joe: Um, I guess when I got on the plane. I mean, I knew everything was—or somewhere in there. It was kinda, I guess, it didn't really, you didn't really think about it 'cause you were still so busy and still doing your work. I didn't really think about it, I guess, until we got on the plane just because I was always busy doing something else. Then you get to the point where you just—you don't believe it's gonna end. It takes a lot to convince you that it hasn't always been this way, and it's not always going to be this way.
- John: Right.
- Joe: You know, so, I guess, when we got on the plane 'cause we kinda snuck out. We were trying to get out early, and our commander, I guess, made a deal. We didn't even go through the normal like, APOD [Aerial Port of Debarkation] and an Air Force terminal stuff. We just—he got us on buses, and we went and we got on a C-17 that was going to Germany with some, ah, Navy EOD [Explosive Ordnance Disposal] stuff. They had like two trucks and a couple of pallets so that easily fit the rest of us with our bags on there, too. So, just kinda snuck back to Ramstein.
- John: Nice. Was there, ah, I guess—what was the homecoming like, I guess, in Ramstein?
- Joe: Um, let's see, we got back to Ramstein and got onto buses back to Eibelstadt. So, it was about an hour and a half, two hour bus ride and got in the hangar, and they had us put all our bags down and stuff, and this was in our hangar in Germany. And then they had us assemble outside, and we marched down the taxiway to another hangar where all the family and stuff is waiting. And then they started—they had their ceremony in there, and they started a welcome and blah-blah-blah, and then they played music. I think it was "Beautiful Day" by U2 and opened the doors, and we marched in, and they had like five minutes of speeches, and then they released everybody to families. That was kinda neat, but then I know I felt pretty bad about it 'cause as we're standing there—we march in, we see all these people and cheering and banners and then families, you know, wives and kids and everything, and I knew none of them was there for me, you know. So, it's kinda looking at it like it's a great big celebration, but I didn't really have anything to celebrate. I was kinda in the same situation I was the week before in Iraq, was just, you know, still by myself, still on a Army base. So, that was kinda tough. And then when they actually released everybody and people all ran to their families and the single people, we pretty much are just standing there in the middle of the floor, looking at each other. That, that kinda sucked. Ah, but then, you know,

said hi to our friends' wives, you know, not the same, but they're glad to see ya, just hi to a friend kinda thing.

John: Yeah.

Joe: It's not like the homecoming really. So, then we went back to our hangar, and they had pizza and beer there for us. So, we started, you know, have some pizza and beer which, you know, was supposedly the first beer we had in a year [laughs].

John: But it wasn't?

Joe: No, no, we had sneaked quite a bit, and that's the nice thing about being in aviation when you get to go other places and move around you can—we knew enough civilians, we could get a hold of beer and liquor and stuff, so. Although that had, ah, had some problems with that while we were in Iraq, and it kinda pissed me off 'cause the Army in general is not very evenhanded in the way they handle alcohol and drunk driving and that kind of thing. So, we had one guy who was a sergeant. He was my Crew Chief at one time. He was one of our Crew Chiefs in our platoon. He got drunk, and it was mostly his fault. He's just an idiot. He went—he had been foolin' around with another guy's wife, with a married woman in another platoon. So he went into the women's tent trying to find her in the middle of the night when he was drunk. So he got into trouble. He got like put out of the Army. He was married, too, and he was messing around with someone else's wife. But then, other people—he got in trouble, but a lot of other people that had alcohol didn't. I know like when they took the pilots' tent down, bottles just rolled out from underneath it, empty bottles, and no one said a word to any of them.

John: But the pilots being officers?

Joe: I, yeah, I saw a lot of that they got away with stuff that enlisted wouldn't, especially if you're lower enlisted. If you're a Private or a Specialist and you make a little mistake, you're gonna feel it. Or if you're a Lieutenant who makes the same mistake you're probably not going to get the same treatment.

John: Yeah.

Joe: So, but, anyway, back to the homecoming. So, we had our stuff in the hangar and we went over to, started getting rides back to our barracks, and that was depressing, too, because when we left all of our stuff had gotten packed up. And at the time they said it was in case we move to a different base while you're gone, but it was really just so that all your stuff was packed up and inventoried in case you didn't come back. So, it took a

while to get that stuff back. So, we basically went back to empty rooms, and they didn't want us to leave the base so they told us we couldn't leave base until—which was, again, you know, a double standard because all these other married people that lived off base got to go and do whatever they wanted.

John: Right.

Joe: So, not that I could really go anywhere 'cause my car was still in lockup from—

John: But it's the idea of being unnecessarily restricted like that—

Joe: Yeah.

John: When you've just been in a combat zone and your responsibilities were above and beyond anything—

Joe: Yeah.

John: And then to just treat you like a—

Joe: So, I've just got an empty room to sit in, and that was depressing and awful, and then they had a—but they had specials on beer for us at the shoppette. So basically, all we could do for that week was sit in our rooms and drink twenty-two ounce Heinekens that were on special. The Family Readiness Group tried, the wives and stuff, they had bought for my platoon, the flight platoons, at least, the wives and families, had thought ahead. They had packages there for once we got back with new bedding. We didn't have to use the old Army sheets and green blankets and—

John: Really?

Joe: And they had like towels and washcloths for us and little things to— household items, just to make it a little bit better, a little more comfortable. So, still had to wait like a week to get our stuff back out of storage and cars and stuff, and that was a big pain in the butt, getting my car back 'cause then we had to re-register 'em all and prove we had insurance, and then they hadn't—I found out later—they had told us they were going to move them to indoor storage. Basically they were in a parking lot fenced in at our airbase. They said they were going to move them to indoor storage so I had left my battery connected and stuff like that. So, I get back, and my battery's dead, and my brakes are all rusted, and, yeah, it was just a big headache trying to get that back and then found out that they didn't do the paperwork right so I couldn't get reimbursed for anything that was wrong with it. You know, typical Army stuff that they say you

can get reimbursed for just about anything if you follow, you know, volumes of rules and stuff. They say, “Well, we gave you a chance.”

John: How much longer were you at Germany then?

Joe: I was in there until, this was in January, January 29th was when we got back, and I was getting out in—well, I was hoping I was getting out on November 29th. So, but there were still Stop-Losses going on so we really didn't know, so. But didn't really have time, too much time think about it because we were busy. The aircraft were coming back, we had to get 'em, everything fixed. They were all going through, ah, what they call a RESET [aviation maintenance program], basically a huge, big, overhaul. So we had some at Mannheim. All the aircraft went back to, from, to, I think it was Antwerp [Belgium] on the ship, and then they were put on a barge, and it floated to Mannheim, Germany where they had Coleman Army Barracks. There they have, ah, a maintenance unit that's mostly civilians. It's an Army unit, but most of the workers are civilian contractors that come in to overhaul the helicopters and stuff. So, that was where we spent time going down there to get the helicopters. Some of 'em we brought back to Eibelstadt to work on; some of them stayed there to get overhauled. So, it was a lot of work to do and retraining everybody on all the stuff we had missed during the year.

John: Did you have a chance to go home before you got out?

Joe: Ah, yeah. I got out—I think it was in February I went home for like three weeks or a month or something like that to take time off.

John: Uh huh.

Joe: Right, it was after like the week and a half of In-processing and doing all our paperwork and physicals and stuff like that. Then I took leave for about a month.

John: What was that like, coming home?

Joe: That was, that was different. I had been back while I was in Iraq over Thanksgiving. I had gotten two weeks of leave so I'd been back, and I was kinda getting used to things. Yeah, that was a shock, dealing with a lot, 'cause actually the day I got back on leave in November my mom had a heart attack. So, I went—the first time I saw my mom was in the hospital. So, that wasn't, wasn't the best two weeks off of Iraq that you could have.

John: Right.

Joe: But it was a nice relief to be out of there for a while even knowin' I had to go back, and so, dealing with my mom's heart attack and getting to see the family and a little break. Got to home for Thanksgiving, so I did that and then got to go to a Packer game while I was home, a Packer-Bears game and then back to Iraq. So, it was—it felt good to be out, and then afterwards it was a little, it was nice to be back and relax, you know, get to see, but it's still—it was hard because looking at it from different eyes than I ever had before. That whole—everything had changed, you know. It was all just like I'd remembered it but changed, completely different, so. But it was good to see the family. I just kinda stayed close to my family, didn't really go around and do much of anything. And then—so, that was about four weeks, then back to Germany and like I said, and doin' all this fixin' the helicopters and trying to get new people trained up and because we knew we'd have to do it again. You know, eventually there was still stuff to do in Germany. And presidential visits and so then by May of—yeah, 'cause then the 60th Anniversary of D-Day was in June of that year, June 6th. So the President was coming so we had to support that visit. So we got helicopters fixed up and ready to go, and I went on that. So I got to go to France again. This was the second time to support the President's visit to Normandy. That was, that was probably the best experience of my military career because it was such a huge celebration. And to be able to see—'cause, I mean, the whole Calvados coast there, the Normandy, was just full of people, re-enactors, and the veterans, and parties going on everywhere, and it was so much fun; it was a blast. And, then getting to work for the President, and I got, like I said, that time I had the, ah, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Richard Meyers, and the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, ah, Marine Corps General Jones; both were on my aircraft. I got to fly them around and kinda impress them. That was a lot of fun, got to land side-by-side with Marine One when the President got out.

John: Really?

Joe: Yup, watched him and the First Lady. I don't know, probably shouldn't say this, but it was at, ah, we took them to a place called Arromanches [France] which is where one of the Mulberry Harbours were, the temporary harbors they built.

John: Okay.

Joe: This was like in the British sector, they had a big—like on a bluff overlooking the bay they had a big celebration for all the dignitaries. There was President Bush was there, and the Queen of England was there, and I watched her helicopter fly in, and then right across from us was, ah, the President of France, Jacques Chirac. His helicopter was there, and then I felt bad for Vladimir Putin from Russia. He didn't have a helicopter. He

was there in a big limousine, and it looked like, ah, the Munster-mobile [John laughs]. It was this big, boxy, black limousine; it looked like it was on the Munsters, I swear. Oh, and then they had a huge show 'cause they had—the dignitaries were all on the reviewing stand on this bluff, and they had soldiers from all the countries that had participated in the landing march in front of them, and they had aircraft fly over from all these countries. So, it was like a big air show, and then they had ships at sea from each—from countries that had participated in the landing out, going by in review. And then you could, we could—I was like a half-mile away from this, but I could hear—they'd say USS whatever participated in the landing, and it was still in service and going pit tjere on, just offshore, in Normandy again.

John: Wow!

Joe: That was a lot of fun, they must have had some champagne and stuff 'cause as we were waiting to take off again President Bush and the First Lady come up in the limousine, and I know the President doesn't drink, but I think the First Lady does 'cause she needed to be helped from the car into the helicopter. And then I had some friends who were back at the airport, and they said when they got there that she needed help getting up the steps into Air Force One, too [both laugh]. So, they must have had a good time.

John: Besides, you don't often see the First Lady drink.

Joe: No.

John: Those crazy librarians.

Joe: Yup [both laugh].

John: So that was a good experience for you, then?

Joe: Yeah, that was the best, I mean 'cause then we got lots of time for sightseeing around there. We drove all up and down the coast. I went to Omaha Beach and ah, Pointe du Hoc, and, ah, a few others, Bayeux. I'd been there a few times; it was really neat. And, what was it? Went to Sainte-Mère-Église a bunch of times; they had a huge party there. That was the first town liberated by the 82nd on the—when the paratroopers dropped in. So, they had a whole bunch of stuff there. They have a museum there with the old gliders and an old C-47 cargo plane, and that was neat to see 'cause that was actually delivered there by a Chinook from the U.S. Army in the '80s when they built this museum. They flew this, the U.S. Army donated this plane, and then it was slung underneath a Chinook and brought into this museum. That's how it got there.

John: Really?

Joe: So, I have pictures of that and a little plaque from the Chinook unit that brought it. And then they had some of the guys from the *Band of Brothers* [TV miniseries] were there for the anniversary and got to see them. And just meeting all kinds of military from all different countries and all branches and all kinds of beer and sausage, you know, the *real* French food, the provincial stuff, the sausages and cheese and everything. Went—stayed out at night, just drinking and having a good time, and they had like a temporary TV studio set up next to the church in Sainte-Mère-Église so there was always stuff going on there. And every year the Sainte-Mère-Église they hang a dummy from the bell tower of the church ‘cause that actually happened. It was a man named Sergeant John Steele. When he parachuted in he actually got caught on the church steeple and hung there during the first part of the battle ‘til he was cut down and captured by the Germans. And then he escaped the next day and got back, and he actually wound up going all the way to, into Germany with the 82nd, so.

John: Huh.

Joe: All kinds of neat stuff like that went on.

John: How long was that? How many days or weeks?

Joe: That was—I think we were there about, five or six days. Oh, I forgot. We couldn’t—they didn’t have any hotels ‘cause it was so busy. So we wound up staying at a monastery. It was a couple hundred years old. They said it was actually used by the Germans as a hospital during WWII and the Normandy invasions. So, that was another, that was neat too, a neat place to be, back in the countryside on a hill, and there were still, you know, about a dozen or so monks there.

John: Really?

Joe: That ran the place, but, you know, they offered to let us use it, so.

John: That’s probably better than staying at a hotel, actually.

Joe: Yeah. It was a great experience, too, to be in the countryside there and see this, and we’d go up and hear them in the morning, chanting, up in the abbey and stuff. And to see how long it had been there. Like they had a little graveyard for them next to the church, and it was neat to see ‘cause there’d be a white cross, and they would have two names on each side where they had buried brothers over the years ‘cause it was so small, [both laugh] just stack ‘em up one on top of each other.

John: Really?

Joe: Yeah. And they had their own farm. That's how they made their money. They raised cows and made milk and butchered cows and stuff. They had a little store with all fresh meats and cheeses and all kinds of other—they must have, they have like a, network of all these monasteries that each one specializes in making something, and then they kinda trade back and forth. So, you went in there and there's like the religious items, you know, rings and Bibles and stuff but also the cheese and meat they made at this monastery and the candies they made at another one, and then they had a whole bunch of wines and beers from different monasteries. So, we ate pretty good while we were there, too, get some nice monastic beer, the Chimay, and some nice cured meats and cheeses.

John: Good stuff.

Joe: Yup.

John: That's awesome. Ah, so when did you actually end up getting out?

Joe: I got out, and I left Germany, and I started—by then I was pretty sure I was getting out. I still wasn't certain because there was a Stop-Loss on. I was set to get out of the Army on November 29th, but I didn't know if I would get caught in the Stop-Loss or not. So I kept preparing like I was getting out, and eventually I did. About—the Stop-Loss was lifted so we kept going. I got out, and then at the end of October I was supposed to go on terminal leave on like the 5th of November. The end of October a new Stop-Loss came out 'cause the unit got orders to go to Afghanistan in February. So, they had less than a year off between Iraq and Afghanistan. But the Stop-Loss came out—it was ninety days from the day they were supposed to go. You couldn't—no one could PCS [Permanent Change of Station] or ETS [Expiration in Term of Service].

John: Okay.

Joe: Ninety days prior and that ninetieth day was December 1st, and I was supposed to get out on December 29th. So, I missed staying in by two days. So, I did finally get to go leave on the—it was like the 5th of November I left Germany and came back home, back to Wisconsin.

John: And you're a student now?

Joe: Yup. Yeah, I was kinda thinking about that the whole time I was ending the year, the last year in the Army, thinking about going in the Army. I

took a while off. I got out in November 2004, and then I started school in September of 2005.

John: Okay.

Joe: And had—this was when I first kinda really started to notice the effects of the PTSD, the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I had actually felt it start, I mean, I could—the day that I did that mission April 2nd with all the bodies I felt something change in me that day, and I knew something was wrong. But I just kinda ignored it, you know, and just kinda went on.

John: Hmm.

Joe: Through the rest of the year doing that stuff and just kinda thinking, well, when I get out of here I'll feel better. I'll be fine. Then, so, I just kinda went numb and did my job for that year. And then got back to Germany, and still didn't feel good, kinda depressed, run down, something still wasn't right, but I convinced myself that I could go on, and it'll be all right when I get out of the Army. And it wasn't, I mean, and I didn't—I knew I needed help when I was back in Germany. But I never went and got it. I just thought, you know, I can tough it out. I, I'm better than this, I can make it work, it's fine. It'll get better. And kinda looking around and seeing all these people that had been in the same situation as me and, you know, they're not going to the shrink. They're not having problems. So, it's just you. You can fix it, and then it'll be all right when I get out of the Army. Then I got out and was living at home and it really wasn't—it kinda got worse. I didn't have—I just stuck close to my family, and even them, they didn't understand anything. And I felt so bad. They just—people annoyed me so much. That what they thought was important that wasn't important, kinda the same contempt I had for the people at Doha when I was back in. It was the same—didn't really [Approx. 5 sec. pause in recording] Where was I?

John: Ah, feeling something wasn't right when you came back.

Joe: Yeah, yeah. And I didn't, I just didn't know where to start or what to do, you know. Nobody, I couldn't talk to anybody, you know, 'cause I didn't think they'd understand, or I knew they wouldn't understand. And I just kinda withdrew. I moved in with my brother, and basically, I just did nothing for months. I didn't want to do anything. I was just living off the money I had saved up from the Army, and I had a plan that I was going to go to school so I did follow through on all that. I got my admissions done, did all my applications, and got accepted to college, but that didn't start until September so I was just kinda loafing around, and I'd go out and drink too much, you know, just not know when to quit, just keep going and going. Then I would drive, you know, and I'd hate myself the next

day for doing something that stupid, for going out drinking and driving. And had a lot of trouble sleeping. I would just lay awake at night and get heartburn and just from stress, I guess. I would just—I'd have to sleep sitting up 'cause it hurt so much. If I'd lay down I would just burn and burn. And then that went on, and then, finally about—I just couldn't take it anymore. I just wasn't getting better, and I'm beating myself up 'cause I couldn't fix it, you know. Then finally I just realized that I had to get help, and that was in about August. Before school was starting I went to the, the county veterans service officer, and I was pretty much in tears, just saying I need help. I mean, how do you, I need you to tell me how to sign up to get to see the VA and then talk to somebody. So, he started the paperwork on that, and said—by that time, I knew I was moving to Madison [Wisconsin] so just kinda set it up that to go to the VA hospital here in Madison when I got down here. And that's what we wound up doing. Ah, it still wasn't—it still got a little bit worse, you know, coming and starting school 'cause then it was an even greater shock. I wasn't just around the average people. All of a sudden I am sittin' in a room full of eighteen year old kids, and here I am twenty-eight years old and dealing with this, and now I got these flighty, know-nothing kids, where that priorities are completely the opposite of mine. So, that was a lot of shock, getting adjusted to school. I did pretty well, though, I think. And, so, in the meantime I'm going to the VA. They put me on some antidepressants, and I started classes there with social workers with about a dozen other guys with PTSD for what's called the Symptoms Skills Group. Basically we learned what the symptoms were and coping skills to deal with them. And that helped a lot, learning what was going on because a lot of it was, I would have these feelings and emotions and thoughts, and I wouldn't know why. I wouldn't know where they were coming from. You know, I would just feel bad. I would just feel awful, and I didn't know why. And then going through this skills group then that helped me to identify what I was feeling, really, and 'cause it's so complex. It's such mix of fear and anger and frustration, and but also joy that you're alive and then guilt over feeling that you're alive or you're out and somebody else isn't, and your emotions get so mixed up because—I know like at times during the year in Iraq when I'd just kinda gone numb. You just didn't feel anything. Instead of having like a range of feelings there was this big dead spot in the middle, and then if you got really happy, you would feel something. If you got really angry, you would feel something. So, the happiness and anger kinda felt like the same thing, you know. It was feeling something, you know. You couldn't really tell the difference between your emotions anymore. It was hard to tell what was, what was sad, what was angry, what was happy. So, it got—learned to deal with that and then started doing pretty good. And school was pretty good. I got good grades, B average, you know, but socially I was still wasn't where I wanted to be. But I went off, I thought I was feeling better, and, oh, how'd it work? Part of this problem was, while I was home in April of 2005, before I started

school and stuff, on April 5th my unit that I had gone to Iraq with had gone to Afghanistan. So, they were there. On April 5th they lost an aircraft in a dust storm, and I lost friends of mine, a guy named Chuck Sanders who I'd worked with in Alaska, and then he had gotten to Germany about the time I was leaving like in the summer of '04. And him—and then Mike Spivey who was the new crew chief that I had trained, and a guy named Pendleton Sykes who was a young gunner and one of the pilots, ah, Clint Prather. He was a really funny guy, one of my favorite pilots. And then another one was Dave Ayala. He was another pilot. He had been the Rear Detachment Commander back in Germany while we were in Iraq. And then there was a bunch of passengers, too, on that one. So, that had affected me, you know, when I was back home. And, but, things were going better. Like I say, I got back to, got going in school and in this treatment, and I was on the antidepressants. And I thought I was doing pretty good, and so about April or May of 2005 I, ah, or of 2006, you know, I'm doing good in school, getting' out and meeting people and stuff so I decided to go off the antidepressants. The class had gone from like January to March and so, I'd finished that and felt good about that, and so I went off the medication and felt pretty good in the beginning of May, and then during finals week or right before it started, the 5th of May 2006, I lost another friend in Afghanistan, ah, and that screwed me up again, and in combination with finals and all that and then—'cause I had the summer off I kinda regressed so spent a lot of time alone again and then kinda went backwards. So, then in the fall of '06 I went back and got on the medication again, and I went through another treatment called the Cognitive Processing Therapy, where this was just individual, one-on-one, and it was actually looking at my experiences, myself, and kind of reliving them and learn how to think about them again. Because a lot of it, what they describe a lot of the problem with PTSD is that, if you have a belief about how the world works, and you have, you know, there's—we all think there's rules about how the world works. And when those rules get broken it really messes you up because then you don't know how to—you have—the memories come back because your mind doesn't know where to put 'em away. It likes to organize things according to these rules that you have for yourself. But when the rules get broken then your mind, your emotions, don't know how to deal with it. So, basically, this therapy was to take these things and think about 'em, learn to think about 'em in a different way to make 'em *fit*, you know, to try and to realize that the emotions you feel are because of the way you think about it. If you can think about it rationally, in a different way, you can change the emotion. Like I—you feel guilty about it, but if you can convince yourself that, that, you know, it's not your fault because you weren't there, but, you know, so. That helped a lot. I'm doing a lot better now than I was, so.

John: The VA has been helpful—

- Joe: Yeah.
- John: Throughout?
- Joe: Yeah. They've been really good about getting me in there to see them then—
- John: What was the process like, filing for the paperwork with the CVS—
- Joe: Ah, it was pretty simple. Just one, that one time with the CVSO [county veterans service officer] just filing the paperwork and then he put it in, and I forget how it was that I made the appointment, if they called me or I called them. I think I called them and made an appointment to come in and see 'em. Or, no, 'cause they sent me the thing for an appointment to get basically a physical to get in there and to get on disability and stuff and just a big assessment and then at the same time do the psychological assessment, met with the psychiatrist, and went over my story, and they picked out the treatment plan for me and started out from there. It went pretty smooth once I got it all started.
- John: Now do you—
- Joe: Once I asked for help it was there; it was easy to get.
- John: Yeah, that's good.
- Joe: It's just getting to that point where you can ask for help that was tough.
- John: And probably the biggest step, too?
- Joe: Yeah.
- John: It was good that you were able to identify that.
- Joe: Yeah. Oh, it had been in the news for a few years before I went in. So, I knew it existed and kinda had some idea. But, still, it's hard to identify that stuff in yourself.
- John: And it can come back anytime.
- Joe: Mm hmm.
- John: Yeah. Pretty strange.
- Joe: Mm hmm.

- John: I still have dreams myself. Are you using the Wisconsin GI Bill?
- Joe: Yeah.
- John: Did you have that?
- Joe: So for school it was actually a lot. I was amazed at how great it was. I'd planned—I'd been saving up money, and I knew was going to use the Federal GI Bill, the Montgomery GI Bill and stuff like that, so, and then when I got back to Wisconsin I found out they had the Wisconsin GI Bill. That's just, that's just phenomenal what they're doing. I mean, I basically make money. I mean, 'cause I get the Wisconsin GI Bill—originally it was fifty percent, and so they paid half my tuition, and then the state Veterans Affairs Department had another program called VetEd that would pay the other half. And then I get my Montgomery GI Bill money every month, and then I still qualify for grants and stuff on top of that. So that really completely took care of my education which is good 'cause, I realized afterwards that it would have been a lot tougher. Even with the money that I saved up; I'd saved like \$40,000. It still would have been tough to make four years of school.
- John: Mm hmm.
- Joe: Without that extra paying the tuition. So, I was really pleased and surprised at how good the education benefits were.
- John: Yeah, Wisconsin does an incredible job.
- Joe: Yeah.
- John: It's—yeah, I think they do a good job for the veterans.
- Joe: Mm hmm.
- John: To make it easier 'cause, I don't know about you, but after having spent so much time out of high school I spent so much time out of college that just tryin' to get your brain started—
- Joe: Yeah.
- John: Working again for school, you don't want to have to worry about working a job or anything.
- Joe: Mm hmm. Yeah, it's a different way, I mean, I used my brain in the Army but in a completely different manner [laughs].

- John: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah, it eases the transition, not having to worry about some of those other things.
- Joe: Mm hmm.
- John: What are you studying?
- Joe: History. I always liked that so I've taken that up, 'cause I had—just love to know what things are going on. And I had—it's helped me out in the past, I know. I've always read history books and stuff while I was in the Army and sometimes reading about stuff they did in Vietnam and WWII. A lot of times I can use it in my work. I know there were a couple of things that I pointed out that were done in Vietnam that, I guess, the institution of the Army had kinda forgot about. But I'd read about in books, and said, "Well, you know, we can do this, and it'll, you know, take care of whatever problems."
- John: Such as? What's an instance?
- Joe: Well, I remember, like when I was in Kosovo, they had, ah, the landing zone there was really rocky and dusty because they had stripped all the vegetation off of it, and I remembered that they had learned that lesson in WWII in Burma. The Japanese had used American POWs to clear airfields and stuff in the jungle by hand. They didn't use bulldozers because you would tear up the soil, and it was so thin that nothing would grow back, and it would just be dust. And that's where they did the same thing in Vietnam with the 1st Calvary Division with their big base, I forget where it was. They called it the "Golf Course" where they had cleared it by hand, cleared the jungle by hand of trees so that the grass would still grow so it wouldn't just be a big dust bowl.
- John: Huh.
- Joe: Well, in Macedonia they had drove all these trucks out there, and so it was all mud and dirt and dust, and they didn't let the grass grow. When I had got there it was grass growing, and then for some reason they had gone to do some construction work and drove all over it and killed all the grass. So now it was all rocks and dust and—it was too late for me to help with that, but I saw the mistakes that the institution forgets. The Army doesn't always remember what it did, the lessons it learned. But if I could study history then I could remember the lessons that were learned and help out, get things done, use that memory to get things done quicker.
- John: Right. Yeah, that's pretty good. That's all I have for questions. Whatever else would you like to talk about?

- Joe: That's about all I can think that needs to be said.
- John: And you have a lot of materials that you're donating as well.
- Joe: Yeah, yeah, there's—a lot of this fits in, letters and stuff, so. What was I gonna say? Oh yeah, the—didn't get to it, but this thing with the bodies in April, it was like a couple of weeks afterward that we started hearing about this, ah, Jessica Lynch and stuff. And I kinda put it together that that was when they rescued her was when they'd recovered these bodies, and that was actually the night that they had planned that mission, executed that mission that night, and then we went and picked up the bodies in the morning. And that was the special operations helicopters I saw up there were the ones that had taken the Rangers in to execute that. And they had actually, you know, gone into the hospital and picked up Lynch, and at the same time they had gotten told where the bodies were buried, that had been, you know, mutilated or whatever, and they went, and I guess, dug 'em up by hand, and brought 'em back. So that was my little part of that. I just feel sorry for those guys that had to—I mean, as bad as it was, my part of it, they actually had to go and exhume them in the middle of the night and stuff. And that—and all the controversy and stuff they talk about, this—they never talk that. They just talk about how they went in and rescued her, and there's so much more that goes on that it pisses me off what's in the news, that there's so much more going on than what the news covers. There's so many more important things they could talk about than the stuff that they spend weeks talking about.
- John: Mm hmm.
- Joe: You know, I mean, there's so much that goes on that people don't see. They hear about somebody gettin' killed and then they want to see this coffin, flag-draped coffin, back in the States, and they don't think about what it takes to get someone back. And there's all kinds of—no one wants to know the machinations of what goes on in between—how the Army actually does things. They just want to critique it and say what's—"Well, they did this wrong, and they did this wrong."
- John: Shut up and let us do our work.
- Joe: Yeah.
- John: And don't critique it—
- Joe: Yeah.
- John: Unless you're in the system.

Joe: And if you say that then you're just a, you know, callous soldier that—undemocratic, just wants to do the thing. Oh, it's just nuts.

John: Yeah.

Joe: It's just nuts, what people do.

John: Well, Joe, thank you very much.

Joe: You're welcome.

John: I've enjoyed it.

Joe: It's been pleasure. It's been good for me, too, so.

John: I'll see you around.

Joe: Yup [laughs].

[End of Interview]