

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

BRIAN MARTENS

Aircraft armament specialist, U.S. Air Force, Desert Storm
Firefighter, Wisconsin Air National Guard, Operation Enduring Freedom & Iraq War

2012

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Martens, Brian. Oral History Interview, 2012.

Approximate length: 1 hour 55 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

Brian Martens discusses his three tours of duty, including deploying to Saudi Arabia as an aircraft armament specialist in the U.S. Air Force, Bagram Airfield (Afghanistan) in 2002 and Balad Air Base (Iraq) in 2004 as a firefighter with the Wisconsin Air National Guard. He comments on why he enlisted in the military and how his family felt about it. Martens outlines his basic training at Lackland Air Force Base (Texas) and advanced individual training at Lowry Air Force Base (Colorado). He describes being stationed in Bitburg (Germany) and deploying to Saudi Arabia, including preparations for chemical warfare. He outlines serving at Nellis Air Force Base (Nevada) and explains his decision to leave active duty and join the Wisconsin Air National Guard. Martens remembers how he felt about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and as a result deploying to Bagram Airfield (Afghanistan) in 2002 during Operation Enduring Freedom. He recalls the difficulty he had leaving his family. He discusses his duties as a firefighter and living conditions in Bagram. Martens mentions returning to the United States and serving at Offutt Air Force Base (Nebraska). He describes being deployed with the National Guard to Balad Air Base (Iraq) during the Iraq War. He gives his thoughts on the management of the war and an anecdote about an attack on base which he responded to. Martens reflects on his service in the military and lastly comments on his retirement due to his mental health.

Biographical Sketch:

Brian Martens enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in 1988. He was stationed in Bitburg (Germany) and deployed to Saudi Arabia as part of Desert Storm. He left active duty and joined the Wisconsin Air National Guard, deploying twice; first to Bagram Airfield (Afghanistan) in 2002 as part of Operation Enduring Freedom and then to Balad Air Base (Iraq) in 2004 during the Iraq War. Martens retired from the military in 2006.

Interviewed by Rick Berry, 2012.

Transcribed by Joe Fitzgibbon, 2014.

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Interview Transcript

Berry: This is an interview with Brian Martens, who served with the United States Air Force from 1988 through 2006. 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: November 12, 2012. The interviewer is Rick Berry. Brian, thank you for agreeing to do this interview with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. Can you tell me something about your background and life circumstances before entering military service?

Martens: Well I think going into high school, I really never had good grades, you know. Cs, Ds, and Fs, and I did not have the money, attitude of the college--or I'm sorry, the money or the attitude or the grades to go into college, so I made a decision probably my junior year that I was going to go in. And I delayed enlistment in February of '88. I left in September of '88 for basic training.

Berry: How did your family and your parents feel about you joining the Air Force?

Martens: They were more than happy to [laughs], because they had to actually sign the papers because I was seventeen at the time, and--you know, my mom had some tears and stuff, but my dad understood that it was the best route for me to go. And--I was in Civil Air Patrol during high school and I think that helped me out--it did help me out a lot, seeing that I only spent two weeks in basic training and came out with two stripes. A program they had way back when, where you could try to challenge the tests.

Berry: Yeah, could you explain what the Civil Air Patrol is for the listener?

Martens: Civil Air Patrol is an auxiliary of the Air Force, which is very similar to Junior ROTC you know with the Army and the Navy and so forth. Teaches aviation, aerospace--discipline and--basically, it teaches you everything you need to know if you want to go into the military as far as drill, how to survive in basic training is a good way of explaining that. And you know, esprit de corps and you know, they do teach you actually--their main mission is to augment search and rescue crews during a crash, time of emergency, whatever. They have specialized equipment and they actually do have civilian pilots in [inaudible] that do aerial observation looking for crash sites and so forth. And that really, really helped me out to get an idea of what the little things, you know--how to shine your boots, how to maintain a uniform--that, you know, is going to keep you out of trouble, not getting yelled at by the sergeants. And you know it did teach me a lot of lessons. I knew when I was in Civil Air Patrol that I was gonna leave--I was gonna stay in past high school, anything like that. Everybody knew where I was going. And it helped me out *immensely*. And I, when I got to basic training I

didn't brag, "Oh I'm in Civil Air Patrol, I'm gonna get out of here early." No, I kept my mouth shut and did--eyes and ears open, mouth shut. And do what the DIs tell ya and I got through it. And it really, I think it really shaped or laid a foundation on my career. When I was younger, I wasn't the spit and shine airmen, you know, I used to have hair back then [laughs]. But you know it taught me to never quit and be the best I could be at my job. My first job in the Air Force--.

Berry: Well let's go back to basic training first. Where did that take place?

Martens: Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. I went down there 13th of September 1988. The usual, you know, first night you get yelled at 'til about 4:30 in the morning and you know, a couple guys are like, "Oh, they'll let us sleep in 'til ten, we didn't get here 'til one in the morning!" 25 minutes later, you know, the guys are screaming at you to get up. And I knew from my prior experience in Civil Air Patrol that it was all mind--it's a mind game. The DIs put you, or TIs in the Air Force I should say [laughs], put you through so much physical and mental stress that their job was to see how well you coped with that. How well you had come together as a team, you know, 'cause you can't do it by yourself, you never can. You know, when you got done with your bunk, your uniforms, and everything was straight away, you helped the guy next to you. In 1988, pre-Desert Storm, pre-9/11, you know, it was still a time where the TIs would--they wouldn't hit ya, but they would--that brim of that Smokey Bear hat, they would just cut right across the bridge of your nose and [background noise]--there was no illusions of who was boss down there, you know? But it's what I expected, and basically I tried to be a ghost, you know, fly under the radar. That was--.

Berry: How long did basic training last?

Martens: For me, sixteen days. Normally it's six weeks. So, I did the confidence course, I did the rifle course, I did the written test, all with other flights, trying to get out of there early. And you know, people say, "Oh yeah, you didn't spend the whole--" Well, if you were in my position, you'd do the same thing.

Berry: When you enlisted, did you enlist for a specific job field in the Air Force?

Martens: Yes. I was an aircraft armament systems specialist. Basically, I loaded--the job description was load nuclear, non-nuclear munitions on fighter/bomber aircraft. My specialty was F-15C models. Air to air--and all I loaded was missiles, guns--ironically, as a bomb loader, I never touched a bomb in my life [laughs]. My total was air to air my whole mechanical career.

Berry: You began that training in that field after your basic training.

Martens: Directly after basic.

Berry: Did you make any lasting friendships in basic?

Martens: There were a couple guys in basic training that followed me to my first tech school and ended up being in Desert Storm with me. So, yes I--I wasn't there long enough to really know everybody there, but there were a couple guys that I knew that were planning on following me along to Colorado where my first tech school was, or technical training.

Berry: Do you remember anything about the food, and the living conditions in basic training?

Martens: The food, not really because you were shoving it in your mouth so fast you really couldn't [laughing] taste it that much. But I weighed about 95 pounds going in to basic, and I probably left there about twenty pounds heavier just from the amount and quickness of eating, you know. The drill or training instructors, you know, sitting there at the table banging on the [hits table with fist repeatedly]--demanding you shove more into your mouth. One time I remember that, one of the more senior instructors came by and he's like, "Boys, today is salad appreciation day," and nobody moved, everybody was sitting there like this in the--all of sudden another one came up and is like, "The man said it's salad appreciation day!" So everybody goes to the salad bar and loads up on that, and it's like "Oh, God." The food generally with the Air Force was very good, compared to the Army, or the Navy, or the Marine Corps. That's one thing, you know, the Air Force did have better living conditions, did have better food. And that's part of the reason that I went. If you're going to be in combat, there's no reason to be miserable [laughs]. But, yeah I still remember names of my--and this is 24 years ago, I still remember the names of my DIs. Names of some of the guys--certain things are burned into my memory I think--that occurred even so long ago. Paul Meyer, Tom Higgins, I'll never forget those names, you know. It was--I'm not saying it was easy, basic training was still a challenge, you know, but like I said this was back during the tail end of the Cold War, you know.

Berry: And did you expect to make a career out of the Air Force when you entered?

Martens: No [laughs]. If you would have told me when I enlisted I would have been in three separate wars, and in for eighteen years, I would have called you crazy. I had no--it wasn't totally against, you know, I wasn't totally against it, but I was just going to see how it went, you know, and--now by the time--I'll reach back to the States, you know, and join the National Guard, I knew it was going to be a career then.

Berry: Okay so you completed basic training, it sounds like that was a positive experience for you for the most part.

Martens: For the most part, yeah [laughs].

Berry: And you received orders for your next duty station for your Advanced Individual Training [AIT], tell us about that.

Martens: My first AIT, or advanced individual training was in Lowry Air Force Base, Colorado. In the winter [laughs]. So--and it was an aircraft armament specialist field and basically I went to school in a big giant hangar that had every aircraft you can imagine. B-52s, F-111s --all the Cold War breeds. F-4s, F-111s, A-10s. My specific--you were assigned a specific aircraft when you entered school and mine was F-15C and D models. Not the Strike Eagle ones, the fighter bombers, but my entire career as a weapons loader was on the same aircraft. Which, you know, it was advantageous in that I got to know the aircraft intimately. Something goes wrong with a launcher, oh it's this pin, or this wire right here, trust me. But the disadvantage to it was, in order to get promoted you had to take these tests and one of the skills tests was you had to know every bomb rack, every munition, every armament system of every jet in the inventory. I never touched a B-52 or an F-111, so I was at a disadvantage. The only bad thing about being a weapons loader on the flight line is that it's probably one of the few jobs that has absolutely no civilian counterpart as far as employment. You don't see too many civilian weapons loaders that don't work for the Air Force afterwards, or whatever. But it--if you had to work on the jets on the flight line, weapons was the way to go I thought, because, you know, my opinion was if it weren't for weapons, the aircraft would be just fancy photoreconnaissance [laughs].

Berry: Did you feel that training prepared you well for your future actual duty assignments?

Martens: Yes. Like I said, in high school I got horrible grades, but from the time I entered basic training through my whole career I excelled in every academic, every evaluation. I can say without too much ego, I was very good at what I did. I might not have looked good, you know, in a wrinkled uniform full of jet fuel and everything, but I was one of the better ones. I was quick, safe. I could tell ya what's wrong with a missile just by, you know, the initial report of it, you know. And it was a rewarding career, you know. My first duty station was West Germany back when it still was [laughing] West Germany. In the Reagan Administration, and we caught the tail end of the Cold War. When Warsaw Pact, Russia was still completely intact, I mean, they were crumbling apart by then, but our mission was very real. I had no doubt when I was in West Germany at my

base that if a partial or total nuclear exchange would have occurred, my life expectancy would probably measure in less than half an hour.

Berry: What base were you stationed at in West Germany?

Martens: Bitburg, West Germany. Very far West Germany over by Luxembourg, Belgium, France, that area. Our base had 75 F-15s. We were the front--edge of the sword, I guess as far as air-to-air defense of the NATO forces in that area.

Berry: Tell us about the living conditions there at that base.

Martens: Kinda like college dormitories. It was a job. I worked the swing shift or night shift a lot of times. You know, just 'cause a lot of the maintenance, a lot of the fun stuff went on at night; the maintenance and the troubleshooting and so forth of the aircraft. During the day time, all you're doing is kicking chocks and assisting with launches and recoveries and stuff. And--I got there, I arrived there in June of 1989 [laughs] and that's the first time I'd been further away from home than a simple flight out to Colorado and I never felt more alone in my life. Couple guys I actually went through technical training with, they all got orders to Bitburg, Germany, none of 'em wanted to go. They all wanted to stay stateside, close to their girlfriends, or whatever. I was like, "You guys are--that's crazy, you know, go out and see the world." So I was the last one in my class to get my orders, and I got Luke, Arizona, or Luke Air Force Base in Phoenix and [laughs], so the first guy that banged on my door I switched assignments with him and I--that's one of the best decisions I ever made. You know, I like to drink beer, but I was seventeen, I wasn't gonna deal with the stateside--you're old enough to go die for your country, but you're not old enough to have a beer. Well, in Germany, a little different. You were eighteen, even on base, you know, you could partake in fine German beer [laughs]. And the first two years I was there, you know, we did the traditional--we had war games once--four times a year, for a week at time playing in chem gear, or chemical warfare ensembles. And basically my job in combat at the time was--easiest way to explain it was a pit crew on a fighter jet similar to a racecar. The jet would come back after a mission, the weapons crew would reload it, the crew chiefs would inspect for battle damage at all. Refuel it, and get it ready to go within probably 30 to 45 minutes it was ready to go up again. So, you know, did that for a couple years. When I was on home, back here in Wisconsin, on August 2nd 1990, when Saddam Hussein decided to "annex" [laughs] Kuwait into its nineteenth province, I called back to my unit and I was like, "Is this for real, or--" and they're like, "You're coming back in a couple days, right?"; which I was scheduled to. I'm like, "Yeah, as scheduled, yes." Its like, "Get back here now." And I returned to the base, and to see every plane that could fly fully loaded, with full tanks, really kinda sunk it home with me that we were

going down there. Soon. And what they did in Germany, we had three squadrons of 25 F-15s per squadron, total of, you know, 75, 80 F-15s to the base. They sent one squadron to Turkey, they sent one squadron to Saudi Arabia, which I was with, and then they kept one squadron at home to kinda keep an eye on things in Europe because at that time the Soviet Union was starting to get into its death throes. So nobody really knew what was going to happen with that. Berlin Wall was starting to come down. I was in Germany for that. I wasn't in Berlin, but-- Couple days, December 22nd, 1990 is when we left. And we got back to Germany, we didn't go back to the States, went back to our home base on June 30th, 1991. And a lot of us wanted to go--you know, because we'd been training for two years. And we wanted to see if the stuff really worked, you know? So a lot of us volunteered to go down there, and when I stepped off that plane, I had never felt heat--as far as temperature--after we took a 747 from Frankfurt, Germany, stopped over in Rome, and went to Riyadh, or Al-Kharj--what eventually became Prince Sultan Air Base, but--they literally built a tent that we lived in for six months the day we got there. So we were there for a couple weeks before the war started--and if I'm going too fast, or if you want to back up, or if I'm missing something, you know, please speak up, 'cause I tend to talk [laughs] kinda, once I get going I tend to talk kinda fast [Coughs]. Excuse me. But we immediately went to work, you know, setting up all our aircraft, loading--making sure they're all working right, loading 'em. And when the war started, it started at late evening, and I was--or early morning, and I was due to report to work at 0700. I got to work on the flight line--Tent City and the flight line were about, oh probably a good three miles away from each other in case something exploded. And there were these two commercial jets sitting on the ramp. Well, apparently they tried to land at Riyadh, capital of Saudi Arabia when the war started. They were getting shelled by Scuds, so they came to land at our base. The aircraft control tower knew it, but nobody else did. So all of a sudden we're sitting here and these two commercial airliners land, and the cops or the security just went bonkers [laughs]. They thought, you know, maybe a battalion of Iraqi special troops had commandeered a couple planes and--'cause we were the largest combat air base in the world by then. We had more than--well over 125 fighter-bombers, fighter jets, cargo planes, electronic warfare jets, helicopters, you know, stationed there. Pretty juicy target. And I thought of the absurdity of these poor people stuck on this jet in 120 degree heat, you know. They did get let go finally, but after that it was a month of air war. Every day, about forty F-16s would take off full of bombs, come back pretty much empty. At nighttime the Strike Eagles from the F-15E models would go up at nighttime, and they would come back at dawn.

Berry: The E model F-15 was designed for ground attack.

Martens: Primarily for ground attack. It could carry air-to-air weapons, but due to the amount of fuel, and the additional weight, it could fight its way in and out from air-to-air threats but its main purpose was to drop precision munitions down--

Berry: Could you describe what might be a typical day for you in this part of your career? Just when did you get up in the morning, what did you do during the day?

Martens: We got up probably 3:30, 4 in the morning to catch, catch the shuttle bus to work which took about a half hour. We would get there--my crew was assigned three aircraft that were our responsibility if something needed to be loaded, unloaded, fixed. These three jets were our responsibility. And, you know, lot of times it was boring, you know, being at an air base that really didn't get that much incoming fire. Scuds were fired at us, but none of 'em really came close. Twelve hour days. Pretty much from 7 am to 7 pm and you'd get some chow sometime during the day when you could. There was no union break or [laughing] anything like that or lunch break. You got food when you could. After that you went back to Tent City, I shared a tent with nine other guys. We'd play cards, watch movies, you know, try to pass the time best we could. I--myself, I learned to play cribbage very well and I always had my nose in a book somewhere reading some type of novels, or--and that would carry me--that would go into my successive tours also, when I went to Afghanistan and in Iraq. There was always music and reading books that kept my sanity somewhat, you know, keep your minds off of things. After the war ceasefire, after the ground war--pretty much routed the Iraqis, then it kinda got kinda boring, in that, you know, our mission then was just supply, or make sure that our aircraft were up keeping an eye on things. And that's--by the time we left, all our aircraft were gone, all our equipment were gone, all we were waiting for is airlift back to Germany. So a couple of us stopped shaving, you know, we had half beards on, we sit there and get tans during the day, and play cards at night and my boss came by one time, he's like, "You got twenty minutes to be on a cargo plane off the base that's going back to Germany, if you want to go home, that's--" So, "Oh, yeah yeah."

Berry: Did you have an opportunity to get off the base at all while you were in Saudi Arabia?

Martens: I did. I did. [laughs] A cruise ship was docked in the Persian Gulf in the country of Bahrain. Now it didn't go out in the Persian Gulf and cruise for obvious reasons, but they did--since it was not on Islamic land, I guess--you could drink on there and stuff like that. They had kind of a lottery, picking a couple guys from each shop. My boss--we had pieces of paper in a hat--my boss saw the little bit of a name sticking out from one of the slips. His name was Martinez, mine being Martens. He thought it was him. So [laughing] he picked my name. So I

got to go out there for a couple days, and I'll tell you what--after my first couple beers--and this is going from probably borderline--alcoholic to absolutely no beer at all [laughs]. So after the first couple beers I hit the rack and I did have a good time. I also had the opportunity to go to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on kinda like a sight-seeing trip and so forth. That was eye-opening in that the streets and commerce during the heat of the day in the desert like that is almost--nobody's almost around, it's all night. And not just during Ramadan when it's forbidden to eat, smoke, or drink in public during the daytime. But there is a teeming nightlife, you know--and nightlife not being bars or anything like that, but--it was kinda interesting to see first-hand that part of the culture that's, you know--I don't want to say--unaffected by, you know, politics or anything like that. Shop owners, restaurant owners, a lot of them wanted to say thank you, you know. For coming over and making the sacrifices we made and--.

[break in audio from 00:31:07-00:31:22]

Berry: Brian you were telling us about your visit to Riyadh, would you continue with that please?

Martens: I got to wander around a couple shops, buy new music tapes which were in high commodity [laughs] after you listen to the same ones for five months. Back when we had cassette tapes, before CDs were ever popular or anything like that. But I can honestly say that the hospitality of the Saudis that trip you know really--you know, really kinda struck me deep inside that these people were--as kinda backwards as society is compared to us, deep down they're just people that wanted to live their lives, honestly were. And I ate dinner at a restaurant with a buddy of mine and I'm really not sure what we had to eat [laughing]. Some type of shrimp, but it was very delicious. Those were the two times I actually left the base in Saudi Arabia. The rest of the time I was, that's where I lived. And we had to put on our chemical warfare gear a couple times, you know, especially during the run up to the war, because--we really didn't know what Saddam was capable of. He was capable of gassing his own people, so I see no reason why he would, you know--other than that we would have probably turned his country into glass--.

Berry: Had you practiced maintaining the aircraft wearing those suits in the past?

Martens: Oh yeah, since day one of Germany. That's how we played war. Gas masks, chemical warfare gear. Because that threat was real, very real from the Warsaw Pact. You know, if they wanted to take over Europe, they're going to hit us with everything they had and that would most likely include chemical weapons because I'm sure they were--had no illusions that we would have responded with

nuclear weapons and the world would probably be a very [laughing] different place today. But, back to Saudi Arabia. We got back home, or "home"--back to Germany after an eight-hour flight in a C-141 in parachute seats. All my buddies were looking at their watches, you know, it's countdown to beer time, you know. And the Sergeants' Wives Association in Germany, God bless 'em, at five a.m. on a Sunday morning, they had tables upon tables of German beer waiting for us. Because they knew a lot of the guys, you know, were single. We didn't have family over there other than the guys we lived in the dorms with. You know, the married guys could go back to their families who, some of 'em were still in Germany--a lot of 'em went to the States, you know, during the war. Just to be with their own families, the support and stuff like that, not like they abandoned, you know, anybody like that. But yeah I was pretty much pickled by breakfast time [laughs] when we got to the chow hall that day. And there were Chief Master Sergeants that made it a point to be up that early to come by our tables in the chow hall, sit down with us and ask, "We're very proud of you guys, is there anything you need other than probably a week's worth of sleep and a case of Jack Daniels [laughs]?" But I thought that was--I thought it was touching, especially when one of the chiefs that we had that was a very well liked chief, was dying of cancer. And probably had a year left, but he made it a point to come out and make sure that we were okay. And I don't think you see that enough anymore. I think some of the--I'll get off on another tangent with that--after Desert Storm I spent another year and a half in Germany. I did come home back on leave a couple months after I got back from Germany. My mom couldn't take it much more [??]. I had to come home and surprise her. And beside Saudi Arabia, you know, during my time in Germany I traveled everywhere. When you were a jet mechanic you followed where the jets went. And TDY, Temporary Duty, you'd go to some country for two weeks. Usually, close to the ocean so the fighter pilots could practice live firing over the Mediterranean or the Atlantic, and we would always have to go with 'em. And that's back when Temporary Duties were basically fun, you know, you did your job and then at night you partied hard and so forth. And--Spain, France, Italy, Denmark, England, all over central Europe. You know, it was just an incredible experience for a guy that was--who had just turned eighteen, and spent the years eighteen until he was 22 in Germany. I mean, it was the best, one of the best decisions I ever made.

Berry: When you enlisted, how long was your first obligation?

Martens: Four years.

Berry: Oh, so you were still on your first enlistment through this period.

Martens: I reenlisted about three years in, because I know I wanted to try a different base at least. 'Cause after four years in Germany, you know, get these new kids coming in, think they know everything right out of tech school, and you just--you're like, "That's--time to move on." You know. And in January of 1993 I finally got orders to, ironically, Luke Air Force Base again, and I ended up switching to Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas because they were forming the last F-4 Wild Weasel squadrons at the time. I honestly wanted to work on a different aircraft. You know, I knew the F-15 very well, you know, and I could teach the younger guys and girls, you know, everything I could with them. A change of pace, you know. So I spent, oh, roughly two and a half years in Las Vegas and that desert heat out there, it wasn't [laughing] much better. I mean, the aircraft was so hot during the day you had to wear gloves to load missiles or touch the surface of the aircraft. And it was fun out there, but by the time I left there I was ready to get out of active duty. And actually I had no plans of going into the National Guard afterwards, I was just, "Clean break," you know, "I'm done." I'd seen enough. And I don't know what possessed the Wisconsin Air Guard here in Madison, but I suppose it's an automatic letter they send to all recent honorable discharges from active service, say, "Hey you want to come work for us one weekend a month?" I was like, "Yeah, sure," You know--[indistinct voices in the background] well they didn't have a spot for me in the weapons loading department, so I kinda fell in to crash fire rescue, fire department. "Yeah, sure that sounds fun." [laughs] So I ended up going back down to Texas for another four months of technical school right after I got back. And that really was one of the moments that really changed my life. I had no idea about what being a fireman was all about and, especially a military fireman. I--honestly I think, to be even a jolly--I call 'em jolly follies [laughing], volunteers. To be even a volunteer fire department or a volunteer medic really takes a special type of dedicated person. But to be a military firefighter when you're getting shot at [laughs], I think you gotta be crazy. So for a person that had absolutely no fire experience whatsoever, you know, I took honor grad from their four month course, and started spending time with the Wisconsin Air National Guard. Things were going well out there, you know; learn a lot of stuff, doing a lot of exercises. Then 9/11 came along.

Berry: You were working as a full-time National Guard airman?

Martens: The National Guard was a one-month, two weeks out of the year thing. In 2000, I received a job--do you know where Volk Field is [Volk Field Air National Guard Base, outside of Camp Douglas, Wisconsin]?

Berry: Mmm.

Martens: I worked there full-time, still do. I'm a fire captain up there doing basically the same thing I did in the Air Force. Crash fire rescue on military aircraft--the base up there is a big war games facility--and any medical response or any medical problems that they soldiers, airmen up there have, we respond to that. And not only that, we teach them how to--not really teach 'em--we give them tips on how to survive in a combat environment. 'Cause I ended up being a firefighter in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq. And the night of 9/11, or the day of 9/11, I remember exactly where I was. I was getting off a shift about eight in the morning at Volk Field. My fire chief came out and he's like, "A plane hit the World Trade Center." "What are you talking about?" Go in there, and there's this big giant hole in the north tower. And I thought about it and I thought about it, and I was like, "That hole is right in the center of that building. There is no way that was an accident." And as we were watching that second plane hit, I was like, "My God, it's--you know, think about all the firemen, cops, port authority, everybody--all the office workers still in that building, that was very well timed." And I hate to say it, but that operation, the 9/11 operation was actually quite brilliant because they caught us with our pants down, literally. We had alert jets like we've had since the Cold War, you know, all along the eastern seaboard, western seaboard, but that's something that they would never have expected. If I would have told anybody on September 10th that "Hey, tomorrow nineteen guys are gonna hijack four airplanes and kill three thousand people in three different areas." I would have been committed, you know [laughs], been in the rubber room. That night, I reported to the base out here at Truax and I told my boss, "Do not send anybody without me." Because, I'm ashamed to think of it and say it, but that night I really, really wanted to go over there and kill somebody. I was very upset, I was very pissed, I was--I'll try to keep the profanity to a minimum, here [laughs]--my wife at the time was crying asking me what the *hell* is going on. I couldn't give her a straight answer. Four months later, I left to go to Bagram, Afghanistan, 2002--January. And I was--I was--I believed in what we were doing. I believed in what we were doing in Desert Storm very much. I believed in what we did in 9/11 immensely. You know, and I--when I finally got my orders down, I had to tell my wife, I was like--and I was really scared about telling her because our orders, initially we were going to be gone for a year. And, I knew where we were going--Kandahar. We got diverted on way, we went up to Bagram, which wasn't [laughing] much better. But, yeah I sat at my wife's work in the break room and told her I was going to be gone for a year, and we had a--two and a half year old son at the time. And she took it very well. And I admired her--we're no longer married, but to this day she still e-mails to say "Happy Veterans Day, I'm very proud of you," and stuff like that. So yeah I left, and probably one of the few times I've ever cried during the military was on that trip out, on the plane out,

'cause--you know, the immediate family, I'm left with five other people; all firefighters within my unit out there at Truax. We've known each other, you know, intimately the last couple years. None of us were strangers. And as we were leaving, the sergeant came in and said, "Hey, guys,"--as we were saying goodbye to our families he's like, "Guys the bus is ready, plane's ready, it's time." And then my son really knew something was up because my wife was crying, my father was crying, my mother, sister were crying, and as I left, you know, he just started crying, "Daddy, daddy." I just walked straight out. According to sources later there wasn't a dry eye in the house. And that was immensely hard, you know, leaving my son not just once but twice, following in Iraq. So, you know, it took us about a month to get to our destination because we got held over in the Middle East for about a month. Which kinda sucked because all of our fire gear, all of our baggage was packed up on this huge aircraft pallet. We couldn't unpack everything because we didn't know when we were going to go; could be in a couple hours, ended up being a couple weeks. So we were kind of in limbo. We used that time to scrounge every piece of toilet paper we could get [laughs] and every piece of food we could get too. And we eventually did leave, flew out through Pakistan; spent a couple hours there. Glad I went to Afghanistan, 'cause I [inaudible] be in Pakistan. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, made a couple stops. When we came in, we were on a C-17, when we came into the landing over Bagram Airfield, there wasn't just the traditional, you know, long approach landing. Yeah [laughs]. And the loadmasters told us what was going down, probably about thirty seconds before they started turning, 'cause they made sure we were all in tight, all our gear was in tight, our weapons were ready. And we started banking. And this was twelve, this was midnight. And the inside of the aircraft was red, red lights, but you could barely see 'em. You could see the loadmasters walking around making sure all the chains were tight on the couple Humvees we had in there with us. Couldn't look outside, there was no point of reference or anything like that, so we were like this for a long time and all of a sudden straightened out [bangs on table] bam. I thought about going up to ask the pilot if we were shot down or if we landed [laughs]. Back door opened, and I, you know, as a kid I camped with the Boy Scouts a lot, and it's dark out in the woods. I have never, ever seen it so dark, so blacked out that you literally couldn't see that far in front of your face. They told you to put [crackling noise] to load up a clip--we carried amber, I guess, weapons--green, yellow, and red status weapons. Green meaning [inaudible].

Berry: Tell us the sort of personal weapons you were issued?

Martens: We went over there with the Vietnam-era M16s, the fully automatic ones. Not the M-4s or any junk like that. And the ammo we had would work in our weapons,

but the new--if we needed any more ammo, the newer light armor-piercing rounds that a lot of the special ops guys--and that's what they stocked over there--would not have worked in our weapons. They would have fired, but they wouldn't hit anything, because the rounds would have tumbled too much because of the rifle twisting and so forth. So I thought that was, you know, okay we've got 1200 rounds between seven of us. If the base is overrun, we're going go through those pretty quick. And those were the only weapons we had. We had bayonets, but they were the old M7 Vietnam-era. Apparently the security police didn't want to give up their good stuff, seeing as they were going to *Idaho* and we're [laughing] going to Afghanistan. [coughs] But, yeah, they told us to load our weapons, put your left on the shoulder of the person in front of you, and the loadmaster walked us out to a pickup truck and they drove us back to the [inaudible]. Couldn't see a thing, not one thing. 'Cause all the people that worked on the flight line--the pilots, the crews, the people that unloaded the aircraft, loaded the aircraft--they all had night vision goggles on. It was total, complete total blackout. I've never seen anything like it. And we got to a tent that was probably not much bigger than this room with six of us and all of our gear. And each of us had probably about ten bags including our fire equipment, our air pack bottles for fighting fires, uniforms, clothes, equipment, everything. And you literally had to walk a path to get to your bed [laughs] and stuff. But that night, or shortly after the Chief Master Sergeant that was our fire chief--he immediately came in, he was Air National Guard from Atlantic City--and he's like, "Guys,"--and we had a female with us--"Guys, gals, relax, it's not that bad here. Looks that bad, but its [laughing] not that bad. You know, just relax, get some rest, and you know, we'll check on you in the morning. If you need anything, take,"--you know, there was no white light allowed, no white flashlights, all the subdued red, green, blue flashlights that you had literally, point to the ground so you wouldn't step on a mine, there were mines everywhere--and he was like, "If you need anything, come get me." Which I thought was just magnificent that he took time to make sure his new people were coming in, that they were armed up, that they knew what was going on, that they had food; they knew where the bathrooms were. I wish they hadn't first shown me the bathrooms, [laughs] I would have rather not seen them at all. The slit trench and you know the traditional outhouses with the fifty-five gallon drum with diesel fuel in 'em [noise of disgust]. We literally lived with the Army, with the 101st and the 10th Mountain Division. And I got up the next day, I look outside, and all I saw was garbage, junk. Old Soviet tanks blown in half right behind our tent. Russian airplanes crashed littered the area. And I went back inside and some of the other people were starting to get up, and I was like, "Don't look outside. [laughing] It's, it's not worth it." But we made the best of it. You know,

it's one of those things with--we were so miserable that we were happy. 'Cause we were together.

Berry: Five person team you were involved with kinda stay together and you were assigned to an Air Force unit there for firefighting activities, is that--

Martens: There really was no parent Air Force unit there, we just kinda [coughs]-- Excuse me--operated within our own. I guess technically you could say we belonged to the Army. And they took care of us, you know, if we needed something from them as far as building materials for our tent or anything like that we would trade, you know, certain things with--we would--popular thing is we'd wash off their Humvees or their helicopters from the sand and stuff like that, and they would give us building materials, nails, and wood and stuff so we could make our tent as livable as possible. And we did. But there wasn't a parent Air Force organization there probably 'til April.

Berry: Were you assigned then to an Army unit? How were you supervised?

Martens: 10th Mountain Division. Supervised--we were supervised by our immediate of command, the Chief Master Sergeant that was our fire chief, but the next person he reported up to was an officer in the Army. 'Cause really there--literally there was nobody else there. When I got there, there was probably a couple hundred paratroopers, some 10th Mountain Army infantry and a bunch of people who wore civilian clothes that were armed very heavily. Non-governmental organizations like CIA, bunch of Navy SEALs there. Worked with them, and when I mean work with them, assisted with the wounded. You know, we didn't go out in the mountains or anything like that, or so forth. Yeah, just a wide variety of special ops community there. You know, and a lot of them, you know, realized how bad--formed good relationships with all of 'em, played cards with 'em, you know, pass the time telling stories like all [laughing] military people do. I don't know if you're--are you familiar with Operation Anaconda? Anaconda was in March 2002 when Rangers, 10th Mountain decided to go up into the mountains, up into the super boonies to try to flush these people out; the Taliban, Al-Qaeda. And as a Chinook helicopter was coming in for a landing to drop off a couple troops, a SEAL--Petty Officer Neil Roberts--was on the tail gun, and as they were coming down he unclipped himself from the aircraft, you know, so he could get out quick. Well as they were landing, they took all kinds of RPG, small arms fire. And the natural reaction to any pilot, I would think, is to get the hell out of there, instead of being a sitting duck. Well unfortunately Petty Officer Roberts fell out of the back. Only about twenty-three feet above the ground, but there's no way they could have went back and got him. For the amount of fire, there was enemy on 'em within less than a minute. And--there is Predator video of it. I've never seen

it. There's rumors among the Navy SEAL community that there were snipers that were way up in the mountain--Navy snipers--that had seen the whole thing but ran out of time. And the story I heard, it might be urban legend I don't know, but, is that one of the snipers had killed Officer Roberts out of mercy. They had castrated him, had put his genitals into his mouth, basically there was no way he was going to live, so maybe it was an unwritten agreement--maybe it was just an agreement between guys who knew they were going to die, and if they were in that situation, you know, just to end it. Which, if--I don't know if the whole thing's true, but yeah, I can see some set of truth of that is. And I cannot imagine how heartbreaking that would be, to shoot a guy that you have--.

[Break in audio from 01:02:22 to 01:02:26]

Berry: Okay Brian, let's maybe get back to your airbase and could you tell us about a typical day there in Afghanistan?

Martens: At first, when we first got there, a typical day would be--we didn't have, as a fireman; we didn't have a fire station. [laughing] Actually, our alarm command center was in the corner of one of the other guys' tent with just a walkie-talkie talking to the single crash truck that was posted right out on the flight line. And we would do two hour--two to three hour shifts, two guys in that truck. In case something went wrong out there. And if something went wrong, I don't think we would have been around, because we were [laughs] stepped out to the side to have a cigarette one night, in the middle of the night, and I noticed a pallet of helicopter rockets right next [laughing] to us. Immediately put out my cigarette--but that's the way--that was our shifts. We did two-hour shifts, you know, 24/7 somebody was out in the truck at all times. Our communications between the aircraft control tower, which we needed in case we had to go out on the runway, we had to talk to them before we could go out there so we didn't swipe into another plane or a plane was coming in to landing, they would have crashed. That would have been bad. So we had three walkie-talkies; [laughs] one for the truck, one for the aircraft control tower, and one for the fire chief. Which made it kind of difficult, you know, in communications stuff, but as my tour went on, probably March-April timeframe, we had secured an area for an actual tent with more--little bit better communications facilities. We had all our fire trucks lined up there. So it was somewhat of a traditional fire department. You know, everybody was--on shift was at the same area. And we would do twelve hour shifts; noon to midnight or midnight to noon. And every couple weeks we'd switch 'em out, you know, so you didn't become a total zombie by sleeping during the day all the time. And we didn't have air conditioning, so the tents were pretty much unbearable two hours after sunrise, so a lot of the guys would come to the fire station on their off time; go into the back area where they had cots that were air-conditioned and sleep. So

sometimes they never left the fire station. We would--to pass our time, you know, we would help other units. A lot of it was cleaning off the sand and the grit and the junk, because we had the high-pressure hoses with our fire trucks and water over there wasn't scarce--drinking water was. There was a couple times that our supply lines did get cut, or the weather was just too awful to land planes in, so they had to start rationing water, MREs ah, MREs [laughs], I ate them for five months before I--before we even started getting fresh vegetables, fresh fruit. And I lost forty pounds.

Berry: Tell us about the food.

Martens: Food in Afghanistan had much to be desired for. I mean, yes, we had food in our stomachs, but when I wrote home, they were like, "Well, what do you need?" Cigarettes and food [laughs]. And, "Food? They don't feed you over there?" Well, *yeah*, but it's--you can only put so much Tabasco sauce on beef stroganoff and it's just--.

Berry: Did you have a chance to get off the base at all?

Martens: Once. And it's only because me and a couple of the other guys were foolish enough to go downtown to try and bargain for bootleg vodka; Russian vodka from the black market. Silly idea, but--we went down there with an Afghan interpreter; me and another one of my fellow firefighters and then one of the special operations medics that we kinda palled around with. Went down to the village and I had never, ever seen so many kids under the age of fourteen with automatic rifles. It just *flattened* me. And you're like, "Okay, lock the doors," [laughs] you know, like that's going to do a whole lot of good. Myself and my partner in the back, we had fully loaded guns, but I mean they were rifles. There was no way we were going to be able to pull 'em up in time to engage anybody if we had to. So--the medic was with us, he's like, "Keep your hands close to the guns, but not *on* the guns." And we were trying to write in the dust on the dashboard how many bottles we wanted, and for, you know, we were going to give 'em like a hundred bucks. And they started handing us bottles where the paper seal was busted. "No, I don't want that [laughs]." You know, afraid it'd be poisoned, you know, which had happened. Not with our troop but other times. And that was the only time we went off base in Afghanistan. And I've got all the respect in the world for those guys that, you know Army troopers and special ops guys that get into those helicopters day after day. You know, if they survive the helicopter trip up into the mountains [laughs], then their fun really began. But I did have some nervous moments. There were a couple times as our base in Afghanistan did not have any type of fence, perimeter, it was all mine fields. So there were Afghans on our base, and then some of the bad guys had breached the perimeter a couple times.

You know, and that's why we carried fully loaded weapons with us at all times. [coughs] Excuse me. And by the time--by the time we got ready to leave there in June, we--the group I was with were one of the groups of people that had been there the longest. And of course, active duty Air Force came in and just ruined everything and you know, "Oh you guys gotta start saluting." Saluting? You know, back in the States that's standard procedure, but over here with all these snipers are around-- "There's no snipers." And you're sure of that? I'll salute you, but I'm gonna stand over here, you know, so I don't get hit. And that's I think when I lost faith in how we were--how they'd come in and just thought they were gonna solve everything within a couple months, you know-- Right. It's frustrating when you're--whether you're on the ground and you know the reality of the situation because you've been there long enough to know better--and then you get these guys that are just bucking from promotion, trying to make a name of themselves, you know, trying to implement garrison rules that are only really practical, you know, stateside, or at a garrison base, you know, in Europe or something like that. So shortly after that, you know, we left.

Berry: Were you able to maintain regular contact with your family while you were stationed in Afghanistan?

Martens: Sporadic. E-mail was hit and miss, and even that was later in the--I was able to send a few e-mails out because our chief of our fire department was adamant that you kept your families--not really up to date on our operations over there, but you let them know that you were alive and well because, you know, if they're calm back home, that's less what you have to worry about.

Berry: Now how did your family feel about your deployment?

Martens: They were very proud. My mom never said much, but you know, that doesn't mean she wasn't proud. My dad, I think, was at a loss for words, 'cause he--you know, out of a family of probably on his side of well over 150 cousins, uncles, so forth--there's only been four of us to go into the military. And besides my grandpa in World War II, I'm the only one that's ever seen combat. So, you know, I tried to keep them in the loop as much as possible, and as my time went on there it got easier to do that. You know, more resources showed up. You could keep in contact. I did call home a couple times. One time was with a field phone. The old fashioned Vietnam field phone in a trench in the middle of the night. But, I got through, I got to talk to my son and my wife for a few minutes. All I did was tell 'em, "Are you guys okay?" "Yes." And then she started talking, I was like, "I don't really have that much time here to talk, I just wanted to let you know I'm fine, the guys are fine, love you both." She's like, "Okay." And she understood that very clearly and my wife--ex-wife now--understands; she was an

outstanding military spouse. I can't imagine the sleepless nights that she had back here raising our son, you know, while I was six thousand miles away and there was no guarantee I was coming back. But conversely in Desert Storm you had to wait in line for an AT&T phone. Yeah, each war communications got a little bit easier and better. We finally got outta there. Took us five trips to the flight line and we got booted off the cargo planes every time because of cargo. Because the runway at the time was being rebuilt so you only had about three thousand feet of usable runway. So the planes had to land and take off as light as possible. So when we left there's probably a dozen of us in the cargo bay, and our pallet of stuff, and that's it. And that was the most straight-up takeoff I've ever seen, or ever--.

Berry: This was a military aircraft?

Martens: Yeah, C-17 cargo plane, Air Force. You know, and away we went. Took us a couple days to get home, we had to make stopovers in the Middle East, and Germany, and the east coast. But, it took us a while, but we got back.

Berry: You came back into Truax?

Martens: Yes, Dane County Regional Airport at about 12:30 at night on a Friday night. And [laughs] it was the weekend before--it was the night before guard drill weekend. And one of the commanders actually came up to us and asked, "Well you guys are going to make drill tomorrow, right?" [laughs] I was like, "Nah, I don't think so. We've been--none of us have seen our families in six months, and drill is five hours away. I don't think so." So the next couple weeks we spent, at home; R and R. About a month later we got sent to Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska. Basically to complete our year of duty and to backfill for the firefighters from that air force base who had been sent over. And it wasn't a bad gig, I mean, we were close enough to--Omaha was close enough to back here to where we could make--on a long weekend we could make the trip across Iowa, a six hour trip. And that got old--by the time I got home in November of 2002, I had enough for a while. 'Til Iraq came [laughing] around. And Iraq was a little bit different than Desert Storm and Afghanistan is that--we got mortared--.

Berry: Did you go over to Iraq again as a firefighter?

Martens: Yes, yes, in August of 2004. You know, we just got back from Afghanistan late 2002, by that time operations were ramping up, there was no question of if it was going to happen in Iraq. It was when. And I volunteered for each of my combat tours on the basis of: if something was going to happen to me over there I wanted it to be on my own terms. I didn't want, you know, somebody else ordering me to go there. And I didn't need to be ordered. I--when I raised my right hand in 1988 I

knew. I'm not like some of these people nowadays, "Oh I only signed up for the education," I knew specifically very well what could have--what I could get myself into and I was fine with that.

Berry: Where were you stationed in Iraq?

Martens: Balad Air Base.

Berry: Tell us about that. What sort of facilities did they have, and where did you live, and that sort of thing.

Martens: The facilities in Balad were probably the best out of all three wars, I mean they--the fire department lived right around the fire station, I lived on top of the fire station in kind of like wood huts. Which, the amount of indirect fire we took in, probably wasn't [laughing] the smartest thing, but [clears his throat]--little bit more modern facilities, more communications as far as home, more rec--more welfare and recreation abilities. More things to do to keep the troops occupied. Chow was--the food was really not bad at all, but the catch was the Iraqis who were firing mortars at us got to know where the chow halls were, and when the chow halls were crowded, so some of my crew and, you know, I was in charge of a rescue truck--a rescue truck being a fire truck, we didn't carry any water but we carried all the technical rescue stuff, medical equipment, ropes, rappelling, car accident equipment and so forth.

Berry: What sort of training did you have to prepare you for that work?

Martens: Fourth months in Texas. Was the basic academy for all branches of the military who want to be into the fire protection career field. And they taught us a little bit of combat operations there, but mostly what you learned from is playing war with your group. For example, the squadron I was with at Truax, we would go up to Volk Field once every couple years and play like a week's worth of war games. Where they would teach you how to--teach you what not to do, you know, don't congregate in a big area if something happens 'cause you're just a big juicy target for indirect fire. Which ironically is what happened in Iraq [laughing] but I'll get to that in a little bit. So you know our war fighting skills, you know, were honed and were sharpened probably in the late '90s and lessons from 9/11, so by the time we went to Iraq we were pretty--a lot of us were already veterans from other wars, so--and you know, the basic idea. You had to instill on some of the people that when you started hearing booms, don't walk to the bunker, run [laughs]. You know, and it's a constant learning experience, you know, you could be there for three months and think you've seen it all. Well, you haven't. Eighteen years in the service, I never saw--always lessons to be learned. Balad Air Base was a large Air Force and Army facility. Army had a large logistics supply area there, so there

was a good presence of them. 25th Infantry and the 1st Infantry I think were there with us. And the first morning we woke up we took three rockets. And they were close and they were loud, and I'm like, "*Holy* shit." [laughs] "What did we get ourselves into?" Afghanistan we got shot at a lot, but most of the time, it was villagers fighting other villages and we just happened to be in the crossfire. They really didn't get into the heavy-duty suicide bombings in Iraq or Afghanistan 'til after I left. But you know, after four months of getting shelled every day, it kinda gets on your nerves. And the worst part about that is there's really nothing you can do. There's nothing you can do to shoot back--you know, you're in the middle of an air base, where you gonna shoot at? They're shooting from miles away. And that's always the most frustrating. I would say one of the more difficult days I had was September 11th, 19--2004, I'm sorry. We were taking fire, and all of us, you know, were taking cover either in the fire station or in the bunkers and we heard one hit pretty close. And my immediate boss who happens to be the fire chief of the Volk Field, still my immediate boss. Traditional wartime doctrine for Air Force firefighters, if you're under attack, you don't go out unless, you know--but, my--I'll call him "Matt." He knew the gravity of the situation, he knew some Air Force guy had been hit, and he did not hesitate sending himself. I don't know how my driver did it, but we were doing 65 miles an hour through Tent City. And we were the first emergency services there. And turns out the guy--he was a security policeman for the Air Force, younger guy, 23 years old. He was walking to the shower--flip flops, blue jeans, you know, no shirt, towel. 120 millimeter rocket hit probably twenty to thirty feet away from him. And that's really not what got him as most, is the gravel and the round rock that they had laid through the entire Tent City to keep the dust down. That's what got him, is those rocks blowing up, and they blew him about six feet. And bystanders were around, mostly guys coming to or from the shower, had their bath towels just, you know--there was a lieutenant colonel doctor there thank God. And we got there, and I looked at him--ironically, for having no shirt on he only had superficial wounds in the top, his head was fine. He ended up losing his right hand 'cause a piece of shrapnel or rock must have caught it. But his legs [clears his throat]--were like you opened 'em up with a filet knife, you know, from the hip all the way down to the ankle. I could see in the meatiest part of his thigh all the way straight down to the femur. I'm like, "My God this guy's--" And he wasn't screaming yet, because he was in shock. And it--part of being a firefighter I should say is you're also a medic. Similar to what EMTs are around here. And since we were the closest, the fastest, we got there first--all I did was start you know, busting out the trauma bandages, these huge bandages, you know, the size of a sheet of paper that--all they're designed to do is soak up the blood--so I just started stuffing his legs. You know I didn't get grossed out, I was--I didn't--I went kind of cold as far as

emotions. I didn't know the guy personally, but then again he was a brother in arms; an Air Force brother in arms. I didn't think about it. After I got into the groove of things, you know--this is what needs to be done. And there were so many bystanders around, and the lieutenant colonel, the doctor's like, "Who here is fire department, who here is ambulance, who here is a medic?" And you know, raised our hands. He's like, "The rest of you get out!" Which is the sensible thing to do because during all my years of playing war, the last thing you want to do is congregate anybody, much less the upper command staff of the base, you know, around. One round came in and hit that guy. Lightning can strike in the same spot. So that was probably--and I had gotten in a verbal argument with my deputy fire chief and fire chief--'cause I made the statement that--later on during the debriefing, I had made the statement that "You guys should not have been there." And I didn't--I put it tactfully, I didn't say those two guys shouldn't have been there, you know. From the basis of, what if another round would have come in? Well they didn't take it that well. So I got exiled to another fire station on the other side of the base [laughing] for a couple months. And that's one of the few times I--I guess, I broke down in my room and I just, you know, did I fail? 'Cause I still didn't know if the guy was still alive. And a couple people came in, some folks I was in Afghanistan with that I had known for years--kinda like, "It's not your fault," you know, blah blah blah. What it comes down to, I tried to explain this to a group of fifth graders the other day--what it comes down to, when you're over there, and the first bullet goes whizzing past your head, you know--politics, God, country, apple pie, you know--all that stuff goes out the window. It's the person next to you. The person on the other side of you, are the people that are going to keep you alive. Not generals back in Washington. And it's those people you have to depend on, 'cause they depend on you. And I told a buddy of mine one time, I was like--he's like, "You know, we're probably gonna die," I was like, "Well, at least we'll die together [laughs]."

Berry: Now why don't we pause there, Brian--.

[break in audio from 1:33:46 to 1:34:58]

Berry: Okay Brian, if you would continue with your experience in Iraq?

Martens: After that day, you know, you just kinda got into a routine. Where you know, got up, did what needed to be done, but there was always surprises here and there, as far as enemy activity and so forth. And I think in Iraq I encountered a lot of people--lot of higher ups as far as rank--not just Air Force, I mean Army Sergeant Majors--that were just concentrated on the wrong things I think. You know if you were wearing your reflective belt walking down the street in Iraq. To me, that was a big bulls-eye. Or, having your physical training uniform or your shirt tucked in--

rather than border security, or keeping us safe. PT tests. I think everybody over there was sweating enough. And we had a few remember-able events I guess. Fallujah, the second battle of Fallujah when the Marines went in and cleaned house happened in November of 2004 when I was at Balad, so we got a lot of the wounded. 'Cause we had one of the better military trauma centers in theatre. No matter how bad of a day you thought you had, you go down to the wounded, and spend some time with them, and that'd really put into perspective how lucky you were, even being in Iraq. So some guys would take instruments down to 'em and play for 'em, other guys would just play cards with 'em. You know, I think that's what brought me back into perspective after my experience with the other Air Force guy who had been wounded. 'Cause he didn't stay in theatre, as soon as he was stable enough they shipped him to Germany and then to Walter Reed 'cause we didn't have the facilities to take long-term care of a double amputee and so forth, so. I never saw him again. I do have some articles that some of the guys I was over there with forward to me every now and then, reminding me that "Hey, you made a difference. As much as--as frustrating as it is and as horrible as war is sometimes, you made a difference in a young man's life who's still around today." [clears his throat] I think that and a couple other reasons make it all worth it. On the day I go up before God and Judgment and stuff, and "What have you done with your life?" I think I'll have some pretty good answers. I hope.

You know, drawing down to our conclusion of our tour in Iraq, the shelling started getting a bit more intensive. I would wake up in the middle of the night hearing explosions that weren't there. I'd be in my bullet vest and my helmet by the time I hit the floor from my bunk. I'd peek outside and didn't see any explosions or hear anything, and everybody'd be business as usual. I went to--after I got home, that continued for a little bit. I went to see some psychiatric help, and they're like, "Well, that's normal somewhat, you know if it doesn't go away in a little bit, couple months, come back and see us." And--before I left for Iraq, my wife and I were kinda starting to split up, and when I left for Iraq, she tried a new job in Omaha, Nebraska of all places [laughs]. But, you know, I don't blame the military for my marriage. That was not the only factor, but, you know, I did sacrifice that. I sacrificed some of the earliest years of my son growing up and I'll never be able to get that back. [clears his throat] But--let me take a break for a second.

Berry: Brian when you returned from Iraq, you continued in the Air Force, what sort of activities and assignments and so forth did you have then?

Martens: Well after that I never--I haven't been over since. I spent--actually about another year and a half in the Guard. I was getting ready to go back for my fourth tour, second tour in Iraq, when I was medically stopped for seeking mental health

issues. Which--it pertains in that throughout my whole Air Force career, if you went to mental health--and this, you know, before 9/11 and so forth, before Desert Storm--if you went to mental health on base it was pretty much a death sentence to your career. It's not so much that way nowadays, but--especially if you worked around restricted areas, secret, top secret areas, like working on jets. So you know, last couple years I was in the Air Force, I just had it. I needed to get some help. My wife recognized I needed to get some help. This is relevant in that my orders were stopped for my second tour to Iraq the same day, and I was medically retired within six months. And you know, now they're handing stuff over there, handing out depressants or anti-depressants over there like candy. And that made me bitter for a while because I was not ready to give up. I wanted to--it was very important to me to get twenty--I got eighteen years in almost to the day. But it was very important for me to get twenty years in. But--maybe it was the man upstairs; God's way of saying three wars was enough.

Berry: Did the Air Force help you with that situation? Did you meet with Air Force doctors and so forth?

Martens: No. No. They gave me a couple choices, or they sent my records, statements and stuff--because I never put it on my yearly physical form with the National Guard because I knew that's exactly what would happen. By the time I did, during my eighteenth year, I was filling out a form before I was supposed to go to Iraq, you know, "Are you on any medications?" "Well, yeah a couple." Well, it stopped me dead in my tracks. They gave me a choice of cross training into a job that is non-deployable overseas, basically a desk job which I had no interest in--I could appeal it, I could separate without strings, with no strings attached, which was--after all I'd been through, no, absolutely not. So I retired for medical reasons. Not quite the way I wanted to go out, but it happens. And I was bitter for a while, you know. I've been serving in the Air Force since the Reagan administration, and some snot-nosed doctor decides to "Well you can't go because you're taking antidepressants". But, I left on good terms with, you know, my friends, coworkers and stuff. They all understood. You know, it's just bureaucratic stuff that kinda got in the way. Nowadays, oh I'll be out fishing on Lake Mendota and watch all my friends go to drill on a Saturday morning at seven a.m. so I guess in a mixed blessing it was good that I got out. And it's a huge part of my life, you know, my military service. I think it took me a while for me to really get into how people have sacrificed and what they've done for their country. I'm an avid reader of history, military history. And it's just incredible some of the things these people have done, you know, Medal of Honor winners and so forth; guys jumping on grenades. I mean, that's not really the way I wanted to end [laughing] my Air Force career, jumping on a grenade, I mean--if that situation ever came up I

would hope I would make the right decision. I'm not foolish enough to say, "Oh yeah, I'd jump on it," or-- But it's been a very rewarding life experience. And I don't regret for a day--not one day--that I enlisted when I was seventeen, got out and saw the world, I fought in some of the most god-awful places in the world for people I don't even know [??]. But with people I know who held the same values, I guess I did. The one ribbon I have here, the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award, I have six of 'em. And I think that really reflects on the integrity, the quality of people I served with, all the way from Germany to present day. I mean, without them I couldn't have done half the things I did. And you know, I--couldn't be prouder. And I tried to keep in touch with a lot of them, and now with the advantation of Facebook, I've talked to people I haven't seen--.

Berry: Have joined any veteran's organizations?

Martens: I belong to the Legion [American Legion] in Cross Plains and that's--it's nice, but there are very few younger Desert veterans. Most of 'em are Vietnam veterans; some World War II ones. Ironically [laughs], I think one of the only other guys in the Legion used to be the chief of police who pulled me over more than once when I was a teenager. But he was in World War II, Vietnam--World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. And I think him and I are the only two people in that post that have been in three separate conflicts. And humorously [laughs], he told me when I was younger that I'd never make it in the military.

Berry: Are you active in the post? You attending meetings now and so forth?

Martens: Not as active as I should be, but I do make it to the parades, the Veterans Day ceremony they had yesterday, any funerals of our post members. I'll grab a couple other of my veterans that aren't members of the post just so we can have a, you know, a line of people in Class A's for the firing squad and so forth. I guess maybe I would like to get involved with maybe something more along the lines of a VFW, that's more combat--I mean, I think--correct me if I'm wrong, the Legion is a lot for--not just combat veterans, but people who were in, in times of conflict and VFW is more, you know, you had to serve in theatre--you didn't necessarily have to fire a shot, but, you know, there's more specific criteria. I guess [laughs], other than the Legion, no I'm not really part of--and not just, and not because I don't want to, it's just, you know, I'm not really sure.

Berry: Is there anything else you'd like to relate to us? In general about your service and so forth? Maybe you could tell us why you decided to do this oral history interview. We're certainly pleased that you did so, and appreciate your taking the time to do this interview, but why did you decide to do it?

Martens: Last week I was kinda surfing the sites as far as [coughs]--excuse me--and I came across the Veterans Museum. And I've known the place has been down here, I've never been here before but I saw something about oral history. And I started reading into it and I was like, "This is exactly what I'm looking for." Something to be able to tell my story--and I'm sure I'll think of ten other things as soon as I [laughing] walk out the door, but not being in like, a hospital setting or, you know, just free of my own choice to come in and tell someone what I've been through. [coughs] I've been toying around with the idea of writing a book and I guess about six months ago I started jotting down ideas for chapters and so forth. And I think that has something to do with it too, kinda formulating my thought process and so forth. And I've got just bags of stuff sitting at my house just gathering dust that I don't want to throw away, but I--they belong in a museum. And I didn't bring it all with me today, I [laughing] couldn't have fit it, so--but, I think that's--mostly I just wanted to come down here and see, you know, I wanted to do the oral history and kinda see what you--what kind of set up, and what you all are about down here. And I did look into, briefly, into the volunteering as far as being the interviewer or even being a part of the Madison veterans' community, not just the Cross Plains veterans' community. Cross Plains is great, they just put up a very beautiful war memorial down there, and they do put on a lot of programs, but they're limited in what they can do. The Legion members there, they each, if they're not retired, they have full time jobs as well, so in my being a fireman, I have a lot of days off, so--.

Berry: Well we certainly thank you for your service and we thank you for taking the time to do this oral history interview.

Martens: It's my pleasure. It's my honor.

Berry: Thank you Brian.

[End of Interview]