

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

TIMOTHY LA SAGE

Fast Company/Instructor/Scout Sniper/Military Policeman, Marine Corps, War on Terror

2012

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La Sage, Timothy., (b.1975). Oral History Interview, 2012.

Approximate Length: 6 hours 15 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

Timothy La Sage discusses his service with the Marine Corps Security Force Battalion, Fleet Antiterrorism Security Teams [FAST]; the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines; and the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. He describes receiving instruction at Marine Combat Training and Infantry Training Battalion as well as at Security Force School. La Sage outlines his time spent in the FAST company and details the training required for such work. He discusses his deployment with the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines to Okinawa Japan at Camp Hansen as part of a Marine Expeditionary Unit Special Operations Capable [MEU(SOC)], instructing Scout Sniper and Military Operation in Urban Terrain (MOUT) courses as well as working as a School of Infantry instructor at Camp Geiger [North Carolina]. La Sage recounts how he received 2 Navy Achievement Medals. La Sage describes his enlistment with the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines in the Fox Company during which he received a Humanitarian Ribbon and the Fleet Assistance Program at Camp Pendleton [California], where he served with the Military Police Company. La Sage then discusses his first deployment to Iraq in 2003 with the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, including leading the invasion with the Division React Platoon, taking Baghdad, and living in the town of Rumaythah. He remembers the living conditions which his platoon was subjected to due to their advanced position. He also describes his second deployment to Iraq in 2004 and his time spent in Ramadi with a scout sniper platoon. Additionally, La Sage comments on base life at Camp Pendleton and the impact of the military lifestyle on his family.

Biographical Sketch:

Timothy La Sage (b. 1975) served with the Marine Corps Security Force Battalion, FAST Company from 1993-1996. He then reenlisted in the Marine Corps, serving with the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines as they deployed to Camp Hansen [Okinawa, Japan] and then worked as an instructor at Camp Pendleton [California] and Camp Geiger [North Carolina]. La Sage served with the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines from 2000-2006, deploying to Okinawa, Japan; East Timor; and Iraq twice, in 2003 and 2004. He retired from the Marine Corps in 2014.

Interviewed by Rick Berry, 2012.

Transcribed by the Audio Transcription Center, 2015.

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

[Tape 1]

Berry: This interview is with Tim La Sage, who served with the United States Marines during the War on Terror. This interview is being conducted at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum at the following address: 30 West Mifflin Street, Madison, Wisconsin, 53703, on the following date: January 30, 2012. The interviewer is Rick Berry.

[break in recording][00:00:37]

Berry: Tim, thank you for agreeing to do this oral history interview. Can you tell us about your background and life circumstances before you entered military service?

La Sage: Yes, sir, thank you for having me here. Growing up, before I joined the service, everybody thinks it's a normal childhood. I guess reflecting back now, I think there was a lot of assets that I was afforded, other than other people I guess. I grew up, the suburbs of Wisconsin, mostly in Sussex and Lannon area, and then I moved to Germantown, Wisconsin, like I said, all suburbs area.

I grew up with my house up against the woods, so I spent a lot of time outside or in the woods or whatever, with my brothers. I have Pete, who is my brother, older by two and a half years, and I have younger brothers as well, two younger brothers and a sister. I come from a divorced family and lived with my stepdad and real mom, and my father and family lived also nearby in Wisconsin, in the Waukesha area primarily.

Grew up playing sports, grew up wrestling, since I was about third grade and on. Played soccer as I got a little bit older, and baseball. Really liked sports, really liked to be out and about, and enjoyed the friendships and everything, outside the house. Not for any particular reason, but just really excelled at some of those sports.

My stepdad had a business, which was interior and exterior design, so I believe we were the free labor, me and my brothers, and it taught us a lot about working for our money. He paid us a small amount here and there, but it was nice to have that coming in, knowing that I was learning a skill. At the time, it was tough work, carrying shingles up to a roof or sanding windows, hanging off a ledge, or laying tile, you know all things you would pay somebody pretty well to do, you know I was able to learn as a kid, grumbling along the way, I imagine. It was still really good to learn and to do that stuff.

I did end up getting a job at Stark Oldsmobile and Dodge in Menomonee Falls, driving cars and washing cars and being a porter, and driving down to Six Mile

Road, I think it's called, or whatever, going down towards Illinois, where there's an auction. They would buy cars for the dealership, and we'd all go down in a van and pick cars up and bring them back to the dealership, you know as I got old enough. Stuff like that was a lot of fun to me. It seemed like traveling, even though you're going about twenty minutes outside of Milwaukee.

I had a good upbringing, went to St. Johns Lannon Lutheran School and up until sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, I went to Kennedy Middle School, because we moved, and that was in Germantown, Wisconsin, the town school. After that, I was still living in Germantown, the same place. Me and my brother went to Kettle Moraine Lutheran, which is a grade school, now is in Jackson, Wisconsin, a small town outside of West Bend. It's a really nice school. Both those Lutheran schools, it's really nice knowing that, you know, I've been in the military now, almost nineteen years, and I'm just coming back to Wisconsin, and people that I went to school with, it's a very tight-knit group, they're all still friends. The class, a couple classes up and a couple classes down, everybody is still friends, they get together and their families know each other and stuff, so it's nice coming back to that good upbringing.

Berry: When did you graduate from high school, year-wise?

La Sage: I graduated in 1993. I could have graduated a little bit early. I was trying to, because I enlisted, or I signed the papers to join the Marine Corps, in August of '92, and that was my junior year. I was doing all right, I was a B and C student, type of thing, and that was definitely by choice. I think I pretty much accepted that I could be, for me, that constitutes an average student, and yet I could still work or I could go out and play. I had a decent car at the time, and I'd go out and cruise around and stuff and maintain that average grade type stuff, and that was acceptable for me.

I had an older brother who graduated a couple years ahead of me, he was a senior when I was a freshman. He started his college career, and I noticed how hard he worked and he wasn't focused and stuff. So I was happy graduating in '93 with Bs and Cs, and knowing I was going to go into the military after that.

Berry: How did you come to choose the Marine Corps?

La Sage: Me choosing the Marine Corps, sometimes I say the Marine Corps chose me. I went with my brother and a good friend of mine, Dave Brazee [sp?], a Wisconsin kid, we went to school together, all of us did, and Dave and I weren't classmates. He was a little bit older than I. We went down, because my brother, now a year or two, couple years into college, I believe he was going to WCTC, out of—I don't even know if it's Waukesha or something like that. He was mediocre going through college, wasn't focused and stuff like that, so he was going to join the Army, and my friend and I said okay, we'll join the Army too and we'll all go together.

So we went down to the recruiters and lo and behold, the math said I wasn't old enough yet but those two were, so they both enlisted and went, and since I was left hanging, a Marine recruiter outside the mall, snagged me up, and lo and behold, in the blink of an eye, I remember him sitting in my living room and I was signing papers with my mother, because I was seventeen and a half at the time. I did some tests and all that stuff and was in the delayed entry program for about a year, it was just shy of, I believe, before I went for boot camp.

Berry: Tell us about boot camp. How did you get there, where was it located?

La Sage: Boot camp for me was in MCRD, San Diego. It was a great time getting there. Wisconsin is pretty much on the top end of a triangle as far as going left or right, when it comes to boot camp, either West Coast or East Coast. Mississippi is usually dividing line. My family, my mom and stepdad had moved to Arizona just prior to going to boot camp, you know six months or something like that, and I helped them with the move and the recruiters talked and all that stuff. So I ended up leaving from Arizona, over to San Diego. Boot camp, it was nice out there, I loved it.

Berry: How long did boot camp last?

La Sage: Boot camp was three months. It's longer than the rest of boot camps, other services. Marine Corps Boot Camp, in duration, if you take the short version, is three months. It's broken down into three phases. Your first phase is pretty much delousing you of civilian lifestyles and getting you used to military timelines and discipline, and getting you used to just waking up and being held accountable for your actions.

The second phase, the second third of boot camp is you're shipped off to Camp Pendleton, about thirty miles or forty miles north of MCRD San Diego. Camp Pendleton, you're taught field skills. You qualify with the M-16, A-2 service rifle at the time for me. You go out to the field and you do a lot of hikes, put your pack on. You're more getting dirty than, you know, marching around on the parade deck, learning how to drill or march in a military fashion. Up there in second phase was more, for lack of a better term, combat training.

Third phase, you come back down to MCRD and you clean yourself up and learn about the history of the Marine Corps, and your fellow brothers in arms, and you know more classes on marching and rifle detail and how to march with it, and just all kinds of disciplines like that.

Berry: How about the facilities itself? Where did you live and what was the food like, that sort of thing.

La Sage: The food in military facilities at MCRD, for me it was great. It's in San Diego. The weather is glorious, the environment is glorious, and as far as chow and all that stuff, thinking back about it, you don't really recall much about all that stuff. You just know timelines. You know how fast you ate, you know how fast you moved around and all that stuff. Thinking back to it, I remember eating eggs every morning, and that was really good. I'd grown up in Wisconsin, I'm a big egg and cheese and that type of breakfast type of thing. You know, getting eggs, whether they were processed or not. It's not like you taste it, you know you wolf it down as fast as can be, knowing that you're going to regurgitate it five minutes later doing pushups or something like that anyway, so. It's all a good time down there.

MCRD is up against, right on the airport in San Diego, so you get to see real life. That's the difference between Parris Island boot camp and then MCRD boot camp. Parris Island, you're secluded. MCRD, you see planes taking off, you know, and you see the housing, the San Diego houses outside the gate there. It's all hillside stuff, so you can see all that. A buddy of mine in boot camp was able to see his house or his neighborhood at least, from where we were marching around, which led to a lot of pushups, you know, because he'd be unfocused. It was a good time for me. I liked the environment down there, and I had some aces up my sleeve when it came to that type of lifestyle.

Berry: Did you find boot camp physically taxing?

La Sage: For me, the physical portion of boot camp was a lot easier, I think on me, than it was on almost everyone else. I grew up wrestling, since I was in third grade, played soccer once I was a little bit older than that, middle school on type of thing. Wrestling, I thought I was good and I left it at that. My dad wished I would have went a lot farther, because he thought I was a lot better than good. So as far as the endurance stuff, as far as running, soccer, I could run, play a whole game of that, it's all easy. That was really easy for me.

Even the psychological portion of boot camp was a little, I think easy for me as well. I didn't try and lead on to that, because of the fear of the unknown, you don't know. If they catch on to that stuff, they'll eat you up. But, you know, coming from a separated family and having brothers and arguing and wrestling around and all that stuff, I mean as far as the aggressiveness of boot camp, I think I was set up for success with that, I was used to that type of lifestyle. And not meaning just all the yelling, I mean yelling happens, you know with stepdads or whatever, but as far as somebody in your face and all that, it was very easy to stay calm; whether it be from a wrestling coach in your face as you're doing drills or whatever. It was pretty easy.

I did have a--boot camp is three phases. I think I had a fourth one intermixed or parallel, because I had joined the Marine Corps with an eagle, globe and anchor tattoo, which is the Marine Corps emblem, on my arm, and that was quickly, on

day one, when you're getting shots, discovered, and lo and behold you pay a price for claiming the title of something you are not. So every time anyone else would do something wrong, I was the add-on, I was the battle buddy if you will, of so and so can't march in a straight line, he'll go do pushups. "Hey, La Sage, why don't you go join him since you're already qualified apparently," you know? I got my fair share of additional workouts through that boot camp.

Berry: How about recreation? Did you have any free time that allowed you to do things?

La Sage: Free time for me was minimal and for everybody else was minimal. At that time at boot camp, free time consisted of Sundays, and that was polishing boots and prepping uniform for the following week; sewing. Oddly enough, you learn how to sew in boot camp, which pays dividends down the road as an infantryman. I would sew up stuff or whatever. I liked to draw and doodle. So I would focus in on just utilizing my own time. I didn't write too many letters home. I liked to detach myself from things like that when I'm working, so I can completely focus on that type of lifestyle. I wasn't getting too much mail and I wasn't really sending too much mail home, but growing up in Lutheran schools, I went ahead and would go to church. I was kind of hesitant at first, I didn't know what Protestant was, you know, and the military is pretty much traditionally broken down to Catholic or Protestant, and then other, you know all kinds of other stuff. I would go to Protestant service, an escape for a Sunday, you know, a couple of hours or something like that, but other than that it was just getting back and getting ready for the next week, the next day. Not even next week. You pretty much lived day by day or half-day by half-day, and you're just kind of prepping for those next events.

Berry: Sounds like you basically enjoyed the boot camp experience though.

La Sage: I did. It can be easily mistaken by people. Boot camp is going to be the most difficult thing that you go through, until the very next day of your Marine Corps life. Every day is an adventure, as you would say, and not to quote from another service department, but like the SEALs, you know, "The easiest day is yesterday." The Marine Corps lifestyle, if you set yourself up, like anything in life, physically, mentally, you prepare yourself, you investigate what it's going to be like, and then you swallow all that, but then you open yourself up to actually listen and learn, you'll be fine, you'll do all right.

Berry: Did your family come to attend graduation from boot camp?

La Sage: When I graduated boot camp at MCRD, my stepdad and mom were living in Arizona, and they had flown my girlfriend, high school girlfriend at the time, out there as well. They came to boot camp graduation and watched us march across the deck, and that was nice. I went back to Arizona after that, after graduating, and spent the next ten that's given to you poolside, drinking a couple Coronas and hanging out with the girlfriend and family for a little while.

Berry: Tell us about your first assignment after boot camp. Was it what you expected when you enlisted?

La Sage: The first thing they do out of boot camp after your ten days off, is you check into either ITB, Infantry Training Battalion, or MCT, Marine Combat Training, a company is what it is, but one of those two schools. MCT is for non-infantry Marines, and then the ITB, the first one I mentioned, is for infantry Marines. Roughly a month to two months long in duration, depending on which one you go to. At the time that I went, military protocol was that you go through both. So you do Marine Combat Training first, which all Marines go through, and then they'll take the infantry Marines and take them aside, and then send them through the full course again, and a half, you know, to ITB, which is SOI School of Infantry.

So the Infantry Training Battalion, I knew I was going to be coming out of boot camp doing twenty-mile hikes, eighteen-mile hikes, fifteen-mile hikes, out in the field, shooting, running the hills at Camp Pendleton, which I got a brief introduction to in second phase of boot camp, which is a harsh environment at the time. It's pretty hilly and canyons and stuff like that. I knew it was going to be pretty rough out there, so getting prepared for that was my main focus on those ten days off.

Once getting into that school, it was harder than boot camp, I would say, because you physically had to carry the weight of other people. You would find yourself having to pick people up or pick their gear up, forty-plus pounds, or sixty pounds, or whatever it may be. It is a standard out there, it doesn't get too crazy, but you have to physically find yourself, one, telling yourself to get up and over a mountain or a hill, depending on where you live, but then also carrying the weight of a team or other people, and then realizing that your life isn't about getting on top of that hill or being able to physically get over a hill. It's to get over that hill and still have the endurance to fight, and then give your hundred percent. That's what that school was all about in learning. It's broken down into teaching you land navigation and map-reading and just basic field craft. That's not even your real first duty station, so all Marines will do that.

Then, after those schools, that's when you finally get broken down and sent to whatever you signed up to the Marine Corps for. So if you signed up to become an admin person, after that field school, you go to your administrative school and then on. For me, I joined the Marine Corps under what was called a UV code, which translates to Security Forces. Security Forces main job is to guard nuclear refuel and de-fuel facilities or vessels, i.e., submarines or ships that had any sort of nuclear abilities, and guard them in refuel and de-fuel or in the transitioning of the cells back to a plant or anything of the sort. It kind of relates to Department of Energy, which we would work with on occasion and stuff like that.

So you've got school, which is boot camp, school, which is infantry training, and then my next school, before you even get to a unit, would be Security Forces. In Security Forces School, at the time, the Marine Corps had—it still has a unit, but at the time it was highly offensive and unique and special unit.

Berry: Where was that school located?

La Sage: Security Force School is in Chesapeake, Virginia. So from Camp Pendleton, California, they put you—you graduate the one day from infantry training and you don't even know how, but all of a sudden there's a plane ticket for you and you're shipped off via bus, thrown in to the USO to wait, you know in San Diego. Then on a plane and then you're off the plane, and then there's a rickety bus waiting for you, and you're thrown on there and then driven over to Chesapeake, Virginia. Then you check in and at the time, Chesapeake, Virginia, it was probably about fifteen mobile homes, and that was the training facility. It was out in the middle of nowhere, these mobile homes that you lived in, which now they have barracks and it's like a base and stuff like that.

They would teach you--Security Force School is basically to teach you law enforcement type of skills; guarding. They qualified you in pistol training, which is unique in the Marine Corps. Pistol qualifications were usually given to and still are given to medium to senior officers. Back then, they were also given to corpsmen and machine-gunners, that would have to carry our big machinegun, and instead of carrying a rifle on the side, they would carry a pistol.

Berry: What sort of pistol was it?

La Sage: The pistol back then and still today is the Beretta 9mm semiautomatic pistol. It carries fifteen rounds. There is a SOCOM, a Special Operations Command pistol out there, which is a .45, but that's for something else. The 99 percent carry the 9mm Beretta. So you qualify with that, and de-arming people with a pistol, as far as utilizing a pistol. A lot of knife training at the time, you know thinking back. Did a lot of hands-on training, because there was a lot of detention and arrest, and non-deadly force training that went on. The Marine Corps is a lot of deadly force type of training and this unit, deadly force was the easy part, you know we would shoot all day type of thing, but the rest of the time was spent on hand-to-hand combat and de-arming people, really trying to work on, at the time it was line training, but then they would give us Aikido classes and stuff like that as well, and learn how to do joint manipulation, which as a decade and a half progressed, what I think was kind of advanced for them back then. So it was a good time down there, but they were screening us. It was a fairly large class, because the whole Marine Corps would go through, just if you sign up for Security Forces, would go through just this one place. And so you're talking maybe a hundred people, Marine Corps-wide, would go through this Security Forces class, at a time, and so out of those hundred people, every once in a while they'd do a screening of a guy or two, to see if they could make it to a special unit called

FAST Company. FAST Company stands for Fleet Antiterrorism Security Teams, and it is parallel or equal to, you would describe it as Navy SEALs.

Not to claim the title or anything even remotely to that, but to give it some validity, FAST Company had two commands for Marine Corps paperwork and stuff like that, you fell under Marine Corps Security Force Battalion, and you had a colonel there that would take care of your records and anything of the promotions and all that stuff. Your operational command was an admiral, CINCLANT Fleet. It was the admiral in charge of the East Coast at the time, and he would parallel you with SEALs. Our training was at Little Creek, Virginia, where the SEALs train at. We'd go to Dam Neck, where the SEALs were at, we'd go to Coronado, where the SEALs were at. Outside of that though, we'd work with a lot of Army and if anything Rangers, but a lot of bearded individuals. You have Delta and stuff like that, that we'd work with. So, if they were doing an insert—you know, they did a lot of stuff without us, but if there was some sort of joint task force, where we were allowed to go with them, or they just needed extra manpower, to either do simple tasks that they didn't want to leave the manpower for, so like guard the inserts. So if they were flying in somewhere and leaving their plane, or something like that, we would assist with that. If they were running patrol, we would run patrol with them and then stop. They would go and do the extra five-hundred meters to a mile or whatever, and do the actual mission and then come back to our safe area, and we'd escort them back, type of thing. You know, little tasks like that.

Berry: Was your FAST Team assignment your first non-training assignment, your first operational assignment?

La Sage: FAST Company was the first unit that I actually got to. Security Force School was supposed to send me to a post. There's like Kings Bay, Georgia, there's Rota, Spain, and that's a defensive, if you think of like Embassy Guards. It's something similar to that, where you'd go and stand post. Well, this FAST Company did an indoc, they'd run you to death type of thing, and then have you shoot. They'd qualify you on different things and then once you pass their indoc, that's when they accepted you, brought you over. They were based out of Norfolk, Virginia but never there. I'll get into that in a second, which was a hoot. That unit was my first duty station, my first unit, and that unit was a hundred miles per hour every single day. That unit qualified you in CQB, which was close quarters battle, where you would, instead of taking your bayonet with an M-16, you know, and you think oh, old school stuff, or even nowadays stuff, they would teach you how to repel upside down, with a pistol in one hand, to throw a grenade in a room while your other buddies repel into the room. You qualify with an HK-MP5, which was highly unique at the time, which it's a machine pistol, MP stands for, and it shoots nine-hundred rounds a minute, it shoot 9mil, and highly surgical weapon. You qualify with a bunch of other less than lethal weapons as well, a lot of things. You wore flight suits, you dressed in black, and it was pretty unique at the time. You really realized you made it when you found yourself walking

around Virginia Beach with a beeper on, back in the early nineties, which was highly unique, unlike now.

Berry: The purpose of the beeper was if they needed you very quickly?

La Sage: The beeper, you were on call 24-7. The beeper. We'd run a couple drills here and there, meaning all the time, but we would also get—you never knew when the callout was. When the unit went to Haiti, when I got there the unit was in Somalia, for the Black Hawk down scenario, which we ended up flying over for. The unit's primary mission is to recapture embassies in distress. You have a four-hour window to be flying. That means four hours on the tarmac, flying away with your kit bag, ready to go. That left like zero room for vacation or anything of the sort. That unit was always on the go.

The very first day that I checked in, I'll never forget it. The 1st sergeant told the six of us that were coming to the unit, he said, "Welcome aboard. I don't do many check-ins, because not many people come, but I flew back from Somalia." And this is right after the Black Hawk down incident happened. We're talking 1993. He said, "I just flew back from Mogadishu, Somalia, and I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm taking three of you with me right away, and then the other three in three months, will be over there as well." It was a fast awakening of what's to come and you quickly realize that you know nothing in regards to what you're supposed to know.

It went by very fast, it was a fast three months type of thing. When we flew in, President Clinton, at the time, had organized a pullout, immediate pullout of operations. The Black Hawk down incident was a changer for us in U.S. Forces. FAST Company was at the embassy and they recaptured that, maintained that with Embassy Guards, and from there they ran some patrols to make sure that they could assist with anything they could, with the U.S. Forces, in regards to Mohamed Aidid, and the actions of Delta, so. From there, flying back and school, Scout Sniper School. You have all kinds of different schools that they would send you to. A lot of defensive driving and offensive driving schools, where you learn how to pit vehicles and how to block vehicles, and how to drive escort trains, you know at about eighty miles per hour. It was a really, change of a lifestyle that you never forget, just some of the things that we would do.

I was able to go to an exchange program in Scotland, England, which was just one of the best things that I can remember. We flew in, they picked twenty of us out of the whole group, they picked twenty of us to go over there and work with the British and their special army service. We were afforded an opportunity to run the highlands and *yomp*, as they call it, you know the hills with them, which is throwing about an eighty to—I'll just say at least an eighty-pound pack on, and hike in the mountains. There's certain things that I can recall as if it was yesterday, that I'll never forget, all these little life lessons. As we were dropping water purification tablets into our canteens, because at the time water purifiers,

we're talking 1994 now, you know now I have a water purifier. Back then I had a tablet. You'd cross these streams and—

[break in recording][00:31:37]

Berry: Tim, you were telling us about your experience in Scotland. Would you continue with that please?

La Sage: Yes, sir. Some of the funny things and best things I can remember happened in FAST Company. We were just talking about yomping, or humping the hills. For us, as like Scout Snipers, we would go ahead of a company or ahead of a unit, and observe and make sure the routes are safe and stuff like that. We yomped into the highlands, you know, and it was at the time, the most physically demanding thing I've done, and that's every single thing. I know I've said that about a million times so far, but at the time, I remember getting my butt whooped and looking around and realizing the Brits and us and everybody were really working our tails off, getting up in this area. There was snow as we got higher, there was a snowstorm coming that night. We were two days ahead of the company that were getting there, and I remember just pounding water and dropping purification tablets in canteens and stuff. We were switch-backing the stream going up there, so we could stay by a water source, and as we got higher, I just remember looking and there was these two dead mountain goats in the stream. We all paused for a minute you know, like five minutes, I'm looking and I'm like, all I could think to myself is God created these animals to survive in this exact location and they're dead, and I'm hiking this hill for another day yet, you know? You really start to—you do a lot of inner thought or inner prayer, like, "Oh please God, let me just keep going for a little bit longer." So, funny things like that. Once you get done with those funny things, at the time miserable things, they're embedded in you and it's the things that you laugh about with your buddies in a pub somewhere else or whatever.

You get up to the top of that mountain; I remember we took one guy not from the unit. There was a Marine liaison there and we brought him up so that he could film and stuff like that. He left his boots out and I'll never forget. When we checked in, in Camp Condor, outside of Glasgow, Dundee area I think it was. Anyways, when you check in, they gave you their version of a canteen cup, because they'll stop for hot wets all throughout the day. They'll stop for some soup or some tea type stuff, you know, throughout the day or whatever and we're like oh yeah, we'll do that. But I remember they handed us this flag, like an eight year-old would have on the back of his bicycle, or a dune buggy would have, I remember this flag. It was this little blaze orange, triangle flag, on a little tent pole type thing, that you know, telescopically opened up to about ten feet. I'm like what is this for? But once we got to the top of the mountain, I remember there was no talking. I just remember these guys getting ready to bunker down for the night, and I remember them trying to build up like a half-igloo, or just kind of getting down in the snow so the wind would blow over the top of them. I remember them

putting the flag at their head, so right above their head they would bury this flag, and it was about eight feet up or whatever, seven feet up. I'm like yeah, you know, *c'est la vie*, that's what I'm going to do too. So I buried my flag and that next morning, the snow had blown and came down and basically covered us, and the flag was so that whoever dug themselves out first could find where the other people were, to help undig them too. So you made yourself little igloo cocoons with your bag and everything else.

My dad, my real dad, was a mountain climber all through my childhood, and I would go on these trips with him and stay at base camp, and I know how they lived. But to just allow the snow and weather to cocoon you, it was pretty unique. I remember this add-on, this liaison guy, he left his boots outside of his bag, and they were ice. His boots were solid and filled. You know, I already was highly disciplined, I think, at that point, but that was just, I'll never forget that. You go the extra mile and you put your rifle in your sleeping bag, you put your boots in your sleeping bag, or at least in a different bag or whatever, but anything that you don't take care of because you're too tired or cold or wet or whatever, is going to be ten times worse the next day. That guy had to be evac'd out of there. He was combat ineffective, he was training ineffective, he was ineffective.

Anyways, another event on that trip, I could talk all day about that trip. The Brits were a great group of people to work for, and whenever you're around Brits and you say you've done the exchange program with them, they take you under their wing immediately, because they know what you've done and it's a brotherhood there. I remember also hiking another time, about two days, three days into nowhere, and setting up camp. We're dropping our packs and starting to think about defense and perimeters and who's on watch, you know first, and who's going to get some sleep first. I'm watching the Brits change clothes. They had packed civilian clothes, and they just dropped their packs and they're starting to change clothes, like throw on a t-shirt. I'm asking one of the sergeants, I'm like hey, what is going on? He's like, "We're changing over and then we're going out." I'm like yeah, I'm thinking patrol, I'm like okay they're changing, so maybe we're doing some counter-terrorism type stuff or we're going to go into town. No. Their vehicle pulled up, they went out in town, took us all out in town, to the pub, since we were about three days ahead of the company. They would drink at night and then work the next day, and it was just nonstop. It was pretty fun.

Berry: That might say something about why wars are fought by young people.

La Sage: Definitely, you were at a hundred percent at all times, meaning okay, lack of sleep. You were pushing yourself at all times. Sooner or later it wears on you, but you as a professional, need to know where that point is and stop ahead of it. Scotland was a great time.

FAST Company was paged. I remember sitting in an establishment, I'll say, at nineteen years old, in Virginia Beach, and the beeper goes off and I immediately

have to drop quarters for a phone call. Nobody had cell phones at the time, I don't believe they were really invented, except for the Brick. You raced back to Norfolk, Virginia, where your barracks were at, and I say barracks. It was an abandoned hotel out in town, no gates, no gate guard, no military installation, across the street from a subdivision and a school, and that's where our antiterrorism unit was. It was pretty glorious. In the middle of the barracks was a civilian-run bar, with barbecues and stuff, that we'd put flyers around town about happy hour, just so that we can maybe not work all day and night, because civilians would start showing up.

Anyways, you'd get a page and show back up at the barracks and sure enough, shortly thereafter you're on a bird going to Haiti, so FAST Company did Haiti, when the police department was shot-up in Haiti at the time, around '95. So you had a lot of times where you'd be called up. They do a lot of what you thought were just test runs, but later would find out something actually was going on and you were just an auxiliary, a just in case if you will. So, they'd put you on a bird and fly you around for about three hours or whatever, and then stand you down and come back. There was a lot of stuff like that that would happen as well.

Berry: Some of the deployments then, were quite short-term?

La Sage: FAST Company was fast in just about everything else as well. It was fast deployments, fast everything. The deployments in general were three months, like the Somali deployments were three months at a time. Haiti was short-lived as well. That was two platoons at about two and three months at a time. For me, I also—FAST Company, you're sworn to a seventy-five-year silence type of thing, what's going on. There's a historical, you know, lineage, of what FAST Company has done, but some of the operations, you're not to mention what happened.

We did some national deployments as well. I was deployed to the Seattle area, Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, which is outside of Seattle, near Bremerton, Washington, due to some national threats, with some types that were antigovernment. It was for a refuel, de-fuel of a nuclear sub, and so we were called up to that. That was supposed to be a one-month deployment, just to run security while they exchanged the nuclear cells and they refueled the sub and that was it. It turned into a five-month deployment. So you really, you know there's no girlfriend or there's a million of them, which you know that understand. There was no commitment anywhere other than outside the unit. As far as vehicles go, you've got to think at the time, there is an auto pay for your vehicles. You had allotments through the military but it wasn't as convenient to leave as it is now. Back then, you really couldn't have any contracts really, because you never knew if you were going to be gone a week, gone a month, gone whatever.

That deployment to Bremerton, I remember I had a motorcycle at the time and I was like wow, I've got to find a way to pay this on a monthly basis type of thing, instead of being there and being able to do it. You know, stuff like that. It made

you grow up with a business mind as well, kind of fast, you've got to be responsible. Just like working at the White House or working anywhere else with military, these special units, if you show any sign of being a burden, you might as well pack your bags, or they will for you. If you have any discipline problems, if you have any financial problems, if you have anything; okay, thanks for playing, we'll send you out to the fleet, where you can be managed more easily. So, it made you grow up kind of fast.

Berry: How long was your assignment with FAST Company?

La Sage: Nineteen ninety-three to '96. Three years is the norm for most Marine Corps units, and then they'll start processing you to move to another area and stuff like that.

Berry: Where did you go after your FAST assignment?

La Sage: After FAST Company, I enlisted in the Marine Corps four years active duty and then four years inactive. So about three years of my first portion of my career was all done in FAST Company, so I had a year to—actually it was even less than that, but I owed yet. They sent me out to the Fleet Marine Force in Camp Pendleton, California, and I was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines. That's on the north side of the base, where all the Marine units are, but Camp San Mateo in Camp Pendleton, California. So, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, just like anything else that you hear like that, when you hear of a battalion and the Marines, it's an infantry deploying unit. You work as a battalion, company and platoon level, going out to the field and getting ready to do either a six-month or seven-month deployment somewhere at the time.

When I was there in '96, there was a couple things going on or brewing. With FAST Company, you were privy to anything and everything going on in the world; any threat level that was rising at the time, everywhere. Once you get to the fleet, you don't hear much until things are really out of control and you're talking about mass movement of troops and stuff like that. So, 2-4 was mostly training.

I did a deployment to Okinawa, Japan, which is a six-month deployment, and the easy way to communicate that is it's a posturing deployment. They'll continuously—they just recently, this year, kind of changed it slightly. So we're talking eighteen and a half years, or fifteen and a half years later, you know, and they're starting to make changes. We all still deploy to Japan, and that's just in case Korea or anything. Anything in that realm starts kicking off, you have a staging force of military there that can launch. Out of Japan now, just recently, they're starting to also do that out of Darwin, Australia, do a six-month deployment over there. It's more of like just staging and posturing of troops, the just in case type of people.

Berry: You've been in the Marines almost four years now. How did the promotion process work?

La Sage: The promotion process worked as well as the demotion process. I never got demoted but I was on, I think working so hard. You have to do some administrative things once you get past like lance corporal, E-3. You have to possibly go through schools and stuff like that, you know at the time, and I think I did well, I think I did fine. I didn't have too many problems or anything like that. I think being young. At the time when I first came into the military, you could drink at eighteen years old, on a base, and that changed to where you can't, you've got to be twenty-one. Out in town was twenty-one. But you could drink at eighteen and you have beers and stuff like that at eighteen or nineteen, you're bound to make mistakes. The best thing is your buddies will clean you up fast, because they like your support, so they try to keep everybody on the straight and narrow.

For me, I was a corporal at the time, which was a noncommissioned officer, and that's for me and for everyone else, that's when you kind of first realize that you're making it, that you know that you're doing good. In the early nineties, it was highly unheard of to see a sergeant in his first four years. It was pretty much corporal and right at that four-year mark, you were either picking up sergeant, or you know if you reenlisted you were going to be picking up sergeant. That was kind of the timeline. I was at my four years still, picked up corporal and was doing well, I think, for myself. I was immediately put in a squad leader job which usually, when you come from outside of a unit, these guys have already been working together and they know each other, you don't really just jump in and take over somebody's pot, you know pot of twelve guys. You kind of have to work for your spot, but just knowing tactics and knowing all that stuff, I was easily able to take it over. A lot of times they don't let Security Force guys do that, because all they know is how to stand post. So it would be like the local bank security guard now all of sudden taking over an infantry fighting force, charging hills, he may not know how to do that, but since FAST Company was offensive in nature, it was pretty easy to move into that.

Did my Okinawa deployment. The workup constitutes of twenty, twenty-five mile hikes and going to the field. Pretty much, you're in the field all week. You come back, clean gear on Friday, turn in weapons and have a weekend. Then at times you'll do like a month at Twentynine Palms, California, do some desert training or something like that. So you're gone a lot before you even deploy. Once you get on deployment, you live in Camp Hansen for the most part, in Okinawa, which is outside the town of Kin. Okinawa is a staging place for a MEU, a Marine Expeditionary Unit. FAST Company would go in and take over embassies. Their support is a MEU or a MEUSOC. The MEUSOC is a Marine Expeditionary Unit, but it's a Special Operations Capable portion of that unit. So us in Okinawa, you're either a helicopter unit—you're all infantry, but you'll fight out of helicopters, you'll fight out of small boats. The only way I can easily describe it is

you throw out the Navy SEAL term, “little black Zodiac boats,” or you fight out of Trac, amphibious vehicles. So you work out of Okinawa.

For me it's not as prestigious or whatever, as FAST Company, but you quickly learn that okay, if you're on a MEUSOC, you have to be ready for about sixty different missions, and they're coming out of everywhere. Some of them TRAP missions, tactical recovery of aircraft or personnel, so if a pilot goes down or anything of the sort, it's your guys that have to go in and get him. If an embassy needs reinforcement--all this type of stuff. You have to be ready for anything, a non-combative operation. So if there's just some uprising somewhere and you're going to insert yourself. Humanitarian missions. The MEUSOC, you've got to be ready for everything. So what can be easily constituted as okay, now I'm just sitting here waiting in Japan, because I'm coming from FAST Company, I was really spoiled there, you know, to now, just kind of training and waiting for missions to pop up. At that time, there wasn't too much going on for the big Marine Corps, you know big military in general. It was good. It was a chance to get back to the basics for myself and just be worldly, you know being in Japan and going to a couple different places. I went to a couple different countries at the time; East Timor and stuff like that, and that was mostly just for humanitarian and support type of missions, nothing too crazy going on.

Berry: Somewhere in this process, you apparently decided to make a career out of the Marine Corps. How did that come about?

La Sage: What came about was really thriving and needing and wanting that brotherhood. Coming from FAST Company, I almost got out. It was very easy for me to get out. You instantly have a fat resume, coming from FAST Company. You've worked with the State Department. You're talking like an eighteen, nineteen, twenty year-old kid, you know, or Marine if you will, sorry, working with the State Department, having secret to top secret clearance, qualified on the top weapons of the era at that time. You can get a job in that field that you like instantly, you're craved by agencies. You're working out of Langley a lot of times. We're working in Virginia, that's where we're based at, so you may go shoot over at the FBI's range. You quickly network for a young man, with all the right people. I was very quick to almost get out and from there, get some sort of job, but I honestly knew, that I think was still immature at that point, to where I don't think I could transition out of the military. The things that you say to each other and do, and work like in a Marine Corps tree-line if you will, does not translate well into a cubicle, until you have grown up and matured enough to flip on and off, that switch. Somewhere in there, you insert a woman, and I found myself staying in the Marine Corps. That was short-lived, so that's not even worth bringing up.

Berry: Your second enlistment was for another four years?

La Sage: I have commitment issues and I only reenlisted for three years. At the time, it was like three or four-year enlistments. In special occasions, you can do a two-year enlistment, but I enlisted for three years and that was—I remember I specifically did that for a job. I ended up getting a really good job coming off of that Japan deployment, with 2-4, and that was working at division schools. Division schools, so you have 1st, 2nd, 3rd Marine Division, around the world, and 1st Marine Division is West Coast. You've got 4th Marine Division of course, but you've got 1st Marine Division, where I was working out of Camp Pendleton; has a school system which teaches you Scout Sniper School, military operations in urban terrain, which was very new at the time, as far as working in and around a city, you know kicking down doors and all that stuff. Being a sniper and being a CQB guy, a close quarters battle guy, a SWAT Team guy if you will. Division Schools gobbled me up and I went over there. The general had to sign a waiver for myself and one other FAST Company guy, to work at Division Schools as a corporal. We were able to do live fire ranges, throw grenades in a tire house, where you can actually—room clearing practice, clearing procedures, and then throw grenades in rooms. That stuff is usually reserved for officers and gunnery sergeants at the time, and staff sergeants. As a corporal, we were able to run and gun and train at the time.

I was assigned, first went over to Scout Sniper basic course, but that was short-lived due to an investigation outside of my responsibility, so they revamped the whole school system. I'll wrap that up with brandings and stuff like that. That was the introduction to hazing I think, in the Marine Corps. They did some revamping at that point, and I was salvageable, as they would say, meaning I was unaware of anything that was going on. So they kept me on as an instructor, moved me over to MOUT Instructors Course, where I stayed for about a year and half. MOUT Instructors Course was just a great time as well.

Berry: Where was that located?

La Sage: MOUT Instructor is—first I taught military operations in urban terrain, and then I was quickly brought on to teach the teacher, if you will, on how to teach people how to kick down doors and all that stuff. That was taught at Camp Pendleton, California. It was roughly at the time, you know this is 1997, I think a twenty to forty-million dollar facility. It is a full-on, I don't even want to say village. It is this huge, okay, large village of buildings, and you're talking eight stories tall, all the way down to two-story and one-stories with basements. A city block of sewers underneath and just all kinds of live fire ranges on the back side of it. So this huge complex area of training and you take on forty students at a time for a course, that lasted anywhere from two weeks to a month, depending on which course you were teaching, and twenty of those students would be military and then twenty of those students would be law enforcement. At the time, when I first started, for the first like six months to a year, that course was not only military, but all the local—well, not local. We would teach national level agencies, SWAT teams, Feds, they would come through these courses, and it was multi-military as well. You'd teach

Navy, and anybody that needed to learn how to repel from a roof, down into a window, to kicking down doors, to just the very basics too, if you think about Vietnam and Hue City and stuff; how to move and patrol and walk through a village, and stuff like that. So there was a lot of training going on there. Military-wide is when you started seeing all these villages pop up, in the Army and everywhere else, and we replicated our stuff off of like Army as well. It was just an awesome facility to work in.

That was my first introduction as an instructor role, to work in an eight-man staff, and a small group of guys that you had to logistically plan everything. So I got forty students, I want to shoot fifty-thousand rounds. I want to blow up four-hundred grenades. You've got to plan all that stuff and request it a month ahead of time, and you've got to get drivers and trucks to pick it up. It was good for a young guy, to learn all that stuff, but then to get out there and really do all the training. I think that's when I first realized I liked to get up—I liked kicking down the door more, but after that, I don't mind getting up and talking about teaching and how to do it and all that stuff. It was enjoyable.

MOUT Instructors Course, that lasted into late '97, '98 timeframe, which was odd. That was supposed to be only a six-month gig or job, and I squeezed it for everything I could. Picked up sergeant there, was reenlisted at that point. There's a way to work the system to benefit you. I would always reenlist early. So let's say I reenlist. I do four years, but my third year, a year outside of your end of service, end of active service, you can put in your package to reenlist. So I would always try and reenlist six months earlier than my cutoff, when I was actually getting out. So if I reenlist for three years, really you're only doing an extra two and a half or two or whatever. So I was already coming up on my EAS one way or another, being as I reenlisted that first time early. I had been due for orders as well already, so at that time, I had to leave that. Division Schools, I went back to 2-4, which is my parent command. They're the ones that actually owned me.

Berry: Two-four would be the 2nd and the 4th Marines?

La Sage: Yeah, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, and like a fraction, we always kind of break it down. We end up just saying 2-4. Second Battalion, 4th Marines, out of Camp Pendleton. Went back there for processing, a couple weeks or whatever, and then had orders to become an instructor at the School of Infantry on the East Coast, all the way out in North Carolina.

Somewhere in there, I forgot to mention, when I was in 2-4, during the workup portion of their deployment, I was able to be selected to play soccer for the Marine Corps. No glory in there but no shame either, because I remember it was six to eight months prior to that deployment, that I was able to wake up in the morning. I'd watch my guys going through the glorious misery of their day, the painfulness of their day, and I'd wake up in a set of Umbro shorts and walk out, stretch out, and we'd practice in the morning for a couple of hours and scrimmage

in the afternoon and that was it. But we would travel around and play games in San Diego, around other bases, or play other units on base as well, and that was a great time. The liberty that it gave me, it was definitely rejuvenating, because you start doing these deployments and you start doing these workups, and if you don't get a break and stuff like that, it's easy to burn out. I definitely was very fortunate in some of that stuff.

Berry: So how did you avoid burnout?

La Sage: I definitely have good friends. I love to go out, so whether it was playing soccer, which was work at the time, there's no burning out from that. But as far as the military, the actual Marine stuff, going out on a weekend. I actually really like—since growing up and playing in the woods, I actually do like it when I'm out there training and I'm out there doing stuff. Just like boot camp, having a little secret about hey, it's actually easier for me than what I'm going to let them know about. So was the training. I enjoyed working so hard and then getting on top of that mountain, metaphorically or physically, and then being able to sit out and look over the land or whatever and just be in tuned with everything, and being instantly rewarded for whatever it is that I just had done. That was rejuvenating for me but you know, a beer on the weekend doesn't hurt either.

Berry: Let's pause there if we can.

[Tape 2]

Berry: Tim, you were telling us about your assignment at the School of Infantry on the East Coast. Would you continue with that please?

La Sage: Yes, sir. I had received orders to become an instructor over at the School of Infantry. The School of Infantry is the pinnacle of two arms I guess. One arm would be to train MCT, which is Marine combat training, and the other arm would be infantry training battalion. When I first came into the military you've got to do both. Well as time progressed, now you only have to do one of those, and so you go to the School of Infantry, which is located at Camp Geiger, North Carolina, and Camp Lejeune. It's basically an appendage of Camp Lejeune, if you will, is the way to pronounce it. Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. It's a small camp offshoot of that.

Camp Geiger, check in, and you quickly realize that no matter what your qualifications are, it's all about they have an empty spot somewhere. What I thought I was going to go and train infantry Marines on infantry stuff, I went to go train non-infantry Marines; so the admin guys and the cooks and the candlestick makers, if you will, on infantry stuff. My job was to give them their one shot at learning what they need to know to become an infantryman or woman,

if war broke out and all hands were needed type of stuff. So that was day one, learning that.

Day two, I realized there was—I don't like using the word disgruntled, but a lot of somewhat disappointed guys like myself, who wanted to train their brothers, their military guys, now learning that they're going to train non-infantry guys. Well, we all formed a pack and our little vow to each other was to make sure that we train these guys and girls to the best of our ability, so that if this is their one shot at learning how to be an infantryperson, they'll never forget it. So, like a drill instructor tries to burn that into new Marines or recruits minds, we try to do that as well. The caliber of instructors that I worked alongside were impeccable. These guys were all top-notch guys. It's just different. Like if you have a policeman who goes to transfer units and finds out his next duty station is going to be a security guard somewhere, instead of actually in a patrol car, it's a little different. That's where I was at.

You check into this unit and you find out you're on this fast-paced, seventeen-day—

[break in recording][00:02:58]

La Sage: You find out that the training schedule is a fast-paced, seventeen-day training cycle. Day one, you pick up about four-hundred students. North Carolina, like Parris Island, is the only place female individuals become Marines, and then female Marines, if you will, train there as well. Our company at the time, was one of two companies, there was only two companies that trained females. I was a sergeant at the time, so you had a couple female sergeants that had their own platoon of females, and then we had our platoon of males. We had that—I don't even want to say challenge, but we had that addition to our unit as well. We took it eagerly and happily as well. We really set the pace for that unit, and when I say we, I'm talking once again, about six to eight instructors per platoon, for this company. You have four platoons, so you've got roughly four-hundred to four-hundred-fifty students at a time and that's a lot of moving around, a lot of shooting, a lot of grenades, a lot of obstacle courses, a lot of patrolling through the woods, a lot of everything. They all have to get checked off on these qualifications.

My counterparts and I, I don't think I could do it again now, but it was ninety miles per hour, all day long, yelling and screaming and training and adjusting and grabbing, and really shock and aweing these guys to remember this stuff, because you only had them for a short time and then they go to their administrative school or they go to their cook school or refrigerator repairman or whatever. So we really trained them hard. We vowed to each other, we'll make every class an indoc, like these guys will never forget this stuff. Anyways, training these individuals was pretty extensive. We had a sister company as well, a fox company, that trained females, and honestly, you always think your unit is better or whatever, and they

definitely had a lot of problems; instructors getting in trouble, students getting in trouble and stuff like that. We did very well.

Our battalion commander really approved of our company. We found ourselves in the paper a couple times. There was two large incidents that happened in that unit, where awards were given out, and that was the first unit that I was at, that I got—well that's not true. That was the first medal I received, was in that unit. I've received a couple personal awards, but in that unit, within—this is highly unique, but within a twenty-four hour period, I received two Navy Achievement Medals; NAM is what we call it. The easiest way to break it down for an outsider is you know, you have Medal of Honor, Silver Star, you have a couple of awards, but you have Medal of Honor is the best it gets, and then you have—you know, when it goes to the stars, you have Silver Star, Bronze Star, and then it goes Navy Accommodation Medal and then Navy Achievement Medal, and those are given out, those are your personal decorations. You had to do something personally to get awarded that.

So within a twenty-four hour period, I had received two Navy Achievement Medals, both for lifesaving steps, lifesaving actions. The first was, I was out on a patrol with my forty-man squad, which is unrealistic, it's really a platoon. I had my group of students and I was out on patrol and it's like two in the morning and it's actually snowing in North Carolina, it's freezing rain, and definitely rough weather for their seventeen days of training. By day three, they're done with issuing gear and all that stuff. They're out in the field until day sixteen, type of thing. We were at the back end of that training, we were out in the middle of the woods, and I had set up a quick little defensive circle, I'll call it, where we get in nice and tight, form a circle, you cross legs, so that you have physical contact with the guy next to you. We were taking like an hour rest period, where 75 percent of us would be awake, and then you allow a few people here and there—I would allow like five at a time, to come into the center to rest and recoup, and that's for an hour. So really, you're talking, what do they get, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, to get off of duty, if you will. In that portion of time, I'm sitting in the center. We have a radio, I have a student, you know, you're talking to an entry level student, entry level Marine, and he's monitoring the radio. Really, everything is my responsibility, I'm teaching as I go. Off to the side, I have a Marine dragging another Marine in a headlock and bringing him to the center of the circle and both of them are fighting. At first I thought it was a fight. Mind you, the weather is terrible and it's two in the morning, so it's hard to see what's going on. I'm a handsy instructor, so I'm quick to snatch somebody up. I watched these guys dragging each other over to the center, and so snatch them both up, and I quickly realized that the one was bringing the other one to my attention. The one individual, a large individual, was exasperating, he was choking, you know, and not choking when a lot of people say they're choking. He was choking without making any sound, so he had zero air passage. He was done dancing. African American gentleman and his color, that was the first thing I noticed, was his color. I'm like oh, we've got some problems, you know?

Tried to create an airway, you know put my hand in his mouth, and it was solid. He had his hands around his neck, he was doing all the telltale signs, and he was starting to go limp. I had shoved my hand so deep into his mouth that his teeth were pretty much on my wrist, and I depressed his tongue. He was a big kid, and I remember, because I had him in like an arm lock, and holding onto his body, like if a swimmer was escorting somebody in the water. So I got my hand down his throat, and I remember really depressing his tongue, like the back of his throat, which created his gag reflex, and he threw up. I just remember his whole chest cavity inflating, where he finally got air after however long. Of course, as soon as he got that air, then he was able to fight again. He started biting my hand and all that stuff, so I took my hand out and I watched him instantly grab the throat and couldn't breathe again.

Anyways, long story short, the guy went into anaphylactic shock and was choking. His throat closed up. I was able to maintain an airway, throwing things at my radio operator, until he brought the radio over to me, and I was able to contact my headquarters. Mind you, I'm easily a mile or two into a tree-line, to where I had to give them a grid coordinate, to get a Navy Corpsman out to my site, via a vehicle. I had to drag this kid over to a nearest trail type of thing. It was pretty extensive, you know, and got this Marine on a vehicle and they created an airway. I always say, there was about three things that I've always wanted to do in my life. One was land a plane, you know, non-planned, help with a birth of a child, which I take that back now, and then the last was to create an airway, to do a trache job on a throat. That was my chance, you know, and I couldn't do it because I was holding on to the guy and all this stuff.

But anyways, this guy was taken away and at the graduation of that class, that Marine, he was dropped, he didn't complete the class or whatever. He would just go to the next class. But that Marine came to the graduation and seeing that Marine better and well and talking, you know and stuff, that was pretty rewarding. So that was at two in the morning, two to four in the morning. Well that next morning, at about five in the morning, we had to wake everybody up, or get everybody going, from wherever our patrol sites were at, our little defenses, link up onto a road, and then as a company, we would do a hike back. That was like one of their finales, was to do this. All their field gear, all the stuff they've been living out of for the last two and a half weeks or whatever, is to hike them back to Camp Geiger. I remember we waited for a while before we could actually get permission to hike, so that the battalion commander could say whether we could or not, which was the first time ever because of weather. The weather was just terrible. So we started hiking back and we got the permission, we all hiked back as a company, and we were stepping it out, we were moving, and by the end of it, I remember just being face in the rain and people just being miserable. This translates to everything combat related, that later on, I would tell guys too. I'm like yeah, you can be miserable all day long, but that doesn't get you to where you need to be. You can quit, you can do everything, but once you quit and you cry

and you sit down and you can't go any farther or whatever, well guess what? You still need to get back. There isn't a magic truck, there isn't a magic helicopter, that you need to take matters in your hands and put the left foot down and the right foot down.

So we were hiking back and everyone--that was the first time I can remember that everyone completed that hike, because it was clear to everyone that they had no choice. The weather was that bad. Anyway, we get to the armory, and the very first thing you do is you get to the armory and you turn in weapons. We have this formation at the armory, the armors are moving slow, they're coming out of their nice warm little area, and I watch our company, who is standing in formation, waiting for us to turn in weapons, and this was no more than ten minutes after we stopped hiking. We knew what was about to happen and we were trying to get everything turned in as fast as possible, so that the Marines body temperatures wouldn't cool down and all that stuff. I'm inside, telling this guy to open up his cages faster and the sergeant is like okay, you know. About eight to ten minutes after we stopped, I looked out and Sergeant Bolanos, a good, dear friend of mine, comes running in and he's like, "We have a problem." I look outside and I saw three people already laying on the ground, and then I look over and as I'm looking, within seconds, I watched six guys over here pass out, I watched three guys over here pass out, and then half a dozen people over—and it went into pandemonium of hypothermia. It was just horrendous. So all these people are hitting the deck, locking up, seizing up, and it was just, it was horrible.

Sergeant Polinsky gets on a public service type of thing that we had at the armory, in case someone tried to do something crazy at the armory, there was like a kind of a 9-1-1 phone there. He got on that phone and called—the transmission that came out was we have mass casualties at the armory. Now, I don't know, you know, you think worst case scenario. The individuals that got that message put out a broadcast. We had Onslow County Fire Department, emergency medical. We had Jacksonville emergency medical ambulances and fire. We had Camp Geiger's little place, Jacksonville PD. The entire skyline from the neighborhoods was red and blue lights and you're talking easily, two-hundred and some people that went down, you know, and then you had another fifty to a hundred. Everybody had symptoms of something or another.

Okay, now you take six or eight instructors and what do they see, okay, life-saving things. We've got all these medical people here within ten minutes of that call, which was great. Now, what's my next problem, is I have well, okay, let's deal with the people, let's get them into warmth. But mind you, I have about four-hundred rifles and weapons laying on the ground, and civilians walking around, and people everywhere, and oh. So, the accountability issue, just scooping armloads. We actually broke down a door and broke into, I guess you would say abandoned barracks. It was for NCOs. Broke into that so that we had a place to stage weapons and machineguns. It was just debauchery. That ended up

constituting one of my next Navy Achievement Medals. Having two within one day was kind of unique, and a little prideful moment there I guess.

School of Infantry is a three-year duty station and I was done with that, you know, that type of training. I wanted to implement my own training, instead of always teaching and stuff like that. Three-year duty station. My old platoon sergeant was the monitor. The monitor is the key master, if you will, of people's careers. So when you got orders, you transitioned to a different unit or whatever, there is one man responsible for an entire field of jobs. So, infantry guys go to this one person, all that stuff.

Berry: How much choice did you have in your future assignments?

La Sage: You could say okay, you're in the infantry and you want to stay in the infantry, you can say I want to go to the West Coast. You can pretty much pick a coast and you're not guaranteed anything. I want to stay in Camp Pendleton. Okay, here you go, here's Twentynine Palms, which is in the Mojave Desert, which is not Camp Pendleton. So you can ask for anything but you will get what they need you to fill. I was highly fortunate to have him there and I told him, hey, I want to get—I'll help you out by going to the next deploying unit. That's the phrase I would use all the time, throughout my career, is if I needed to transition out of somewhere or whatever, say give me your next deploying unit out of Camp Pendleton. He needs to fill that spot before they deploy. They may deploy in a week or two, a month or six months or whatever, but he needs to manpower-up that unit, so you're doing him a favor and he's doing you one type of thing.

So, bouncing back and forth in the country, left Camp Geiger, North Carolina, and bounced over to the most decorated battalion in the Marine Corps; 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. That was just a wonderful place to be, and that's in Camp Pendleton, California, right back to where—it's the neighbor of 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, where I was at. Same little camp, same everything. Started working a unique duration there. I ended up staying there from 2000 until 2006 timeframe, around 2006, I think it was, where I end up leaving there. The 2-5 was a great command, a great unit, great subordinates, it was everything. I was assigned to a Boat Company, which is you are about six to eight men, packed on a little black Zodiac boat, and you are always under the radar. You're leaving from about up to twenty-five miles off the coast, doing these little black boats underneath the wave-tops, and infiltrating the beaches, and then small unit going quickly aggress, or do whatever it is that you have to do on mission, and then back to your little boats and zip underneath the radar, back to a small vessel somewhere. Just the stealthiness of that unit, I fell in love with it quickly, just the high tempo, high offensive in nature type of work was great. Everything from these boats and having to—I like the water, I like to surf, I like being around the ocean. Being in these boats, in the tranquility, at two in the morning, about twenty-five miles off the coast, in these huge rolling waves, you know, out in the middle of the ocean,

twenty-fives miles off the coast. You are quickly a speck in the middle of nowhere on these little things, you know, and it was a lot of fun.

Berry: How did you know where you were twenty-five miles off the coast? Did you have GPS?

La Sage: Even back then, you didn't really have GPSs like you do now. Technology has just gone through the roof. You're talking in the year 2000, you could get a GPS, but they weren't like how they are now, to where everybody could have a GPS. Everybody has watches and hand-helds and everything like that now, but back then, you had pluggers and stuff.

The Boat Company, the reason what made it awesome—so many reasons, but that company, you would break it down into thirds. So this third of the company, you're going to *dominus ominus*, you guys are assault climbers. So like every beach, there is a cliff soon after that beach. You don't go to the nice beach to infiltrate something; you kind of go to some harsher, sneakier areas where they don't see you coming. So you send some guys to Assault Climber School, so you can picture teaching your guys how to mountain-climb, and to basically lead some lines up so the rest of the company can climb up after them. The other third of the company become scout swimmers. Scout swimmers are a six to eight-man force that will sit about five-hundred meters off the coastline and like I said, these boats are black, you're low to the water, nobody can see you, quiet engines, and you slip into the water in the middle of the wee hours of the morning and you swim to shore. I have no qualms with the SEALs, you know whatever, but if you had to picture how it works, it would be like the SEALs. You infiltrate a beach and you sand-cookie up in the sand and you're crawling up on the beach, and then you stealthfully probe left and right, and then you set up a defense real quick. You're talking six to eight guys, and then you have what we call marking the BLS, the beach landing site. You wave in the rest of those boats in three waves, and you're talking six boats at a time that will break the surf. You're talking breaking the surf with these little boats. When we practice in Coronado and stuff, boats are ten feet out of the water, flipping, Marines flying everywhere and it gets pretty crazy. Now you do that on mission, at two in the morning somewhere, in some foreign country, and it gets kind of hairy. You've got to ride in-between two waves coming in and stuff like that, and you have to move fast; otherwise the next waves will eat you up. You get to shore and you quickly zoom out and take down a satellite tower or go hit a camp or whatever, and then you come back and jump your boats and zoom out to a hovercraft or an LCU, a Naval vessel of some sort, that will take you the other hundred miles out or whatever, to where the actual ship is. That boat life, that crew was great. So yeah, assault climbers, scout swimmers, and then you have the actual coxswains, the boat drivers. That company is broken up in thirds, they all go to their schools, they all train in those schools for months to come, and then you come back finally as a company and you go through tests, training events, held by the MEUSOC that I was talking about earlier, where they qualify you to go out on missions and stuff. That's just a

great time, to get out there, but like I said earlier in Scotland, great times are usually bonds formed by misery. I think that was the second time I've ever hallucinated, you know, out on the water and you see gnomes running across the water, because you're so tired and hungry, and you're like no, I know that's not real. Yeah, sleep deprivation will do some miraculous things to you.

It was a great unit. We deployed to Okinawa, Japan again, went to East Timor for some stabilization ops. I ran security out of East Timor, ended up getting a Humanitarian Ribbon out of that. We did tons and tons of training events, worked with SEAL Team 5 on deployment, stuff like that, and it was a good group of guys that even today, still to this day, a majority of those guys are still friends and stuff like that. They hang out or check on you or whatever. That was a good unit.

After a couple years, I guess, a year or two or whatever, of being in Boat Company, a good friend of mine, Brent Clearman, he needed a guy over in the Scout Sniper Platoon, and being a school-trained sniper, which is not the norm, I guess, there's roughly, at any given time in a Marine Corps of about two-hundred-thousand, we're downsizing to about 180 now. But two-hundred-thousand Marines, there's roughly about two-hundred school-trained snipers in the entire Marine Corps.

Berry: Tell us about Sniper School.

La Sage: Sniper School is just about eight weeks, eight and a half weeks, you know, of the most difficult training that you're going to go through, as normal. It is quite extensive. You have to qualify a known range course, the KD course, up to a thousand yards, now we're working in yards, because scopes and our math translates into yards as far as sniping goes. You also do the unknown course, and that eats a lot of guys up.

Berry: When you say unknown, you mean the distance is unknown.

La Sage: The distance is unknown, to a target, so all that talk of I was happy being a B and C student in school, now I'd better get on my horse and do the right thing and know my math, because trajectories and velocities and all that, you need to be Johnny-on-the-spot pretty quickly, with knowing all that stuff, if you're going to hit a man-size target at this unknown distance, with wind involved, at per se, you know, 250 yards or 820 yards. You have to do the math on figuring out all kinds of—

Berry: What sort of weapons were you using?

La Sage: At the time, you used an M-40 sniper rifle, M-41. Nowadays, they're at an A-5, there's about three different other type of sniper rifles. The A-portion is basically a modification has been done to the rifle, per se, a stock change or a scope change, or a flash suppressor change, or something like that. At the time, it's a

Remington 700 equivalent rifle that is modified with a trigger in stock. We were shooting an Unertl scope at the time, the company's name was Unertl, and that was under contract for too long, or a long time I should say. That weapon is basically out of Vietnam as well, that type of weapon. We used to use M-14s, you used to use a couple different weapons, but you know, the Remington 700 type that shoots—a civilian version would be a .308. Everything is broken down by calibers and stuff. In the Marine Corps, it shoots a match grade .762 round, and it is not machinegun ammo. Machinegun ammo is .762, so when you see the machineguns shooting, it's either .50 caliber or .762, or the .762 machinegun, like the old M-60s, or what we have are 240 now. It's that same type of round that's match grade. As far as snipers go, there is just an extensive wealth of knowledge on weapons that you need to familiarize yourself with and became comfortable with as well. You find yourself shooting a lot of different things.

Sniper School in general, stalking, you learn how to apply camouflage in the movement, and you quickly realize the difference between cover and concealment, and what can you shoot through and see through, as far as how to move without being seen and really planning for extract. Anything from just stalks, being able to—in school we're talking. Being able to set up the traditional stalk, you start about six-hundred, seven-hundred meters away from a Humvee or a vehicle that has a couple guys with spotting scopes or binoculars, that will sit there and look for you. So you'll start out of view, about six-hundred, seven-hundred meters away. You have to get within two-hundred meters, two hundred yards of that truck. So, from the time you leave that behind a tree or whatever, little—

[break in recording][00:31:36]

Berry: Tim, you were telling us about Sniper School. Why don't you continue with that if you would.

La Sage: Sniper School, doing stalks. The challenging part is everything, but the end result is getting within two-hundred yards of the observers, unseen, set up an FFP, or final firing position, and taking a shot with a blank round, on target. So that shot goes off, they hear where you are basically at now. Now they get a chance to then dial in and look for you, for a duration of time, a short amount of time, and then if they can't find you, you take your second shot, and that's when you—that's if you score your perfect stalk. So, once that's done, they check the dope or the measurements on your scope, making sure that you have the right distance and you had a wind call. So if it's crosswinds and stuff like that. Once they check all that, then you had passed.

Berry: And this would be one person or a team of two?

La Sage: In school it's individual, they're testing all of you. That's just pushing everybody through school. The physical training, you're running in a ghillie suit. A ghillie

suit, it's hard to explain, but if you picture netting on the back of a set of camouflage utility uniform, and you have shredded burlap, making your uniform look like a bush, you know? So you're running and training and working out wearing this and it gets wet and it's heavy, and it's physically demanding. So yeah, Sniper School, it's very unique. It's honestly feared and most respected throughout any military worldwide. The Navy SEALs, the Army Delta, everybody, they know okay, a Marine Scout Sniper, they know exactly what you've gone through and they respect you tremendously for that. You're held to a standard.

Berry: Okay. Well, you were about to leave the Boat Company then, for a new assignment, and tell us about that.

La Sage: In that same unit; 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, they needed a sniper over in their Scout Sniper Platoon. I went over there. Well, let me back up, before I even get there. Two-five at the time, this was 2000, so around 2002, I'm off of deployment, you know, East Timor and Okinawa, and I went to Palau, outside of Peleliu. This is all World War II, island-hopping campaign battle areas and stuff. Went to Palau with the Boat Company and that was tremendous, that was great. Came off of that deployment and we have a program in the Marine Corps, it's called Getting FAPed, F-A-P. Getting FAP, and I believe it stands for Fleet Assistance Program. Getting FAPed is okay, six months usually, and you go to the gym, like you're the staff member at the gym. So we don't have at the time, and even now, I mean you don't have a lot of civilian employees that will work. Instead of paying like a civilian employee, you could have a Marine do that job. You could work at the gym and hand out towels or sign people in. There's a bunch of different jobs. You could work at the pool, where they train at the pool, and stuff like that. My job, I got FAPed to Military Police, since I had some law enforcement training and I worked with law enforcement stuff. I got FAPed over to the Military Police in February timeframe, of 2002. Well, that was supposed to be a six-month job and, you know, one way or another they deemed me an asset, a commodity, as far as what I was able to do for them there, and I stayed on for a full year.

So for a year, pretty much January to January, I worked at Military Police Company, Camp Pendleton, California. I went through Police Academy and I was assigned a secondary job title. My main job title is 03, which is infantryman. After that, I have 85-41, which is Scout Sniper. So, when they look at your job titles, they see your qualifications, they look at these numbers and say okay, he's an 03, he's an infantry, he's an 85-41, he's a Scout Sniper. And then they looked at this 58-11. They gave me an additional MOS, military occupation specialty, of military policeman. So I basically was able to become an MP if I ever wanted to transition out of infantry. So, did the squad car thing and everything. Well, this was post-9/11, and I was deployed for 9/11. We had called up and actually did some stuff for that, that's off the record, but nothing too glorious. We manned up on a ship and went towards the Middle East, and then that stood down for 9/11.

After 9/11, Camp Pendleton and the major bases had blockades from the gates, all the way out to the nearest exit to the highway. You had these Jersey barriers all the way out. If you made a wrong turn, and you've got to know Camp Pendleton. It is—I'm going to get it wrong, but the best way I can describe it as a time. On I-5, Interstate 5, the highway on the coastline, there are three exits, and it's about a half an hour long on the highway. So if you picture driving seventy miles per hour on the highway, and in a half an hour there was only three exits. The first exit is the south side of base, the middle is the next one, or the north side of base, so it was quite large. These barriers went out to these highway ramps and every wrong turn or out of gas or whatever, would come up to the gates, and you searched their vehicles. Anything from felons to drugs to all kinds of different things would occur constantly, nonstop, on that base. There was a lot of things that happened while working with the MPs. I guess I kind of realized it recently, when I went to go update my clearance, every ten years, twelve years you've got to do that, and I had about a dozen things that came up on my background investigation for assault on a policeman. At first they were concerned with that, you know it was like what it this, and then they realized that I was the policeman. There were all reports that were written, where people had resisted arrest and whatever and 95 percent of the things I would deal with were civilians that came up to the gate. It seems like not too much would happen, but I had the largest drug bust on Camp Pendleton was myself and another Marine had stopped a vehicle. There was a Montero Sport and my buddy opened up the hatch of the back end of the vehicle and three full, industrial size C bags, you know travel bags, fell out, dumped out, already prepackaged, cut bags of cocaine and marijuana, and there was another bag in there as well, I mean huge bags. They were trying to cut it through Camp Pendleton, because there was border patrol checkpoints on the left and right side of the base. Yeah, there was a lot of criminal activity that would happen in and around that area.

That was a year of doing military police work and during that second half of that FAP, I knew there was a movement for Iraq going on, and I knew I was committed to this base security with the MPs, and there was no way in the world I was going to miss going to Iraq when that kicked off in 2003. Talking to my unit extensively, talking to my 1st Sergeant and commanding officer, I said I will straight up walk away from this unit if I have to and hide in your plane, type of thing. I literally got back in the back end of January of 2003, to my unit, and this is all on the same base, but I'm working nights, you know I'm working every day type of thing, and I have not trained with my unit, haven't done anything with my unit since the Boat Company a year prior.

January, the third week in, I get back to the unit. By February first, we were flying out to Iraq. So, not working with the unit or anything like that, but they knew me and everything was good. 2003; up and flew over to Iraq, and this is where things get quite extensive. We lived in Kuwait for a short duration of time, while we waited for the Act of War to be signed off by the Commander in Chief, and

waited to actually move into Iraq when things were all signed up. For me, you know, you have—we lived in a tent city, these big like circus tents if you will, for a short duration of time, but as the clock started ticking towards when we were actually going to move into Iraq in March. So February first, we get into the country, into Kuwait, you go through classes; nuclear, biological, chemical training, because you're worried about enemy dropping dirty stuff on you and all that. Lived in gasmasks in that tent. A lot of the pictures that I have is us just sitting there reading books in gasmasks, or we're going out for a run in gasmasks, and all that stuff.

Berry: You were back serving as an infantryman now?

La Sage: At that time, they needed me in the company, still in Fox Company was the Boat Company. So I'm in that Boat Company going over there, and that's when I was talking to my buddy about getting ready to go over and help out snipers and stuff like that, but I was still in the Boat Company. It was a great company and I knew they were going to go far. They had ABC Nightline News, Mike Cerre, was assigned to them, to document their push through Iraq. The big chiefs all know, but they knew that we were going to be in front of our element. There was about a four-prong attack going into Iraq. You had a third IAD, the Army element, that was the big arrow going up, and the other three arrows going up were Marine, RCT-5, that's what I was attached to. An RCT is this huge train of vehicles basically driving up. So if you picture the whole country and you draw this big arrow going up, that would be one RCT. So there was about four of those that were attacking Baghdad.

Berry: When you say going up, you were essentially going up the coast, is that correct, or close to the coast?

La Sage: If you picture Kuwait and then you draw four arrows up into Baghdad. So it was basically this four big arrow attack into Baghdad. It's easy to say that but really, the highways led the routes. We stuck to the highways for the most part, that you could, due to canals and everything else, but yeah, you had basically four different logistic trains going up, and four different fighting forces, going up towards Baghdad.

Berry: You're on the eastern side of those four?

La Sage: In the beginning, we all started together in Kuwait, and then after you passed Basra, the south of Iraq, that's when everybody kind of split. Picture a football. We all started at the bottom, at the point of the football, and then ballooned out, and then all came back in towards Iraq. For us, at first it's very "Mad Max," Mel Gibson type, racing up and down the roads and all that stuff. I was very fortunate, because my platoon, so you're talking a small platoon of like thirty guys or less, about thirty guys we'll say. My platoon got cut away from my company and assigned to help 2nd Tank Battalion. So, 2nd Tank Battalion, in the RCT, was the

very first vehicles in that RCT. So if you picture this big blue arrow drawn up towards Baghdad, the very first point of the arrow, and I literally mean the very first vehicles on the road, driving up, are two tanks, and then behind them are a couple other tanks, and then you have some tract vehicles, some Amtracs we call them, and those are the ones that go in the water and on land. Then after that, you have some rocket guys on Humvees, and so you have all these fighting vehicles.

Well, the very first fighting vehicles are your Abrams tanks, your tanks upfront, and our job as a platoon was to stagger two of our vehicles in-between the very first two tanks, and our job was to keep all the enemy infantry, the Mujahideen, Fedayeen types.

Berry: The vehicles you were in Humvees?

La Sage: We had Tracs.

Berry: Tracs, not trucks.

La Sage: We had our platoon cut up in Tracs. My vehicle was in-between the first and second tank on the road, so whenever we'd stop or if a tank was stopping to take a shot and we were by some houses, we'd go down and clear out the houses, clearing out meaning guns up and going through windows and doors and clearing out the houses to make sure nobody's shooting at the tanks and all that stuff. So, at every single given moment, we were the first Americans that anyone saw, and when I say we, I'm talking me and a squad of guys, because you have another squad, twelve guys, that are outside, guarding you. I was the assault—this is one of the parts I take great pride in. I was assault squad for this group of twenty guys, and when you look at—since this is for history. When you look at the war, and when you look it up through the military history, they have a map and they documented all the key things that happened on this map. Then you go through the lineage of Iraq. It will label us as a Division React Platoon. Division React Platoon did this or that or whatever, and so that's what we were labeled as. Well, you know these tanks, they refuel at night and we'd sit out in-between the two tanks and make sure cars aren't coming down towards them, and we were deter them by shooting next to the vehicle and they'd turn around and leave. Or if they did get close, we would have to detain them and then push them out the back end type of thing once we leave the next morning. You just knew that every situation, you were the first contact they had with military. The other groups that went other directions, they had their own people like us, but there was only four prongs. Our prong, it was a great feeling to know that you set the precedents. You had to put the fear, and I mean like God-like, not even close like I am, but I'm just saying the respect level. You had to make them respect you fear-wise, so that the people behind you, who may not be infantry or fighters, so they don't get hurt as well. That was big on your mind.

Yeah, middle of the night, kicking down doors and clearing out and finding families that way, and making sure that they didn't have any weapons, and then jumping back in your vehicles and then driving and main tanks shooting at you, or shooting out, but they're shooting right next to you to where, I can't even describe it, but to where the no hair on your head would just blow back, the air would suck out of your lungs. When that tank would shoot and you're in a vehicle sitting on top of a vehicle because you're shooting the whole time at what we call runners, in a field, and people trying to throw grenades onto tanks and RPGs at tanks, and that was our job, is to keep the people off the tanks.

Berry: What sort of rules of engagement were you operating under?

La Sage: 2003, during the pushup we were at war, and a lot of people don't understand that you know, we've been fighting ten years, we've been fighting for so long, it all kind of melds together. Well, at the time, we were at war, so if in layman's terms, the best way to describe it is, if you felt threatened by it, you could engage it. Now, that has changed a lot, but in war, if I don't like the way a window looks, because all of them are lit up and then this one is dark and I think something is there, I can engage at that window, you know just put a couple rounds at that window, just to make sure if something is in there, it will stay down. Anything further than that is, you know, there's all kinds of different things. There's guys running to you instead of away, you know, if they're carrying weapons, they're in uniform. If they're in uniform, they're wrong. There's pamphlets that were dropped down. They're supposed to leave the area. They're not supposed to be wearing their uniforms. Now, if you look at it, you understand that if they don't wear their uniforms, the Mujahideen and Fedayeen will kill them, the very purebred fighters will kill them. So you understand that okay, they'll be wearing their bottoms with their white t-shirts and they'll be waving their blouse, their top, above their head or whatever, and that stuff is fine.

If you ask my command, they'll know that I was like the first one to engage for our RCT, and I remember, I'm very happy that I did that, because I could tell that my guys were very eager, but that is a huge step to cross, and hesitation, as we say, "hesitation kills." If you pause or hesitate or whatever, the enemy is not and you're going to pay the ultimate price for that. But after those first shots were fired, the guys really stepped up, they understood it was okay, self-preservation and the defense of our brothers and all that, that it was okay to do our job. This first individual, I remember we were a couple days or whatever, into the push in Iraq, not far at all. I remember a guy on the backside of a building being sneaky, you know. It may sound bad but that was wrong, and according to our ROEs at the time, you're not supposed to be being tactical. So if somebody is being tactical in nature, low crawling up to your vehicle, if he's sneaking up to you instead of sneaking away or something, he's doing something wrong. So now you identify him. So he's hiding and kind of turkey-peeking, he's like peeking at our vehicles from behind this building. I couldn't do anything about it yet, but our vehicles were driving and for some random reason our vehicles stopped, and if our

direction of movement is twelve, and our seven o'clock, where I positioned myself in our vehicle, so our back, left-hand side, is where this guy is at. He had a weapon in his hand but he knew we were all looking at him, so he knew he couldn't really just bring the weapon up, because he'd get shot and all that stuff. It was like this frozen moment in time to where my weapon was on him and I had a squad automatic weapon, which is a machinegun that's hand-carried, and it shoots the same rounds as an M-16. I had my partner's SAW out there, in case things got really bad, that I could use that SAW. Well, you know, at first I'm like hey, do you see that guy? And then finally, we stopped the vehicles and now we're in his kill zone, to where he can do something about it, but there's more of us, and so we can do something about it too. All my guys were like he's got a rifle, you know, and I'm like gentlemen, do you see what he's wearing there? They go yeah, they're pointing with hands, instead of pointing with their rifles, my guys. I'm like, "Do you see what's going on here?" And I already have this automatic weapon in my shoulder, and I'm looking at my target instead of looking at them. I'm like, "Do you understand that he's wearing full uniform, he hasn't taken off his blouse?" Yeah. "Do you see a rifle in his hand?" Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm like, "Gentlemen, what's today," you know, and like I said... I'm being hesitant about saying this but it's war and that's different from combat operations. War is war, so this cat has got a rifle in his hand and he's wearing his full uniform and he's peeking around a corner of a building, the back of a building about seventy-five meters off the road, so he's in a good position to take little potshots or sniper fire at us as we go by. I'm like, "Gentlemen, you see this individual, right?" Yes, yeah, I see him. Keep an eye on him, like negative. We keep an eye on him and we drive away. Ten seconds later, the guy that doesn't know it, the other Marine that's in a vehicle behind us doesn't know that about that guy. You have to engage this guy, you know, and they're like well, you know. They weren't hesitating or anything like that. They just have never crossed that line before, you know?

FAST Company has taught me so much. There's so many things about engaging targets that it is second nature. To be able to go through a room of fifteen targets and you come out of the room and realize that you only shot ten of them, and then you look at the other five and realize that those targets didn't have weapons in their hand. Your brain is just in tune with engaging all the threats and leaving the unknowns alone. Anyway, I open up fire on the individual and he goes down. He has his rifle, he brings his rifle up as I'm engaging and the first couple rounds are off to his left, and then went across him. It was about a twelve to fifteen round burst. End up hitting him and he goes down and he is done. So, I look at my guys and there was this pause, I'm like, "Gentlemen, we are at war, and if you breathe, that means you're waiting too long. You need to engage anyone with a weapon. If they don't have a weapon, don't engage." We've had a zillion of these classes, but to actually haven't applied in, it was basically a training environment, you know, with this individual who paused for us. I think it saved a ton of lives, because that moment on, the guys that I had in that vehicle and the vehicle next to us, were morally just and tactically perfect. I watched a million times where a guy had a

weapon and then saw us and then threw it down, and they didn't engage, and I saw a million times where they had to engage. There was definitely, walking away from that deployment, happy with our guys and what we'd done.

On the push up to Baghdad, there are literally hundreds of stories about that, there is every town. For instance, our navigator in that first tank was shot in the face and he unfortunately, you know, God rest his soul. He died and we missed a turn to avoid a known ambush. So right before this turn that we were supposed to take, to avoid this total alleyway, a kill zone, into this town in Iraq, we missed it because he just so happened to get shot. He went down, we missed the turn, drove straight into this kill zone, and it was hundreds of people shooting within ten meters of our vehicles. The old western, with people falling off of roofs and landing on the other side of your vehicles, and RPGs whizzing past your vehicle, hitting the building on the opposite side. It was ridiculous. Now, take that scenario and the lead vehicle realizing it and then trying to execute a ninety-point turn, stopping the rest of the hundreds of vehicles behind us, outside the town. Stopping them so that we could orchestrate this fifteen-vehicle U-turn out of that town, out of that kill zone. It was a half an hour, an hour, of just pure machinegun fire and grenades and just bodies everywhere and duking it out. It was ridiculous. From that situation, to the first time I ever got hit, to our 1st Sergeant Ed Smith, you know, twenty years in, didn't have to deploy, but wouldn't leave us to deploy without him, he was killed. There's about a million stories that I may have to elaborate on.

Berry: Did you have a corpsman with you in your squad?

La Sage: We did.

Berry: Tell us about the makeup of your squad.

La Sage: We had a--the platoon is broken down to these vehicles, but these vehicles will pack anywhere from twenty, twenty-five, twenty-eight guys in them, which is misery, but I mean you could pack anywhere from a squad, twelve guys, and on. So, I had a machinegun team attached to me, three guys. We had two rocket guys, so they could shoot a rocket at something. So you have a squad and you had about thirteen guys, and fire teams of four, these little four-man groups that if I had to, they could clear a couple rooms over here, and I could clear a couple rooms over there. Or, in a vehicle, four of us, plus one of my attachments, machinegun, a rocket guy, could be up and out of the vehicle, watching, while the rest of the guys are down below, either feeding us ammo or just giving themselves a break inside the vehicle. When I say in a vehicle, picture taking a road trip with dad, you know, across country, but make that road trip weeks, weeks long and the typical dad who doesn't let you get out to go to the bathroom. I mean, bathroom, eating, living, in that vehicle. You're in that room with twenty guys, in that small, I mean there is zero personal space. My sanity was to be on top of the vehicle, and we call it air watch. You're standing on like ammo crates, looking out of the

vehicle, so that you can engage the enemy and the enemy can engage you, but at least I can stretch my legs, I'm standing up.

Berry: Would an RPG penetrate the vehicle?

La Sage: The Tracs and the tanks have solid armor on it, so if you ask a tank person they'll say no. If you ask a Trac guy, they say no. In Baghdad, I watched a lead tank, first time since Hue City in Vietnam, we had three tanks in an alleyway, in solid urban fighting, shooting main tank rounds down alleyways and just all kinds of stuff. Well, the lead tank got stuck in an alleyway junction, banging his turret on light posts, trying to knock it down, and rubble is all on his tank. I mean, picture World War II, and that's how I can relate this picture. There is brick from a whole story of a building on top of this tank, and it was trying to move. Well, that second tank was stuck in an intersection of alleyways, and it took about seven RPGs and flat-line that tank. When you look at the lineage, the timeline of the Iraq War, which is documented by Department of Defense, it will exactly tell you this scenario I'm telling you. It will talk about how two A-10 jets, bombers, were going to come in, and they did. How they documented it as two A-10s did strafing runs or a bomb run, in Baghdad, on April ten.

[Tape 3]

Berry: Tim, we were talking about your attacking north, towards Baghdad, but something significant happened in your personal life about that time. Could you tell us about that?

La Sage: Yes. You get talking about work and you forget all the things that are going on back home and elsewhere. On the nineteenth of March of 2003, we had pushed up from some fighting holes, about three kilometers shy of Iraq. We were in Kuwait, about three kilometers shy. We lived in some holes. Other forces, they had set up tents and little facility areas, waiting to get the order to push up. We had patrolled into a harbor site, just shy of Iraq, out of these holes, once General Mattis had sent down a letter stating that we're going to be proud of you, going to war, go forth and conquer type of letter. It was a blue diamond letter, it's kind of famous.

So, March twenty-first, we had pushed across the border, assaulted a few oil refineries, you know, the guards for around them, trying to keep them from lighting them on fire and all that stuff. We had ABC Nightline News embedded with us. Mike Cerre was the reporter's name, and so he followed around and documented all the things that we were doing and watching us do our attacks. So we finally got the order to push up, full on war is declared and we're off, off we go.

Fast-forward about a week and a half later, I get a little handwritten note on like a little piece of cardboard, from Mike, stating that oh, hey by the way, we got news

that you just had a daughter born on March twenty-first, the day you guys crossed the border. You don't get many phone calls, especially back then, 2003 there was no logistics set up. For us it was go, go, go. Eventually, like long eventually, a month or something later, I got a ten-minute little satellite phone call. I got a little message saying that you know, mom and child were fine and everybody was healthy, so that was good. But back home, I guess what happened was she was in a military hospital. They did like a little special on her, because her water broke when the news came out that the U.S. was invading Iraq. Then they went to the hospital and the baby was born, in line with the time that we crossed the border, type of thing. Kennedy is my little war baby, you know, who was born March 21, 2003. You know, having that stuff on your mind, and that's my second daughter at the time. I have a total of three now, three daughters, but having children you know, and family back home, that can really make or break you, when you're doing some of the things that you're doing. Everybody has a different way of coping with that stuff and for me, it was almost putting it on the backburner because otherwise, it would pretty much envelope your thoughts or it would affect decisions that you would have to make. For what we do, hesitation kills, so if you hesitate or you're not fully committed to jumping over a concrete wall to throw grenades at a doorway and raise your gun and go in there. If you hesitate with that stuff, well the enemy is going to do it to you. Sometimes you're going to have to block some of that stuff out so that you could focus on getting back to them really, when it all comes down to it.

A lot of little life-changing events happen when you're gone and you realize that, you know, you realize quickly that everybody grows and changes along the way, while you're doing your thing, so.

Berry: Did the Marine Corps have a support system for your wife back home, while this was happening?

La Sage: Absolutely. Every unit, back then and today, has a family readiness officer, which either is a civilian or it's like the sergeant major, or if we deploy then it becomes like the sergeant major's wife. They'll have key volunteers. It's basically, if you take a replica of us in the Marine Corps, with squad leaders and platoon sergeants and stuff like that, and you make that into the wives, you have like one wife in charge and she'll put out emails and messages, you know like so and so is having a baby, and then the other wives will send flowers and care packages, see if they need any help with the other kids. It's definitely a take care of each other type of scenario.

Berry: Okay, to get back to your attack north that spring, you mentioned A-10 attacks.

La Sage: That was the grand finale, yeah. That was definitely on April tenth, was the day that we took Baghdad, and from a news perspective, that's when you see Marines pulling down or assisting in the pull-down of the Saddam Hussein statue. While that was going on, it looked like a lot of celebrations and stuff like that, you

know, and for eight hours that day, while they were pulling the statue down on one side of the town, we were still duking it out on the other side, by Saddam's mansion. We came out of there and one of the battalions had tried to set up a blocking position, where they went out like about you know, four or five blocks out and they set up a little linear defense, so that the reinforcements couldn't come in. Well, they left their back open and they were taking some pretty heavy casualties. We had taken three tanks, three Abrams tanks, and our little crew of about twenty-some guys, and we went out, into the city, and just picked an unknown area to pretty much set up our own blocking position, so that we can work the medevac piece for that battalion.

Berry: Were you still in your Amtrac when you started?

La Sage: Started in the Amtrac, and immediately have to leave the Amtrac. So, a lot of on-ground fighting there. The lead tank ended up getting pinched in an alleyway system. There was multiple alleyways, from every direction, entering into the street that we were on, and so the lead tank ended up getting stuck and pinched in-between some rubble and walls, like a four-story building on the left, and then a compound house on the right, like a little compound wall, trying to smack its turret to clear some of that rubble, knocking more rubble onto his tank. So he was pinched there, which trapped the second tank in a kill zone really, of like two alleyways from the left, looked right at him, and on the right-hand side, a street looked at him. There was easily, at one point, looking over—and this is all in a matter of you know, fifty meters or so, you had three tanks. It was bumper to bumper traffic really, with these three tanks, and we had gotten out and on foot, and pretty much tried to set up in these alleyways, to keep everybody off the tanks. Well, at one point, I counted seven RPGs, direct hits on the tank, and it ended up destroying the tank. The tank was flat-lined, it couldn't go anywhere, that second tank. That first tank was still, you know, trying to clear its way out.

The third tank had rotated the turret down an alleyway system. I don't know if you ever heard a tank fire, you know, but it will suck the air out of you. It really blows you back when you're near it. You never see anybody near a tank when it fires for a reason, but for us, we're all on foot, right outside the tanks. I remember that third tank, you know they wouldn't come out of their tanks for anything, so there's like three guys in their tank, and then us twenty guys, you know circled up around the tanks and were fighting it out. Meanwhile, while all this is going on, you have to understand there are people everywhere, shooting at us. It was the wild west, where a four-story building on the left, you look up and you shoot and he falls off the roof and he lands on the other side of the street, trajectory of a body, you know, and it's just, there's people everywhere. Guys throwing a grenade and it goes over your head but into the other enemy's courtyard, where he's shooting at you, and they're hurting themselves. It was a melee of ridiculousness and then all of a sudden, a main tank will shoot around, down this alleyway, at like little pickup trucks that are setting up, because they had harbor sites, little cachets if you will, of pickup trucks, throughout the city. So if you

picture like a little Ford Ranger or whatnot, and the whole bed of the truck was RPGs and grenades and AKs, and they'd have those staged throughout the city, where somebody could just jump in and drive it to the Mujahideen or wherever, you know, they had ground fighters at, to reinforce them. Well, the main tank taking a shot, knocking a few of us down, and just really, you know, psychologically messing with the enemy. We know what it is, we know what happened, and we know we're okay, but that cooks off, that tank round cooks off, and the enemy pauses for a little bit and you're able to kind of gain some ground.

We did some room-clearing, like hotels. There was like a hotel that we were right next to. We were able to kick down a door and start clearing that, because they were shooting at us from that hotel. Five feet away from a guy who's shooting at you from around a corner, and you're trying to get around the corner and throwing grenades around that corner instead. It was pretty much in your face. We were out there for eight hours. What ended up happening is you're running VHF radio frequencies, which is great for all of us on the ground and all that stuff. Well it's not great if you have to deal with anything with air, because they run off of UHF frequencies. And so for us we had to call like anything, any support that we needed, we would call back to our headquarters and be like, "Hey, I need a gunship," or I need a medevac, or anything like that. They would orchestrate that and bring it to you with their radios.

Berry: As squad leader were you making those calls?

La Sage: Absolutely, yeah.

Berry: And you had a backpack radio? I mean you didn't have an RTO with you, you had your own radio.

La Sage: We had RTOs and throughout the platoon we had radios. So definitely a life learning lessons is two is one, one is none. So if you have two of something, when one of it goes down or breaks or gets shot—we had a radio get shot, well, you still have at least one more radio. If you only bring one thing to a fight, or to anything in life, and that one thing fails you, well, then you're out.

Berry: How well did you find your training prepared you for this experience?

La Sage: I honestly—I really really have been fortunate with all my training because this scenario, this whole war, everything that we do, hesitation really kills. You can pause a situation, refocus, reattack it tactically, or whatever. But when you just freeze, when you have the deer in the headlight look, and that happens often to enemy or others or whoever, where they just like are overwhelmed in their thought processes trying to disseminate what they're supposed to do, when that hesitation happens, those people that react, they just—it's unstoppable force. If a boxer knows that okay, soon as I get hit on the left side, instantly react with a punch, a right hand, because that means the other guy's arm is down, they train

that way to capitalize on somebody else's move. And really my training—quick story. For 2000—that April tenth day was just eight hours of stories. And one of them, which is—it's a pretty funny story for all of us, but there's a lot of lessons to be learned from it. So we're trapped in that alleyway, tanks are shooting, we're shooting. At this point I pretty much had slung my weapon, and I'm shooting an AK-47 and throwing enemy grenades, and we had RPGs as well. There is no resupply, there is no reinforcement, there hasn't been the whole time up to Baghdad, due to the string, the length of our convoy was so long that nobody—we were constantly going that no one could get up to you to reinforce you. Ammunition, eating chickens on the side of the road because there was no food. And that increased, or that got better the farther back you got, because that's where your supplies were. For all of us up front, in bulk, an after-action came out saying one MRE, a meal ready to eat that we get, the little packaged meal, was normal for each person a day. One a day. And when you're going nonstop, that was a concern but—

Berry: You mentioned you were using an AK-47. Why were you not using your own weapon?

La Sage: Well, I err on the side of caution. So they issue you six or seven magazines or clips or whatever you want to call them, but magazines to put your ammunition in, holds thirty rounds. You're talking about a small amount of ammo when you're talking about one eight-hour fight. Well, that one eight-hour fight rolls into another day of fighting, another day of fighting, another. So the more ammunition you have the better. Well, my gear alone, you're talking forty pounds of gear, then ammunition, then water, you quickly weigh yourself down. So anything that you can Pacman, anything that you can gobble up from the enemy and use just like they use from us, you're actually saving your ammunition. So if I needed to take a surgical shot or if I'm doing room clearing to where nanoseconds or split seconds of 100 percent accuracy is needed, I'll be using my rifle. If I'm just laying down cover fire so my buddies can bump across an alleyway, then I'll use their ammo. That type of scenario. Just to conserve ammo.

Berry: So you picked this AK-47 up along with the ammunition for it during—

La Sage: Absolutely, absolutely. And the whole unit did. After April tenth when we seized Baghdad or whatever, we did a weapons turn-in of all of our AKs and everything like that, because then we probed out to Tikrit and did other missions and stuff. But yeah, definitely to conserve ammo, conserve *your* ammo for effective use, you would use their weapon for generalization shooting and stuff like that. One of these stories from April tenth was we were trapped up against this house on the one side, a hotel on the other side, in the lead tank, we'd get on a tank phone, which is a little—it's a telephone in the back of the tank, it's in a box, and you open up the box, you pick up the phone, and it'll call inside the tank, because those guys don't get out of the tank. And you call up, and we're like, "Hey, are you able to move?" And they're like, "No, I can't move," and all that stuff. And

it's like all right—and the only time I've seen somebody really get out of the tank is that tank had taken like an RPG ricochet off the front—which is fine, because it's heavily armored in front—and just literally you're pinched in between two walls, the one wall is a hacienda, like six-foot wall, well, that tanker, it was the commanding officer, got out of his tank and was shooting and engaging over that wall. And we ended up having to jump over and clear that house out. Well, we go to clear the house out, and do it pretty violently, kicking down doors and everything. We haven't found anybody in the house at this point.

There was nobody in there. And so we're clearing it and, like a SWAT team would go through a house, you're kicking down doors. And guns are up and you're flying through there. And we get to like the last two rooms and one team of like four, five guys have to go left, and one team has to go right. It has to be simultaneous, because if the one team goes right their backs are open. So you got to do it at the same time. And so we take—like I said hesitation kills, we didn't hesitate. So you take like a little two-second time-out to get eyes on your other team leader to coordinate this simultaneous entry.

Berry: Did you coordinate that with hand signals? How did you do that?

La Sage: Yeah. Definitely hand signals. And there's things in any language that psychologically you'll know something's going to happen. So if I'm a bad guy or a good guy, whatever, in a room and I hear noise outside and their feet are shuffling or boots are shuffling and all that, and then there's this quiet pause, and then in any language you pretty much hear a one, two, three, go, that escalation in tone, escalation in voice, okay, so now you know something's about to happen, somebody's about to come in. So the better off you are of using hand-arm signals, you're helping yourself stay alive. So about ready to go in these last two rooms, and one team breaks right, me and another small group of guys go left. And there's two individuals in this room, which is similar to the one that we're in now, big desk, conference desk type of thing. A man in business slacks and a white like undershirt. So he looked like he should have been wearing a business collar shirt or whatever. But he had taken it off. And he had his arms straight out from his side showing that he had no weapons or whatever. So you picture a NASCAR sitting outside at about 90 miles per hour, 120, getting ready to blaze through this room. And to be able to decipher targetry or enemy in a second, you have to decide whether to shoot this guy or not shoot this guy. So he made it abundantly clear that he had no weapons. And that's where like the answer to your question about training—that's where shoot/no-shoot training comes in. You have all these targets and now you apply this in real life. I come around the corner and there's like a worker, a gardener type if you would, who's standing behind him, and he's kind of cowering. And so his hands aren't totally visible. And stuff like that is what you key in on.

It's like I know what he looks like because we dealt with him afterwards. But other than that all I see is hands. His mean look can't kill me. His foot can't kill

me. None of that can kill me. What can kill me is his trigger finger, his hands. What does he have in his hands? The one guy doesn't have anything in his hands. I'm rapidly moving through the room. And the other half of my team circles around this conference table and deals with the worker that was hiding in the corner. And they didn't shoot him either because he ended up not having a weapon.

But this individual, he turned around—he was very easy to deal with. I came up, I put him down on his face, I flex-cuffed him up, and searched him, patted him down, stood him up. And we were in like a little circle around these tanks. So we tried to get everybody away from that area, because it was solid fighting.

So we escorted them out, and told them to leave the area, and sent them off running down the street away from us. So get them out in the street, tell them to beat feet, and so they kick up rocks and they take off running. And so they're still flex-cuffed, hands behind their back, and they're running down the street.

Berry: How did you communicate with these people?

La Sage: It's amazing how easily everybody speaks English when there's a weapon in the face. Or it's easy to express intent on what you want to happen. From your facial expressions, gun in the face, and then you realize they're not a threat, or they're an unknown. And you search them, they don't have anything, and the old universal hands up in the air like what are you doing here. And you stand them up, and honestly, you take them outside, you point a direction, and they'll go that direction. So they take off.

And you do pick up greetings in different language. We have a lot of language lessons that we go through. But qif and salaam alaikum, alaikum salaam, and just all kinds of different Arabic that'll help get you by. But really in the heat of the moment, reality is reality. And people learn quick. So these people take off running down the street. And we take maybe about ten, fifteen steps away from the tank, that last tank, just to peek down this alleyway that the house was up against, just to see if anybody was there sneaking up on us. And there was this nice SUV, like a Montero Sport, parked up against the back of this building. And I'm looking at it, I'm like, "That doesn't belong."

Earlier we saw like a Chevy Z71 or a brand-new pickup truck in the middle of Baghdad, and like okay, certain things just jump out at you, like that doesn't belong. I go over to this SUV, and you break a lot of things in war, so we shoot out the window and look inside of it, open up the locks, and take a look in it. And there's some suits hanging up in the back, luggage bags, like somebody's going on a trip, they were trying to get out of there in time. So there was a suit jacket hanging up—or thrown in the passenger seat. And instantly I'm like, "Okay, that suit jacket matches the outfit that he was just wearing," because he just had his

shirt on. I'm like "Ah." I'm like, "Okay, so this is his vehicle, it's up against his house."

And so we go to the back of the vehicle, open up the back, and there's a general's uniform hanging up in the back of the vehicle. So it's got his full dress or whatever, his general's outfit, the uniform. And I was like, "Ah." And it had his luggage. Open up the one luggage and it's just standard luggage. And check the other bag, the other like deep briefcase, for any traps or any wires or anything. And we end up popping that and it was filled with money. It was filled with fifties and hundreds of American money. Huh! And the first thing that comes to your mind, a lot of people automatically, hearing this, will be like, "Oh, what'd you do with the money? What'd you do?" The first thing that enters your mind is to run back out to that street and look to see. And people talk about nightmares and stuff. And everybody has dreams. But this is one of my nightmares, letting this guy go, not the people that I've harmed, but it's actually letting this guy go. Turkey-peeking around this alleyway, I take a look. And I just see him at the end of the street, like their little 500-meter run that they took. I just see him turn left and out of sight. I was like, "Ah, he just got away." And it's a general from our top fifty-two, the deck of cards that has all the most wanted on it. So he busted left, he's gone. We go back over there.

And of course there's money, which is not a big deal. You take the money, I gave it to Lieutenant Doyle, the platoon commander, and he turns it in to higher, and that's that, that's an easy day. But just seeing that uniform, the general uniform's from the Iraqi Army, I was like, "Oh," that was just sickening to know that he just ran off.

And a very smart man, to be undressed enough to where I know he's not hiding any weapons or whatever, and just sitting there calmly with his arms straight out. So yeah, that was definitely the one that got away for me.

Berry: You're in this close quarter combat situation. Do you remember how you felt emotionwise?

La Sage: There are so many funny stories, like I said, about that one eight-hour conflict that I know that I was having a great time. There was times where as we call it the pucker factor, but the old—the fear senses, the Spidey senses were pinging. And that's fine. That lets you know that you're not getting overconfident or standing up in the middle of a firefight instead of seeking cover. That keeps you in check. But I laughed so much that day. I was laughing so hard at different things that day, as people are shooting. They couldn't shoot. The angle of fire from a four-story building, they couldn't stand up to lower their weapon over the edge of the building to shoot directly down at us, so they would shoot and it would impact the building on our other side maybe eight, ten feet off the ground. So you knew you weren't—I mean there was ricochet factor and all that stuff. But by the time they

stood up enough to pop up to take these shots, we were engaging. And we had a pretty good setup there.

But there [laughs] was just some funny stuff that happened. RPG hitting a wall that they didn't activate, so it didn't blow up, and we're laughing at them, and just different things that happened that was so funny. So I knew I was having a good time. And what I mean by a good time is just things were under control in an absolutely uncontrollable situation. For us we were engaging enemy from every direction. What we were doing was trying to get that second tank out of there. Trying to get that first tank unstuck, and us in particular, we were just trying to protect the tanks by engaging everyone around us.

In the meantime what we didn't know is the report came up that that second tank was deadlined, that it was destroyed or whatever, dead in the water. Well—

Berry: The track was out or something.

La Sage: The RPGs had flatlined that tank mechanically. Engine failure. Basically a catastrophic kill on the tank. Tank is done. And there was only a few of those for the war, and some of those were like a tank had rolled into a canal and flipped upside down and stuff like that. So there's a few of these tanks that went down. Well, this one was dead in the water sitting there, and it got reported to higher about it, this tank is sitting in the middle of Baghdad and its nonfunctionable.

What we knew is that we had called through our unit—remember VHF and UHF. I had called on VHF and we got a—Hercules is the vehicle that'll come out and tow a tank. They'll hook up a tow bar and pull this tank backwards and get it out of the alleyway. And then we'd be able to back up the other tank.

So you got a tank dead behind that stuck tank in the front. So it was quite the scenario. Anyways, we knew this vehicle was coming in. The Hercules ended up showing up. Forever and a day it took. But it shows up. Nobody gets out of the vehicle, nobody does anything. So you have infantry guys. Jake Washbourne and myself, in particular, have to get out this humongous tow bar.

And you've never learned this in a class; you've never been taught how to do certain things. But it's funny. When people are shooting and there's combat going on you can pretty much fly a helicopter. So [laughs] you learn quick what you need to do.

So we rig this thing up for tow and they tow this second tank out. That's when we get the call that you need to get out of there. And we're like, "Oh, why? What's going on?"

[break in recording][00:31:00]

La Sage: So the message comes to us through our higher, battalion, and it wasn't even through battalion, it was just—came from the river that two A-10s were dispatched inbound. Their primary mission was to destroy—A-10s are tank busters. To fly in and drop on our own tank to destroy it, so the enemy can't use it down the road, or in future battle, or anything like that.

Berry: These A-10s were flown by marines.

La Sage: Yes, correct. So they're en route to our pos. And to this day and back then and in 1993 or whatever, I've always kept an American flag or a Marine Corps flag in my body armor. So behind my armor I'll keep a folded up flag. And I would always have like a team leader or assistant team leader do the same.

Well, we had broken out our flags. And it was literally like a movie of us on the edge of the tank with the American flag flying so that hopefully these A-10s—because we had no communication with the pilots or with anybody that has communication with the pilots. So [laughs] I'll never forget—*Black Hawk Down* the movie does a good job at this with—I think they used a helicopter—shooting above troops and just what the troops down below have to deal with. Well, that happened to us. So we had two strafing runs. When you look at the lineage of the war, the history of the war, they talk about two A-10s were dispatched and did a strafing run in Baghdad. Well, the helicopters, anybody could have done that, those planes were dispatched to destroy that tank and then last minute were waved off and saw us duking it out on the ground. And they did a buzz run on the street to the right of us. So an A-10 jet just coming in hot. And all you heard was this *whump*, and that's there I think thirty-millimeter gun on the front just rolling. And then the next thing you heard was just all the casings hitting off the buildings and dropping down below and bouncing off everything. And so they rip up this one street to the right, and he flies off. And I watch enemy, I watch guys that are dying down the street, I watch even some of my own guys take their eyes off the threat and look up at this plane.

And I remember all I could yell was Dash Two, and that's the second aircraft, flying in pairs. And you see everybody just all of a sudden melt down to the ground again, seek some cover, and still waving a flag, and shooting down our own alleyways and dealing with our own threats. And then just the next street over on the opposite side of the street was that second A-10 just *whop*, and its casings hitting the deck, and they're gone, *chuu*, out after that. But that was one of those moments too where you get the goose bumps like I have right now thinking about that moment. That could have gone really bad or it was a huge psychological turn in our favor. The enemy quickly realized that we had some assets that—well, we really didn't have, because I didn't have control over them, but they were there duking it out with us.

But that fight, it lasted, we were staged at 6:00 in the morning outside of a highway overpass. We slept at Saddam's castle or his palace that night. And then

we planned this little raid and it went well, and duked it out. But there's things that we learned as well that didn't go well, like our extract from that alleyway, the Hercules pulls out the tank, that lead tank backs out away from where it was stuck, and they all leave, and we watch them drive away, and there we were, twenty-two of us in the middle of the street, a couple miles away from reinforcement, and sitting there on the street.

Berry: Did you still have your Amtrac?

La Sage: No. They'd left. So we literally had nothing. And they drove off and we're standing there in the road. And all I could tell is my guys—and you could freak out or you can do whatever, or you can laugh about it. Because you know that you have a lot to say to keep your guys' heads in the game. So a little laugh, and it's like well, it's our turn for the Mogadishu Mile. Just like in Somalia where they had to run out at the end, it was exactly what we had to do. We bumped across every street and every alleyway that we were just fighting in and out of, and tried to catch up with our vehicles, and they were gone. Until we finally hit the riverbank, where US forces had set up like a blockade, they were set up there.

And it was very odd, because building to building, alleyway to alleyway, we were fighting. People still shooting, throwing grenades, RPGs going off. And I remember distinctly on the back side of this one building we're fighting it out for a little bit trying to get to the other side because we can see that where the river started was pretty much on the other side of this building. And it's a main street where all kinds of armored vehicles were set up at. And so on the back side of the building is full-on combat. On the front side of the building we have US forces sitting like on their vehicles, finally getting a chance to eat. I'm like we're trying to get to that point, and I remember being highly agitated by the time we got to the other side. And on the front side of this building that we were fighting in and around, there was some locals that were sitting on like a stoop, on some steps. And I quickly raised my gun to them, I'm checking to see if they have weapons. I remember there was an individual, one of our guys, a US force guy, on the other side of the street on his Trac, they had a bunch of Tracs and light armored reconnaissance vehicles. And he's like, "Hey, that guy is good, he's been here all day, man, chill out." I'm like, "You got to be kidding me." Twenty feet away on the other side of that building somebody just threw a grenade at us. And we're fighting and you're sitting here, eating some bread, and chilling out. But that was kind of frustrating.

But that day had so many things going on. They tried to name the alleyway that we were in Macaroni Alley. And locally in Wisconsin they did a—I think it's WTMJ; I believe is one of the radio stations, whatever. When we finally got done fighting, everybody else has been done for a while, and it sounds like I'm tooting my horn. But everybody was already set up and relaxed and gear off and chilling out and eating and stuff like that. And we finally dragged our butts over to

friendly forces area, and I remember just looking around at everybody. I was like, “Where have you all been? What have you been doing?”

You just take off your helmet, you sit down, and you’re just a hot mess if you will. And sitting there, and a civilian American guy sits down, there’s contractors, and embedded reporters, and stuff like that. And this guy just sits down and looks at me. And he looks like he’s—everything’s good, and goes—looks at me and he’s like, “What have you guys been doing? You look like hell.” And it’s like it’s just—I remember looking over at him. I’m like, “Are you—yeah, it’s been nothing but pulling down statues and a good day for you, it’s been eight solid hours for us of fighting.”

And he’s like, “Oh, really. I’m with CNN. You mind if I do a report?” And I was like, “Yeah, I don’t know how well my filter is working right now. Let me try and get a sip of water and tone down my attitude for a second.” But he sat down and did an interview. And that interview went back home here. And that was the first time that my family—they happened to be listening to the morning radio, and they put that footage, that tape, here in Wisconsin, and they played it on the radio, and they ended up calling my mom for like an interview. “Oh, we haven’t heard from him,” because there’s no way to talk to anyone back home. But yeah, so that interview, it went—I told him the story of where we were set up at in that alleyway system we had—in the middle of where the tanks were at there was a little house that we ended up seeking refuge at, that we could stand in the doorway and shoot from and stuff like that.

Well, there was a family in there that didn’t escape or get away in time or whatever. So that family in there we detained. But they ended up being just fine. They ended up being nice people, whatever, they just got stuck in the situation. So they had one AK-47 in the house. And we took it from them. And they were using it for self-defense. And just had them sitting on the couch and all that stuff. And I remember one of the daughters had come up and she was agitated with everything going on. And she was like—with all the fighting, she asked if we were hungry. And she was wearing jeans, and for a Middle Eastern woman or whatever, I took note of the fact that she looked pretty westernized, pretty cultured, and had makeup on and stuff like that. I was like, “Okay.”

She’s like, “You guys must be hungry.” And she sat there and made us macaroni with some sauce for us to eat. And I’m like, “There is no way I’m touching that food.” But regardless, she’s in the corner. If you picture a ninety-degree angle, and in that corner of that room is like her little stove, and she’s cooking. Well, there’s rounds. There’s bullets ripping through that corner of the room going out the other side. And the other side was the alleyway on the back side of their house. Straight up combat. Straight up fighting. And she’s like kinda yelling in her native tongue and cooking and stirring sauce and [laughs] I’m just like, “I’m really—I could skip a meal, don’t worry about it.” But yeah, they tried to name that place Macaroni Alley where we were at just because of that.

Berry: Did you alter your actions at all in a combat situation here when you had a civilian embedded with your group? A journalist or contractor or whatever? Did you have to take care of them at all?

La Sage: We were highly fortunate with, and highly selective of, who we took. So Mike Cerre from *ABC Nightline*, he contracted through them. I—you know, where he's originally from. But so *ABC Nightline* news adopted us. And they for a duration, six months before the war, they followed us and did a couple reports on our training, or leading up to it type of thing.

So they were with us for a little while. The great thing about Mike—Mike and Mike, his cameraman's name was Mike—but Mike Cerre is a former marine, a former infantry company officer in the Marine Corps. And that's why we pretty much signed off on him coming with us. So highly fortunate having a guy who understands marines, understands how to lead marines—because a lot of people, the whole you get more with sugar than you do with screaming in somebody's face, [laughs] that stuff doesn't work well in the Marine Corps sometimes. Depending on what service you're in sometimes it does work. But to each their own. For us, Mike was highly understandable towards how we trained, how we fought, how we led. And that really showed itself in one of his interviews, in one of the occurrences that happened about halfway up to Baghdad.

I was about 500, 600 meters away infiltrating a—think it was a 53rd Iraqi Brigade whatever. It was a compound that had known enemy in, and we did like a 1:00 in the morning type of assault on this thing, night vision. And it had like little tunnel system, it was pretty in-depth. And we had snuck away from where the convoy was parked at. They were going to park for a night, and they set up like a blocking position on the road.

Just picture a highway and just all of our traffic stopped on the highway and those first two vehicles set up like machine guns to watch for any vehicles coming at them. Well, for us, we went off to the side about a half mile and then up about a half mile to this compound and cleared it out, just so that in the middle of the night they wouldn't hear our vehicles running, idling, and come and do an attack on us or whatever.

Berry: You had night vision goggles when you were—

La Sage: Yes. Yeah, so it was a full-on raid over to this compound, and night vision goggles. Set up like an outer cordon around the area, and then me and my squad with reinforcement went into the compound and cleared it out. But while that was—once we established that, that battle was over, we established a position in that compound. We were going to use that compound to see if anybody came back to it, and use that compound as a—we were able to see our convoy pretty far away in the night. And it was flat area, you can see over in the distance. I can also

see the highway; it was perpendicular to us going all the way out across the skyline type of thing. So any vehicle that would pull up, I'd be able to see it as well.

Well, I see a vehicle come over, the headlights come up, and they drive pretty fast, it's like the autobahn out there, and so they're flying towards our convoy. And you can see the textbook standard operating procedures occur. You can see a tracer round get shot to the left and right of the vehicle. So they'll shoot a warning shot basically to signify, "Hey, look, hey, we're over here, you're coming towards us, stop." And like I said reality speaks all languages. People learn instantly, "Oh hey, look, I just got shot at." They make the decision to either turn around or keep going or whatever or slow down or whatever they're going to do.

So the first vehicle turns around and leaves the area. While this is happening there's two other vehicles also coming towards them at 120 kilometers or just going really fast. So the second vehicle is coming towards them. And a second tracer shot is fired and in the still of the night I can remember to this day the sound of the engine was *whoop*, you can hear it speeding up across the desert plain there. And I already know the next step is okay, so they shoot a couple more tracer rounds, letting them know. They shoot a flare up. Still nothing. Well, here comes the machine gun. And so then the machine gun takes out the vehicle. And you're talking speeding that fast. By the time a vehicle actually rolls to a stop or stops, you're talking within a couple hundred meters from the position.

For any VBIED or vehicle-borne improvised explosive device, any bomb that's rigged up to a vehicle, 500 meters away an engine block, we have footage from our post of an engine block or part of the vehicle just ripping through the blockade and causing damage to anything. So you have to stop these vehicles far out. Well, first vehicle stops, and second vehicle comes. And this is all about Mike Cerre, the reporter. And so the second vehicle is coming, and same thing. Right after they watched that vehicle get shot to disable the vehicle, second vehicle goes around them and just accelerates even faster. And you're talking upwards to eighty miles per hour really. I mean, the vehicle is flying.

So the machine guns lighted up after their warning shots and trying to stop the vehicle any way they could, engage, ricochets off the road, shooting at the vehicle, vehicle even after getting shot, the vehicle still is pedal to the metal coming at our area. And I watch the machine gunners take down the vehicle. Mike Cerre was trying to film at the time. He was filming the first vehicle, and this vehicle, there was a flip and roll *Dukes of Hazzard* style with this vehicle that almost took out Mike Cerre. I mean, it was definitely look out type of stuff, hit the deck, and vehicle careens off to the side into the ditch.

That vehicle—and you got to understand this is war, this isn't operations now going on. It is if something's unknown and it's coming after you you got to take it out. So deemed appropriate with our standard operating procedures, vehicle

doesn't stop, try to disable it. The vehicle accelerates, then you have an issue, and take out the vehicle. Well, that vehicle was filled with women and children as well as men. And it was horrific at the end of it all.

And I remember Mike could have filmed that a million different ways. And he filmed it, he didn't twist it. He said, "Hey, this is tragic, and it's women and children in here." He was up-front and honest about it. But yet he put the twist of hey, look, this is war, the vehicle didn't stop. And it could have gone—with media you never know how it's going to go. And he didn't hide nothing, but he also didn't throw us under the bus if you will. So yeah, it was a pleasure working with Mike.

Berry: What kept you going through all this?

La Sage: I have no idea. Because we would find chickens on the side of the road and eat them. Sleep deprivation wasn't even a term. It was if you were—it was just no sleep. It wasn't even deprived. It was just—I cannot recall sleeping. I can recall oh, hey, look, I got five minutes to get off my feet. And it's just—honestly I do know. And it is the pride of being with your brothers, the pride of knowing that you are—finally it's look, hey, I'm making history. Here we are today. But it was the pride of knowing that I'm not going to let my guys down.

And it's amazing what you can do. I mean, there's times in training where I've done some ridiculous things as far as food-deprived, sleep-deprived weeks on end out in the woods, four weeks at a time and longer. But to where I've ordered a Mountain Dew from a tree, because I was delirious. I've watched a guy try and get his cheeseburgers from a bush. Delirious. And gnomes running across the ocean water when we were in a boat company. You see things.

None of that. None of that in Iraq, because there's a little thing called adrenaline that makes up for everything. And a lot of times you can't insert that into training. There's ways to. But still it's not the reality of adrenaline.

So that stuff will keep you going forever. And just the reinput of each scenario has its own adrenaline dump that you get. And it's not as a drug, because you don't really control it. It's not like I can say, "Oh, here we go," and you're trying to get yourself ready for it. It just occurs in the heat of the moment and you realize when you were dog-tired five minutes ago, next thing you know, you're jumping up and over a six-foot concrete wall. Guns up. I already have a grenade out. Throwing it. Oh, I got to scale this ladder because the ladder is broken; I got to get a guy on my shoulders to climb. I mean, it's funny to watch and see guys that you know maybe struggled in physical training along the way or whatever. We go for a five-mile run, he might fall out. None of it. Everybody was 100 percent; everybody was rocking and rolling to the utmost.

Berry: Did your group take any casualties during this action?

La Sage: Yes. April fourth we were in a pretty heavy battle south of Baghdad and that was the first day that I got shot. And April fifth was the day our first sergeant, Ed Smith, was killed. Ed was—First Sergeant Smith was at twenty years, could have retired, had his retirement papers going, and they asked him, “Hey, this Iraq thing is kicking off, if you want to come out.”

He was already an eight-year veteran on the Anaheim Police Department as like a reserve guy who then would just sign over full-time. He already had his job lined up all set to go, family, kids, wife. Already on the SWAT team as a reserve police officer, which is unheard of. Just an all-around great guy and leader. Had his life set up the way we all do, all try to.

So he went along with this, said, “Absolutely I’m not going to leave my guys behind.” At the time he was like eighteen years in recon. Just came over to us, finished up his last two. So anyways, he ended up in battle. A main tank had shot into a warehouse that we were taking sniper fire from. Well, the warehouse was an ammo dump. Said named ammo dump starts blowing up, and it is as if you’re watching Fourth of July at your local park.

Now tip Fourth of July over on its side towards you. So all these fireworks, all these explosions, all these *thruu*, the ricochets and just metal flying. It’s everywhere, it’s flying at you, it’s over you, it’s all around you, and stuff is cooking off, things are on fire.

And our heads are up and out of our vehicles because there’s still people in the field and we’re still shooting. And he had gotten to the top of his vehicle, not standing out of it. He was just out of his vehicle yelling at all—literally telling us all to get down and close your vehicles up until things stop blowing up. And to get down. He was literally yelling at us to get down. And he was hit in the side or back of his head with a chunk of shrapnel. Large chunk of shrapnel.

And he had some coherency to him. I mean he was definitely hurt. And he was carried out of the vehicle and carried to a helicopter that landed out front of our convoy for us. But at one point he had said some things and was coherent. So there was hope of okay, he’ll come around, or there’s a recovery down the road type of thing.

Later that—a couple days, later that day or a couple days later, we had found out that he had passed away. So that was before Baghdad when all of our mayhem was going on. There was mayhem every day on our trip. But definitely we were aware that people we knew were going to end up getting killed, people we knew would end up getting hurt.

For myself when the day prior I was engaging about four to five guys, five individuals, about fifty meters off the road in a field. And they were shooting at

us. We're driving by. The drive is—I don't know, twenty, thirty miles per hour type of thing. So up to forty maybe. But tanks can drive fast, Tracs cannot. So they stick everybody together, so everybody's going one speed, which is slow. And so these firefights, you think about as you're driving by, and you think what, maybe a couple bursts of machine gun.

No, at like twenty-five, thirty miles per hour, you have minutes before you get there that they're shooting at us, minutes in the kill zone, minutes afterwards where they're engaging you. And so my spot, the back left side of the vehicle, I'm engaging from right to left these individuals. And so I shoot the first person, shoot the second person, shoot the third person. I'm working the fourth person when that first person that I engaged was able—and I remember seeing—I didn't quite see it happen. But I remember seeing the individual after it happened. He was shot but he mustered up enough yahoo to get to his side, and he took a shot, ended up hitting me right in the ribs. Hit me in the side.

Berry: Is it an AK-47?

La Sage: It was an AK-47 7.62 by 39. This guy cooked off a full round, which is a higher powerful round than what we're shooting. And so it's a solid round. It's machine gun ammo. And so he took a shot, hit me in the side. Any other day of the week that's a kill shot. Lungs. You have body armor on front and back.

Now we have side SAPIs, which are to protect your sides obviously. But back then you only had a front and back SAPI, or body armor. Well, you get shot in the side, most likely it's going to ricochet inside your body up against that body armor. It'll hit the inside of your body armor after going through your body, and then ricochet back and forth or—it'll do you in. Or it'll just go straight through. And either way that's a double lung shot.

Well, I got shot. I go down, I fall down into the vehicle, and that was the first time I realized how much I was sweating or whatever, because I hit the ground, and mind you, there's like twenty some people in your vehicle. And you're talking put twenty some people in any vehicle, it's packed in there.

So I fell onto people. And first thing that you think of is weapon safety, and I better stop some bleeding quick, so my weapon is carabinered into my body, so my sling is carabinered, because last thing you want is drop your weapon off to the side. Or you do take an explosion or something and you drop your weapon.

So my weapon is slung to me. I'm falling. I'm still holding on to my weapon. And put it on safe, and I hand it quickly to somebody, and I start reaching. We're in chemical suits. So you're wearing like a jumpsuit chemical suit for months. I haven't showered, changed, or nothing. And unzip, I reach in, and I instantly feel just like a pool inside my coat. It's very hot out, and you're wearing like a coat and all kinds of stuff. And I'm just like, "Oh, that's bad, that's really bad." And I

pulled my hand out and outside is bright as Iraqi desert, and inside the vehicle is dark, so it was hard to see. And of course I'm thinking the worst, to a point where I couldn't—either one, I wasn't seeing what I thought I should see so I didn't believe what I was seeing. But I kept reaching in and feeling how wet I was. And I looked at my hand and I didn't see nothing, kept reaching in trying to figure it out. And finally I started tasting my hand and I was like, "It's salty, but I've tasted blood before," I'm like, "that's just sweat." I finally unzip your coat in like a wet suit, it's just all sweat. I'm like, "It doesn't make sense to me, I feel like I got hit." Literally when somebody asked me I'm like, "I feel like the boyfriend trying to win the girlfriend the stuffed animal at the carnival and he uses a sledgehammer to ring the bell, that's what it felt like I got hit by." And so I feel like my ribs. Or I feel how bad I feel inside.

But I look over and Bradley, Corporal Bradley, he was laying next to me. So he was up there with me, and he was laying down. And I see some abrasions on his face and—light abrasions. And I'm like, "Are you okay?" And I can see he's disoriented. And I'm like, "I think I'm okay, I'm going back up." And this is all a matter of five, ten seconds or something, this whole episode. And I think I'm good, okay, and I look at him, "Are you all right?" And he's like—

[Tape 4]

Berry: Okay, Tim, continue if you would.

La Sage: We're in a vehicle and I look and I think I'm all right, just hurt, not injured, or whatever, vice versa, and look at Corporal Bradley, and he's not doing so hot, in shock aspect of it. And so doc pulls him aside, I took my knife, and I cut his sling off of his body. And I take his weapon. He had same weapon as me but it had a 203 launcher attached to it, which is a forty-millimeter grenade launcher that'll—so I can shoot my rifle but then I also can like basically launch a grenade out to whereverland. And that definitely has some effects on the enemy. So take his weapon and I grab a SAW, a Squad Automatic Weapon, which is a machine gun that's belt-fed like any other type of machine gun. And I stack them up there. And I remember for the first time instead of having a good time or being aggressive or whatever I was pissed off. I was pretty upset.

And there's potshots that'll cook off all around you, there's people shooting and stuff like that. It got so bad when I got up there, I remember my belt of ammunition hanging down in the vehicle, and the guys cracking open other crates of ammo and just trying to catch my belt of ammunition so they could strap on a new belt of ammunition so my gun doesn't ever run out. And I was at what we call the cyclic rate. So you have like a sustained rate of shots, six to eight rounds will go off, and you take like four-to-five-second pause, you take these pauses. It was pedal to metal just going through the field of all these people.

And people always ask you that question, “So how many people have you killed?” And honestly, I know a number. And then I know like stuff like that day in the field, there is no way to know, because there was people everywhere in that field running and shooting. And then they [laughs] I laugh now but I was so angry at that point. I remember guys that realized that I wasn’t letting up. And then my best friend Jake, he read into, on it [??] and he started to open up with his machine gun in the vehicle next to us. And guys with their AKs trying to run away to a better dirt mound or whatever to protect themselves. And it was just carnage at that point.

I noticed my barrel was glowing white. It almost becomes translucent to where you see a blink, a flash, every time a round goes out of it. I mean it is just like the strobe effect, I mean it’s so hot that the barrel almost is see-through. But I knew my weapon needed a barrel change, which we ended up doing. And that barrel will burn right through stuff, it’s so hot. And I gave that gun a rest, and I pick up Bradley’s rifle with his 203 launcher on it and I start lobbing grenades out through his rifle out in the field. And I ran out of HEDP, High Explosive Dual Purpose grenades that definitely blows up just as much or more than a grenade would. And I’m reaching in the vehicle in between each shot. They hand me a grenade and I put it in the weapon, I fire at enemy and I’m like, “Another one, another one, another one,” and so I’m cooking off these rounds, and they hand me one.

And it’s different, okay, an HEDP round is however long, three inches long or whatever. We also use that to throw fireworks if you will up in the sky to tell like a machine gunner to shift his fire to the right because us infantry guys are running up this way, it’s a marking tool, we can use it as illumination, all that stuff. Well, I think Dismont [sp??] I believe it was, Lance Corporal Dismont, hands me one, and I’m just putting it in the tube, and I look at him. He goes, “We’re out of HEDP.” And so I’m putting it in the tube. And there’s a guy that popped out of this like—it’s a mud hacienda style wall with like straw, that type of stuff, packed in there, or hay or whatever it is. And I remember this guy, he has his rifle, and he’s trying to run out to get into the fight.

And I took this shot. And this 203 is good up to about 400 meters at best really. And this guy was about 100 meters out. And took a shot at this, hoping to hit and scare him, or whatever. It ended up being a green star cluster. And just think Fourth of July, green explosion, whatever, but it’s just—what I think is just for show or whatever. That stuff is phosphorus. And so I engaged this individual with a green star cluster. And it hit him and the wall behind him and that’s how he met his demise was through that.

At that point I was like, “Whoa, okay, wait a minute, that’s not the preferred method.” So we did a barrel change on the machine gun and went back to that.

Berry: During this period you’re wounded, are you not?

La Sage:

Correct. I ended up—the end state of it was that I had gotten shot. There's a couple things that happened that half of it I didn't know about it, other than what was in front of me as far as enemy goes. So engage the people. The first one pops up, shoots me, hits me in the side, I go down, from what I was told is I tried to get back up right away. Well, an RPG had hit our vehicle. At the same time somebody launches an RPG which caused like debris and fragment to hit Bradley. What I didn't know was I was bleeding from my face as well.

So the shot in the side, here's my plug, and I'll plug them as much as I ever can is I got shot in a knife on my side that I'd hooked to my gear, right? So like a pocketknife that you clip to your pants or whatever, I had clipped it to my gear, right? And that knife and another knife, I held in my hand before I deployed and I said, "All right." I told my spouse at the time, "Hey, here, you pick one of these knives for your purse or self-protection or whatever," and she like was, "Oh, I like that one, it's shiny, it's nice." I was like, "All right, here you go." Well, that was kind of a cheap plasticky kind of knife that I gave her, right?

I took this Benchmade knife, by the company Benchmade. And Benchmade knives, I don't know much, but I know that it has like an outer hardened polycarbonate whatever shell, then it has—like a jungle boot from Vietnam, it has like a steel shank. And then it has the blade, another steel shank, and then the outer hardened metal shell as well. So it's a solid knife. Well, I got shot in that knife with an AK round and it busted the outer shell, the first sheet of metal, the blade had snapped in half. That second sheet of metal, it had warped ninety degrees, and I have a circle. I still have the knife because I dummy-corded it, which is tying like a string from the knife or from the object to your body, so if you drop it it'll still be on your body.

Well, when I picked it up it had a perfect hole in it, but it was warped ninety degrees to where it curved that round a different direction. And then the outer shell as well had this hole in it, perfect circle, a peephole. And that bullet hit me in the side and ricocheted into my body armor. So my body armor exploded on the side and that thing saved my life, that knife.

Well, what I didn't realize, to this day I still have like twenty or thirty pieces of fragment. I was told it's not shrapnel. Shrapnel is something else, is the precursor of fragment. But so fragment in my face. I got hit all round like my head and my face with all this shard, this metal debris from the RPG, and the metal debris from our vehicle that exploded.

So got up, and in my temper tantrum of engaging the enemy, one of my buddies had taken a picture. And so I got camouflage paint on here and there but it was pretty sweated off. But I was bleeding from like around my eyes. And all around my head and face. So it makes for a good picture.

Well, the corpsman is busy working on one of our guys. We get the lull in the fire and I got a piece that I can feel sticking out of my eyebrow. And I had taken a Leatherman at that point. And I got a picture of them—of me pulling a chunk of shrapnel out of my eyebrow with—and as a firefight is going and stopping and continuing, so I pull this chunk out, and then continue on with the fight.

Well, down the road it became an issue of—with Purple Heart you need to be seen by a corpsman. A corpsman has to provide you medical aid. It's like "Did the corpsman provide you medical aid?" I was like—thinking I was all important, I was like, "Ah, no, I did it myself." And like well, you got to have medical aid. I was like, "Well, he did give me some gauze." It's like "Well, there you go, there's some medical aid." But yeah, that was the first time that I was hit, yeah, April fourth. So I mean I thought about it after the fact and now I'm like that should have slowed me down or that should have made you more cautious or whatever. And it really didn't. Not even a little bit, it actually did the opposite.

Learning from—there's got to be a mistake in there somewhere. To a point where on a future deployment I requested and got different ammo that has more stopping power, because I shot that first individual but he shot me back. I'm like, "All right, so that doesn't work for me, let's get something else going," so that you learn from our mistakes. So that's where that went.

So as far as everywhere else, there were so many engagements and so many episodes that occurred that it's really all—and no sleep—that it all mushes into one big pile. And you quickly realize from being in our fighting holes to three kilometers shy of Kuwait and a pack that I know for a fact that nobody has ever had a heavier pack than when we all had everything that we owned for a whole deployment on our backs walking into the border of Iraq. It was incredible.

I remember the platoon commander at the time—we're back in March now getting ready to step off, March nineteenth. And I remember him saying, "Hey, we're leaving in an hour." And he was pretty stressed out. He's a good cat, so don't get me wrong. But he's like—he's a lieutenant. He's like, "Hey, we're leaving in an hour." It's like okay, we're leaving in an hour. He's all like, "We are leaving the RCT, the whole thousands of people up to our next position."

I was like, "Please tell me I'm in a vehicle." He's like, "No, we have to patrol there so we can," basically the leaders' recon. You can see if anybody's waiting for you or whatever instead of just driving into it. It's like "Please tell me they're taking our packs." "No." I'm like, "Oh." [laughs]

So we ended up putting a pack on our back. And he asked me, he goes, "We need to have six different points, we can't just walk straight line, we got to zigzag around." And I'm like, "All right." So I remember having to plot the navigation route and patrol route into, up to the border of Iraq for our RCT, so that we waited from the nineteenth to the twenty-first to kick it off.

Little prideful moments like that. I was like, “Yeah.” Mike Cerre, the news guy, I think it was March twenty-eighth was one of the worst sandstorms that I’ve ever—the worst that I’ve ever been in. But the locals that we talked to, the Bedouins and everybody else, it was the worst one that they’ve seen, and they live there. And it was absolutely ridiculous red-out if you will. It was Mars.

So I remember having to do a patrol and plot a course there and ABC was doing like a satellite upfeed like “Hey, give us an update” type of thing. And Mike was doing a quick interview walking the lines of us. And we’re all down on the ground. And I remember not even realizing when it happened, but seeing that feed later, I was on my hands and knees quickly drawing out a patrol route so that we can go on a little mission type of thing.

Berry: How did you navigate in the desert? Did you have GPS available for instance?

La Sage: Not in 2003. Vehicles had GPS. There was things called a PLGR that is big and cumbersome. It’s not like nowadays. And it’s funny. Nowadays is not that far past 2003. But huge huge jumps as far as personal GPSs and communication, all that stuff. But hey, nothing works as good as a lensatic compass. You get your map sheet, you find out what the declination is, which is offset from true north, and you plot your points, you subtract that difference from true north to what your magnetic is, and you put boots to the sand and walk it out. And really it is a fairly easy concept. But to be able to put it on a map knowing that you’re going to utilize and you have ten minutes—literally at the time I had ten minutes to do it. It was good to be able to make that happen. So that sandstorm had covered everything in sand. Every ear canal, every nostril, every orifice of a weapon, everything was covered and filled with sand.

I already knew horror stories of weapons not firing and stuff like that. And then aftermath, you talk about the—well, let’s just go with facts. Jessica Lynch. Whatever may have happened—well, in her statement, “I couldn’t engage my weapon. My weapon was weapons failure, it wouldn’t engage.” That’s how she became captured.

Well, clean your weapon, that’s what it came down to. So our plan was to clean weapons. Well, what does it do after the worst sandstorm is it rains. In the desert. And it was just—I remember just scrubbing mud and it was just misery. And that’s really where you better embrace not living in a five-star somewhere. You better embrace being a chameleon on the ground instead of a princess in the sky, because if not you’ll have a mental breakdown.

And that was one of those moments where we all just looked at each other and realized we were—this was misery. But you wake up, you stretch it out, and you left right left into the next fight. And that’s what we ended up doing day after day.

Mail was nonexistent. So you had to find your own morale, which was your buddies for the most part.

Berry: So what did you do with your spare time? You really didn't have spare time.

La Sage: No, spare time was 100 percent cleaning weapons. Spare time was 100 percent cleaning weapons. And a way of life for an infantryman or a Marine Corps infantryman is weapon gear body maintenance. So if you had to set up a pyramid of priorities and responsibilities, the first thing is your weapon. I will clean my weapon. I will ensure my weapon is able to fire. I will lube my weapon. I will ensure my sights are good. I'll make sure my sling hasn't got a cut on it so that when I'm using it it breaks on me. I'm making sure my magazine springs aren't sandy so that it continually feeds rounds. You *clean your weapon*.

And knowing that you're in the desert, you absolutely clean your weapon. After that is gear. So weapons gear body maintenance. My gear. We had Frankensteined our gear so that it worked for us. Meaning here is a vest. Well, one of the first things you do in boot camp is learn how to sew. And between tape and sewing and all that stuff you end up making yourself gear. Nowadays I mean you can buy gear, but Marine Corps takes pride in the fact that we do more with less. I mean we don't have a budget type of thing. And so yeah, definitely work on your gear. Well, some things rip, some things tear. Bootlaces break. A big thing is everybody's trousers, the crotches ripped out of them, everybody's. They're so dry-rotted or salted from sweat that everybody's crotch was ripped. So you'd have to sew that thing up. Yeah, I remember the first time I was able to change into a uniform or change a set of cammies. You're talking four months. Four months goes by of one set, one uniform, and that thing will stand up on its own, it is white. White with salt. And we would try and rinse it off in a bucket of water. And that'll get you through for another month. It was just—no showers. And [laughs] you're able to figure out that when you don't have a choice, I mean you've got to make it work.

So you thrive where you can. And things that you know are a loss, after you complain about it, you realize that they're still a loss, so why bother to complain, you might as well just go with it.

Yeah, 2003 was definitely a deployment of—an eye-opening experience for the Marine Corps in general because unless you were in some sort of special operations that was their first step since 1991 really. Unless you did small things defensively in Bosnia or whatnot. But 2003, the young guys that I had with me, they just performed magnificently to us doing raids on villages in the middle of the night to vehicles stopping and you get out of the vehicle and there's straight up machine gun fire at us, sniper fire, machine gun fire. And you have to get out of the vehicle. And watching guys—the only thing you can try and relate it to is—and it's God knows nothing is as tough as that—is Normandy. Vehicles are dropping, machine gun fire is cooking off. And you're a sitting target coming out

of a vehicle from one position. All they got to shoot is to the left or right of that vehicle. They know you're coming out of it.

One field in general, we all lined up, and there was this huge linear building that was shooting at us, and then a big tall hotel that was shooting at us. And these vehicles pull into this field and stop and drop their ramps and we're all like [laughs] you know, I remembered hearing the rounds ricochet off our vehicle. And it's like "Well, stay low at least."

So getting guys to a berm. And you definitely have been put into some bad situations, just like we put the enemy into bad situations. It goes both ways, war doesn't play favorites.

I remember being pretty motivated. When we would patrol villages and stuff like that and take over houses, definitely take over by force, but then you realize it's a family that just didn't get out in time or whatever. And you don't let your guard down but you raise or lower, just like a law enforcement officer, you raise and lower demeanor and stuff like that accordingly.

Well, I end up asking—outside of these thresholds it was this design with flowers in red that you would see. But it was exact on some of these other houses. And on every house really. Like "What does that mean?" And they're like, "Well, that means that we've had somebody killed or kidnapped by the mujahideen or fedayeen through Saddam's regime. Somebody in this house has been kidnapped."

I was like, "Okay, well, all the houses have that." They're like "Yeah, all the houses have had somebody that's been kidnapped." And it really dawned on me early. I believe in everything I do type of thing. And then it dawned on me early that okay, nukes or no nukes or whatever type of deal that whatever one person deemed the country to go fight for or whatever, that's fine, I'm all, I'm down with it, because the year prior when he wiped out the Kurds with chemical warfare, obviously there's something there, but for me it was definitely a protective type of mentality.

So I use Orange County because I lived in Orange County for a long time. If Orange County thinks that they're so much better than everybody else that they start killing people in Riverside or Los Angeles or whatever, sooner or later National Guard or somebody's going to step in. Okay, when they start killing all those people, that little Orange County thinks that they're so good that they start killing everybody in the country, another country eventually is going to have to step in and do something about it. And that's kinda how I felt.

Because house after house after house. "Have you seen my husband? Have you seen this person? My daughter has been kidnapped—or my son has been kidnapped." Every house there was something like that. And then masked graves

we'd come across. It was definitely a matter of trying to cease and assist (sic) all operations from a tyrant and his followers, and just—I took a personal note in that.

Berry: Do you think the Iraqi civilians were pleased to see you?

La Sage: Two thousand three, Marines go in hardship area, everybody goes into hardship areas. Don't get me wrong. But the mentality is we go shorter deployments in harder or more combative areas. But this one in 2003, it was notable that yeah, we fought and every day we were shooting and engaging people and killing people. But every day that was the minority. You go into houses to try and fight across the street shooting at somebody else. The people in the house like I said are trying to make you food and thanking you and trying to hug you. I mean you knew you were about to get in a firefight as you were driving down the street because you had—okay. You go from easily fifty people, twenty people on every street corner, like a parade, cheering for you, and taking their money out and spitting on it, on the ground, they take their money out that has Saddam Hussein's picture on it, taking a dinar out and throwing it on the ground, stepping on it, and clapping and waving their hands at you, to all of a sudden them shushing you away and running into their house to warn you, and then all of a sudden nobody's on the streets. And you're like, "Okay, hey, check it out, next block over looks like we're getting in a fight." And sure enough.

So they will downsize their numbers. They'll try and warn you. And then they just will be off the street. And then all of a sudden you'll start getting shot at. So yeah, the people, everyday people, highly highly happy that we were there.

Now over duration on future deployments that I went on, we would go into an area where it was all basically migrants if you would. There'd be Syrians, there was—it's all fighters from all over the area that would come to this area to fight us. The local people evacuated. So I chalk that up as yeah, everybody here pretty much hates you, but everybody here is the bad guy. They're the ones that have kicked people out of their homes or kidnapped people. And they're doing their thing. So that's fine by me. [laughs]

Berry: After Baghdad fell how was your unit set up there? Did you have a base camp you could live in then?

La Sage: Well, what we did was move up to Tikrit. Tikrit was the next big offensive combative mission that the Marine Corps in general went off to. So north of Baghdad. Went and did some assaults on a hiding spot if you will for guys that ran from the fight.

So you had some of the mujahideen, personal security guys for Saddam that had taken off. When we were in Baghdad we learned from intel reports, federal and military, that we had literally just missed Saddam and his entourage or whatnot.

So he did end up evading. So we went on a hunt looking for a couple routes or whatever. Went up to Tikrit, did some battles up there. And that's where—I believe it was there where that field was where the vehicles dropped and there was bullets ripping past the vehicles and we had to jump out and take over the area.

But after Tikrit we ended up going down. Coming back down we were assigned to the Samawah district, and we lived in the town of Rumaythah. Smaller town. And I love that town. It was a typical small town. Now in general when you're walking it it's huge, because I walked that town every night. And for the next follow-on what, two, three months or whatever it was, four months maybe, that's where we stayed at and worked our operations. So my battalion lived out of Samawah. And then my company had ownership of a town to set up like a police department, set up security, make sure nothing is going on.

Lots of good stories from there. But couple key ones that jump out is that town was very calm in nature. And this is right after Baghdad, everybody was very pleased that we were causing change. Obviously worried about who we are, just like we would worry about anybody coming in our country. Are we too aggressive? So they were cautious with us. But a week, two weeks goes by. And they soon realize that you're just there law enforcement style. They saw everybody during the day walking the streets, patrolling the markets, making sure nobody is getting hurt or anything like that. And there wasn't any engagements in that town. So from solid battle to absolutely no engagements in Rumaythah.

And talking to a lot of buddies in different areas, there was a lot of that. There was like oh, things calm down. After like two, three weeks after Baghdad when people all took off or licked wounds or did whatever, things were calm for the rest of that deployment. Rumaythah though, there was a time where I could have easily—I shouldn't say should, but I mean there was a time where I don't know how I didn't, but I should have shot a guy. And it was the one time on that whole like three-month stay there where—and I don't pray for war or nothing like that, but I'm always on the lookout, might as well be prepared. But this one incident happened. I'm like oh, that was the time where I could have engaged. But I didn't.

So I set up a pretty elaborate—basic concept but elaborate insert plan, because my job, my squad, platoon, I would run, me personally, would run patrols all night. The rest of the company worked days. Which didn't always go well with the company gunny or first sergeant types, that I'm sleeping all day.

I had an impeccable tan because I would be just wearing like my running shorts to sleep in because it would get up to 140 or whatever. While everybody else is working through the day I'm laying there catching up on my sleep because I work nights. But you're having to roll over every hour to get your tan even, but regardless, prepping for the next night. I'd go out every night and I'd come back before—beginning morning nautical twilight is basically before the sun comes up

and it's starting to get light out. I'd be coming in at friendly lines every night. Well, one night—we would insert with one seven-ton big old truck, an Oshkosh big old truck. And you fit twenty some guys in there. But I'd have a couple Humvees front and back leading this little convoy of my patrol.

And we'd drive up and do periodic brake checks. Do little *rrr*, little brake check, and drive off. Well, that whole vehicle like rolls to the front and rolls back with centrifugal force as you're doing that. And—

[break in recording][00:31:38]

Berry: OK, Tim, we're back on here. You were talking about a patrol.

La Sage: Yeah. We did insert with like brake checks to where the velocity of the vehicle would lean forward and then lean back when you hit the brakes. And the two guys sitting in the last two seats on the left and then the other two on the right, they would just jump off the truck and slip into the nearest alleyway. So four at a time would get off the truck and we'd do this over the next like five, six alleyways so that we'd all patrol up in like a little four-man team in each alleyway, but parallel each other moving forward, and on major cross streets maybe drop an infrared chem light or we'd mark it so that you can see which teams have made it across and stuff like that.

Well, we had done this insert. And me and my group of like three, four guys are in an alleyway. And there was a streetlight so we had tucked into the shadow. First thing is make sure we have good com. Do a radio check back to our CP, our command post. And lo and behold, yeah, we don't have good com. So my buddy Jake, who is a monstrous man, [laughs] big tall guy and built. He's having problems with the radio. I reach up. I got my hand—and this is—I have physically trained, you can translate that, many a student in Marines on not to do this. And I've done many a push-ups thrashing myself thinking of why I did this. But I take my hand off my pistol grip and I reach up underneath the flap of his radio. So I take my right arm. It's up in his pack. So and you know how to do things in the dark blindfolded, all that stuff. So I know each knob on the radio and I know okay, to reset the radio I'm going to power it off, power it on, I'm going to make sure he's on channel one.

So I'm doing that. And around the corner about fifteen, twenty feet away comes a man that—the only description I can give you is he's in his full battle dress. Which would look like—lack of a better term or smarter term would be a Ku Klux Klan member. Full white gown, full white dress, full white cap, and a white face mask on. So that is their outfit when they're ready to accept death. They're going to go do something that they're ready to die for. And that is what they'll wear when they're traditional.

So this guy comes walking around the corner. He has an RPK in his hand, which is a machine gun version of the AK-47. So I got my firing hand underneath a flap that's cinched down and down into my buddy's pack. His back is towards this guy who just turned the corner. My other two guys in that alleyway are about fifteen, twenty meters ahead of us on point. They're just in a kneeling position getting ready to patrol forward, because this guy came up from behind us.

And I was just—instantly knew I was an idiot in a bad situation, because I couldn't engage this person. And so anyways I take my hand and I just say his name. I'm like, "Jake." And I launch him forward perpendicular to the individual. And we have a technique that we call running the rabbit. When we clear rooms we have a fast mover that'll—I say tactically run. So you move as fast as you can shoot. But he launches from around the corner drawing the visual attention and weapon attention from somebody hiding in the corner of a room while him and the guy who's up against—a friendly that's up against the wall will just—that friendly up against the wall will just turkey-peek and engage him or whatever, it's a diversion technique.

Well, so I launch Jake. I yell, I'm like, "Jake, your 6:00." And so I launch him. And he instantly goes guns up. But I'm like now ten feet away from this guy in his kill zone. We're in the dark. So he didn't quite make us out yet but he kind of picked up something. So he slowly starts to bring up his weapon.

By that time I'm already moving towards him. And it was just—it happened so fast that I question myself sometimes. Why didn't I just stop and engage? Engage meaning shoot him. But I transitioned my rifle to my left side around my body and at the same time all in one motion transitioned my weapon and reached out and was able to with my left hand grab his buttstock and my right hand because it was already coming up onto my body take his—underneath his barrel and pivot his weapon to where his front sight smashed him in the face. So boom, just a little chop that hit him in the face and knocked him down. And took his weapon away and gave it to Jake. Got the guy up and patted him down and checked him out and all that stuff. He didn't have anything else on him.

We incarcerated him and later found out he was like the right-hand man for the sheikh of the town, the boss of the town, but he was moonlighting at night still doing some old school mujahideen stuff, fedayeen stuff. So was able to stop that individual without shooting him. So that was like the one—a big thing.

That town, we lived at the edge of the town, and we lived in a soccer stadium, a concrete soccer stadium, concrete bleachers. So for the next three months I slept on a conker (sic) bleacher. Like it would be basically living in a tiny version of Lambeau and sleeping on the bleachers type of thing. And when things got hot they were hot. When the concrete was cold it was cold. And it was miserable. Months into that—it was miserable everywhere, but months—

Berry: But the food was good! [laughs]

La Sage: Finally started getting some food, which was—it was no fault of the Marine Corps. It was just you're going so fast and so far that your logistics can't keep up with you. And if you slow down for logistics that means the enemy is hardening their positions and preparing for you. So it was a righteous diet for everybody. So it was all good.

The food they would truck in daily for the most part one meal for you. So we ate MREs, these packaged meals, like a hiker or any other person going to the field would. So we'd eat those two times a day. And then one meal a day we would have C rations, basically lunch lady food, you have some sort of vat of chow, like a vat of eggs or a vat of whatever, which was a big morale booster, it was good to actually eat food food.

So that came once a day. Mind you, for almost a decade after—now that's 2003, it's 2012 now—whenever anyone asked me—decisions are tough. Decision in the face of the enemy, decision work-related is easy as it comes. Decision in the cereal aisle is ridiculously hard. You stand there and look at cereal. There was a movie out, *Hurt Locker*, and probably the most—the one accurate part of that movie or whatever that captures reality is he comes off a deployment and he's standing in the aisle at the grocery store and he's overwhelmed with that decision of making a choice on cereal.

But regardless, these choices, you definitely have a hard time figuring out. You got this food. Like “Oh, I want eggs. No, I don't know.” You don't have these choices before, so it's kinda funny.

But showers, the last month that we were in country they finally got a bladder system, like a rubber pool if you will that'll hold water, and then a filtration device that'll—like artesian well type that'll bring it up into a tent, a small tent. I'm saying like an eight-person tent. You got a shower every other day I think or at that point, that last month, I think we were at maybe every other day. And that shower, with monitoring of a noncommissioned officer, somebody was posted at that shower, and you literally turned on the water for one minute, there was a person with a stopwatch, he turned on the water, and you got a chance to lather up, and then one minute, no matter what you're doing, soap in the eye or not, it is water is off. And so the water is off at that point. From there you can take as much time as you want. Your body is wet. You can lather up or do whatever, if you're fortunate enough to have soap. Get cleaned up the best that you can. And then you get a glorious two minutes after that to rinse off. So once you're ready you tell him to hit it. And then he turns on the faucet again if you will and then you have 120 seconds to clean yourself off. And so every day you're pretty much coming out of there with soap still in your hair and in your eyes and all that stuff because you'd rather have it on your body than not use it.

So that was a painful process, because it's in the desert, and then you walk away and you get all the wet sand on your—it's just one of those things. You're polishing up a bad situation really. But to get back in your salty cammies that have the crotch ripped out of them and a boot that's coming apart that's taped together. Just a rough situation.

Care packages at that point, once we stopped in Rumaythah, there would be a mail dump once in a blue moon, like maybe a couple, two or three times. That has to go to a whole other town where battalion is. Somebody's got to sort it. We got to set up a convoy to go get it from that different town. It was quite the feat to get something.

But some socks, some baby wipes, that was glorious, that's when that all started. That goes a long way. So yeah, living in a soccer stadium, edge of Rumaythah--Running patrols every night in and out of fecal matter-filled canals literally. Because they'll dig like a trench system for that, for their bathroom coming out of their house. So all the water-filled streets are not water. The little tunnel systems and trench systems with flowing urine and everything. And it's happened, you're so stealthy at night, there's times where [laughs] oh. One of my individuals on patrol, my marines, had a bucket dumped on him. Just somebody was throwing it over a compound wall, not knowing that we were there. And he got hit with it. And it's just that type of misery. Well, guess what, at that time we didn't have showers set up yet.

And it's not even a shower anyways but regardless I mean that's the type of misery that you ended up embracing and [laughs] just a rough situation. But you do the best with what you got. In that stadium I remember we came in and ran it and lived with it. The Marine Corps in general can do anything with nothing.

We turned our position over, that town over, to the Dutch. The Dutch Marines came in and they ran like—so the last couple weeks that we were in country, they [laughs] ran a couple patrols with us. We did some joint patrols where their guys would come out with us and then they would run a patrol and we would go out with them, supervise type of thing.

And the first thing they did is went and built like a whole facility away from ours. Like stuff with like tents and a chow hall and there was like “Absolutely no way we're going to live in that stadium.” Because it was [laughs] ruthless on the body. To be up all day or night or whatever and then come back and lay down on concrete was pretty rough. And there was a mobile PX. So there was a truck that would come around once a month or maybe like three or four times we had it when we were there. And through MWR, like morale, welfare, recreation or whatever, whoever ran that truck. But it was a tactical vehicle that they would fill with like Pringles or—it was a store. Like protein. They had limited things that they could bring. But there was like different things that you could get or whatever.

But I remember knowing the guy because he used to be an infantryman that changed jobs, the sergeant that would bring it over. And I would talk to him like “Hey, man, I’m just kind of curious, is everybody living like this? Is this how it is?” He goes, “Dude, you have no concept of what’s going on.” I’m like, “What are you talking about?” He goes, “There are camps and like full-on military facilities being put up. There’s chow halls and contractors.” And I’m like, “Are you kidding me? [laughs] I live in an abandoned soccer stadium.”

And it was definitely eye-opening that that’s how we lived. I take great pride in my career knowing that I’ve always been at the very tip of the spear with minimal to no support. Like I’ve always been at the lowest bottom of a command. Meaning not at battalion or regiment in an office at a desk or planning a mission so other guys could go out on it type of thing. I’ve always been, for eighteen and a half years now, the one that comes back in the lines and dropping my pack and people looking at me like “Oh, hey, you want some water? You want food?” type of thing. So I’ve been pretty fortunate with that. [laughs] I think it’s fortunate, because—

Berry: How about the young marines in your squad? Did they accept that hardship?

La Sage: They did. They knew. I told them right off the bat. I said, “I will do everything and anything to be on every assault that there is. And if you don’t like it let me know.” And there was none of that. They’re all about it. And you train so hard not so you can sit on the bench. So they were all about it.

And they knew though, there were some hard nights where we’d go on a patrol or—this is even before Baghdad where you’re nonstop fighting all day. The vehicles will stop and tell you, “Hey, we’re going to take four hours. Rotate your guys into sleep.” Well, that’s what one person, one commanding officer, one person would see is like “OK, we’re stopping four hours, that’s our rejuvenation time.” No, that’s time for me to get out and clear all the houses around those vehicles so that we don’t get attacked. That’s time for me to go on then offensive patrols, security patrols, looking for mines, IED, bombs or whatever.

And then in those four hours if I get one or two guys to be able to not be looking down the sights of their rifle then I’ve succeeded. But other than that it is solid work. So yeah, in that aspect it was rough as far as the downtime or time in between missions or whatever. There just wasn’t anything.

Berry: Did you have much problem in 2003 with roadside bombs or IEDs?

La Sage: Not exactly, no. And the reason for that is exactly why units—like I’m a sniper, and my buddy’s in recon, we didn’t get utilized offensively like we should, because your position is not a position at all, it’s constantly moving, you’re never stopped. So yeah, it’s hard for me to get ahead of my unit and help them out,

especially since we're not going in circles, like working out of a city. You're working out of a whole country. So you can never get ahead of them to set them up for success like we should, even though like I said we were very much up front with no one in front of us.

But what that does to the enemy is they can't do that either. They can't get ahead of you. They know that you're coming into a city, but they don't know from which route, because you never patrolled there before, you're not operating in and around that city, you're basically doing a locomotive through that city trying to get to Baghdad. It was definitely a race to Baghdad. So they don't know which way. Once you get into a town, you can take the outskirts left or right or through the center, the gauntlet. So them placing IEDs wasn't necessarily an issue in 2003. I mean it definitely was thought of, definitely being cautious of stuff like that. But the gunfighter was the priority at that time. That soon changed. Very quickly changed.

Berry: So we're pretty much at the end of your deployment in 2003. How did you transition back to the States then? The whole unit go back?

La Sage: Yeah. You transitioned down to northern Kuwait, and you lived in the desert still or whatever. And that's the time where like I remember seeing MTV out there, and they had like—coming back to Kuwait where I literally lived in a hole in the ground where there's nothing but desert and camels and Bedouins. Then now I come back and there are like huge built-up areas, hardened buildings, big tents, big whatever, satellite, the like full thing.

Berry: How long a period was involved here? Like five months?

La Sage: Say five months, five, six months. I'm like, "What is this?" And rifle racks where people put their—they go into a tent and put their rifle in a rifle rack and then go to their workstation and work. I'm like—I still—I sleep with a loaded weapon every single night in country. I'm like, "Are you—OK." [laughs] So there was definitely some transitions right then and there. Let alone now we move into a set of tents, getting ready to—they're booking flights and all that stuff for our whole battalion. Traditionally infantry battalion will go off as a battalion together and come back together. And you'll have like little advance party that'll come ahead of time to set up barracks and all that stuff. But yeah, so we all come back together.

And I remember it was nothing but shakedowns looking for contraband, AK-47s, just looking for things that people may have brought back. You hear the horror stories. If they find something, that individual, yeah, gets in trouble. But what it does, it takes that whole battalion, that whole unit, and puts them to the back of the manifest of flights. So that may be another month. You become the lowest priority at that point. [laughs] That was told to us.

So huge amnesty boxes. And our unit, the worst it got was a bunch of Cuban cigars type of thing, because where they're collecting contraband they're also selling Cuban cigars. That type of thing. And you'd smoke them all day while you're here, but before you leave, you got to empty your pockets type of thing. So that was about as bad as it got.

But I ended up transitioning somewhat decently I would think. Coming back from that austere environment and just the nonstop go go go. I remember the first week I was home. I ended up flying home. And the first week I was home really—you're very self-aware that you're going through a change.

Berry: Where was home at that point?

La Sage: I lived out in California. But I came to Wisconsin and visited my family here, had a little welcome home in Germantown and had a get-together with aunts and uncles and all that stuff, but then went back to my home in California. And I remember driving down the I-5, Interstate 5, it's the autobahn of California, and everybody's doing—slowest car is doing seventy-five miles per hour.

I just remember driving that first week. And I tell this story a lot. But I'm driving. I've gone through a lot of defensive and offensive driving schools. I'm highly aware of vehicles around me, all that stuff. And I'm maybe like six paces off of the vehicle in front of me. And ocean is to the right, and Orange County is to the left. Cruising. I'm in the slow lane. And out from underneath the vehicle in front of me bounces a pinecone. So pinecone bounces off the road and is coming windshield height at the vehicle.

And I do what's called threshold braking where you're doing whatever you're doing, sixty, eighty miles per hour, and brake pedal to the floor, simultaneously accelerating. So one time, a stop, boom, instantly off of it, you don't slow down, you don't do anything like that, but just a brake check and full gas, which puts the car into almost like a side spin. Not a spin, a side slide, to go around things.

So about seventy-five miles per hour. I got a baby in the car. I got my older daughter in the car and my spouse. And threshold-brake on the I-5 around the vehicle and up and off the next exit, which was about half a mile down the road.

And I just remember pure sweat. I was just sweating so bad. And just the heart is obviously out on the hood of the car. I'm just pumping away. I'm like d-d-d-d-d. So I'm trying to catch my breath.

I remember my wife looking at me and just being like, "What was that? Are you okay? What was that?" I'm like, "It's kind of awkward. One, a pinecone in southern California. Palm trees, I get it, a coconut bouncing off the road, I don't know. But a pinecone is a little awkward."

The moral is a pinecone at about seventy plus miles per hour looks exactly like a grenade. It looks just like a grenade coming at you. And that's when you realize that you need—you get these little wakeup calls. Yeah, I work nights, I get it, I'm going to be up at night. But when I'm walking the house checking locked doors, looking at windows, getting back up, checking locked doors, checking window, you understand that you're still on mission, you're still on patrol.

Berry: The Marine Corps had any program to help you with that transition back to civilian life?

La Sage: There's tons of opportunities. Like there was pretty much we have welcome home briefs where they will afford you all the opportunities. If you need any assistance—they put you through what they call now Post-Deployment Health Assessment. Were you around burning trash? Were you around this, that, and the other? How do you feel? They go through the full gamut.

But back then they definitely put us all in a big theater and gave us all the assets that are available to us. Married folks went to like a marriage enrichment and reconnection type of class and stuff like that. So [coughs] excuse me. Yeah, they definitely put that out to us knowing that it would be a big issue.

And there was times where the marriage is—I don't envy a military spouse, that's for sure. I mean that's the hardest job. Me going out and fighting, that is what it is. That's what I want to do. Staying at home and worrying about somebody else is unbearable I would say, to a point where what ended up happening when I got shot was I wrote a letter to Benchmade Knives explaining the situation. I was like, "Hey, your knife is awesome, blah blah blah," as professional as I could, on a piece of cardboard, because it's free mail, and it was an Arabic water box I wrote it on. But I write this letter about how I was shot in this knife, and your knife saved my life and blah blah blah.

I sent it off to the company in Oregon. Basically put it in an ammo can that we used as a mailbox. And you hope and pray that some left the area. But I guess it sure worked because Benchmade CEO types or whatever flew down from Oregon to my house in California to present me a new knife engraved and everything, which was awesome.

The only problem is I'm still deployed. The next problem is that my wife answers the door. Third problem is she doesn't know that I was hurt. And then they read the letter. "Oh yeah. Because of when he was shot and stuff." And so you can imagine being a spouse at home, not hearing from me, knowing that I was shot, and it was just—it was pretty hard on her.

Plus newborn, and just all that stuff. It's pretty difficult. And you have the other wives, the key wives that I was talking about, the family readiness officer. They'll check on you once a month or they'll send out e-mails, giving people assets. But

if a person isn't going to take the asset of counseling or a budget plan or free—whatever, that type of stuff, you reclude yourself, and you're alone. You got to deal with all of life's problems. So yeah, it's pretty difficult for the wife or husband that's at home.

Yeah, 2003, after the fact, after war, one of the hardest parts was being so close to those guys and so bound to their survival and them being bound to ours, and just living and breathing everything with those guys, under such stress environments. And then that's just over, that's gone. And so pretty much longing to be with your guys. And then you have family and you're like okay, you slap yourself out of it, trying to take over responsibilities and get used to your new mission of being dad or husband and stuff like that, and active duty. So you get a little time off, couple weeks off, and then its right back to work again training for the next deployment.

Berry: What did you do on your time off?

La Sage: Time off, I ride motorcycles, stuff like that. But you're in southern California at the beach. You try and find some tranquility on the beach.

But I was going to say it earlier with the food. When somebody asked me, "What food do you want? Hey, what would you like for dinner?" I'm like, "I literally don't care as long as it doesn't have sand on it." The MREs were fine because they're in like little packages. But you go down to those tray rats that I was talking about earlier, and sand is blowing always. So your food is covered in sand. And so that was the misery part.

And so like going to the beach, I love the ocean, and you surf and stuff like that. But go to the beach and it's like you're just—the sand. You're like ugh. But it's bittersweet because you know that you're hanging out in southern California, not somewhere else.

I was pretty fortunate in June of that deployment, 2003. *ABC Nightline* wanted to interview like four or five of us. And they had to do that from Kuwait. And so we're talking about the beach and being able to feel the sand in your toes and stuff like that. Well, we pretty much pirated, hijacked, or taxied down to Kuwait from Iraq for a five-day excursion, my commanding officer, myself, and a couple other guys, like four or five of us. And they put us up in the Marriott five-star, which—ridiculous in Kuwait. Kuwait is very rich, very well-off. The crotch is ripped out of my trousers. And I'm in this five-star hotel in Kuwait. And they look at us, and like "We're going to have to get you guys some clothes."

They're doing interviews on—basically like how we're doing now, trying to document the stuff. And they would do one a day. So you're there for like five days. You get time off. And my commanding officer, they gave him a car, and we're all in this car, and we're looking for something to do. We're all—

[Tape 5]

Berry: Tim, we left off talking about your ABC interview in Kuwait. Could you go on with that please?

La Sage: A few of us had gotten picked to go down to Kuwait and talk to ABC Nightline News. They set up interviews at the Marriott there. It was my commanding officer, myself, the executive officer, Lieutenant Chase, and another Marine that was doing a lot of work, a lot of activity, a lot of shooting as well. He had gone down there. We went down, you know puddle-jumped here and there, and borrowed vehicles, and crashed overnight in different camps or whatever. It was definitely an unplanned trip, you know, as far as getting down there. They just wanted us down there and by any means we could get down there. It was quite difficult to find our way down there, it took a few days.

End up showing up at the Marriott, and I remember walking in, still with the one set of cammies that I've worn for months, with the crotch ripped out of them, because of just dry-rot type, you know, and sweating. It's just horrendous smell I imagine. I walk into that hotel and it's a five-star Marriott and just seeing all the gold and everything, it was just instantly you feel like you don't belong.

But we get there. And Mike Cerre was waiting there for us and obviously he's like, "We need to get everybody clothes and checked into the rooms." I remember distinctly they give us the rooms. We all have our own rooms. And coming from combat and then down to Kuwait City, you know mentally there's a change like okay, I'm in a city that isn't at war right now, whatever. But yesterday I was shooting at people and that type of thing where it's combat where I was yesterday. And now where I'm at right now its handshakes and high fives and how can I help you, sir. So still on the alert-- You check into your room. And going from an antiterrorism unit, asked to change rooms then so you don't go into the same room that they planned for you. And you settle in.

We had pistols on us and you just settle in for a minute. And they said, "You'll be able to relax for the evening and they're going to go out shopping for clothes for us and tomorrow we get started on some interviews."

That night we're just supposed to relax and definitely couldn't relax. I hopped in the elevator and the first thing I did was go to the roof and then work my way down and just check out the building and see, just look around. Got up to the roof and there was a pool. And I haven't showered, bathed, or anything. And I just remember seeing that pool. And it's an infinity pool overlooking the rest of Kuwait City, and it was up against some Plexiglas windows or whatnot. And I was like, "Or I can let down my guard and get in this pool."

I remember it was really late at night too, and just stripping down into like white government issue boxers and jumping into that pool. I remember at one point looking over and my cammies were—I folded up my uniform and set it down. And my pistol was underneath my blouse. But able to—like if I had to reach for something, it was right there.

I remember a worker had come in, a local, and I imagined he was going to tell me that the pool was closed or something like that. So he came up and I had waded over in the water when I heard the elevator coming up. I had my hand underneath my blouse on my pistol, and he walked in and just looked at me, I looked at him. He turned around and walked away. [laughs] And treading water with my hand underneath my blouse at the edge of the pool.

So I'm sure he knew to just give me some space. So he had left and I spent probably like an hour, hour and a half up there, just relaxing and decompressing. Yeah, and then went back down and crashed out for the night. Then we started one by one doing interviews but we were down there for I think like four days or something like that. And they ended up wanting us to go relax, go walk the town. You can do anything. It was definitely awkward coming from Iraq into Kuwait within a twenty-four-, forty-eight-hour period. One being combat and then the other one walking down the street and buying a Pepsi or Coke or something like that, when I haven't even had anything cold to drink or anything.

I mean from one extreme and harsh living environment to I can walk the streets in civilian clothes and get something to eat or whatever. It was really awkward. And everybody there in Kuwait, blue jeans. And there was traditional dress as well, but definitely modernized as well. We make it a point not to talk to females and stuff like that. And then females walking around now in Kuwait, and they're trying to talk to you, "Hey, how are you? You guys from America?" Speaking good English. It was just—it was eye-opening.

Berry: Did you receive training from the Marines with respect to the cultural aspects of the Middle East?

La Sage: Definitely going into the deployment, prepare for the worst type of mentality, you understand traditional behaviors and cultural respect and stuff like that. Don't make eye contact with females. If there's a female in the room ask for them to be removed so that you can search a room and all that stuff as far as Iraq goes.

The story of what happened with the lady making macaroni and cheese for us in Baghdad, quite the opposite. I mean she was all about talking to us. She was wearing blue jeans and makeup and stuff like that.

We learned a lot. And in the rural areas it definitely seemed to apply. But anywhere near a city or anything like that, a big built-up area, seemed like there was some modernization of their culture and women being either one, outspoken,

or wearing less than the traditional black gown type of thing. They're actually wearing blouses and jeans or slacks or whatever, stuff like that. So we definitely saw some differences in some of the areas.

But the Marine Corps gives a lot of culture classes everywhere we go, whether it be language and history and what to expect and how to treat them, what's polite, what's not polite, how to eat with them. You go meet a local sheikh of a village, he's in charge. And it's raw goat time. Be quite impolite to refuse a meal or something like that that's been prepared for you. So there's a lot of classes and training that you go through. But it's more like you're just learning as you go as well. So you learn a lot but then you pick up a lot as well once you're in country.

You see what works and what doesn't work with people. Sometimes they want you to meet their wife. Other times they don't want you even in a room anywhere close to their wife and kids. So it depends on the situation too.

When we were down in Kuwait for those four days it was exactly like—it would be like California. They have a highway, Pacific Coast Highway, in California, it was very similar in Kuwait around the Gulf there. I remember looking at like a *Motor Trend* magazine or whatever, some sports car magazine, with brand-new top cars out and seeing at least three or four of them driving on that road in Kuwait. The amount of money that was driving around, walking around, was amazing.

One little reward that we gave ourselves was while we were waiting for our time to do this broadcast, our CO was driving. And we're all packed in the car. One of the guys was doing his interview. He looked over on the waterside, and we're on the Gulf Drive pretty much. On the right-hand side is nothing but shopping and stuff like that. On the left is the water.

And he looked down there and there was a Jet Ski rental place. And he's like, "Well, when's the next time you're going to be able to say that you rode Jet Skis in the Gulf?" So we pulled over and sure enough, we went shopping first, and just like Oakley stores and Speedo stores or whatever. I mean there was just like anywhere else, full-on stores. Bought some board shorts and took a day Jet Skiing. And then forty-eight hours later back in Iraq, and everybody envious of the clean smell that they could smell from our guys coming up. It was quite different I guess. You noticed how bad everybody else smelled then too.

Berry: Do you know how you were selected along with the other guys to do these interviews?

La Sage: Mike Cerre and the company knew that me and my like twenty guys—never even saw the company because we were up in front. They literally drove past and drove over the carnage that we had left for them. And so they knew that we were definitely doing a lot of work.

I remember distinctly at one point—and this was on the ABC *Nightline* special my folks told me, was the company had taken some sporadic fire or whatever. And up ahead I was already in like a full-fledged firefight. And so they pushed through and started catching up towards the front of the convoy where I was at. And the company gunnery sergeant, Dan Ferguson, he's on film. And so the vehicles stop and everybody starts getting out. And they're like, "What's going on?" And I just remember it set in that maybe I was a little bit special or something like that because he had jumped out. He was like, "I don't know, go find La Sage and see what's going on."

At that point I was like, "All right, that's my leadership. And they're like just getting into what I go through every day, every night up front." So I think they knew what we had gone through up there and they were wanting like this, they wanted some of that pushed back to the States and wanted some of that documented or whatnot.

Berry: You and your twenty guys would constitute a squad?

La Sage: Squad is traditionally thirteen guys. Our platoon, who was up front, so we had three squads or so, and it was about thirty guys, but some of those guys were attached to like mortars. So those guys are actually back behind you a little bit. I had two vehicles basically. I had two Trac vehicles that was loaded up about anywhere from twelve to fifteen guys apiece in those vehicles. And that's who I was up front with. So the tankers weren't with us, we're just attached to that first tank leading the convoy up to protect his tank and the one next to him.

But yeah, small element, group of guys, to a point where not for lack of discipline but just because there was no means to do the normal military things, which was shave, I remember we had stopped long enough, about forty-eight hours roughly, about a day. Maybe it was like a day for full vehicle maintenance and stuff. And we were pushing up to Baghdad. And that was the first time I saw like my sergeant major and some of the other people from our battalion let alone the company or whatnot. Everybody was so back behind us that—never even saw. I saw Oliver North more than I saw my unit. I mean I didn't see anybody other than somebody zoomed up to the front real quick and did something and then zoomed back out.

I remember our sergeant major had come up. I'm bleeding from my face from yesterday's firefight. And there was a no cammy paint rule that had come out I guess where you're not supposed to put cammy paint or camouflage on your face. For what reason I don't know.

But for us it was highly beneficial psychologically, because we were clearing houses and rooms every day all day. Vehicle would stop for five minutes. We'd get out and probe out from those vehicles and look for any ambushes or whatever.

And if there was houses there we'd clear these houses and then jump back in the vehicle and take off.

Well, the locals, when they'd see, when they'd see you, they're intimidated and stuff like that. I had a skull painted on my face. So for them when they saw that, almost every single time—I had a guy with an AK-47 in his hands just drop it and just stare at my face as I came in. We had disarmed him, or I had disarmed him, and came up to him. And the whole time he was just like—he had his hands on my chest, on my gear, not to fight me, but to like hold me back.

I was searching him or I was detaining him. The whole time his mouth was open, his eyes were big, he was just staring at my face, he couldn't comprehend what it was. So we used that as a tool.

But anyways the sergeant major types that would come up, and be like, "You haven't shaved your face obviously for like a week or two. What's going on up here? You guys are up front and just running amok, you guys are cowboys up here?"

I remember a good friend of mine, Jake Washbourne, very large man [laughs] that's been killing people every single day with me up there. And just stood up, and he told him in the most direct manner to a point where if it was any other situation anywhere, there'd be—it'd be disciplinary action. But it was just like he just stood up and he goes, "You haven't provided me food for two weeks, go find me food, either bring food, or bring me ammo."

I remember just that sergeant major just turned around and walked away. But yeah, we were catching chickens on the side of the road. And we'd build fires in bookcases. They'd have like metal bookcases and we'd build a fire on the bottom shelf and cook on the next shelf up or whatever if we had like an hour inside of a building or whatnot.

They had lots of flour and yeast and I remember Morton [sp??], Lance Corporal Morton, a marine in my squad. And this kid, he had a Squad Automatic Weapon, shooting people, doing his thing all day. Then we stop in a building, I turn around, look, and he has a poncho, the top part tied around his neck, and then around his waist like an apron, and he's making like—we had like little jelly packets. And he was making like little apple turnovers or what—and it was like a Cooking Channel type of thing. He was in there, it was pretty funny.

But we definitely without any logistic support or anything like that gained the respect I think of our unit, to be able to accomplish the daily tasks that were given to us. So them sending us down to Kuwait, ABC wasn't able to get up front by us. So their special was run about halfway down the convoy and the firefights that would happen or the sporadic shooting or whatever that would happen. So they

wanted to know exactly what was going on up front, and I think that's why Mike had brought myself down.

Berry: Okay. Last session, we were talking about your returning to California. Can you tell us what that was like and how you transitioned back into pseudocivilian life after combat?

La Sage: Well, typical Marine Corps infantry is the first thing you do when you get home is start preparing for your next deployment. But coming home, there's definitely some things that need to be addressed as far as transition and stuff. And the unit and the Marine Corps really, kind of coming into—well, definitely coming into new ground again, new territory since Vietnam. Have a big war, big conflict, send guys home, and you just send them home? Or now this time around they really put us all in an auditorium. And there'd be like a marriage counselor that would give a class or speech and give out business cards. Or there'd be classes on just about anything as far as reintegrating into society.

But coming home was—the flights, I think we stopped in Cyprus and then stopped in Maine I believe. I definitely know we stopped in Maine. Stephen King was signing books or whatever and handing stuff out.

But I remember coming off the plane. And usually with our military flights you definitely have to have patience and you got to have tolerance, you're talking twenty-one-hour flights plus layovers plus inspections of your gear, making sure you don't—like you can fly with your weapons, but you can't fly with your knife. Just goofiness like that. So you're just robotically coming off a plane and waiting for your next flight.

Come off this plane and you just hear mayhem—positive mayhem. And come down the ramp and look and there's hundreds of people just sitting there waiting, just throwing cell phones at you, like “Here, call your family, here, take this, take that.” It was amazing, the reception from strangers everywhere.

Berry: This was in Maine?

La Sage: This was in Maine, this is everywhere that we stopped at an air terminal. Just for like layovers or whatever at airports. They knew somehow, the nation really, because I've heard this in other coasts, other airports as well, that there would just be hundreds of people that would just be what they did that day. They would show up and all they would do is thank and hug guys that came home, and then like the USO would be set up with like phone centers like right there on the passageway coming off the plane.

I mean they'd set up like tables with nothing but cell phones. And honestly you could walk away with them. They don't care if you take the phone, they don't care if you put it back. They don't care. But obviously with us there's hundreds of

people there. So they make a ten-minute call and drop it off. But yeah, it was really nice.

I remember all that stuff is great, but the minute that you're alone and you're back at the house or day number two or whatever, when it's all said and done, all the gear is turned in, and you're at home, I remember the first time—and this is California, which is highly diverse and—like here in Wisconsin where I'm at, my small town, I see the people I went to high school—all the time type of thing. In California, its hustle-bustle just like anywhere else in a big city, but highly diverse as well with cultures.

I remember going to Walmart like the first week I was back or so and seeing an Arabic woman walking. She had a nice—it wasn't a black dress, typical what we see overseas is a typical black head-to-toe dress. This was more flowery or it was nice, but it was definitely traditional, and had a face mask on type of thing. And I just remember walking past her. She was coming, I was going type of thing. And I just said to her, I was, "As-salaam alaikum." And she stopped like dead in her tracks and she looked at me.

Berry: What does that phrase mean?

La Sage: It's like saying hello with God type of thing. Saying—just greeting her, giving a formal greeting, like in Spanish you say, "Como estas?" or "Que pasa?" When you say, "Como esta usted?," it's like a formal highly polite way to say it. Well, so I greeted her. And she had stopped in her tracks and turned around and looked at me. And the proper response then would be for her to say it reversed back, so I would say, "As-salaam alaikum," she would say, "M'alaikum salaam." And she had stopped. And she said that, "M'alaikum salaam." And she came up and gave me a hug. Because they know. Their families are over—somewhere over there, whatever. And gave me a hug and picked up her groceries, whatnot, and walked away. And I remember standing in the parking lot for a minute or two and just looking around. Like all right, so you just figure out how things are going to be or how you need to act.

Some people are internally negative, and they might judge people, whatever. And honestly from what I saw, all the firefights and everything, there was just as many people that was—or more that were thrilled to have us there and thrilled to have a chance at normalcy. So I was fine coming home. I just knew—for me, I call myself hyperalert, like I notice, I know if the doors are locked or unlocked, I know if the motion light batteries have been changed outside. I take notice in those things.

So I knew coming home I would have to really assess myself and make sure that—what I think is normal other people don't think is normal in the way I act or the way I drive or the way—and I am defensive or whatnot, protective.

But I didn't really pick up on too much this first deployment. It was a lot of publicity, a lot of welcome home stuff because it was the war. And we had lost our first sergeant, who was a member of a local town near where I lived. And so there was that. There was the tragedy of it. But in follow-on deployments when everybody's getting IEDed, and that's when things really, really took a turn. I mean it was different from that.

This was more like a really happy to be home, and everything was doing pretty good. Just had the new baby in March, and it was really—my second child, so really trying to for myself and for the family really ignore anything that may or could be left over from the war type of thing, and really show everybody that I'm fine and that I was there for my family.

I had my priority checklist, the kids and all that stuff came first. And then anything that I may have had dwelling inside or whatnot, I would deal with it. But really I didn't have too much going on. I mean I was told that—I didn't—my sleep patterns were always messed up because I worked nights, I patrolled nights. So I'm used to being up all night long. And typical military, most military guys will wake up ten minutes before the alarm goes off type of thing, and that's normal.

But so I didn't really notice those as changes. I just noticed—that's just the normal stuff on how I am I guess. There was a couple episodes where [laughs] I had gotten into an altercation with a gentleman. But he was pretty disrespectful to my father. Just a stranger on the road. I guess normal label would be road rage or whatever. But flipping off my dad, my dad is doing the fifty-five-mile-per-hour, probably one mile per hour under the speed limit type of typical Wisconsin guy type of thing. And—

Berry: So your dad was visiting you in California?

La Sage: I had come to Wisconsin and visited him. And after that deployment I came back to Wisconsin and did like a welcome home with my mom and dad and stuff like that. And this was that first month. I'm not sure which week it was. But it was pretty much immediately after coming back. And the typical hat backwards music pumping kind of kid or guy. He was—I don't know, a little younger than me. But he was yelling and screaming at my dad and all that stuff. And there was a physical altercation that lasted about three seconds type of thing. And it was more of a reality check.

And I think about that a lot because I mean that could happen every day. There's always somebody like that in the world. But that day I guess I decided that that was intolerable to talk to my dad that way. We were just minding our own business driving down the road. This kid is cutting through traffic and all that stuff. To hop out at a stoplight and pop him one in the mouth and tell him to watch himself. And just the look of shock from his girlfriend and him. I walk

back, and then I get into my truck—or get into the van with my dad, and that same look from them was on my dad’s face, along with my spouse and stuff. And I was like, “OK, yeah, that was probably the wrong answer.”

So I think that was the one moment where I was like, “OK, what I think is a five, like I’m running at about a five, it might be somebody else’s ten, so maybe I could step back a bit.” But other than that there wasn’t really any issues that I can really come up with.

Berry: How much opportunity did you have to interact with your family while you were overseas?

La Sage: The first time I didn’t have any until CNN. When I sat down April 10, 2003, after that firefight—after that eight-hour battle, coming back, and I sat down next to that guy and he’s like, “Oh yeah, we just did the dropping of the Saddam Hussein tower—or the statue and all that stuff,” and I’m like, “Yeah, that’s wonderful.” [laughs] And telling him what we’d been dealing with, he was pretty shocked, and he immediately did a broadcast—like I don’t know what he did, but some satellite recording to where it was aired on the radio the next day back home here, WTMJ did it. But he also gave me his cell phone—or sat phone—and he said, “Hey, make a call.”

And I spoke at that time to back home and just gave them like a five-, ten-minute update on how everything is. But before that, even when I got shot and I got hit, I didn’t even tell them anything that was going on. And Benchmade Knives had flown down to my house and presented that. I mean, she had no idea that anything happened. So yeah, there was no contact. And then the last like month or two when we were in Rumaythah doing stabilization patrols and just getting everything to calm down a bit, eventually in that last like thirty days or so somewhere somehow we got a satellite phone.

[break in recording][00:31:36]

Berry: Tim, let’s go back to California and talk about your training and family interactions and social interactions and so forth after your first trip to Iraq.

La Sage: Back in California was—for me, I love California, I love the atmosphere of it. So, very easy to stay upbeat, positive. Knowing that my unit was right away going to deploy again into Iraq, the main focus then turns right into training. And with what my job was after 2003 in Iraq, I took over the scout sniper platoon. The current scout sniper platoon sergeant had—he actually was killed once he got back home, became a highway patrolman part-time type of thing, and in his first six months on probation was killed. So I had moved over and took over the platoon and started gearing them up for scout sniper operations.

And I have a pretty heavy background in the field in that craft. So I asked the new battalion commander to let me just run. Let him know what we're doing, but let me train them outside the box a bit because I can see things were changing. It wasn't typical out in the field shooting from 800 to 1,000 meters away across the farmlands. Understanding that we're moving into the city, there's going to be a lot more urban activity.

So Colonel Newman was the battalion commander, just a great guy, great leader. Let me do anything and everything I wanted, to a point where I had started—since—well, this happened a couple times. But maybe a decade ago in the eighties and nineties, but otherwise Vietnam is the only time there's been like a regimental full-on indoctrination and then beefing up the platoons. Usually each battalion will take care of their own scout sniper process or selection and stuff like that.

For 5th Marines I had set up an indoc that lasts like two days where you can screen guys to see if they're even worthy to go on. Most units at that point will take those, whoever made those two days—or one day. A lot of indocs are just one day. For us we'd do two days and stick them on a hill overnight to do observation skills, and then come back in the morning and find out everybody fell asleep or something like that.

But from there I'd go on for a monthlong indoc. Basically a screening process. And after that fourth week we'd actually—that's when we'd first shoot. I wouldn't even let them shoot really until the fifth week, so I wouldn't waste ammo on guys that weren't going to make the platoon. But yeah, I did that for other battalions, all at once. I took everybody's marines, sent them to school, for 3/5, 2/5. 2/4 was deployed, and so 1/5 had some stragglers as well, but—

Berry: 1/5 would be the—

La Sage: First Battalion, 5th Marines. So basically 5th Marines out of San Mateo. 3/5 had basically no scout sniper platoon. They had two great guys that were transitioning out, Proudman [sp??] and Cole [sp??], those guys as scout snipers, but they were leaving and they didn't have any selectees. They didn't have anybody. So I took over their whole situation as well, making flyers, put them up around the barracks, and everybody, a lot of guys, will want to try out.

So the next eight months or whatever was just training, training, training. I mean we did everything from—this one a lot of people had given me credit for. Camp Pendleton is right up against Orange County, California, very nice community, San Clemente, and the base is right there. Most people even don't realize it's a base right off the highway.

Well, Talega, where I'd moved all those guys away from where their unit was, and I'd put them in Talega, which is where *Heartbreak Ridge* was filmed, so if you remember Clint Eastwood's movie *Heartbreak Ridge*, there's these Vietnam

style Quonset huts and that's where they all lived. That's where I put my guys so they could be detached and focused on what they were doing.

And about a mile away from that through like no built-up area, it's just like a field and some woods or whatever, it goes into a hillside. And on the top of that hill you can just see the speck of a building, and that's the San Clemente Animal Shelter. I'd asked permission to utilize their parking lot and their surrounding area for some training. And they were very very hospitable to let me do that as long as I didn't have weapons or whatever. Said, "No, I'll set up a pickup truck in your parking lot. And there'll be guys with basically binoculars, spotting scopes set up in the back of that. And if everything goes to plan that's all you'll see."

And got up with the Orange County Sheriff's Department, who runs that area, and let them know as well that I was going to conduct a forty-man stalk. So they were to move from base through the wooded area and stuff, and it parallels a subdivision that goes through a skateboarding park and all this stuff up to where that animal shelter was.

And I'm like, "And if you see one individual they fail." But really we're on that hill with spotting scopes as well. What I didn't tell any of the students was—and I'd gotten an animal from that animal shelter, I've lived in that area for a while. All the volunteers, the local people, they walk all the animals throughout the day. So you basically have quote, unquote an enemy patrol with dogs around the animal shelter. Now you have snipers that are trying to stay away from the wind of the dogs to get picked up on the dogs.

So it pretty much made a full-on training event of a compound to get in and around 200 meters of this compound so that they could set up a notional shot type of thing. In the meantime they got to do diagrams, drawings. If somebody's looking at the back of the building that does no good. If they're able to see the doorways, the comings and goings in the parking lot, that's where they want to set up at. So yeah, it was a good exercise. So did a lot of stuff like that over the eight months, ten months or so in preparation for deployment coming up.

Berry: Tell us how a sniper works. Are these working as individuals? Are there teams of two? Tell us about the weapons they're using.

La Sage: In the workups and in the training traditionally snipers will work in groups of two. You'll have a sniper and then you'll have a spotter. Spotter will call wind and look through a spotting scope, basically a monocular, like a set of binocular types. But look through a spotting scope and give the shooter the wind call, like any adjustments he's got to make to his scope. And he's pretty much the senior guy. The shooter, it's very easy to—like for instance, when I was in country I carried a rifle, I did both, I did my own spotting, and I did my own shooting. But me being a senior guy, I would spot for somebody, that's what I should do.

But a lot of times either one, because you want to do the shooting yourself type of thing, you want to—and a lot of the senior guys will wind up just being the sniper. But yeah, traditionally it's a two-man team. But that's like I was talking about I knew that we weren't going to be anywhere near tradition and standard operations.

So we had wrote a new standard operating procedure handbook type of thing for our unit to cover a lot of the urban and going through buildings and shooting from buildings and urban sniper was coming around, was a new course that was getting built and being taught around that timeframe.

I'd sent—I had the highest graduating group of snipers. Sniper school is a very—the saying is attrition is the mission. But no, it's a very hard school to pass. A lot of people get dropped from it. And they'll give you a spreadsheet of exactly what you—over the year like how many students from whatever battalion had gone and what the pass rate was and how many had actually passed.

So with our platoon we had at least half of our whole entire platoon were snipers, which is pretty much unheard of. There's one other battalion in 1st Marines out of Camp Horno in Pendleton that had similar to that. Everybody else was notably 20 percent lower than us and then on down. And I was really inquisitive on why that 1st Marines platoon was doing so well. I want to learn as well. So come to find out that the chief instructor for scout sniper school and his right-hand man had orders to that unit and they were training them on the side. And they were helping them out and getting ready for their own deployment, which makes sense.

But no, for us, we had done some pretty amazing training, but as far as the weapons go, I mean times changed hugely as far as technology and as far as weaponry go. Standard-issue M40A1 sniper rifle looks like a Remington 700 that you can pick up at Gander Mountain or at Cabela's or something like that. Going to that year, they had come out with an M40A3, which is more a square-looking rifle, the stock, the McMillan stock that they had put on it. Things started changing. Money starts getting put in there.

The scope itself, we'd been in contract with Unertl scope since seventies. It's the Vietnam product type of thing. After Vietnam it was the contract. And really it stayed in the Marine Corps forever, Unertl. Well, in the years since, there's been several big name products that came out with glass for the rifles, Leupold and Schmidt & Bender now. I mean those are \$2,000 scopes. I mean it's pretty amazing.

But yeah, they definitely invested time and effort, Quantico did, to updating and upgrading our rifles. The M40 is now modified several different times as well. Meanwhile for two decades it hasn't been modified once, prior. And that's just the M40 sniper as well.

So carry a .50 cal, up to their choosing. They'll have the Barrett .50 cal sniper rifle, it's semiautomatic. Or it can be bolt. But we also—that's for—I mean .50 caliber sniper rifle, if you think about the big heavy machine gun .50 cal that you see in some of the movies or whatnot, and now you make it a sniper rifle, it's highly intimidating to the enemy and whatever. I mean it's just a huge round.

But also Navy SEALs had been using, and Special Forces Army, they've been using a product that was semiautomatic but still holds sub-minute groups. So about the size of a half inch by a half inch at 100 yards, still being able to hold a group that small but the weapon is semiautomatic. So you're going from traditionally having five rounds, five bullets, on a bolt-action weapon, that you would then have to quickly load again five more bullets. I mean it's kind of a Civil War mentality if you think about a long term firefight, a long term firefight meaning anything more than five minutes. And you have a bolt-action rifle, it can become quite outnumbering and really fast.

So when I got—not to fast-forward, but I ended up using a Stoner SR-25, which is semiautomatic sniper rifle that shoots equivalent to .308 here but it's a 7.62 Match Grade round. But there's plenty of different weapons out there. The guys that I trained in 3/5, they [laughs] had—it's unlike everywhere else in the military. You get into some of the special units, you can travel a bit and research your own products and then sales pitch that to your unit and they can possibly buy it or do something with it. 3/5, those guys went to I believe it was Utah or Idaho where CheyTac is and CheyTac was making a new .408 caliber sniper rifle that was quite remarkable, shooting up to 2,000 yards. It's just a good piece of gear that they ended up taking in country, two of them as well. So there's tons of different weapons and all that.

But as far as gear goes, a lot of guys, snipers equals ghillie suit. And that's all they know. Ghillie suit, it really did derive from the Scottish background and the shepherders or what not. I guess you would relate to it to someone who doesn't know a cloak. It'd be a cape or a cloak back then with fur, hide, or whatever. Some sort of camouflage to blend you in. Nowadays a ghillie suit for us, it can be several different type of uniforms, but a uniform with netting on the back that you can tie burlap to. Basically old school sandbags that are cloth and you fray it up and it looks like a big bush on your back, and then you can stick vegetation in it to really blend in. So that's traditionally what a sniper would carry.

But when you think of Stalingrad and a lot of the things that they would do, their snipers, you didn't see them running around with ghillie suits. You saw them running around with like cloaks or capes. Like somewhat like a poncho type of thing. But they would—because a dusty canvas type of cape blends in nicely with a brick wall and stuff like that. So your camouflage techniques change immensely when you go from rural to urban.

Just teaching my guys that and really getting them used to understanding how we are supposed to shoot, the typical guy standing in the window shooting out at people or in the clock tower, the highest building. Those are all ways—that's what the human eye or your psyche is going to look for is you're going to look for the tallest building, and that's where the bad or good guy or whatever is going to be. Or the guy shooting from the window.

Well, it was teaching guys to not come up to the window that they're shooting from but actually—I incorporated a two-room rule which was not to shoot from the room that your window was in. So actually go the next room back. So if I'm in the kitchen, I shoot from the kitchen through the living room out the window of the living room. That way when you're looking into that building with shadow and stuff like that—and we create our own shadows with screen or with cloth.

But it's very difficult to see that deep into a house, into a room. And of course backlighting, making sure you're not standing with your back up against another window behind you or whatever that is spotlighting you. There's all kinds of field craft that has to be practiced. So that's what my entire time off was from war. So you got guys that are coming from war and the country is like, "Wow, yay," stuff like that, which is great. The only thing that mattered was getting ready for the next tour. And that's where you inject a newborn, inject at the time a three-year-old, four-year-old, Jade, my oldest, and family time and stuff like that. And oh, you're going away for a month to go train, you're going to go to the desert, or you're going to go to the mountains. Every week was gone Monday through Friday type of thing, home on the weekends. And that home on the weekends was cleaning gear, sewing gear, getting it ready for Monday type of thing.

So yeah, it was definitely a nonstop lifestyle of getting ready to go on the next deployment. But saying it on tape right here, you think, "Wow, that's really rough." But my oldest had started gymnastics. She's bouncing all over the house. And I pretty much flipped open the phone book and found the first sport that I could come up with to get her out of the house, to get rid of some energy. And Mission Viejo, California was Academy of Olympic Gymnastics. Got her in there to do somersaults and jump around and just get some—rid of energy. And I remember going to—being there for a lot of her practices and stuff. So I was able to do what I needed to do but yet still be there for the family.

Especially since my boss the colonel had let me do whatever I wanted to do. I worked to the standard of hey, let's train, get what we need to get done, and then go home. And that didn't sit well with some of the guys that traditionally some of the other platoon sergeants—like I actually have great relationships with everybody in the military except this one gunny-- my company gunny at the time. He didn't like the fact that we could do whatever we wanted.

But if we trained hard and I hiked my guys fifteen miles starting at midnight and we did all kinds of stuff, and after that fifteen-mile hike we did all kinds of gun

drills and disassembly assemblies, took some live fire shots on the range, finished hiking all the way home and back, and then did some field craft skills like a Kim's Game, which is Keep in Mind Sniper. So on mile ten you show them ten objects for sixty seconds and then when we're done with the hike they got to—they can't write anything down. They got to describe what those objects were by color, size, do a drawing of it. Just doing memory games and stuff with them. I've done all that stuff by the time these guys are even waking up to go to work.

So it didn't sit well sometimes with that guy when I'd be letting my guys go off at noon or something like that, but—

Berry: At this point in your career you're a staff sergeant?

La Sage: I was a staff sergeant, yes. And with a scout sniper platoon you are under the battalion commander. Anywhere else as a staff sergeant—well, as a platoon sergeant, my peer group, they're underneath a company commander, so a captain or whatever. So each company has a captain and a first sergeant and like four platoons with a lieutenant and a platoon sergeant in charge of a platoon. For me as a staff sergeant I'm a battalion asset that the colonel uses. So I answer to the colonel instead of the company commander type thing. So that rubbed some people the wrong way. But really I mean it's a maturity issue. But as long as you have good intent and all that stuff and you're not trying to rock the boat, everybody lets you do your own thing. And that's the number one reason why I took all my guys and moved them to Talega out of San Mateo. We're talking like five minutes down the road. But just so that the daily grind of things, there isn't somebody looking over your shoulder. And not so that we can be devious, but so that we can get things done instead of worrying about some of the trivial things.

So we stay up all night type of thing, we come in, our boots are dirty, they're not polished for Monday morning inspection, it's because I've slept on a hill all night, and all day next day we're doing a boots and utes run to the ocean, which is fifteen miles away.

So stuff like that, it's good to kinda segregate yourself for a while and get the guys spun up in training. But coming home too, the wife knew what I was doing and tried to support as best she can, and get the kids doing stuff and active and all that. And currently my daughter competes nationally with gymnastics, so that was like one of the best moves I think I did, was get her out of the house and bouncing around and stuff like that. But really I'm big on the community as well. So I like to—I have a lot of law enforcement friends or I used to surf and stuff like that. So I try and really spend my time decompressing that way. So all day or at work or whatever I may have not said one word to a group of guys that I'm working with because we're training each other, well, we can't really talk a lot of times when we're doing what we do as far as sniper work. You have to communicate nonverbally a lot of times. Hand-arm signals or just knowing what the other guy is doing.

And then you come home and you really have to be careful with not doing that at home as well. Like you need to open up and talk and communicate and intermingle and balance yourself into society as well, because otherwise if—I don't know. Some people, it might work fine. For me I wanted to be able to do both. I wanted to be highly competent, professional at work, but then also high five, some buddies down at T-Street while we're surfing and then go wine-tasting with some other buddies. I mean, just try and be a positive person and stuff, and injected into the community.

Berry: Did you have a place to live on the base with your family? Or how did that work?

La Sage: At this time I had—long ago I had an apartment out in San Clemente, which is Orange County. But once I got married I had lived on base housing. So it was really convenient where I lived at. It was on the north side of Camp Pendleton. It's the farthest street up; it was the last house type of thing. So my backyard was I got a California mountain. Not a Rocky mountain, but it was the ridgeline, nobody behind us. And it was about 3.2 miles to work down a firebreak and across a field that I could run or ride a bike or whatever to work.

And it was pretty convenient that way. But could also—I had a dog that I had got from that field. [laughs] And later found out it was a coydog, its coyote and like ridgeback and Lab or whatever. But it was pretty nice living the government provided, adequate quarters, I mean talking Orange County, California. And to have a house that overlooked the ocean. I was on the hill. So the ocean was, I don't know, less than a mile away or whatnot, down the bottom of the hill. And I mean it was like less than a half a mile away. But the country's biggest surf spot is right there at base minus North Shore in Hawaii. Huntington Beach is a good one, but literally at the junction of the north gate of base is San Onofre. And that's where you'll see all the surf competitions at.

So it was definitely nice living and very easy to do stuff out in town. And the kids loved it. So it was definitely a good—

Berry: They have a school system for your children on the base? Or did they go to regular civilian schools?

La Sage: You can send them out in town to civilian schools. But the base is a city. I mean really Camp Pendleton is a fully operating city from gas stations to grocery stores to schools. When I say schools, like their school was down the hill from the house that they could either ride their bike or walk to, and that's for us on the north end. Well, the other housing developments on base, some of them, I mean it takes about thirty-five minutes to drive from one end of base to the other, if not longer, about forty minutes. And huge base--

Well, each housing development has their own school. So the housing development down the road, Stuart Mesa is about halfway down base. They have their own school. So it's definitely self-sufficient as far as like you need a mechanic, you need all this stuff. I mean they're right there on base. They provide anything and everything that you could possibly want from the colleges will set up a counselor for you to sign up to take classes through their college or whatnot, for spouses, job opportunities, and I mean it's just really its own city, and it's pretty amazing to watch it operate.

We were able to really—I have a lot of friends in northern Orange County or whatever, law enforcement types. And so I would take the kids with them and really try and keep them to have a normal life. The typical military, you move every two to three years type of thing, bouncing around, which I don't have a degree in anything. But in my mind it kind of sets them up to think relationships are temporary. They're used to moving and all that stuff. So my goal was to really do whatever I could to keep them in that one spot for as long as I could.

So they really did spend from 2000 until 2006 I think it was, so six years in the one spot. And before that I did two years in North Carolina. But before that I was in California again. So moved away once and came right back type of thing as far as the kids go.

And I think that was really good for them. And like as of recently I've moved back to Wisconsin four miles away from my parents' house, which we'll get to. But so for them that's not like a new crazy move, that was oh, we're going to live close to family and stuff like that. So that was really important to me.

The pain of that was that I would have to keep deploying, or I would have to keep doing what I did. Which causes hardship and stuff like that. But I think your kids are highly resilient. At least from what I've seen my kids have to go through. The heart-ripping and wrenching feeling of when you have to walk away from them to go on deployment to them starting to understand, to send letters, and understand how to communicate and stuff like that, to getting excited about coming home, and then just starting the family over again type of thing by coming home.

But them being anchored, having the same friends year after year after year that understand what they go through, and teachers that know them and stuff, it's important stuff for me.

I grew up with the same friends throughout the years and same teachers and stuff like that, and I thought that would be best for them. They've changed school as they get older, and I ended up moving out into Rancho Santa Margarita, which is the middle of Orange County. So they changed schools or whatever. But with gymnastics their friends are all the same over the years and all that stuff.

Berry: Why don't we stop there?

[Tape 6]

Berry: We had talked last time, about your service with training snipers. And you also mentioned your family life some. Could you elaborate a little bit on that?

La Sage: Yes. With training or deployment, the family is definitely going to have to step up and be an initiative-based element on their own. They're definitely going to have to learn how to do things without you. And when you come home you try and integrate as best you can, coming off of like seventy-two hours of nonstop sleep-deprived chow-deprived, and this is just training. So you're three to four days or the whole week gone or a month gone or whatever it is. And so when you come home you definitely try to be at 100 percent and flip that switch. And it's quite a task, because you're also trying to prep for the next week going to the field or the next training evolution, which means cleaning gear, restitching gear, taking care of all your stuff, boots that have mud on them, cleaning them off, and all that stuff.

While doing that, playing catch, kickball, and spending as much time as you can with the kids. And I believe they say it ends up making you burn the candle from both ends at times. And the family is just like anything else. If that's all you know, then it's normal. So the kids, I look back at it. The kids have really gone through so much that is amazing that a normal kid wouldn't go through. A normal kid goes to soccer or maybe goes camping or something like that. And these kids have barbecues with a bunch of guys and then a few months later oh, these two guys have passed away, this guy has lost his leg, or helping Dad pack his wounds, or it's just training, and Dad is gone all the time, and now he's cleaning guns in the living room or whatever the deal is type of thing.

And that's normal to them. "Oh, Dad, okay, I'll see you next week." They miss you just like a normal kid though. There's tears from both ends, from ours and theirs when we leave and all that stuff. But they become adjusted to it the best that they can. I don't know how. Deployments are the worst. But even in training just going away for—instead of 9:00 to 5:00 and coming home every day and eating dinner, usually on a slow week you're showing up to work on Monday morning 5:30 in the morning, running and training and cleaning weapons and classes of prepping to either go to the field that day or that night type of thing, and you don't come back until Friday morning to clean guns, turn them, in, and then you get your weekend off. That's the standard flow week. So they're used to not seeing you for five days or so at a time.

But they somehow become accustomed to it. And there's choices. And that's not how it always was for me in these couple different jobs. Where I'm an instructor role, it's more of a schedule, but as far as like training snipers, you're gone all week. You have to train them that way because that's how they're going to

operate. And definitely three days at a time on mission, come back, doing debriefs, and you cut and paste that scenario into training, and it's showing up on Monday and leaving first thing Tuesday morning, coming back Friday morning. So the wife has to understand.

Nobody has to like it, but you have to know what you're signing up for. And all the cards have to be on the table and everybody's got to have to support each other. So like when I come home, tired or not, I have to know that I have laundry to do and dishes to do to help out her because she's been doing them all week. And if she helps scrub a boot or something like that, or helps me bring in gear, because she's been doing the other stuff all week, well, that's helping each other out. So it's definitely a learning environment, especially for a young couple.

Berry: Early in your career in the Marine Corps you chose a certain kind of career path in the Marine Corps based on your family situation. Could you talk about that just a little bit?

La Sage: Yeah. My thoughts were I like—I grew up in a couple schools where I knew all the kids and I still know those kids now, those adults now. And I like that stability or that anchor instead of bouncing around. Now I love to travel, so I love to see the world as well. The thing I didn't want for the kids was to be the typical military kid where they don't grow up with any relationships. They just know that oh, in a couple years I'm just going to leave. Change schools, change states, I don't have to invest into anything; I don't have to invest into people or anything like that. So I really wanted them to grow up with the same neighbors or same kids.

And my kids are in gymnastics, so they go to the same club for years upon years. And the penalty for that would be for me to always deploy. I'd always be in Camp Pendleton. As an infantry marine, that means I'm always in a battalion. And the battalion is always doing workups training to deploy or deploying. So there's some out there that find their way to evade deployments or just not deploy but also those guys don't get promoted the same or they don't—you're not looked at on promotion boards the same. If you're missing deployments it used to be as long as you did your professional military education course for the next grade, your next promotion, if you'd done that course, then you qualify really to get promoted, you go in front of a board. Well, now the boards in the last decade with deployments, really over a decade, 2001 and on, they look more heavily on okay, he hasn't done his professional military education, why is that, oh, look he's been back to back deploying and everything. So he's out there running and gunning while this guy over here is sitting at home. And sure, he took like a two-month course on base, seeing his kids and wife every night. So for promotion, it looks better for the family, staying in one place. I lived in one house for six years, and I don't know what the average is for a civilian. But for a young couple at the time in our twenties or whatever, six years in one house, it was—yeah, six, seven years

in one house. Same neighbors, other than them bouncing around too. But same school and kids going to the same gymnastics and church and everything.

So I was pretty happy with that because even to this day they're still friends with all those people in California now and we're in Wisconsin. My kid is thirteen and she's been doing gymnastics for almost ten years now. And she has the same friends for ten years in gymnastics. And she's back here in Wisconsin going through her school and then so she has two sets of friends. Instead of a million people that she barely knows from all these other little states or bases that we're at, they have friends that they had in California and they have friends that they have here.

So thank goodness for social media that they're able to stay in contact with them all and stuff like that. Makes things a little easier too. Especially with us training as well. It's easier for me to take a minute out and oh, it's 20:30, it's 8:30 at night, I can take five minutes out if I have service somewhere. As a leader it's a little easier for me to try and make a quick five-minute phone call or something like that while training.

And I try and do it as much as humanly possible and let the guys do it as well, because when we deploy it's quite the opposite. The United States really, the military has come full speed with networking for your kids and family and getting on-screen visual chat, basically like Skype or anything else, set up on a secured line so that you can talk to your family through the chaplain's office or something like that. You go in there and be able to talk, so that's what everybody else is doing. Well, for us that are operating and living on an outpost, which is you're not on a base, you're not where the chow hall is, they bring you food and drop it off and nobody stays there. So your assets, logistics, and all that stuff, all the fluffy stuff, we don't have that when we're over there. And everybody tries to paint their own picture. But when you got a guy who's dropping off some quick supplies in a truck, who drops them off for the rest of the bases in an area, and he's like, "You guys, I've seen every camp in this country and you guys are honestly living in the worst arena."

So knowing that, when we're stateside training, we do as much as possible. When you see a special operations group, you'll notice that like when we go and travel we'll try and set it up to where our families are getting a hotel on a weekend or something and we'll try and do a visit there or something like that, and just try and include them as much as possible, because we know that we don't get to see them as much as everybody else. So it's tough.

Berry: Are we at the point where we can talk to you about your second trip to Iraq?

La Sage: Yeah. I think so. [laughs] That one came pretty fast, but yeah, that whole workup, did a whole regimental workup. I was so happy to be doing that, because that really hasn't been done for a long time. But we'd be getting intel reports from the

unit that's in the area of operation that we were going to deploy to. So 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines was currently in Anbar Province in Ar Ramadi, Iraq. And Ramadi, Iraq was the most dangerous city in the world, deemed by the press. So when the Battle of Fallujah was going on, it's because no press would want to go to Ramadi. And that was a big tactical operation as far as that goes, a big push from us in Ramadi to push everybody to Fallujah so that they could fight everybody in Fallujah.

But nobody wanted to go to Ramadi. And most of the news came from Al Jazeera TV and stuff like that. Basically enemy news on what they have done to us. And you'd get—there were some embedded reporters. But yeah, it was a tough place and we knew it. So as we were training, I was getting intel reports. I had some acquaintances that were in 2/4 that's currently in Ramadi. And they took it hard. Lots of killed in action, lots of wounded, it was a tough deployment for them, and it was their first deployment too. So we were trying to weigh that into perspective in 2004 in the fall when we went over there, so six months prior to that was when 2/4 was over there. So in 2003 during the push and the invasion, 2/4 actually did back-to-back deployments.

Berry: Please explain what 2/4 is for the listener.

La Sage: Second Battalion, 4th Marines, sorry, so 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines did back-to-back deployments in Okinawa, Japan. So they never went to Iraq for the first big push or wave or invasion. So their introduction to the Middle East was the worst city in the world. So it was really tough on them.

Well, we're getting intel reports about the urban fighting. So we did a lot of adjusting to our training plans to try and get up to speed for that. So when we went into country, flew right into what was called Junction City, which is a little liaison camp to push out to either Fallujah or Ramadi or anything of the sort. It was a staging area, an Army base.

Berry: What rank were you at this time?

La Sage: I was a staff sergeant.

Berry: You were an E-6.

La Sage: I was an E-6 at the time. And the scout sniper platoon, we had about twenty-two guys or so. And we would break it down to four guys per Rifle Company. So you had Fox, Echo, and Gulf Company. Each company would get four snipers, four of those guys attached to them. And then you have Headquarters Company as well. They would get a section. So you start stacking that up and you have like a little—then we would have our own little headquarters for radio watches and mission planning and stuff like that.

But ultimately we all go over there together. And knowing that traditionally everything's traditional, right? Until you get into every day in these combat situations everything is nontraditional. So understanding that, I knew that we wouldn't just break down our four guys into these companies and let them go. They're not going to work in a city with just four guys on their own. So we did a lot of talking with the colonel about staying together. So when we got into country there was—on the east side—I'm sorry. As I was. On the west side of Ramadi, on the far west side, there was a place called Blue Diamond. And it was a cordoned off facility, full-on camp. And that's where 1st Marine Division was. So it was the full headquarters for 1st Marine Division over there. Across the river was Hurricane Point, and that was a palace. So if you can picture a palace, that's where our battalion had set up their operations out of.

So those two are neighbors to each other on the far west side. The largest city, Ramadi, all the way on the other side of it was what we called a Combat Outpost. And Combat Outpost was a hacienda style wall in the city on the outskirts on the far east side of the city, outskirts by a block. And it had approximately six or seven built-up areas, like buildings, one of which was like a drive-through building that we could put our vehicles in. One was—you're talking tin roofs and stuff like that. So one was a chow hall. And then we had a couple two-story buildings and that's where we would put the marines in.

So we also had a post called Snake Pit. Snake Pit is on the west side of Ramadi pretty much just outside of where our battalion headquarters was. So being close to battalion headquarters and close to massive support, we put four guys out there. It's a small camp outside of the battalion. So they were still able to work independently and stuff like that and help an infantry company that was holding that post. So there was an infantry company shy of 200 guys, 150 guys or whatever, running patrols and working operations out of that Snake Pit.

We had two infantry companies at that Combat Outpost crammed in there. And they were working—it was more like being embedded in the actual city from where we were at. And that's why they kept that Combat Outpost. And then I would have about sixteen—I think I had about sixteen, seventeen snipers with me at that Combat Outpost.

So we could work on our own, work independently, augment the rifle company. We were fully functional on our own out there. We didn't need the assistance of the battalion on the other side of town.

Combat Outpost has been given up by the Army. Not to throw anybody under the table, but the hacienda style walls has been overcome by the enemy several different occasions. It happened to 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines as well where twenty to fifty guys come charging throwing grenades over this wall and it's a full-on Civil War type of assault onto this compound because really it's hard to say it's a compound. It's just one of their perimeter walls. And you try and set up like a

little serpentine transition area for any vehicles. But supplies are limited and stuff. So it was known that the enemy had attacked this place and had taken the place over on occasion.

And then when the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines came in, they flushed them out and took it back over and worked out of it. But they definitely had their attacks on the place, face-to-face attacks, like trying to climb over the walls.

Well, so when we lived there, you slept with your pistol, it was a definitely unsecured area. You drive to the other side of town to where battalion is, and you unload your weapon and you walk around with an empty weapon around their base. So you can see the two different mentalities and the two different scenarios.

The one had full-on twenty-foot walls and compounds and machine guns and bunkers and all that stuff on the one side of town. And then for us it was you might as well have been in the jungle with no walls. It was definitely worried about people sneaking over the walls at night and all that stuff. So we definitely had a different lifestyle at the Outpost.

At the Outpost the first night that I was there my snipers were still all at Junction City. And it was myself and our platoon commander, Aaron Fielder. And we had - I brought two others with me. Moved over to the Combat Outpost where 2/4 was still at and their snipers. Their sniper platoon was-- they were coming off of almost being dismantled. The whole company out there was almost dismantled. It was a bad situation and as far as history goes there's a lot to be learned there as far as tactical choices and how to employ the unit and stuff like that, because they definitely had a hard go of it. They would take infantry marines and attach them to like one scout sniper, and then have them go off that way. So you have two different groups of people that don't work together necessarily going out.

And just to hit on one of their stories, right before we got there, it was a Marine Corps-wide story to where it really taught everybody not to let your guard down. So they were in a known post, so a place that they would go to every day that they had a man, had sandbags and stuff like that. On the bottom level you had Iraqis working. So there was a place called the Government Center that had Iraqis working in and out of that we had a post up above. Well, this was a post like that where they chose to only have four guys in this post. And they would just observe the highway, Route Michigan, which is the road that travels east to west in Iraq that connects to Baghdad. It was a logistical route, and a key mission was to keep eyes on that to keep it open so trucks can go back and forth.

Well, every day they would have Iraqis from downstairs come upstairs and knock on their door and offer them water. A platter, and have some sustenance and water of some sort, bread or something. And that would go on and on and on day after day, week to week. Well, the one time they went to go answer the door and the person with the tray got pushed aside, and an individual started shooting the

person, the marine that answered the door. And unfortunately, the other guys were not as tactical as they should be. And the investigation came out saying that—so the one was awake, the other three were basically sleeping when the enemy came in and killed them.

And talking to Sergeant Major Booker, who was the battalion sergeant major at the time, who was also a scout sniper, so him and I did an in-depth debrief when I got into country. And he said it wasn't war, it wasn't KIAs and stuff, killed in actions. It was more like an inner city crime scene, and it was quite terrible.

So end of story of that is the enemy took a sniper rifle from that position. So now for us going into country we know the enemy has one of our own sniper rifles and they took radios as well. They had our com assets, which are encrypted, but if you don't keep up to speed on the radio and you don't keep the fill—what's called a fill in the radio—you're going to lose your fill, which means you can no longer talk to other radios.

So they knew once the battery ran out and after a couple days that that radio would be out of play. That's what we would assume, that's what you'd think. But regardless, having an encrypted radio, you'd be able to hear and translate every mission, everything that's going on. So a radio, just like police, your biggest weapon is the radio calling for support, same with us. But it also could be your worst adversary too if the enemy got it.

Berry: Could you tell us about the nature of the sniper rifle you were equipped with at this time?

La Sage: At the time, right now they're on their fifth generation of it. But we had just done a sweep of all our sniper rifles in 2004. And we used to shoot an M40A1 rifle, which is a Remington 700 with a Match Grade trigger and stock and stuff like that. So, floated barrel-- If you looked at a hunting rifle off of the shelf at a hunting store you could almost see what a sniper rifle looked like, a standard rifle.

In 2004 in spring or so—even before that, right around the turn of the year, we had got a turnover of A3s, which is just a third generation of the rifle. And now it's more squared off, it looks more boxy and the stock for where you put your face on has an elevated platform that you can raise and lower so that your eye relief to the scope is matched up to your height of your face and stuff like that.

So there was a bunch of technology changes and just great invested money on our end. As far as big picture stuff, who knows? Money flowing everywhere. But for us to actually see upgrades in gear that hasn't been upgraded since Vietnam was just tremendous. So having new rifles, having different types of rifles too, like trying to—MCCDC is an acronym. It's a unit out at Quantico that tests things and does things. And so they would incorporate different weapons into country and test them and see how they work.

So when I got into country I was shooting an SR-25 made by Knight's Armament. It looks like an M16. It's black. It's a semiautomatic rifle. It looks just like an M16 for the most part. But it has a heavy barrel. It shoots 7.62 Match Grade NATO rounds which is equivalent to .308 in the civilian world, which is a great—is a good hunting round.

So they tried different things and started using suppressors as well. The Knight's Armament that I was shooting, the SR-25, was suppressed. I had talked to some Army folks, ODA, and some other bearded fellows out there, and they were shooting 77-grain 5.56 rounds. So the 5.56 is what we use for our M16s and the first time I was shot is because the round wasn't—didn't have enough impact on the individual to cause mass trauma, so it's known to do that. The M16 is known to go so fast that it doesn't do the traumatic injury that we would like it to do.

Well, a lot of special operations groups use a 77-grain 5.56. So we ended up getting a dump of that. So when I first got to Ramadi, got some 77-grain 5.56, 2/4 gave me their rifle, their SR-25, and wanted me to continue on.

Berry: 77-grain bullet is quite a bit heavier than normal.

La Sage: It was almost equivalent to shooting an AK-47 round. When we would shoot that 77-grain you'd see—not to be graphic, but chunks on a wall. Like if we were shooting at a window or whatever, and you shot your regular 5.56 round, it's a .22 round, it's a high velocity .22 round, like a kid's gun.

Well, you shoot this 77-grain, and it's going to take chunks of brick off and stuff like that. It definitely is more like shooting—as far as pistol goes—a .45 compared to a nine-mil. But yeah, so in country, fully in country now, the guys are staged waiting to come into their area of operation, their AO. And me in leaders' recon we call it, me and my platoon commander and two others, McKenzie and I can't quite remember who the other one was, but went in advance party into fifteen, twenty minutes down the road, into Ramadi, and started doing the RIP, the relief in place, with 2/4. The first thing I got was the debrief from Sergeant Major Booker about what happened with losing the sniper rifle. And I was like, "Okay." So got that full debrief. And that was over on the battalion side of town. He goes, "Okay, they planned up a whole mission," so if you think about just driving across town to where the Combat Outpost was, it was a full-on tactical mission planning just to drive down a straight road. And that's how dangerous it was.

So just to get us inserted into that Outpost took like a couple days of us planning. And then finally they get us inserted into the Outpost. And yeah, first IED goes off in transit. And you get to really see what you're going to have to deal with. And you see how they have dealt with it. And once we got to the Outpost the first thing I noticed is there was nobody outside. So coming from battalion, where you

had people doing physical training, PTing, like you would on a military base anywhere else, where early in the morning you see a bunch of group of guys running a trail or running around the perimeter of a camp or whatever, that's what was going on over on the west side.

And then at the Outpost when you pulled in you had a bunker—or you had a building right by the access point for vehicles and that guy came out and you saw the machine gunners aiming everywhere but on their post. Other than that, you saw nobody walking outside of a building. You saw no personnel. And so when we pulled in, they drove the vehicles right into a building where they kept them underneath a canopy, underneath a hard-shelled building for security reasons, safety. So with nobody walking outside, we didn't know where to go, and they told us that we would have to wait until really dark in order to go see everybody. We don't want to be walking around out in the open. So it was quite eye—

[break in recording][00:31:19]

Berry: Tim, we're talking about kinda replacing the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines. Could you go on with that?

La Sage: So that was an eye-opening experience not seeing anybody walking around, and really understanding that on the other side of camp they lived differently. So pulled into the compound. And in that little hangar bay I guess you'd say you could see little doors on the side or whatever inside the overhang.

So it's an open front and back building or whatever. But underneath that hard-nosed canopy, you had offices. So they had their little company spaces in there. So we got out of the vehicles, went in there. And you saw everybody packed in there. And the marines had their own little houses in that compound. And you're talking rough estimate, if you could picture a small grade school type of size with a yard and everything like that, it wasn't a big place at all.

And it had maybe like five or six buildings in there, whatnot. Well, you go in there, and they have like a command center set up, an operations center, where they plan their routes and their missions and their communications back to battalion. And got to meet the platoon sergeant for their scout sniper platoon and their platoon commander. And they said, "Okay, we'll go over and meet the guys at their building," and stuff like that.

Well, I remember it was still daytime. We were supposed to wait till dark but they were like, "No, we'll go over there." And I remember walking with the platoon sergeant. And the platoon sergeant was—no judge, you know, sitting here. But he was so not happy about having to walk over to this next building over. And you're talking like twenty yards over to this other building. To a point where there was running involved, zigzagging, and all that stuff.

So it was like who am I, so I will do as I say, c'est la vie, so I'm running and zigzagging too. And we get over there. And I'm like, "So is that standard?" And he's like, "Only unless you want to become somebody's target." I'm like, "Okay, noted."

We get in there. And he introduces me to the chief scout, and we talked for a little bit. So all sniper platoons will have the platoon sergeant, a platoon commander, but then you'll have a chief scout, a guy who really does a lot of the training. He takes care of the guys while I'm off prepping missions or doing whatever.

Well, meet the chief scout and some of the guys, and we're all talking about stuff. And the platoon sergeant and the platoon commander leave, and the platoon commander is talking to my platoon commander. And I sat in there with the platoon and really wanted to hear what's going on with the platoon without their leadership there. So you get the clear concise version of what's going on.

And they're like—these guys were pretty bold. They're like, "Well, you want to see what's going on, let's go out on patrol tonight." I was like, "Exactly. Let's go do a transition patrol. Like a couple of your guys and I got two guys. We'll go out."

It's like okay. And he's like, "Yeah, just give me the information for your guys." So Dustin McKenzie and myself give him our information, blood types and last four. Our kill card basically is what we call it, so if something happens to me a guy can pull out this kill card and read my kill card number and instead of saying, "Hey, La Sage is hit," and then people psychologically are like, "Holy crap, La Sage is hit," you just read off this number, and then the guys at the com shop, the operations center, has a roster of these numbers and then goes from there.

But so anyway we give him that information and we get prepped for the night, "Hey, what are we doing? What's the route?" And all that stuff. So they literally—I'm just taking notes and mental notes the whole time on how they're doing stuff.

And these two guys pretty much just kind of high five their way out of the compound, and two of them, two of us, so only four of us going out into the city. It was like, "Wow, okay, this is how we're going to do it."

And to east of Ramadi is a huge graveyard that you can see from Google Earth or anything else that you can zoom in on. And it was a body dump, a mass graveyard, where criminals or whoever would dump bodies, as well as locals would bury people and stuff.

And we would at times insert there because it held a bit of power to them, like they were fearful of it because that's where a lot of mujahideen or fedayeen would be at to dump and hide bodies or to do whatever.

So on the east side of Ramadi we would go in there and by foot you'd walk in there and what ends up being circling back into town that way from the back side. So this thing is about—the best I can do is about a kilometer by a kilometer. So a whole grid square on a map. The thing is huge—if not more. So it'd probably be a lot more than that. It's actually a couple kilometers. So we'd J-hook around that and then circle back into the city from the outskirts, basically from behind the city there, instead of straight down the road where our camp was.

And that patrol was definitely an eye-opener. The four of us, one of which was their corpsman. You wouldn't leave the wire without a corpsman. So one of their snipers, a corpsman, and then me and my guy, walking in through the graveyard and then into some building areas. And then patrolling back. And then their com goes down and we can't—at the end of the patrol, which is semiuneventful, other than just being highly aware that you're out of place out there, you're in a city that they know the ins and outs of, and you're trying to be sneaky in their city. So it's definitely an eye-opening experience. But so their radio goes down. And we sit out for the next I'd say couple hours outside of our own gates not being able to get in, because if we would have got up and came in, more than likely the guys at the gates would have shot us, not being able to see who we were, because nobody'll come in and out of friendly lines without communication.

Well, sat there, it was almost to the point where it was sunrise. Or BMNT, beginning of morning nautical twilight, where it starts to get light. And a convoy was coming in and we had to—we did a linkup with them on the road with IR chem light, and then got guided in with them back into the Outpost.

I was taking mental notes. I was just like, "Okay," this was never going to happen to us, we're never going to be outside the wire without anything less than two radios. Living by everything that we trained. And what we train is two is one, one is none. So whether you're talking about radios, guns, food, whatever it is. If you have two of something, and one goes down, at least you still have one left. And if you only bring one of something when that goes down it means you're out. So that was just an eye-opening patrol, that first one.

Berry: Did you have any access at this time to night vision equipment?

La Sage: Absolutely. Everybody had night vision at this point. And that was even in 2003, we had night vision. And that was really when they transitioned from—we used to be seven bravos, which is two binoculars, two eyepieces that transition into one, that's a seven bravo. That's what a lot of people had. They transitioned into a fourteen, so AN/PVS-14 is the night optic that is just the monocular, just one eye, can hook onto your helmet and you can just turn it down and put it over your one eye so you can—if you get used to it you can look at everything else normally or naturally with one eye and then use your night vision with the other eye and stuff like that. So or it can just fit in your pocket. This is about the size of a fist, your

hand, that you can just put in a pocket and pick it up and use it and then put it back. It's easily used.

The biggest asset that we had is on our sniper rifles we were able to use night vision, which wasn't always the case a long long time ago. They did have PVS-10s. They had Simrads, and those are all companies and optics that provided night vision for a sniper rifle. So we were able to use those as well as I had a UNS that was set up for the Leupold scope that I was using. UNS is Universal Night Sight. And I really liked it because it was just a clamp-on onto the rail system. So a weapon now has instead of handguards that you hold on to, it has these like Legos. Picture Legos. And it has all these tracks that you can just clamp objects onto, a flashlight, a handle, a scope. You can clamp stuff onto it. Well, this night sight was able just to slip on the front of my scope and clamp down. And that was just about a three-inch-by-three-inch square. It wasn't huge and big and bulky. But I would be able to engage at night and see at night, which was a tremendous asset for the rifle.

Working at night, that first night, we definitely had some things to go over as platoon. So we all linked up, got them all into Ramadi, and we had our own little sit-down and meeting about "Hey, let's learn from everybody's mistakes." And like I said, nobody's judging other units on how they've done things, but let's just learn from each other's mistakes. So we're never going to do this or we're always going to do what they did here or this, that, and the other.

Had our final meeting and then dropped our guys off into Snake Pit on the west side. And those guys worked a great deal on their own without my assistance. Or we'd do joint operations to where I was doing so much on the one side that allowed them to move a lot more freely on the west side. But ultimately they independently worked on their own over there, to a point where one of the marines got a Bronze Star for his actions, and I wasn't even privy to what was going on over there. They had their own little engagements and stuff.

On our side we lived in a little building that on one hatch a dog handler lived there, some HET guys, some Human Exploitation Teams, lived there, and that's basically your interrogators. And then our snipers lived through another hatch of this building. But inside the building it was all ceramic tile, all the way up the ceiling, had drains in the floor, and an anchor point in the ceiling for a hook. And that was the building that they used to use for torture and bringing folks over to and getting the information that you wanted out of them.

Whenever we brought anybody into the compound they wanted nothing to do with that building. Take me anywhere else type of thing. And when we would bring them over to our building and stage them outside of that building, because we would do a lot of the tactical questioning, there was a generator room next to where we lived at, in the same building. Just one of the doors was for generators or lights up front because we were right at the front gate area of our Combat

Outpost. The folks that we brought up there just—you could tell instantly that they knew what that building was and they wanted nothing to do with it. And which really opened our eyes too of where we're at and what we're doing.

Ramadi in itself, there wasn't a day that went where we didn't hear IEDs going off. Not a day without RPGs sailing overhead. Since we had just an open compound, they would try and attack us a lot. It could be very generalized attack to where back behind us there was a farm field that from a distance they could just launch mortars into the position. The chow hall, they would try and time it to when we were all eating. The chow hall had holes through the ceiling where mortars would come dropping in. They dialed in so good to where they hit our front door of our building.

And we had some gear staged outside, spray paint for our rifles and gear and stuff, and they blew that up. Another time they actually injured our corpsman and he had to be medevaced out of country. So he took a through and through in the arm and if it was anyone else he would have lost his arm, but he was a huge man, so he just—he was a big guy, big strong guy, so he was able to save his arm. But yeah, they would launch RPGs and stuff. But they had it dialed in so good that they weren't just hitting buildings, they were hitting doors or trying to aim for windows. Or they would wait till you were eating and lob it to where they would get it through the roof of the chow hall or anything like that.

So telling the guys to stay in their buildings, telling the guys to not be out in the open. If you are out in the open, you're moving with a purpose. And whatever you feel comfortable with. I mean cool kids can die too. So if you're too cool to run, well, good luck to you. But if you want to zigzag around and create a harder target, hard targeting is what we call it, then you're just increasing your chances of survivability.

So did a lot of stuff over the radio. Back in Camp Pendleton or whatever it's like "Hey, bring me," platoon sergeant is "Hey, we're out of a meeting, hey, come over here, or bring me two guys." At Outpost it was more like "Hey, let's—everybody get on their radios. Even though we're twenty yards away from each other, everybody get on their radios and we'll have a meeting that way" type of thing.

And you become more comfortable with your own guys on post. And you understand that there was a transition where the enemy didn't have so much opportunity to be offensive to where it felt more comfortable to be outside. But that's not to say that throughout the week you'd have impacts via mortar in that small little area. And the biggest thing that we'd always say is "Please God, don't let me die on the crapper." We had these port-a-johns if you will. They weren't port-a-johns, but they were worse than that. But you had those and you're just like "Ugh." And there's many a times where impacts start hitting and all you do is you make a scramble for your building the best that you can. Yeah, they definitely—

every day all day type of stuff. And it got to be a point where about 4:00 in the morning or whatnot, when morning prayer would go off, about ten minutes after morning prayer would end, you wouldn't be outside. You're like, "Oh, okay, that sounds like the end of prayer. Make sure that you're inside and away from the chow hall." And about ten minutes after morning prayer then your impacts would come in, about ten minutes or so, whatever, or randomly. And then you knew that you could, okay, scramble about and work after that.

Berry: Was there any attempt made to harden the buildings? Put sandbags on the roof and so forth? To help with the mortar rounds?

La Sage: The structure wasn't built for that. Like to take that weight. But regardless, there was no ability to get up on the roof like that. There was no logistical piece to assist with that. Now we had about three—I think three buildings. And when I say buildings, they would be like a very small small house. One-bedroom. I don't know, one- or two-bedroom house type of thing. Now gut out all the walls, make concrete, and no furniture in it, and that's what the marines lived in. So it was basically just like empty small houses, I don't know, 1,000-square-foot house or whatever. And that's where these platoons would stay at.

So they would harden their areas the best they could by put—they could get on their roofs and sandbag stuff and whatever. And we ended up getting ballistic blankets that we'd put at our doors. Basically a blanket that could protect from shrapnel and stuff or fragmentation.

So we would get some stuff like that. But as far as like the chow hall, the place where we kept the vehicles, which was also our company office area, stuff like that wasn't able to be hardened at all. And eventually has a bunch of holes through the ceiling and all that stuff as well.

Yeah, that Outpost, as much of a Frankenstein disaster as it was, it was awesome too, because we were able to slip in and out of it. Vice on the other side of town with all kinds of streetlights and everything and headquarters building, where you're always being watched. And they never left their area without somebody watching. For us, it was easy enough for us to slip out either—I really tried to stay away from vehicles at all costs. But sometimes we'd go with a group of infantry guys that are going to go on a post. And we'd roll out with them and then ditch the vehicles and get on feet from there while they left to go to their post. But it was very easy to work out of that area.

Berry: And tell us how the snipers on a typical mission would support the infantry. Would you go out and set up at a high point overlooking the area that they were going to operate in? How would that work?

La Sage: Couple things happened right off the bat. You have a couple different missions going on. Either one, the infantry is going to do a direct hit on a house or houses

looking for a specific bad guy, or they're going to do a sweep through a whole village, through a whole area.

So it depends on what they're doing. But for us we really supported them in our own way, and that was after the first week of being there. We had lost a company commander. He was killed. And unfortunately the company commander—my company commander, we were attached to a weapons company, the whole sniper platoon. The company commander got into country and turned in his commission and went home. He was like, "There is no way I can do this," and went home. So that individual, Captain Johnson, he left. Captain Rapicault came in—or Major Rapicault came in and took over the company and was killed like a week later in an IED blast. And I'll always mess it up, I don't know, ABC, CNN, one of the news crews was just doing interviews with him, and then the next day he was killed. And they put it in the news interview. It was amazing that they chose him to be like a documentary kind of guy and set it all up, and was going through it all with them, and for a week on patrols and missions, and boom, he was killed.

So after that happened I told our battalion commander—great man, Colonel Newman, I was like, "Hey, if you want to stop the IEDs we can't just sit on a defensive post watching the street. Let me operate, let me get out into the city, and work from behind the enemy." So if marines are standing tall—picture an embassy. You got marines at the gate of an embassy. The bad guys can just peek around a building two buildings away from it or whatever, shoot at them, and then turn back away from them and hide behind that building and never be seen. Because the marine can't leave his post. He's stuck at that post.

I was like, "For us, let us work to where we can get behind the enemy, pick our own houses, pick our own buildings, and support these outposts, or these OPs, these observation posts." So they would have about two or three observation posts along this Route Michigan just to keep eyes on that road so that logistics trucks, fuel trucks, and everything else can drive the best they can without getting IEDed.

And he signed off on it. And from that point on, we would support the marines getting to their OPs, because they would have to go into these OPs every day, either via foot, on patrol, or more times than not via vehicles, getting dropped off there.

And they would get shot at. Or in transition of marines jumping out and running into the hotel—it'd be like a hotel that they would be in for a day or two. And then as the other ones would jump out and get on the trucks and drive away, the enemy would just peek around buildings; shoot at them, and whatnot. And they would have pretty much free rein at shooting at them. Because for us it's hard to see when you're looking at about fifty buildings, but yet a thousand windows, and it's just impossible.

So for us the big transition was week two. We would work out in missions to where I can't really see the OP but I know I'm about five blocks away from the OP in direction of it. So it's looking at me type of thing. And what ended up happening is every day all day we would get taxis or cars or people walking up and having big meetings or conjugating behind these buildings, talking about—and with their arms gesturing okay, you go left, or yeah, okay, and they're just doing their thing. And sure enough, a car pulls up, they open up the trunk, pulls out RPG, he takes out rocket, they're putting a rocket together, and then we shoot them. Okay, they are so comfortable. Because I'm only in week two. But for seven months prior to that they've been doing that to 2/4. They've been doing the same things to the unit before us, and it's been working flawlessly. And now all of a sudden they start getting shot every single day all day from behind buildings where the observation post can't see them. So that really changed things tremendously.

Berry: What sort of rules of engagement were you operating under?

La Sage: You had a [laughs] God bless Colonel Newman because he gave us a free rein to make decisions and then report, instead of report and ask permission. There was no "Okay, you have the green light and engage." It was I have a list of threats and if the person meets this requirement of threat I can engage and then I can call in and report. Because when a guy turkey-peeks, when he peeks around a building and you have about two seconds to engage, and then he disappears again, if you had to wait to call on a radio, get a radio operator to respond to you, and then get a leadership panel to decide that for you, whether you can engage, and then give you permission, and then you engage, well, it's too late. Too late in 99 percent of the scenarios.

But he allowed us to operate, gave us a tree of priorities. Any IED makers, anybody that we see making an IED, anybody with an RPG, and then anybody with small arms type of thing walking the streets, because they weren't allowed to walk the streets with AK-47s and stuff like that. If you saw anybody digging holes in the road and stuff like that, observe them, and then once they—if they drop something in the hole, you need to make your best decision.

That was the thing is he allowed us to make a decision on whether we thought that was something. Why is there an individual digging up a road at an intersection, which is a choke point? So you're going to get multiple vehicles crossing there instead of somewhere else. He's digging up the road. And he drops his backpack in the road. Well, that person is now laying on his backpack. We engage that person.

And that happened just continuously. And it was to a point where we'd come back and you would have to tell each other to maintain your threat assessment, because we go out there—we call it the pucker factor. I mean definitely you know you're small man on the totem pole. But you had such an upper hand, it was

remarkable, but you knew that the second you leave your guard down in any which way, that it was going to be taken advantage of fully.

So there was a book that was written about this, Ramadi, and our platoon. And in the book the author asked me, “What was your best shot?” He was very impressed at the Canadians and Australians and some of the guys that made like the over-2,000-yard shot. Tremendous distance. And I’m like, “Yeah, that’s wonderful, that’s a great shot. Mostly you need breath control, relaxation, and natural point of aim. And you engage your target. And you got to know how to wind call and everything. I mean you definitely need to be a marksman.” And he was, “Well, what’s,” he kind of—it wasn’t insulting by any means. But on the back end it was kind of like oh yeah, so what was your best shot kind of like I didn’t have something like that or whatever.

And I was like, “Oh, my best shot was about fifteen yards.” And the guy is like—kind of caught him off guard. I’m like, “Yeah, fifteen yards.” Because at fifteen yards there’s no echo displacement. I can’t displace my echo from my rifle. So if I shoot symmetrically at a square building in front of me, it’s going to bounce back both directions and then triangulate back to my location.

But I can change that up. I can play games with that and shoot from the side of my building so that the echo dissipates to the right, everybody looks right when I shoot, and stuff like that. It is like a plane or a jet when it goes by. You’re usually not looking at it, you’re looking at where the sound comes, the plane is already gone.

But it was just freedom to operate through him was just tremendous. And so at fifteen yards, a best shot, you better have all your ducks in a row to getting out of that building and detonating everything immediately, because they’re coming for you. You better have a good E&E plan, escape and evasion plan, because they’re coming.

Ramadi in general was the Wild Wild West. And if you could think outside the box, then you were able to survive. If all you knew was I need to sit here on this post and try and stay awake, well, then you were going to get shot at and not know where it’s coming from.

And at times we would go in with the infantry guys into their hotel and help them observe from that building. And we would use it for two reasons. One, to help them, and then two, so that we could see what the enemy sees, or basically see what we should be looking at. Basically what the post can’t see, so what these marines cannot see from their position. And then basically on a map looking at where I can go to where I think the enemy would be able to see those positions, and just doing some backplanning from there and picking out some houses that we would—I guess you’d translate it to break into later. It was straight up climb in the second story windows, break into them, and come across families, or come

across an abandoned building. And then work out of that building for a day or two. It was definitely a unique experience.

Berry: OK, why don't we stop there? And we'll start another tape.

[end of interview]