

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
CHARLES SCHELLPEPER
Medic, U.S. Army, Operation Iraqi Freedom
2014

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Schellpeper, Charles., (b.1986). Oral History Interview, 2014.

Approximate length: 2 hours 56 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

Charles Schellpeper discusses his service as an U.S. Army medic (2005-2011) including why he enlisted, basic training, advanced individual training, serving at Reynolds Army Community Hospital (Oklahoma) and deployment to Iraq in 2008 with the 2nd Battalion 8th infantry Regiment 4th Division. He outlines his early life and explains why he joined the Army as a medic. Schellpeper details his basic training at Fort Sill (Oklahoma) and advanced individual training at Fort Sam Houston (Texas) where he was taught combat medic training. Schellpeper describes working at Reynolds Army Community Hospital at Fort Sill and comments on why he reenlisted and requested Fort Carson (Colorado). He outlines the training he did in preparation to deploy with the 2nd Battalion at Fort Carson and the National Training Center at Camp Irwin (California). Schellpeper recounts being designated Commander Security Detail Medic. He discusses deploying, first landing in Kuwait and then being stationed at Al Diwaniyah Forward Operating Base Echo. He gives anecdotes of interactions with soldiers from other countries and describes an encounter with an IED (improvised explosive device). Lastly, Schellpeper discusses his homecoming and use of veteran's benefits such as the G.I. Bill and the VA system.

Biographical Sketch:

Charles Schellpeper (b.1986) served as a medic in the U.S. Army from 2005-2011. In 2008 he was deployed to Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom with the 2nd Battalion 8th Infantry Regiment 4th Division, serving as the Command Security Detail Medic. Schellpeper left the military when his enlistment ended in 2011.

Interviewed by Andrew Thompson, 2014.

Transcribed by Steve Thaw, Audio Transcription Center, 2015.

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

[File 1]

Thompson: Today is Wednesday, September 3rd, 2014. This is an interview with Charles Schellpeper, who served with 2nd Battalion 8th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, from July 2005 to April 2011, and during Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2008 to 2009. This interview is being conducted at Madison Public Library's Central Branch. And my name is Andrew Thompson. Charles, could we start by telling me where and when you were born?

Schellpeper: Yes, I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin at Mt. Sinai Hospital on April 13th, 1986.

Thompson: And is there anything that you remember from that day, any stories that your parents have told you happened on the day of your birth?

Schellpeper: Oh, not that I can think of, nothing that really sticks out, no, no.

Thompson: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your background, and life circumstances before entering the service. So, things such as your education, your parents and your family home life.

Schellpeper: Okay. So, I was raised my whole life in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. A little bit to the west of Milwaukee. It was just my mom and I growing up. My mom was artificially inseminated, so I never knew my dad or anything like that, so it was just the two of us. No brothers or sisters, yeah, just the two of us. I grew up on a lake, Lac La Belle, and it was a really, you know, nice childhood. Played a lot of sports, I played a lot of, you know, like, cops and robbers and stuff with my friends. My grandpa was a World War II vet, and I remember, you know, just talking to him a lot about World War II. I used to listen to his stories, you know, his funny stories or whatever from World War II, sitting on his lap and listening to those. So, yeah, I think that was--it was a good childhood, and I had a lot of good family around me.

Thompson: Is there anything about your grandpa's service that you'd like to recount? Any of his stories, or--

Schellpeper: I think the ones that I always remembered, the stories--and what always stuck with me about what he told me was, like, the funny stuff that he would tell me from the service. I remember one story was, like, about he was in The Philippines, or in the South Pacific, you know, for almost four years straight. You know, he never came home the whole time. And while he was over there, they would be--you know, the grass would grow up

really high, and they'd need to cut it for the cobras, or whatever. So, I remember him telling story about wearing, you know, rubber boots up to his knees and what not, so he could not get bit by the cobras. And then he had a lot of pictures. Not a lot, but quite a few. And there were pictures of, like, Aborigines, you know, from Australia and The Philippines. And they had a pet wallaby, so I mean, those are the things that I remember, you know, from his service, and you know, what he told me about it. So, and I know it always--it definitely had an influence on my own life, because I always felt really--you know, I mean, just attached, I guess, to the military, and to, you know, the country as a whole. So, I think that shaped it.

Thompson: Sure. How was your high school experience?

Schellpeper: Let's see, high school. Played sports, didn't--I wouldn't say I, like, loved high school by any means, but you know, I played sports, and hung out with friends, and--I don't think high school was anything too crazy. I was really between. You know, I was like do I want to go to school or do I want to go in the military? I mean, those were, like, the two things that I thought about throughout high school.

Thompson: So, military service was always kind of in the back of your mind?

Schellpeper: Yeah. I think it was more I was just, like, afraid to do it a lot of the time. I'd think about it, but then I would be like no way can I actually, you know, do that. And especially then, you know, once it got to be, I think, sophomore or junior year, whenever the invasion of Iraq took place, and then I was like, you know, there's no way I could wake up every morning in Iraq, like, there's no way, you know? So, it kind of scared me off. So, I ended up going to college for a year instead.

Thompson: Okay and where did you go to school?

Schellpeper: I went to Colorado State University for one year, out in Fort Collins. Followed a girl out there, and yeah, then so after a year, I mean, it just wasn't--I wasn't, you know--I just wasn't really enjoying it, and wasn't putting, you know, my full commitment to it. And I was, like, well, you know, the military's still there, I'm only nineteen, and so yeah, then that was kind of, well, do that.

Thompson: Okay.

Schellpeper: And I mean, I was torn, you know, I was trying to decide between, you know, do I want to go in the Army or the Marines, that was, like, my dilemma or whatever, you know, figuring out which one. And then I think once--you know, I went to a Marine recruiter, and I think once I kind of,

like, heard that you didn't get to pick your job whatsoever, at least that was the way I understood it, I don't know if that's true or not, but I just-- you know, my impression of it was, hey, you take this test, and then we're going to, like, you know, put you in the position that we need you at. And so that kind of turned me off from the Marines. And so then I went and checked out the Army. And yeah, I think once--I just got this idea, well, "Hey, you can do what you want to do, yeah, you can be what you want to." You know, whatever. So, I think that that--and I also had a friend at CSU that had done, you know, four or five years of active duty in the Army and had just come back from, you know, the actual invasion of Iraq, or whatever, and I think he kind of pushed me towards the Army too. Because he's, like, "Oh, you don't want to be a dumb jarhead or whatever. You know, you don't want to be a Marine, you know? You'd be better off in the Army." So, I think that influenced my decision also.

Thompson: Sure. Did you have any other friends who had served, who had been over during the invasion, or influenced you in any way?

Schellpeper: You know I don't know if it--I think one of my earliest memories is a good family--a family friend, their son was killed by friendly fire in the Gulf War. And I mean, I was really, really little when this happened, but I remember somebody--you know, my mom, like, telling me about it. And I think that, you know, also had an impact on my view of just the military, and the country, and--but I definitely remember that. And I think that's one of my earliest, just, like, political memories in general, you know, is learning about that. So, and I mean, we still have--I mean, I remember going through some of my mom's things some time, and we had letters, you know, with, like, return to sender. And they were all going to him, and he wasn't there. But, so she had all of these mementos from him still. So, yeah, I think that's another person that influenced me.

Thompson: Sure. So, then you decided to join the Army?

Schellpeper: Yeah.

Thompson: Can you talk a little bit about that experience, both signing the paperwork, and going through the process, and what that was like for you?

Schellpeper: I think, you know, there was one other guy that I was one other guy that I was in school with in college, and he wasn't a friend, I think he was more of an acquaintance. And he was, like, "I'm going in the Army." You know, and then he signed up to be a Cav Scout. And this was, you know, probably a couple months before I went in. And so, when I went into the recruiting office for some reason, you know, I had, like, this Cav Scout thing on my mind. I was like, "Well, I want to be a Cav Scout." And so, yeah, I went to a recruiter in Fort Collins, Colorado. Went to the recruiting

station. I remember his name was Sergeant Halstad. I don't remember if he's a Sergeant First Class or a Staff Sergeant. But yeah, Sergeant Halstad, and I--you know, it's kind of blurry, I guess, like, the actual meetings that I had with him. You know, we probably met two or three times before I actually went to the MEPS station.

Thompson: Quickly, what is MEPS?

Schellpeper: Oh, the Military Entrance Processing Station.

Thompson: Okay.

Schellpeper: Yeah, so we went to that before I went to the MEPS with Sergeant Halstad. But I think--you know, the conversations that I had with him before going to the MEPS station, whereas, you know, where you're actually doing your physical, and you're getting checked out mentally and physically to make sure that you're able to, you know, join the military. And I think that I talked to him about just, you know, what life was like in the Army, and you know, if I would be a fit, things like that. And, you know, what kind of job I would want to do in it. And I think--and you know, I also took the--I'm sorry, this is kind of not exactly in order, but the--I took the ASVAB, which was, you know, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. So, I took the ASVAB, and after I took that, you know, I did decent enough. I don't remember what my score was, but it was high enough that, you know, Sergeant Halstad was, like, "You know, there's no way you can be a Cav Scout. You'd be just stupid to be combat arms, or whatever. You know, do something that is worth your time, and uses your brain." And so, he's kind of the one that turned me on to, you know, trying to be a medic. And then I was like, well, then I'll be a medic. And so, yeah, when I went to the MEPS station, and we talked about, yeah, what I was going to do. And I met with, you know, all sorts of different people there, with the career counselors. And at the time, this was in 2005, yeah, the summer of 2005, I would say that, you know, Iraq was just going, like, horribly, basically. So, I mean, they were giving guys thousands of dollars to join the military at that time. It was \$20,000 if you'd be an Infantryman. You know, you'd get that kind of a bonus. And I think the medic bonus for me was, like, \$5,000. And so, these are--you know, I thought that was interesting. That was something different because now they're obviously not doing bonuses anymore. They don't give you this extra money to sign up or something. So, but that was a big part of when I was joining. So, yeah, and then when I was at the MEPS station, I remember calling Sergeant Halstad, and saying, "Well, here was the job that I ended up with." And yeah, once again, this isn't in order, but the night that I went there--and this station, this processing station that I was going to, was in Denver. So, it was about an hour drive away from Fort Collins or so. And Sergeant Halstad, he drove me there. And I stayed

in a hotel, it was called, like, the Red Lion, or something, it was something red. And it was in Denver. And that was the night before I went to the MEPS station. And I don't remember if that was the second or the first time that I went there. I think it was the second, when you stay overnight. But I remember feeling really lonely, and really just anxious and hesitant about the whole thing. Like, is this the right thing to do? And that was something that sticks out with me about that process. And then, once, you know, all of the talking and figuring it out had gone through--you know, I had brought some friends with me, especially I remember bringing this guy, Judah his name was, and he was the veteran, he had been in the Army for a few years, and he went with me to Sergeant Halstad a couple times. And yeah, so I mean, I had friends and family that, you know, were close friends, I should say, that came with me, and kind of helped me navigate through the process and make me feel better about it. And so yeah, that was really the entrance.

Thompson: So, you had some support there. How did your mother feel about you deciding to join the Army?

Schellpeper: She was just sick to her stomach about it. She was so--you know, she was really upset, and so was my grandma, was really upset about it. You know, my whole family--and we have a really small, close family. So, I guess they were all just really upset about it, which was kind of like weird to me, kind of, I didn't--I mean, because I had always talked about it, as being something that I would might want to do, and yeah, I--Yeah, so they--yeah, I was surprised that they were so upset. And I think a part of the reason was also that I was in Colorado when I did it. I wasn't in Wisconsin at the time, when I was meeting with the recruiter and stuff. So, you know, I was still a resident of Wisconsin, obviously, and all of that, but I was out in Colorado at CSU. So, yeah.

Thompson: Did you have any discussions with your family before deciding to go in to see the recruiter? Or was it after you had decided to follow that path?

Schellpeper: Well, I know that before--when I talked to you about--I was talking about going to the Marine recruiter, you know, I did that with my mom. You know, I remember when I was in--I think I was probably on, you know, winter break or something from college, and I came back to Wisconsin. And I think I was--you know, we went out and we met a couple--I think we went to an Army and a Marine recruiter together. So, I mean, this certainly wasn't, you know, out of nowhere. I mean, she definitely knew it was something I was considering and wanting to do. But I think it was--I'm just her only child, and so I think that just--and then with the two of the wars going on, I mean, it was just like, well, what's going to happen? I mean, it was a very unknown time. I mean, you didn't know what was going to happen with the military. So yeah, they were definitely not

supportive. And I think that they didn't talk to me for a while. You know, it was--I mean, they came, my mom came and that's later on in the story, we'll get to that, I suppose. But yeah, with--

Thompson: Just regroup.

Schellpeper: Yeah, I was going to say, my mom came out after I was done with Basic Training. And then, that was the first time that I probably had a lot of contact with her, up through that whole process before that. And it definitely wasn't, you know, Kosher. Things were stressed, and she was still upset then.

Thompson: Sure. So, let's go back to MEPS, and deciding to be a medic. Can you talk to me about the emotions and the emotions and the feelings surrounding when you actually decided to sign, and did you have any second thoughts, or were you comfortable with that decision? What was going through your mind at that time?

Schellpeper: Yeah. I think I kind of--I felt like it was, you know, an exciting and an adventure. I kind of think I had just these commercials in my head that I had seen on TV, or, you know, read in books. So, in my mind, I'm like, oh, this is how it's going to be. And I think *Band of Brothers* was still kind of big then. I mean, it wasn't new by any means, but I remember watching *Band of Brothers*, and seeing the medic, you know, in *Band of Brothers*, Doc Rowe, or whatever his name is. So, I was like, oh, *Band of Brothers*, you know, this is what I'm going to do, and yeah. So, that was what--that's how I felt. I don't think I was--I wasn't hesitant at that time. I mean, once I had to go back to the MEPS for the second time, where you actually swear in, and then you get on the bus, and then you're going off to Basic. You know, that was when I would say I was really, you know, sick to my stomach then. And then I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is crazy." [laughing]

Thompson: How long did you have between visits at MEPS? The first one was for the processing?

Schellpeper: Right. The first one, yeah, was for, like, the physical and the mental evaluation, you know, getting all of the paperwork in line, picking your job. You know, the second one, yeah, was for the swearing in, and I don't know, probably last-minute things, and then maybe cutting your orders cut or something, you know? And then you're going. But that time in between was probably about a month. You know, I remember it was a month or a month and a half. It wasn't really long, but it was enough time, like, that I had time to go out, you know, and do things in between. So, I went back to Wisconsin during that time. So, I guess I did see my family before I went in. Because I went back to Wisconsin, and I remember that being a really, like, sad time, just with my family. I remember my mom and grandma; I

think they probably cried a lot. Just, I remember probably the last day I was there, paddling her out, being--we live on a lake or whatever, just being out on the lake, and being like, when am I ever going to come back here? When's the next time I'm going to come back here? And so, I did that, and then we also--I went with, you know, my girlfriend at the time, and we went up into the mountains in Colorado, and spent some time up there. So, I remember it was really--yeah, it was really sad the whole time. I think then I wasn't--I don't remember feeling as excited then. And then I was kind of like, "Oh, do I really want to leave all of this?" And yeah, I think that was the time in between.

Thompson: Has your family--did they come to terms with your service?

Schellpeper: Oh yeah, and well, that's, like, the worst part is you know, they were just so proud of it the whole time, and, like, couldn't--had to tell everybody. And it was like all they wanted to do is talk about it, and now especially that I've been out, it's like, oh, well, you know, it was all so great. It's like they forget, you know, how much grief they gave me during the time. And I reenlisted, and when I reenlisted, you know, that was like, "Are you crazy?" You know, they were more upset with me when I reenlisted than when I signed the first time. So, but yeah, I mean, they eventually came around. And it was, like, a lot of people in my family had served in the military too. I mean, it was, like, we're brought up, you know, it's just talked--and that's--I didn't--that's how I just started feeling, and that's how I was raised.

Thompson: Sure. Okay, so you're at MEPS, and you're put on the bus to go to training. Tell me about Basic Training. Where did you go, the camp, talk about the camp and its facilities.

Schellpeper: Okay.

Thompson: Tell me that story.

Schellpeper: Okay. So yeah, I remember at MEPS, my uncle, he showed up there, and this is the day we're leaving MEPS to go to--going to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, which is in Lawton, Oklahoma. It's in southern Oklahoma. And yeah, my uncle and my girlfriend were there that day, and you know, my uncle had been in the National Guard, so he was kind of giving me some tips. He's like, "Hey, the guys that have been there for two days, you know, they're going to seem like they know everything, and they're going to act like hotshots, but they're no different than you. They've only been there two extra days." I remember that specific advice. Which was really true, because I remember getting there, you know, guys had been there, like, a week. And you're, like, you know, they think that they knew everything. And you're like, are they real soldiers? But yeah, so I remember--so then,

you know, we did the swear-in, and we get on the bus, and I think I had a big manila envelope with me. And I think that had all of my orders in it. And, you know, remember sitting next to the guy next to me, and we kind of talked about how we were nervous, and just kind of small chat. We get to the Denver airport, and then I remember a couple people, like, immediately recognized that I'm going to a military--you know, that I'm a new inductee, because I have this manila envelope, and they're, like, "Oh, where are you going?" And I was like, oh, you know, I already--so, I was kind of nervous. But I was excited too because I think I was, like, oh, I'm finally--people are kind of looking at me like maybe I'm in the military or something. But yeah, so I remember we flew out from Denver. We get to Oklahoma, Lawton, Oklahoma. And then they've got, you know, a kiosk or whatever setup for all of the Basic--you know, the new recruits that are coming in. And then by that time, I'm just, like, completely like, "Man, I shouldn't have done this." [laughing] You know, I was really, really upset and nervous then, and probably, like, already homesick and lonely. And I had been out to--I had lived in Germany for years as an exchange student in high school, and stuff like that. So, it's like I had been out and been away from home, but I was still just like, no, I was just nervous and sad to be gone. And a couple other guys are there, you know, they're all waiting for the bus, we have to call somebody to get the bus, and we're talking. And I think maybe once I'm with some other guys, you know, you feel a little bit better. Like, you know, you have more courage. And we load up, and then we take the bus over there, and everyone's goofing around, and people are listening to music. And I think that was probably our last time, you know, being in the civilian world, as opposed to, you know, when you cross the threshold into owned by Uncle Sam, and are in the military. So, we get there. And I think right away, I expected, you know, like, something in the movies, you're going to get screamed at and yelled at. And my first impression too, and you were asking about the settings and the scenery. I thought it looked something maybe straight out of World War II. I don't know, the barracks just all looked super old, and you know, they're all just lined up, and I had never--I don't think I'd ever even seen, really, like a military post, or been on any kind of military installation. So, I didn't really know what to think anyways. But I was, like, this looks really shabby, and not that great of shape, or whatever. And so, we got [inaudible], and then like I said, I thought once we got off the bus, I was going to start getting yelled at by drill sergeants, and screamed at. But instead, we got brought into this little room. And this is probably, you know, at 6:00, 7:00, 8:00 at night. I mean, this is later in the evening by the time we get there. And they give us some nasty food on a tray. You know, I think they're called Jimmy Dean's. You know, I hate Jimmy Dean's, I liked MREs more than Jimmy Dean's. But the meal's ready to eat. Yeah, so I think they gave us some of these Jimmy Dean's. And they start giving us a lecture on different--I don't even remember, it was just, you know, all of these different standard operating procedures, or, like,

what is expected out of you, maybe, as a soldier. Safety, like, equal opportunity, sexual harassment. You know, just all of these weird classes. And we sat there for a couple hours, and I'm starting to get tired. You know, finally, that ends without anything crazy happening with the drill sergeants. And then, you know, I finally get to sleep and it's probably--you know, we get to lay down, we go to our barracks, and it's all of the guys that have been, you know, funneling in over the last couple of days. And they're all staying in the open-air barracks. And it's dark in there, you know, because everybody's already asleep, because we're getting there late. And the drill sergeant's, like, "Well, just there's your bunk, or rack," I don't know if we already had them assigned or we just picked them. But we got in there, and I just remember being super tired and really exhausted. I lay down, and I fell asleep. And then it seemed like the lights flicked on, like, minutes later. And it wasn't a couple minutes; I probably slept for an hour. But I mean, the lights went on at, like, three o'clock, or four o'clock, I don't know. It was so early, and I was, like--didn't expect it all. I was like no way is this--and then the drill sergeants, like, "Get up, get out of your rack! Get up, don't sit down again!" So, yeah, and that was the reception for Basic Training. You know, obviously this isn't even actual Basic Training yet. You know, you're waiting in the reception unit until you're actually sent into an actual Basic Training unit. So, this--but already, I was, like, man, this is so early right now, and I was so tired, and it's like, we're going to stay up the rest of the day for real. [laughing] And so, then I think, you know, this for a week or so I was probably at this reception holding area. And everybody kind of just--I remember wanting to go to Basic Training because everyone's like, "Yeah, you need to get there so you can just get it done with. Like, right now, you're just prolonging the inevitable." And I remember not feeling like a soldier, you know, looking like just an idiot with long green socks pulled up to my knees, wearing PTs, you know, they give me, like, the gray PTs and the black shorts, and a canteen or something that I got to carry around with me everywhere. And yeah, I just felt like a big dork. And we sat around on these bleachers, and in a box. And the drill sergeants that were these reception drill sergeants, they were, you know, Reservists, a lot of the guys, I think. And I don't think they did the drill sergeant thing all the time. I think they just did it sometimes, when they were activated. So, they kind of just taught us classes, you know, little things here and there. I remember always having to walk on the sidewalk. Like, that was one of the first things that I think I got yelled at for. Somebody else did, but they cut across in the grass to a sidewalk. And it's like, "No, you don't walk--get off the grass! Why are you stepping on my grass?" And so that stuck with me. And yeah, we did a lot of just little classes, and we'd go and eat. You know we'd line up for meals, learn a couple of cadences, people trying to march in step. And all of this was confined to a pretty small area, you know, we probably didn't go farther than 800 yards away from where we slept, you know, where the chow hall was. And yeah, and then we

slowly were--well, I shouldn't say slowly, but I think--we got a couple pieces of the uniform, maybe the PTs and whatnot, but then I know that we actually had to go to, you know, the--what is it, not the CI--is that the CIF, the Central Issuing Facility? I think it was, yeah. I mean, for all of the clothing, the military gear, and what not. And that's when I was like, I don't know when I first heard the term hurry up and wait, but I mean, that was the first time that it really definitely--when I was, like, thinking hurry up and wait. Because I remember just getting yelled at, like, "We need to get there, we need to get in line! Hurry up, get over there!" And then we would stand there, and you'd just stand there for thirty minutes or forty minutes, you know, like, what was going on? And then all of a sudden, the Drill Sergeant would be like, "Hurry up, get up there! Go and--you've got to go get your--" and then you'd get your gloves, and that was, like, the whole process. You know, you had probably twenty stations, or maybe less than that, but each station, someone else would just, like, pile on some other article of clothing onto you, or push it in your duffle bag, and you know, you're issued all your BDU, your Battle Dress Uniform, the camouflage, the green and black. They were still wearing that at that time. Yeah, so then you get the boots and the uniforms, and it was a lot of hurry up and wait. I mean, each station, you'd have to hurry up to get to the station, and then you'd wait there while twenty other guys are ahead of you. And then once we had all of this gear, I remember feeling maybe a little more a soldier. I was like, "Yeah, now I'm going to, you know, wear my BDUs." And then, I don't think we were still allowed to wear them, though. Only to church, I think you were allowed to wear your BDUs to church. But at reception, you had to stay in your PTs. So yeah, and then we did a clothing inventory after that, they give you all your clothing, and then you have to hold out, well, here's five sets of underwear, hold them up, you know? And so, started learning the Army way of, you know, checking the checker. So yeah, that was reception.

Thompson: Real quickly, when did you go into reception? When did Basic Training start for you?

Schellpeper: Well, I flew out on, I think it was the 7th of July, I'm pretty sure it was the 7th of July. And so, this reception, you know, started the 7th of July, I would say. And it went for, yeah, a week. Yeah. I mean, I was there for probably a week, you know, not much longer than that.

Thompson: And this was in 2005?

Schellpeper: Yes, yeah.

Thompson: Okay. Okay, so reception week is done, you get ready to go to Basic Training.

Schellpeper: Yeah.

Thompson: Can you talk a little bit about that experience and maybe the feeling surrounding getting ready to actually go to Basic. And then talk about what you did during Basic, and that whole experience.

Schellpeper: Okay. Right, so the--when they were taking guys to Basic, they were taking them over on, like, buses, and they were like cattle carts, I don't even want to call it a bus. I mean, it was like a trailer with two poles in it, and people were holding on to the poles or whatever, there's no seats in it. I remember there was, like, graffiti all over it, like, "Welcome to hell." Or, like, "You're going to hell." Whatever, you know, all of this weird stuff that other people just in my same shoes wrote, not like they knew what the hell was going to happen anyways. So yeah, I think we would line up when these buses would come, and they would call out your name if you were going to get to go. So, you never knew if you were going to actually go or not. And so, we stood out there, and I was just, like, you know, please call my name. And finally, they call out your name, and it's like you got to run--I don't remember if we had to run back, or we had to have all our gear. We might've had to have just pack all our gear, and be sitting there with all our bags, you know? But I remember having to; you know, get your gear together and make sure it's there. So yeah, they call out my name, I get to go on, I get to go in the cattle cart, I'm like "Yes, you know, finally, going to Basic Training." And I think then, you know, it was on the same installation, you know, on Fort Sill, and it wasn't very far away, it was probably, like, a ten- or fifteen-minute drive to get there. And then when we got there, then it was like, yeah, you know, what you see in the movies, or you know, what you think of when you think of Basic Training. You know, the doors open, and then there's just, you know, five or ten big crisp-looking guys with their drill sergeant hats on. Just yelling and screaming, just saying, you know, "Get off, run off, and hurry up, and get in line, your bag needs to be facing at a perpendicular angle, 40 degrees," or whatever. Giving out some incredibly specific directions that there was no way you were going to be able to follow them. But, you know, they wanted to do that so that you would mess up and they could punish you for it. So, I remember, you know, we're probably with fifty--I don't remember how many other guys. Who knows? I mean, it was a company's worth, it was the whole company who--so maybe it was 100 guys, you know? And everybody's lined up like that, and it was just--I remember them telling, like, "Keep drinking water, keep drinking water, drink your canteen. Finish your canteen and hold it over your head." And if you didn't, you know, drink all your water, and it started dumping out all over your head, there was some kind of punishment for it, you know, if it was pushups, or running, or go fill up your canteen again, and then drink it all right in front of me right now. And it was just the whole, you know, cluster. Nobody knew what they were doing, everybody was scared,

everybody was tired. And I think nobody really knew they were supposed to be messing up the whole time. So, people are trying to do the right thing. Some people start getting mad and yelling at other people, because they're messing up, and they think they're getting punished because this person's messing up. And it was a lot of pain, and being wet, because you're sweating and you're dumping water all over yourself, you know? Because you can't keep drinking the water, because it's going to make you puke. So, I remember--and then I think that was called, like, a shark attack or something. Yeah, I think that's the word for it. And they did that--and then, I mean, after the Basic Training, it's nine or ten weeks, or whatever, and each week, the new group came in and we'd listen and laugh, see those people coming in, because we knew they were doing the same thing. So, that was--yeah, that was the introduction to Basic Training. And that was, like, how I remember, really, like, a lot of the first week or so, was just lots of directions, and, like, lots of messing up. You're never doing the right thing, you're always jacked up, you're always tore up, you know? You're never right, and it's just, like, beat your face, get down, do pushups, you know? And that's what a lot of it was. And I remember--yeah, I don't remember--I guess I'm like--my complete emotions at the time, but I know that I was really, like, "How am I going to keep doing this? This is horrible." [laughing] So, yeah, and you know, I'm sure they took us up into the bays, like, where we actually stayed that night. And, you know, these buildings, I don't know--they kind of were like almost big Xs, just in this large pattern, and each wing had its own company, and training company, and so we were assigned to, you know, one bay, they called it. And out in that bay, there would just be a big--it was almost like a parking lot, you know, in between where the two different rooms were. A big blacktop parking lot. And that's where, you know, you would go out for formation and get ready to train. And then upstairs, you would walk up some stairs, there's a door, you know, by this parking lot, and then up the stairs were, you know, the rooms. And the way that we had our rooms setup, and I think it's different, you know, for each post, I'm not sure. But in our bay, it was--there was four rows of individual beds, they weren't bunks. And so it was, you know, the beds were just lined up next to one another in four different rows. And the two rows in the middle, you know, were head-to-head, you know, the two guys were laying head-to-head basically. And there was a--we each had a foot locker, a gray foot locker--yeah, that was right by your bed, that you could keep your gear in. And the foot locker was, you know, my height. It was probably six feet tall or so. And the--yeah, and then there was, you know, within that, there was the bathrooms, and showers, and what not. And we would have to, you know, report to the--when the drill sergeant would come up in the morning, we'd have to stand at the foot of our bed and say something to him. I don't remember what, but he'd come in. So, yeah.

Thompson: Okay, so week one is done. What kind of things did you do training wise throughout Basic Training? What did you--

Schellpeper: Okay, well, the first things that I remember--and this isn't necessarily--I mean, this is military training. You know, it's not the kind of militraining [sic] you see on TV or read in the books, but I mean, like, beating into your head, you know, the Chain of Command system. You know, understanding rank. You know, the Soldier's Creed, those types of things are what consumed our--probably our entire time, but what was really emphasized on at the beginning. And, learning your weapon--you know, the M16, you know, learning to call it a weapon. That's a weapon, not a gun, you know, it's a weapon. You know, carrying it everywhere with you, taking care of it, making sure it's not falling down, not out of your sight. But yeah, so those are the things that really stuck with me. And so, the actual hands-on training, I remember doing lots of marches, lots of rock marches. And the marches--for some reason, I'd always end up in the back, so it would be like a slinky, you know? The guys up in the front, they had to--because there's somebody that couldn't keep up or whatever, and they'd start falling behind. And then all of a sudden they'd be like, "Man, I'm too far behind." Or the Drill Sergeant would yell at them, "Hurry up!" You know, and then they'd run to catch up with the guy ahead of them. So then, you know, the guy way in the back is having to run twice the distance because the slinky has, you know, gradually progressed to where there's more space in between. So, we did lots of marching. We did lots of, yeah, ruck marching. Just, you know, you slowly build up. It's the same with everyone, you do the slow build up, you do however many miles, and then you double it, and you double it, and you keep going. We did that, we did, you know, the obstacle course kind of things that everybody does, like, climbing towers, and ropes, and you know, repelling down it. And I think that's all more, you know, confidence type of training than actual, you're going to do this in the military. You know, we're training you to do this. I think it's more just, like, learning what you're capable of, and what you can do. We did that. PT, you know, we did a lot of PT every morning, you know, did PT, and the way that we did PT always, like, drove me nuts. I remember, just because you're doing everything so uniformed, you know, extend your arms, you know, right face, and--but I don't even remember all of the commands. But, you know, the way that PT was conducted, it was in such an organized manner, you know? Let's see, what other kind of training did we do? We went to--you know, we practiced with our M16s, we did the weapons qualifications. It was always incredibly hot during the day. I mean, southern Oklahoma is just as hot as anywhere else in the South, just about. And this was, you know, July and August, so it was really hot. And that was the first time I ever got heat rash. Yeah, and I remember just thinking how painful that was, and uncomfortable. And the heat rash is from, you know, just wearing all of the clothes all the time, and all of the

gear, and it's just pressed up against your body, and not being able to clean enough, because I mean, we had--it was, like, a sixty-second shower, or whatever. You know, they timed the shower, get in and out. You never can clean yourself well enough. So, I remember getting heat rash all over my back, and all over my butt, and stuff from the--having to wear the body armor, and just pressing up against it, and sweating, and always wearing the belt and stuff. And it always bugged me the most when we were shooting. Oh and I had it on my chest too, I had heat rash all over. And because I remember, every time I laid down, you know, to the prone to the shoot, it was just like a bunch of needles in my chest. Yeah, and--

Thompson: Did you have any memorable instructors, or buddies, or--

Schellpeper: Yeah, I had a good--

Thompson: Everybody seems to remember their drill sergeant.

Schellpeper: Yeah, no, I had a Drill Sergeant--I remember, we had a couple of them. I remember Drill Sergeant Knox, big black guy. You know, six-foot-five, six-foot-six, and had 101st Airborne patch, and you know, obviously, when you come in the Army, you don't completely understand all of the insignia and everything. So, when you just see, you know, 101st Airborne, and you know, he's got the crisp uniform, and the tilted hat, and you just--you know, it's like the model of a soldier, you know? And just really intimidating. Because you think that, man, this guy is just so clean-cut and so on top of it. Just the way they could talk was, like—the drill sergeants--was like poetry. Just the way they could spit out crap to you, it was unbelievable, you know? "I don't have anything to do except go home and kick my dog, you know? My wife left me. I'll be here all night, you can do pushups all night," like that kind of stuff. So, yeah, it was just--it was Drill Sergeant Knox, and then there was Drill Sergeant V, I can't remember his full name. It was hard to say, but we just called him Drill Sergeant V. And he wanted to be known, you know, do the V-up, always the V-up, which was, like, you lay on your back, and you kick out your legs and arms at the same time, and try to touch them. Did a lot of V-ups. And yeah, so, I mean, the Drill Sergeants, and I remember Drill Sergeant V, he had a 3rd Armor Cav combat patch, and he always talked about 3rd ACR. So, I always thought 3rd ACR was a badass unit. And yeah, I mean, the drill sergeants, they always--they were just always impressive. I mean, they were just, like, always the model soldier, and they always were--they were the real thing, they were the real deal. And I had a good buddy, his name was Rudy Nunez, and he was from Arizona. And yeah, he ended up going to medic school with me too at AIT, and then we--well, then we went to different units, but I mean, throughout Basic and AIT, we were really close together, hung out the whole time. And yeah, we talked a lot, and we talked about, I think, girls, and just being at home. And he had a daughter,

so I think he talked about her a lot. But we really got along well, and we—yeah, he was funny. He was a really funny guy. So, he probably, like, lightened me up, because I'm always really serious. So, yeah, that's the friend that I remember the most that sticks out to me. Yeah, you know, I have one—yeah, yeah.

Thompson: Do you have any memorable stories from Basic? Anything that the—

Schellpeper: This is a—I don't remember the specific details of this story, but I have, like, the overall story. And it was when we were there towards the beginning at Basic Training. It was towards the start of Basic Training, and we were going to the Dining Facility, the DFAC. And there was different options that you could choose in the Dining Facility. And some of the foods were—well, our drill sergeants told us, they were just for the cadre, for the people that work there all the time, you know? Not the people in training. And the omelets were one of those types of food. Like, you did not order an omelet. Like, we're not staying here that long, like, you're eating and you're going. And some guy decided he was going to order an omelet. And so, he ordered an omelet. And the Drill Sergeant saw him and he's like, "You just ordered that omelet?" He's like, "Oh, I didn't know I was supposed to get this, Drill Sergeant." He's like, "Oh, just go ahead, eat the omelet, enjoy it. Enjoy the omelet." So, the guy, you could already tell, he was--we were screwed. He's like, you know, "Thank your battle buddy, you know, he just got an omelet, your buddy got an omelet. You're going to see what's going to happen." So, the dude eats the omelet, you know, we all eat our breakfast. We go out to the parking, you know, the drill area, the parking lot. And then it's just, like, smoke us. Just physical pushups, and situps, and sprints, and whatever. You know, he's like, "We're going to get the omelet out." You know, and so, obviously, they punished him more than us, but we got a lot of punishment. And he ended up, you know, vomiting up the omelet. And nobody ever got an omelet again. And that was it, and we called him Omelet from then on. Like, "You're going to get an omelet?" No, no more omelets, you know? So, that was a good story from Basic. That's one that sticks out to me the most.

Thompson: Are there any others that stick out?

Schellpeper: Oh, that's the one I always go to. [laughing] That's what I remember the best! So, I'm trying to--you know, if anything else really, you know, no. I got some ones from AIT, but--

Thompson: Well, let's talk about AIT, how was that experience for you?

Schellpeper: Yeah. Well, I remember finishing Basic and thinking, you know, AIT is going to be better. There's no way that, you know, AIT is going to be like

Basic. And so, in a lot of ways—and the other problem was just getting to AIT took a while in itself. They're only, you know, taking so many guys to each group, so it's like you had to be--I don't know if it was, like, a holdover. I don't think we were holdovers, but we were having to just stay at Basic Training if you didn't get sent to AIT. So, it's funny, it's kind of like the hurry up and wait idea on a macro level. Like, everything you do is, like, well, hurry up to get to Basic Training, but then you finish, and well, then you've got to wait to AIT. But you're always excited, you're always trying to get to the next place, because you know, you're always thinking it's going to be better. And so, AIT ended up being in Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. And that was a great--I mean, a great spot compared to Lawton Oklahoma. I mean, it was a whole different—it was just a bigger city, and there's a lot going on there. And not that I ever saw a lot in Oklahoma when I was in Basic. So, I didn't--that doesn't matter. But yeah. Getting to AIT, basically, like a repeat of the reception at Basic Training. You're trying to hurry up to get to AIT, because you're not actually starting your—I can't remember how--I think it was about four months is how long AIT was. And so you're not advanced to individual training. You're not starting your advanced individual training to be a medic until you leave the reception area. So, I remember, you know, being really nervous sitting at reception, and I'm trying to get to the actual starting process, because I just want to be done with the training, and I want to see my girlfriend, and just see people again. So, and then somehow, something ended up happening. I wasn't supposed to get to go for a couple of weeks. I remember, I was supposed to have to wait. But then, all of a sudden, the opening happened, and they're like, "Hey, grab your stuff." You know, and I was happy, because I was going with my buddy Rudy Nunez, because he was also going to that group. So, we ended up being--I think it was called Charlie, it was, like, Charlie Med. That's what our company was at AIT. So, we grabbed all our gear, you know, go to Charlie Med. And in a lot of ways, like, I remember getting the whole rules and everything, and it was a lot of--a lot--more relaxed than Basic Training. I mean, we had phone cards, and we were allowed to use phone cards after a certain time in the evening. They had some payphones there, and we could use it on our own time. Because at Basic Training, I mean, they had the phones there, but it was only--I think it was, like, once a week, or maybe a couple times--I don't--it was a set schedule, though, as to when you could use the phone. And at AIT, it wasn't like that. And then also, after you had been at AIT for so long, you were allowed to go off into San Antonio for a night. Like, you know, after you had been there for maybe a couple weeks, or a month or something, you got to a phase where you could spend a night in a hotel in San Antonio with other guys, your buddies, or whoever you want, or by yourself. And so, yeah, so we get to AIT, I get there, get set up. And then we really started hitting, you know, the medical stuff. I mean, it was all just about being a medic. Our first half of the training was so you could become a

nationally registered emergency medical technician. So, you have to get your NREMT. And that was all the focus, was on civilian NREMT for that first half of the training. And during that time, we went into a classroom, I mean, and we were in the classroom from--I don't want to say 9:00 to 5:00, but it was basically, like, 9:00 to 5:00. I mean, you were in there most of the day. And you'd take a couple breaks, and you had civilian instructors that were paramedics or something. Some of them might've been prior service in the military. And they taught you, yeah, how to be an EMT. And I remember really liking the training as itself. I was really starting to feel like, hey, this is going to be something different, this is cool, and you know, really starting to like your job. You kind of start, you know, molding to that character. Well, I'm going to be a medic, Foreign Infantry Unit, or I'm going to be a combat medic. I'm, you know, somebody that's really going to be important in a line unit. And so, you kind of just take it more seriously, a lot more serious, yeah, it starts to seem more serious. And they brought—and we were right by Brooke Army Medical Center. No, not BAMC. Is that BAMC? Yeah, Brooke Army Medical Center in Fort—yeah, in San Antonio. Yes, because Walter Reed is in Washington. So yes, BAMC. So, Brook Army Medical Center. And that was the--it's like one of the major trauma units for all of the guys coming back, you know, that are wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. And the major burn ward is there. So, all of the burn, the worst burn victims, you know, from the war are put there. And some of these guys that are recuperating, that are, like, actually able to leave, and can go around, like, they would bring them, you know, to the company. And it would be a guy that was just horribly, you know, like, mutilated or maimed, you know, from an IED, or whatever it was. And he'd be, like, "You guys are so important, you know, a medic saved my life." You know, it'd be stuff like that. So, you really, you know, just started feeling like hey, this is a really important job. And then you would see guys, you know, around at the PXs and stuff that just didn't have noses, and ears, and no hair, and you could--you know, they were just horribly wounded. And you're like oh man, like, this is going to be crazy. And yeah. So, it really opens your eyes to the whole thing. And we did some clinical training at Brooke Army Medical Center, where we were set up with different clinics, and we did some--and this was all the way at the end, though, of the training, that we actually did the clinicals. The first half was the EMT, like I was saying, and the second half was all combat medic training. So then it was--you were taught by, you know, E7s, you know, sergeant first class, kind of rank, maybe staff sergeants. Guys, males and females that had--you know, most of them had a Combat Medical Badge, you know, a CMB, or a EFMB, the Expert Field Medical Badge. And then so, you know, if they had these badges, we just kind of were like, well, they have been in something, or have done something to warrant it. So, we believed them. We took what they said real seriously, and we all thought--just like the Drill Sergeants at Basic Training, we looked at these medical NCOs that had been combat medics

and what not, and we just thought they were like gods, you know? They just had done everything, and they had been in it. And so, yeah. And a lot of that training for that second week was out in the field too. I mean, we would go out and--it was lots of simulations, you know, like, all the time it was simulations, and you would run down your different checklists, you know, like, the ABCs, airway, breathing, circulation. You know, and you would just do those kind of things over and over on mannequins. And doing the training, you know, you'd put on the tourniquets, and you'd put on the Asherman Chest Seals, and you'd put in the nasopharyngeal, and you'd practice, you know, giving IVs. So, it was a lot of hands on. And we would do it to ourselves also. You know, it was, like, after you practiced on the dummy, it was, like, "Well, get your battle buddy, and give him an IV, you know?" So, we did a lot of actual training on people, and we actually put in, you know, nasopharyngeals to practice that. The tubes in the nose for breathing and what not. And yeah, that was lots of stations. And I remember being a medic, a lot of it is just, you know, these--having these checklists. Like, this is what you do every time. Like, make sure that the scene is safe before you enter it. You know, those kind of things. And then, you know, after you make sure yourself is--that you're safe, then you're checking for the consciousness, you know, or the breathing. So, it was a lot of checklists, and just engraining in your head exactly how you're going to treat a casualty when you see one. So, it's just like muscle memory. That's what they say in the Army all the time, muscle memory. So, yeah. And yeah, that was most of my medic training. Then it kind of culminated in this field training exercise at the end, you know, the FTX or whatever. And that was probably for about--that was a few days, maybe a week. And then it was, like, running. You know, you'd go out on a patrol, and one person would be designated, this is the medic. And you would have whatever kind of scenario it was. And you would just run through all of these different scenarios in the field training exercise. And yeah, so and a lot of the mannequins were--I mean, considering they're mannequins, some of them bled, and they'd talk, and they'd have real pulses. You know, if it didn't have a distal pulse or a radial pulse, then you know, check another, brachial pulse, and things like that. So, yeah. So, that was the training.

Thompson: Did you feel as though the training was enough to prepare you for being a combat medic? Did you feel when you finished that you were ready to go?

Schellpeper: Yeah, I felt pretty confident that I knew what I needed to do. But I think that you--I don't know, maybe, like, ignorance is bliss. You just don't know what it's really like, and what you're really going to need to do. Like, you don't even know how to really interact with an actual patient by the time you leave. Like, you think you do, and you think you know, but I mean, dealing with a person that doesn't know you that's having the worst day of their life, more than likely, is a whole different scenario, then. You

know, feeling a mannequin that starts moaning once you move it, you know? I mean, I've felt—it definitely laid the foundation for what I needed to actually become a pretty competent medic. So, I definitely think it was good training, overall. So, yeah. Yeah, so--

Thompson: Okay, so you finish AIT, you're ready to go. Where was your first duty station? Who was that with, what types of things did you do? Just talk about the pre-Iraq service.

Schellpeper: Well, when I—when I got my first orders cut right out of AIT, it was a big letdown. I was, like, convinced that I was--you know, just thought I'd, for sure, be going to some frontline unit, or Combat Arms. I just--that was, like, what I had been trained at this place, and that's just what I—at Fort Sam. So, that's what I was expecting. But then I got orders to go back to Fort Sill, in Lawton, Oklahoma. And I was like, "Well, what am I going to do?" And I was really upset, and really just, like, man, this stinks because I really hated Lawton. I just didn't like Oklahoma, Lawton, and I didn't like the area that I saw of it, and the temperature. And I just was, like, there's no, like, deploying units out here. I mean, there's some, but there's nobody that's--it's not like a deployment base, where it's constant, you know, you're on a rotation, you're always going. And I ended up getting sent to a clinic, like, a hospital, Reynolds Army Community Hospital. And I was assigned to an artillery unit, but they would, like, send all of these, like, medics up to the hospital to work. Like, they kept some down on the line, and then they also had some up at the hospital. And you would work between a day clinic and an emergency room that they had up there, and you'd just kind of, like, switch off and on. And, like, when I--at the time, you know, I really disliked it, and when I first was sent there, I remember just telling everybody, like, you know, who deploys, like, how do I get into a unit that's doing something, like, this isn't what I was training to do. You know, I didn't want to just go to a hospital and be a nurse, you know? It's not what I wanted to do. But I mean, I got just so much hands-on experience there, and I learned how to actually be, like, a medical professional there. I had to do things, actual medical, you know procedures. And I worked under a PA, Captain Gordon. And he just taught me so much. You know, he taught me about suturing, like, how to do stitches, you know, how to just evaluate a patient, how to talk to them, make them feel comfortable so they want to tell you what's going on. How to find out what's going on, you know, how to ask the right questions. And a lot of it, it was injuries and illnesses, you know? It could be sprained ankles, it could be whatever. But I mean, that's what a medic is dealing with most of the time. You know, 90 percent of the time, a medic isn't treating combat injuries, he's treating his guys in his platoon that are, like, "Hey Doc, I woke up with a sore throat," you know? Or, "Hey Doc, my head hurts," you know? So, it's all of the things that you just need to know anyways. And so yeah, when I was there, you know, I worked in a

room, I had, like, a room, a treatment room, and a patient, they'd come in, and I'd interview them, basically. I'd screen them, like, "What do you need? Or what are you here for?" And figure out what's going on, I'd go back, I'd talk to Captain Gordon, I'd give him the story, you know, give him my opinion, which was always really cool, because he'd be like, "Well, what do you think?" You know, and that kind of challenged you to really try to figure out what's going on, and, like, "Well, how do you think we should solve this?" And so you really--I really just learned a lot about the basics of healthcare, and taking care of people. You know, I remember, yeah, doing stitches, I remember, like, there's a lot of people that I think you just get really dirty when you're out in the field a lot, and you can't clean that well. So, people would get, like, infections on their skin all the time, like, abscesses. Like, these big, thick, raised, puss-filled, nasty infections. And we'd have to cut them open, we'd lance them, squeeze them. So, lots of--I kind of set my stomach for things to come also, just getting used to being around, you know, things you're just not used to. You know, people vomiting, and blood, and puss, and infection, and--

Thompson: Is that a common medic experience, to go serve in a hospital after doing medic training?

Schellpeper: No, no, it's—well, that's the thing, a medic can either go—and I remember this at MEPS, you know, the guy is, like, "You could either be a dime in a dozen," as in you could be a medic in a hospital, and you're just one of the many that's working there. Or, you know, you're the guy, you're the one who's out on the line, and you're doc. And so yeah, it's pretty--it's kind of like half and half, you know? Obviously, the men know--males are more—I mean, they're going to go to the Combat Unit. Females aren't in the Combat Arms, they're not in the infantry, or the artillery, or the cavalry, like, line units themselves. Maybe in the headquarters of that unit, but not attached to the platoons. So, I think a lot of the guys, you know, go out—I mean, but a lot of guys are also sent to hospitals too, you know? But when I was at the hospital, I mean, it was about 50/50 female/male. When I was in the infantry, it was all 100 percent male. So--

Thompson: How long were you at the hospital for?

Schellpeper: A year, I was there for about a year. Maybe even a little longer.

Thompson: When did you get there?

Schellpeper: Yeah, I was just going to—just trying to break that one down in my head. I think I got there in February of—no, it was later than that, it was March. Yeah, it was March of 2006, I want to say. And then I was there until—

yeah, so I was over there a year. I was there until, I think, October of 2007.

Thompson: Okay. And from that hospital, you went to—

Schellpeper: Then I reenlisted.

Thompson: Reenlisted? Okay.

Schellpeper: And then I was sent to—I reenlisted for Fort Carson. And that's when I was sent to 2-8. And then I was in 2-8, you know, from 2007 to 2011.

Thompson: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about the decision to reenlist? What drove you to do that?

Schellpeper: I wanted to get where the action was, and to do something. I was, like, how the hell can I get out of this hospital and get to a unit that's deploying? And they're, like, "Well, you can reenlist, you know, your window's open." You know, so that window being the time that you're allowed to actually start reenlisting. And people, a lot of times, you sign up for that first four years of service, you don't have to complete the four years, I mean, I think it's after, like, two years or something, you can reenlist for more years. So, that was what really—that was the only thing I remember wanting to reenlist for. And when I was—I was probably twenty-one. No, not even twenty-one, you know, I was twenty when I reenlisted. So, I still felt like there's plenty of years ahead, two years is nothing. And, you know, whatever, an extra two years isn't going to make or break my life, change it in any way. So, yeah, that's when I was like--and then I decided on Fort Carson because the girl I was still seeing, her family still lived in Colorado, and that's where she was at and what not. So, I wanted to go back to Colorado. So yeah, I chose Fort Carson.

Thompson: Okay. Talk a little bit about Fort Carson. How was getting there, and serving in the unit? What kind of things changed?

Schellpeper: Yeah, I think once--it was like once I got back to Fort Carson, it was almost like I was going back to Basic Training. Because all of a sudden, people were, like, getting yelled at by NCOs again all the time. Because at the hospital, it was a totally, like, relaxed atmosphere. I mean, we wore scrubs most of the time, you know? So, we didn't even have rank on our uniforms that we were wearing whatsoever. You know, we talked really informally, you know, we did PT really informally. You know, we worked out the physical training we did. Because our schedule, we had to be there at the hospital when people started PT. So, I mean, we were having to do it, you know, later in the day, and we just kind of did it on our own. You know our own thing. It really wasn't, you know, formalized. So, it was

really easygoing. So, getting back to Fort Carson, though, yeah—and I didn't find out my unit right away. I went through some—it was another reception thing, where everybody who is doing a PCS, a permanent change of station, is all from all over the military, or all over the Army, you know, all over the country. And they're all, everyone coming to Fort Carson, you know, is getting grouped up in this reception group. And that's where, you know, you're doing more—I don't know it's always some kind of slideshow training and lecture. And who knows all of the PowerPoints that they taught us, but I know we sat there for, you know, more PowerPoints. And then just going through the whole, you know, change of station process, you know, getting your name into whatever you have to get it into, and signing up on all of the stations. There's just a massive checklist of things you have to do every time you PCS. So, getting there, talk to some guys that were infantry, you know, that had been in some stuff. And, like, well, that really--you know, I want to be a medic in an infantry unit. You know, hopefully I don't get sent to another—an-- a rear. I don't want to--I want to be in a line unit, you know, whatever. So, finally, you know, we get our orders cut down, and I'm like—I find out I'm in the 8th Infantry Regiment, you know, 2-8. And I was like, oh, you know, sweet. I'm getting sent, finally. At least I reenlisted, and I'm getting sent to an infantry unit, you know? That's what I thought. So, we get there, we get taken down to—I don't remember what we called the area. I mean, it was just the unit area that--I don't know, there's some--there's a name for it, but I mean, it's the unit area. We get down there, and that's, like, just like a row of offices, like, a row of rooms, and in each room was a company. You know, A Company was at the start, and then B, C, you know, and so on. And all of the companies were there, and the headquarters. And so, I get down there, and like I was saying, the first thing I'm seeing is Privates all over the place, Private as in rank Private, and they're just doing pushups, and getting yelled at by Sergeants. And I'm like, "Man, I'm back in, you know, training or whatever." I came on a holiday, or it was close to a holiday, so everyone was getting off for a four-day. And so, they kind of like left me to my own devices. And yeah, I mean, it was just--it was, like, well, this was what you wanted, and now here you are. And it was really--I mean, the first day we did PT, I remember just almost passing out from not only being in the higher altitude, but just from being back in real PT, and doing it with guys who all they are about is, like, seeing who is more badass, and more--you know, who's the toughest, who's the strongest, who can go the longest, who can sing cadence the loudest. And that was the other thing, it was like you had to sing cadence, you know, the whole time you ran, you know? And it was just, like, you couldn't breathe, you know? You're trying to sing, and sing cadence, the CO is right there, yelling at you, "I want to hear you go louder!" You know, he's got some crazy accent; he was from, like, Puerto Rico or something. He's, like, "You guys are so quiet!" But, yeah. So, oh yeah. Yeah, it was—I forgot, I was going to say a story, I

forgot a story that I wanted to tell. I think it's a good one. And this is from AIT, and we were supposed to be turning our lights off when we were supposed to be going to sleep. And I thought--and I thought it was another soldier--or it was just some other private, some lower-ranking guy telling me to turn off the lights. And we were laying in bed, and I was like--someone's like, "Turn your lights out!" And I was like, "Lick my left nut!" And it was a drill sergeant. And he ran up to me, and you know, he was like, you know, just saying all sorts of swear words and cursing me out. And he's, like, "Come find me tomorrow morning at PT, come find me." And I, like, was so petrified. And I went and found him, and I remember, he made me low crawl, you know, push a water bottle around a canteen, a canteen, on the ground with my face, you know, for like an hour. And I never, you know, talked back again to an upper-ranking individual. I never talked back--I didn't know it was a drill sergeant when I said it. But I always made sure. I was, like, you know, watch what you say, because that was some serious pain that he made me endure. And he really punished me badly. But yeah, that was my AIT story that I was going to tell you earlier when I said I had a good one from AIT. But back--yeah--

Thompson: Yeah, so getting back to Fort Carson.

Schellpeper: Back to Fort Carson. We were on, like, a schedule. So, everything we did, all of the training we did, like, we were set for deployment. You know, as soon as I got there, it was, like, you're out of the deployment schedule, getting ready to go to Iraq or whatever. And I think at that time, Iraq was still kind of, like, the main focus for the military, and for just the public at large. Like, that's what people talked about. We had two brigades from 4th ID, from 4th Infantry Division, that were in Iraq when I got there. The 2nd Brigade and the 3rd—or, sorry. The 3rd Brigade and the 4th Brigade were in Iraq. And I was a part of 2nd Brigade. And so, the whole news, the whole local news, was just dominated, you know, by these guys being in Iraq, and the things--I mean, they went through a lot of crap. And just had a lot of people get hurt while they were over there. And so, that was just always on your mind. And then the unit saying, "Yeah, well hey, you're on--you're set for it." So, I think I just kind of approached everything with a whole new seriousness. You know, everything you did. But at the same time, it didn't seem real. Like, you didn't take it as seriously as you probably should've, because you were always, you know, tired, you're always hungry, or you always, like, just wanted to do something else, you know? So, it always just kind of seemed surreal. And obviously, the guys--probably half of the unit, if not more, had already done a deployment. And so, those guys are always probably a lot more focused, and a lot more, like, trying to keep your butt in line, and hey, this is for real. And yeah, so everything we did was on a schedule. And yeah, I'm trying to think, you know, the first training exercise we went on. I had never even--

you know, besides being in Basic and AIT, I had never gone on an actual field training exercise. And so, I was in a mechanized infantry unit, 2-8 was a mechanized infantry. So, we had Bradleys, which are, like, smaller than tanks. I mean, somebody in the--a civilian would look at it and say, "Hey, that's a tank." But it was, like, an armored vehicle with, like, I don't remember, a 25-millimeter cannon on it, 25 mic-mic, 22 mic-mic. So, you know, we had the Bradleys, they're a tracked vehicle, and then we also had the Abram tanks, so the big daddies with the big guns on them. So, everything that we did was basically--or, revolved around qualifying with these tanks, like, you qualify with your weapon; we had to qualify with the tanks and with the Bradleys. And that always seemed kind of weird to me, because it was, like, we're never going to take these with us to Iraq. We didn't take any of them, they had some over there, I think, already for us that we used, but I mean, it was always, like, a weird thing, that's what we really put our--we were, like, practicing for conventional warfare when we were really about to go fight an asymmetric war, or regular war, whatever.

Thompson: Were you aware of that when you were in training, or was that something you'd thought about afterwards? That difference between what you trained for, and what you actually did? Was the unit aware that they weren't going to be doing this kind of stuff?

Schellpeper: Yeah, I don't know. You know, I think in my mind, I just didn't know anything. So, I just went with the flow. And no, I think, like, when I look back on it, you know, I can tell, hey, that--once we got towards the end of the training, then we started practicing for being, like, light infantry and not mechanized infantry. That's when they actually started making guys use, like, Humvees, and do dismounted patrols, and practice for, like, long-range ambush or whatever, all of these different things. And that was when we went to NTC at Camp Irwin, out in California.

Thompson: And NTC is--

Schellpeper: Oh, the National Training Center.

Thompson: Okay.

Schellpeper: There's NTC and JRTC, the Joint Reserve—or Joint--well, I shouldn't have said it, I don't know. But I just know there's a JRTC in Fort Polk, Louisiana. And you either do your deployment training there or at the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California. And so yeah, we went to Fort Irwin for ours. But that's when we actually started doing, you know--we trained--the command knew what the mission was in Iraq, and that's what we trained for that month there. So, you know, they knew--we didn't know, but the command knew at that time. And so, we--that's what we were training for.

Thompson: How long was it between when you arrived at Fort Carson and when you went to NTC? How long were you on that deployment schedule?

Schellpeper: I remember really sticking, being with my unit in October. So, and that's when I really started doing things with them, was in, like, October and November. And we went to NTC in April. Yeah, we went to NTC in April for a month. So, I mean, you know--

Thompson: So, you weren't there for very long?

Schellpeper: No, and that was the deployment--I mean, that's the schedule for Fort Carson. I mean, you know, you--I came in, you know, maybe a couple months into the training, but I mean, it's like an eight-month training cycle, and then you go, and then you deploy. Then you come back for a year, and you're doing your cycle, and then you're going again. And so, that's what a lot of these--I mean, a lot of the guys in the unit, you know, were two or three--I mean, they had run the gamut. They had gone, they knew the routine, you know? And so, yeah, it wasn't a long time in between. And then it was actually quite a while though, in between NTC and deploying. I mean, almost just as long. We got back in May or so. June, July, August, well, not really long, but then we had, you know, three months in between before we actually deployed to Iraq. So, yeah, and the training that we did, while we were training, like, being like an actual medic, I mean, I was pushed out all over the place. I did some training with the actual aid station, because for the medics, you have your medical platoon, and you're all organically assigned to the headquarters, and Headquarters Company of the battalion. And so, you're all organically assigned to the headquarters. However, you know, each company within the battalion, so Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, and Echo, Echo was our engineer battalion. The other ones were Combined Arms battalion, between infantry and tankers. Every single one of those companies had, you know, three or four medics assigned to them. So, although you're still technically part of HHC, you know, you're kicked out to the company, to the line units. And then from there, you know, each guy, depending on the platoons, and how many--you know, it's usually like a red, white, and blue platoon or whatever. And so then, each platoon will have a medic assigned to them. And the guys that aren't assigned on the line are kept in the Battalion Aid Station. And the Battalion Aid Station is where you have your PA, you know, who's usually, like, a Captain or something, they're Officers. And then you'll have your battalion surgeon, who is, you know, probably a Major. And yeah, so the Officers, the surgeon and the PA kind of oversee the Battalion Aid Station, which is this first echelon of care. You know, in a conventional war, the fighting is going on, and people are, like, driving back from the frontline taking you to the Aid Station. You're getting stabilized in the Aid Station, helicopter, you know, is coming to

pick you up, and then they're taking you to the CASH or something, to the Combat Area Support Hospital, something like that. But so, and I worked in the Battalion Aid Station for a little while when I first got there, I wasn't assigned to a line company. Did training in there, you know, they would bring guys in, pretend--you know, the guys that were out in the companies that were doing the training, they would be wounded, or shot, like, in practice. Not actually wounded or anything, but they're given a card, they're given a card saying hey, this is your injury, you know, go back to the Aid Station. So, we did that for a while, and then I was assigned to Charlie Company, which was one of the tanker companies, before they were combined with the infantry, and I was a senior medic there, and did some of the training with them. And I really liked being out on the line. And then supposedly, since I did such a great job, you know, the Lieutenant Colonel of our battalion, Lt. Colonel Cardinoly [sp??], you know, he was setting up a Personal Security Detail or whatever, the PSD, for him, for himself, for him and the Sergeant Major, Sgt. Major Joyce, and so they pulled me for that. So, I got pulled out from being, you know, the Senior Line Medic of Charlie Company to being, you know, the PSD. We ended up calling it the CSD, the Commander Security Detail, I was a CSD Medic. And that was just for a platoon, we had just a platoon. And it was, you know, probably twenty-five guys or something, you know? And that was--I was, yeah, the medic for that platoon. And then I started doing—and this was--the time that I was pulled to this CSD was, you know, we went to NTC, the National Training Center in April, I was probably pulled out a couple months before that. Maybe in March or in February during a training exercise, to start working with the CSD. And, yeah, so and then once I was with the CSD, I mean, it wasn't nearly as much, like, medical training. Like, then it was just, you know, you're just driving around with him everywhere, and he's doing his own type of training, you know, with the local shake [sic], or the local whatever, when we're out on a training mission. He's meeting with the local leadership, and we're going to be there to provide protection. Or we're going to provide, you know, security while he's convoying to a different location. It was all--the training all focused on becoming a Personal Security Detail for the Commander. And yeah, so that's what we did when we went to NTC. And we did something like that, and yeah, we spent a lot of time. We were very busy, I mean, I don't think we were as busy as the line companies, who probably were up doing training, shooting at ranges all the time. But I mean, we were almost there because he wanted to be a part of every company that was doing every training exercise. And, you know, obviously, you don't get to that high of a rank in the military by being, like, someone that likes to sit around. So, the guy wants to just go, go, go, go, go. And it was, like, we slept in the Humvees many a night, you know, freezing your butt off, or sweating your butt off, whatever it was, if it's hot or cold. And we slept in the Humvees a lot, and we didn't leave the Humvees a lot. Yeah, we did lots of driving around, following him.

Thompson: What kind of contact with your family did you have at this time? Did they know you were going over, and preparing for that?

Schellpeper: Yeah, I think I told them that that was in the works, and that we were probably going to deploy. I mean, that was why I was, you know, trying to get to Colorado to begin with. But I mean, there's so much hearsay and so much rumor in the military. You know, you always are hearing this is going to happen, or you know, so it's like I'm sure that they were kind of like me in the sense that, well, this is real, but it doesn't--it's, like, surreal, you know? It's going to--we know it's going to happen, but it just doesn't seem like it will. And I mean I always had contact, though, with my mom and grandma, I mean, I always called them, like, every couple of weeks. And if I was out in the field, out training, which we did lots of once I got to 2-8, I mean, I would say that we were out on training exercises--we were out every month doing some sort of training exercise. And, you know, it was all the time. We did lots of training. So, yeah, I had contact with them. And then I had a new girlfriend by this time, who I kept in contact with. I always, like, tried to sneak my cellphone out and do some texts. A lot of the times, we weren't supposed to have, you know, our cellphones with us, we were supposed to be completely cut off from everybody, not having any sort of contact. So, I would try to sneak it, you know, and maybe late at night, if I'm on a cot or something, get under the sleeping bag and text. But so yeah, you know, that was the kind of contact that I had.

Thompson: Okay. So, then talk about a little bit if you could, just before getting ready to go, you know, what that experience was like, and then the actual deployment, the beginning of that.

Schellpeper: Okay. Well, I think, like, the NTC was really where it was getting ready to go, National Training Center Fort Irwin when the company--you know, the different companies, they were assigned to their different roles. One was going to be at a combat outpost, you know, COP-4, or whatever. Another one was going to be at a--I don't know, JCC, or yeah, I don't know if that's Joint Control Center.

Thompson: Joint Command Center.

Schellpeper: Yeah, Joint Command Center. But so, we had a couple of them that were going to be out in the city at the JCC with some of the actual local Iraqis. So yeah, that was getting the idea of the mission, we started getting a better idea of what's going to actually be happening in Iraq, and--You know, I always thought that the training was pretty realistic at NTC. You know, they had some people, I think a lot of them were--I don't know if they were, you know, refugees from Iraq that--I mean, most of them spoke

Arabic, and they were from Iraq. I don't know if they'd come over recently, or how long it was, but they were role players, they were called. And yeah, they--it was kind of crazy, because I don't know if they lived out on these, like, training grounds sometimes or what, but there was little communities set up in these different training areas full of, yeah, Arabic speakers. So, you start kind of learning how to—or you're supposed to be learning how to interact, you know, with, like, a foreign culture, and kind of get some basic words, or *keef* or whatever, or *yalla*, like, hurry up or stop. You know, whatever. You're supposed to, like, practice that when the villagers will come up to you and, like--grouping around you, or smothering you, trying to talk to you, whatever, barter with you. So, I remember that part of the training. And then as things started getting closer, I think we had our orders cut in June. You know something like that. It was, like, a month or two before that our orders were cut. And it was, like, you know, you're going to Iraq, here's your orders, it says it right here. And there was a lot of talk, I remember, right at this time, as to whether we were going to go to Afghanistan or Iraq. And, you know, at the time, it seemed like totally—I was, like, “What do you mean Afghanistan or Iraq? Like, there's nothing happening in Afghanistan, like, this war is going to be over soon.” I mean, that was--you know, this is mid to late 2008. I guess I really hadn't--I mean, it wasn't really big in the media yet, like, how things were going there. And so, when you started hearing about Afghanistan, you were, like, “Well, that doesn't make any sense. We need to go to Iraq. Like, that's where the things are going on, and that's where the fighting is happening.” When I look back, though now I'm like, “Well, that makes a lot of sense, because that was exactly, like, the time that things really started getting bad in Afghanistan, and things started quieting down in Iraq.” And we were diverting soldiers from Iraq to Afghanistan. But that was, like, a big thing. It was for, like, a week or two, we're, like, “No, we're going to Afghanistan. No, we're going to Iraq.” It was trying to figure that out. And then I also remember another part was figuring out where we were actually going to go in Iraq. You know, people were saying we're going to go to--I don't know how to say it, Mosul, or Mosul. I don't know the proper pronunciation. Mosul, Mosul. Yeah, so it was Mosul, or Kirkuk, or Diwaniyah, or it's, like, where are we going to go? So, that was another big talk, about trying to figure that out. Finally, we figured out we were going to Diwaniyah. And guys had been there before between 2005 when 2-8 had gone, they kind of flipped around in that area. I mean, they were Iskandariya, I don't know if that was a FOB or a city. But they were a little farther north of Diwaniyah. And they had done some operations in that area when some of the Shia militias were kicking up, and so they were, like, “Oh, Diwaniyah, you know, it's a bad area.” And the people were like, “There's going to be a lot of stuff happening there.” So, I remember thinking like, you know, and then we have all of these--we have these weird meetings, like, with the medics, and they'd be like, “Well, we expect to lose, you know, this many men. And

this is how many casualties we're expecting." And I was like, you know-- it was weird stuff when I look back on it, because a lot of it didn't prove to be true at all. So, that was getting ready to go.

Thompson: We're gonna take a brief pause.

Schellpeper: Yeah.

[break in recording] [01:26:34]

Thompson: Okay, so we're back. So, right before we took a break there, we were talking about just before you deployed. And some of the rumors that were going around about where you were--

Schellpeper: Yeah, where we were going to go.

Thompson: --and specifically, some of the stuff that the medics were seeing, in terms of how many casualties they were expecting.

Schellpeper: Right, the Platoon Leader, Lieutenant Szymanski, he was the one that was talking about all of that stuff. He was—yeah, he was, like, the Platoon Leader for the medics. He wasn't an actual medic, but he was, like, a Medical Service Officer, or something. But, you know, obviously, the PA and the Captains are not—the PA and the surgeon, they're not running the Officer day-to-day side of it; they're most just the medical guys. Anyways, yeah, Lt. Szymanski, he was the guy, he was the one talking about it. Yeah, so getting briefings on that, getting very nervous. My Platoon Sergeant of the CSD, Staff Sergeant Trujilo, he was a real--he was, like, a real soldier, he was a real infantryman kind of guy. Like, you know, he had done a couple deployments before, and he really knew his stuff, so he--I remember he had us doing, you know, like, a house clearing, and it was, like—oh, what was it, like, fives and twenty-fives, like, checking outside of your door for the IED, and then looking out twenty-five yards. You know, he had all of these little things that he had learned in his prior deployments, and so he really emphasized those, wanted us to get to know it. So, I remember our platoon, we'd kind of sneak off and just do this training. And then we weren't doing that, there was someone in his barracks room that we would go hang out in, and watch movies. You know, so we'd have the whole platoon. And we got really close, you know, just during that time. And I remember guys coming in with hangovers, and they'd be, like, "Doc, give me an IV." So, we'd be hanging out in the room watching, in the barracks room watching movies, giving guys IVs, fluids and stuff, so they could get hydrated. Yeah, so that was getting ready to go, and spent time--my girlfriend, she flew out she had been flying back and forth between Wisconsin during this time. And so, she flew out and spent--he had finished college, or was close to it. And

she flew out to hang out with me for a few weeks, and then we flew back to Wisconsin together for my final leave before I left. And yeah, I mean, it was a very—like, a really nervous time. I mean, I sold a lot of things, I sold the car I had, I got a storage unit in Colorado with another guy in my battalion, Will Pascal his name was, and he was a Cav Scout. And I always thought Cav Scouts were funny as, like, I can't believe I ever wanted to be a Cav Scout, because they're, like, might as well have just been an infantryman, you know, if you're going to be a Cav Scout. Because all they ever do is get crap that they're not infantry, you know? So, yeah. So, we shared a storage container, and we loaded up all our stuff in it, you know? All of the moving, got everything out of the apartment, you know? I remember keep telling my mom, you know, if I don't come back, give this to who and who, so and so, and telling her all of this stuff. And yeah, I just remember doing that kind of stuff, just being sad, and also having fun doing the things you can. Finally, get ready for the deployment; it's at the end of August, early September 2008. My mom comes out; she flies out to Colorado to see me off. That night before, the thing that sticks out in my mind the most is, you know, we have this massive packing list of all of the things that we're supposed to bring with us, you know, that fit in two duffle bags, and your rucksack, probably. And so, I remember just trying to get these stuffed. And I'd already done a bunch of inspections before, lots of inspections before we deployed, of these bags, making sure you have all of the things in your bag that is on the deployment list, the inventory list. And yeah, so I remember this night before, just sitting in this hotel room with my mom, like, just trying to get all of this crap, you know, in this bag. And it just won't shut, because there's just so much stuff that I have to bring with me. And the next day, we line up out in this parking lot outside of one of the gyms, like, our brigade gym, or whatever. And we line up in the parking lot, and have all our bags in rows, say goodbye to our family. You know, my mom always—I smoked cigarettes at the time, and she just--she hated it. But I remember saying, you know, like, "I forgot my cigarettes, you know, my carton of cigarettes back at the CP," or whatever it was called, the Company Area. And she's, like, "Well, you better go back and get 'em." She was just weird, because you know; I guess she just didn't care about the cigarettes anymore. She's, like, "He's about to go to Iraq. So, he's going to need them." You know, and so I got the--I went back and got the carton of cigarettes. Yeah, and so then we load up on the buses, a bunch of white buses. And then it's like, yeah, the unknown begins. You sit on the bus, you go to a gym, you sit in the gym, take--get in another bus, you know, while we're at the gym, there was a bunch of stuff from the--oh, the--not the Red Cross, but the other veterans organi--

Thompson: USO?

Schellpeper: Oh yeah, the USO, a bunch of stuff from the USO. You know, there's video games, and different kinds of foods, you know, all of the stuff that you want while you're hanging out at this gym, you know, trying to make you comfortable and relax. I remember my biggest concern; my Platoon Sergeant had told me to make sure, you know, all of the guys are drinking water. That was, like, my main mission, you know, was make sure everyone stays hydrated. So, right away, I'm bugging people, "Hey, you drinking water, man?" It's like, "Doc, we've been gone for, like, an hour, shut up. We don't need to drink any water." So, did that, hung out in the gym for a while, and then we take the next bus, take the bus to the airport at Colorado Springs. Not the airport proper, but some area in the back of the airport, in this different area, this different runway. They drive us up on the buses, basically, to this plane, Omni Air International, that was the company. Big white plane, looks just like a civilian plane. You know, we all line up, I can't remember all of the bags we have at this point, if we're still carrying all of these bags that we have or not, if we've given them somewhere else so they can be loaded in. But on the airplane, I know that we carried probably our body armor, our helmet, and our weapon. And assault pack, like, a backpack, you know? I think those are the things that we actually took with us on the airplane. So, it was interesting finding, you know, the room for all of those things, you know, on a tight aircraft. You know, people complain about legroom already as it is, well, you're definitely packed in, you know, on that airplane. So, we all get in a line, and there's some, you know, high-ranking individual, or whatever, that's sitting outside the airplane shaking everybody's hands. Shake your hand, you know, thank you for doing what you're about to do. Get on the plane, and then, yeah, the flight over was just being nervous, and more anxiety, more unknown, guys that have already been there telling you what it's going to be like. You know, they're the ones that are, you know, "Oh, it's fine." They're the calm ones, and the guys that haven't been there, they're the ones that are just nervous, asking all of the questions. And compared to the other plane rides I had back and forth from that area, which was like a couple, I guess, all together, but this one was definitely the quickest. I mean, it flew by. And before I know it, we're getting ready to get into Kuwait, and we're getting ready to land. And I look down, you know, see the lights, and we land, get off the airplane, and I just remember--the first thing I remember is just this hot, humid, moist air just blasting me as I step off--you know, step onto the ramp going down. And I was, like, that's got to be, like, the prop from the airplane, you know? There's no way that's real air. And walked away from the airplane, and it was the same feeling, you know, hot. And I was, like, holy crap. And it was, you know, midnight, 1:00 in the morning. I mean, it was really late at night, or early in the morning, I don't remember what time it was. And then we all just hung out, smoked cigarettes, and waited for the next bus to take us to whatever--I think we went to Camp Virginia, Camp Arifjan, I don't know. You know some camp in Kuwait. And I also remember during this time,

which is really crazy that it happened, is my best friend growing up, you know, my best friend my whole life, his name's Dustin, and he was a Marine, he is a Marine still, and he had joined, like, the Marines a year or two before me. And he was from the same area in Wisconsin that I am. And we ended up bumping into each other in Camp Virginia, or Camp Buehring, I don't remember which one it was, in Kuwait. You know, and we knew we were going to be there around the same time, but, like, he had texted me, and I got a text--I don't know, I found out. But I ended up going down to this Marine area, and you know, asking for him, and you know, finally found him, and we hung out for a day. And it was just so crazy, that here we are, you know, two kids from Oconomowoc, and now we're in Kuwait together, and you know, one of us is in the Army, and the other is in the Marines. And yeah, so that--and both of us were always so into the military growing up, so it was funny that was, you know, the two of us were there. Yeah, and Kuwait was hot, I think, you know, we thought--it was funny, it's just kind of like Basic Training, where you can't wait to leave reception so you can get to the real thing. It's like, well, you can't wait to leave Kuwait, so you can get to Iraq, so you can just start doing your actual mission. You know, people say that Iraq is hot--or, you know, not as hot as Kuwait. "Man, it's not as hot as Kuwait, you know, we'll get out of here, it won't be as hot." And we did a lot of training in Kuwait, and we were there for--I don't know, it was, like, two weeks maybe, we were in Kuwait. It wasn't super long, but it was long enough, and you just kind of see, you know, cement bunkers all over the place. You know, the little one-man shelter, built of cement, you know, that a guy can get in. You know, see, like, the guard posts, you see the berm, the big huge sand mound that surrounds the whole camp, and all of the barbed wire. And it's, like, holy crap, this is, like, crazy. I mean, all of the stuff that is here right now is just amazing. Like all of the military equipment. So, and then yeah, Kuwait was really hot, we did--our Platoon Sergeant, Sgt. Trujilo, he had us gear up all the time and do, like, runs with all of our stuff, just running around. He's, like, "Yeah, you're going to, you know, acclimate to it," which always was the dumbest thing to me, because there's no way can you acclimate your body. You know, maybe you can stand it, but just by putting yourself in pain doesn't acclimate you to the weather, you know? So, that was always one that people always said, we'd do PT when it was 10 degrees, and they'd be, like, oh, you're getting used to it if you don't wear as much clothes. You know, if you wear too much, you won't get used to it, you know? But so yeah, we did a lot of running out in the desert. And then we did a lot of training for the Personal Security Detail. We did, like--it was some really cool training. It was probably some of the coolest training I'd had the whole time, and a lot of it was live fire. And it would be, like, you know, protecting. You know, you were getting--it was almost kind of like getting a Secret Service crash course or something, you know? Like, some of the guys were getting, you know, like, defensive driving kind of stuff. You'd learn how to whip a

vehicle around, or other guys would be how to secure the principal, you know, your Commander. How to drag him out, or how to fire from a vehicle, you know, all of these different—it was pretty cool, you know? And a lot of them the trainer, the guys that were training us were civilians that were, you know, prior service, prior military. And they were all super high-speed guys. Yeah, they knew a lot. And so we did that, and I have some great pictures from this, where--you know, because we're wearing all our gear, and it's 110, 115 out while we're doing this training during the day, and we get back to our, like, this weird shelter that's, like, covered in insulation, and, like, foam or something, you know, to keep it cool inside these big dome tents, and pictures of us with all our gear off, just our uniforms are just drenched, you know? It just looks like someone poured a bucket of water over all of us. So, it was really hot, and I saw a lot of camels there. You know, there's wild dogs all over the place. Yeah, so it was just, like, oh, you know, I'm here. And I think we all took so many pictures in Kuwait. Like, everybody was trying to take pictures in Kuwait because it was just a new thing, and you were there. And that novelty wore off really fast. You know, and you didn't do it as much in Iraq, I feel like. But yeah, so that's what we did in Kuwait.

Thompson: What was the food and the accommodations like in Kuwait?

Schellpeper: Yeah, when we weren't off doing these, like, little special unique trainings—when we were doing, like, our little unique extra training things, we were going to these shelters that I was trying to describe earlier, like, just covered in this insulation and foam, some kind of hardening insulation. And it would be just like a regular container, like, a storage container, like, a big one that was covered in all of this foam, and turned into a camp--into a tent or whatever. But on actual Camp Buehring, or Camp Arifjan, or Virginia, I was at all of them at some point or another, they were large tents, just massive, yeah, like, really big tan or green tents. And, you know, maybe 100 or 200 guys could fit in it, and it was just--yeah, lined up, like, you know, row, after row, after row of a cot. And yeah, the accommodations, for the most part, for most people, not all of the time, but a lot of the time, for our battalion, were actually probably better in Iraq than they were in Kuwait. You know, because--but yeah, so we'll get to that. So, yeah, that's what we were actually sleeping in, sleeping on in Kuwait. It was just the cots in the big open bays. And yeah, going to the dining facilities, and--

Thompson: How was the food there?

Schellpeper: The food in Kuwait, I--yeah, I always thought the food was, like, college food, you know? It was the institutionalized food, made for the masses, but it wasn't horrible. You know, and you'd go into line, and you know, you could get your--I don't remember what they called, like, the fat food.

There was always a name for it, you know, it was, like, the greasy stuff. You could go in the fat boy line, or whatever. So, you could either get, you know, the fat boy food, the fast food, the fries and the burger, and the hot dog or something, or you can go and get the chicken a la king, like, the main meal that they had that was healthier. So, yeah, I mean, they had everything, it was free, you know, "free." You didn't have to pay any currency for it, maybe your paying with your time and your body, but you got--yeah, they had big fridges full of Gatorade, and full of energy drinks, and full of the Iraqi soda. Yeah, Kuwaiti soda. I guess we had other names for it. But yeah. So, it was pretty good overall. I liked the food. [laughing] In Kuwait.

Thompson: In Kuwait. When you found out you were going to move north, can you talk about that experience, and actually going north and settling into your position in that?

Schellpeper: Yeah, I mean, I guess it probably was different throughout the whole years of how people moved to their different locations. Us, we took a plane, you know, from Kuwait to Baghdad, a military transport plane. You know, like, a C130, or something. I don't know which one--what it was, but it was some type of cargo Air Force plane. And flying in that plane, you know, was, like, a whole different level of being cramped than the civilian plane. Because on the cargo plane, it was just row, upon row, upon row of maybe ten to fifteen seats across. So, the guy who was way in the middle was totally screwed. And everybody had to wear their full gear on it. So, you're wearing your body armor, and your Kevlar helmet, and what not. And then you also have, you know, your bags, not the big bags, because those are all packed on the crates, they're all crated up. That's one of the jobs that you're doing while you're in Kuwait, one of the details is all of the guys go and get their duffle bags on a big crate, and get it all cinched together, so it can be transported around. There was lots of those types of things, like, where you're getting your gear--or, you're unloading your gear, or loading it back up, because obviously, everything has to be brought over there. So, you have all of these connexes, all of these metal, you know, shipping containers that are just full of everything that the unit needs for that year. And of course the thing you need is always at the way back. So, in order to get it, you're taking everything out, so it's lots of unload and load. And, you know, the British, when we saw them later in our deployment, they actually had connexes with doors on, you know, multiple sides. So, if they had to get something, it would just be right there. Too bad, you know, the US military didn't, you know, go on a--go with similar connexes. Yeah, so the quad-conn, the connex, whatever you want to call it, you know, there's all sorts of different shipping containers. So then, yeah, we're getting on the plane, we get on the Air Force aircraft. And they tell us, you know, we're doing the combat incline--or the ascent and descent. So, we're going to go up really fast, and we're going to go

down really fast. So, you know, be ready, some people might get sick. And be ready for that. And, you know, to me, I'd flown on planes plenty, so it was definitely a different--you know, it felt like a rollercoaster, that's just kind of what it reminded me of. Like, your stomach just drops because you're ascending so fast, you're descending so fast.

Thompson: What was the reason for that? Why?

Schellpeper: They did that for fire from--enemy fire. I mean, they were worried about, like, missiles or rockets. I mean, that was the perfect score for any kind of insurgent, to take out, you know, a transport plane full of hundreds of people. And the easiest time to take it out is, you know, when you're landing or taking off, I suppose, because that's when you're the closest to the ground. So, yeah, I--they want to get up as fast as they can, and get down as fast as they can. So, that was why we did the combat ascent and descent. I don't know if the way up guys were puking, but the way down, guys were puking. You know, people had out the puke bags, and they were vomiting. Yeah, I mean, it was a drop. So, we get to Baghdad, by Baghdad International Airport. And that was when I think I really just kind of--I just saw, like, the might, you know, of the American military. I mean, there was just planes all over the place, you know, buildings that, like, had been destroyed were rebuilt. You know, guys that had been there on prior deployments were, like, "Oh, the last time I was here, that was blown up. Or, you know, that wasn't here, you know?" So, they had all of these, like, shelters set up for the transient troops, you know, the guys that are in between where they're going. We were at--by Baghdad International Airport for maybe a day or two, but the whole time we were there, we were waiting for our helicopter. We had to be, you know, on and ready to go, ready to take off. So, yeah, we did a lot of sitting around at the--with all of this gear on, like, in the heat, you know, of the day. And then later on during the night, and guys are just falling asleep on their--using their pack as a pillow, or whatever. You know, staying your chalk, I don't remember the name, but we had some kind of traveling order that we were all supposed to stay in. So, lots of waiting. Finally, the helicopters come, they're loading us up in Chinooks. They crammed those Chinooks, you know, completely full. Just completely packed. I mean, every single seat, every person you could get in there was along the outside of the Chinook. And then on the inside, on the interior, you know, we're all sitting around on, like, the edges on the--yeah, like, surrounding all of our bags. And in between us, you know, we have these crates of bags. So, I mean, this whole thing was just packed. And I remember, it was, like, that day or day before, you know, a helicopter had just been shot down in Iraq. And I was just, like, "Man, holy shit. You know, I'm not going to be able to move out of this thing if it gets hit, or there's damage, or whatever, you know?" Just a really claustrophobic feeling. So yeah, we took that, and it was during the night. We took the Chinooks, landed in FOB Echo, in a

Forward Operation Base Echo, which was in Al Diwaniyah, and that's in the south, it's about--I don't know if it's like sixty to seventy miles south of Baghdad. Route MSR Tampa, the Military Supply Route, the main MSR that runs through Iraq was Tampa. And that went from north to south. And yeah, we were right off MSR Tampa, and yeah, it was sixty to seventy miles south of Baghdad, it was basically a Shia area, it was, like, ninety, probably more than that, percent Shia. I mean, yeah, there weren't really--there wasn't a lot of Sunnis there that I knew of. And we get to Diwaniyah, we land, and it's a multinational base. You know, so you have Ukrainian soldiers there, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mongolia, you know, Polish--did I say Polish already? But I mean, all of these different countries that have a contingent, you know, in multinational core Iraq. And the Mongolians picked us up. And I was, like, man, these guys--and they were driving us crazy, I remember, in their transport trucks or whatever. So yeah, and just my first impressions of FOB Echo were man, this is really--I mean, it was--I don't know, I mean, compared to the FOBs in Baghdad, it was, like, nothing. I'm sure it was still a larger FOB overall, but it was pretty small. I mean, you could see the wire, or whatever, you know, you have the whole thing is surrounded in these big cement blocks, and then another berm, and then a line of barbed wire. And I mean, if you went up on one of the--I mean, they had ramps, you know, that could drive up. You could drive a Humvee up on a dirt ramp, so you could look out over all of these protective barriers, so you could fire on the enemy if they're trying to infiltrate the camp. And so, I mean, the wall was right there, you could walk up and you could see Diwaniyah. You're basically right in the city. It was an old Iraqi army base. And that was a thing, on one section of our FOB, it was--the majority of it was surrounded by this Iraqi army base. I think we were only vulnerable, you know, at one point of it, that we had direct contact between, you know, the base, and Diwaniyah. But most of it, yeah, was enclosed by this Iraqi army compound. So, we had an extra layer of protection. But I thought, yeah, it was, like, man, it was really like basic livings, you know, there was a lot of shipping containers that had been turned into living arrangements, and everything was covered in camouflage netting. Yeah, I mean, I think--I mean, Americans had been there a lot, but they weren't one of the largest groups there. So, I mean, maybe, like, the accommodations were not at the same level, maybe, as some other FOBs, just because there wasn't as many Americans there. It was basically ran by the Poles. And the Poles, they didn't want to leave the FOB. You know, they kind of just hung out. And it was funny because, you know, the Poles, they'd drive around in their Humvees just blasting techno, you know, blasting music, going crazy, doing doughnuts, having fun. And then, you know, you had the American military, that everything's got to be disciplined and rigid. And they'd always tell us, you know, "You guys are like the Russians, man! You're like the Soviets, you know? You guys are so stiff! You don't have any fun." And I always thought that really stuck with me. You know, that

the American army was just like the Soviet army, and that's who they saw it, the Poles. That's how they saw it.

Thompson: Did you have a lot of interaction with the other forces there, the Ukrainians, and the Mongolians on a day-to-day basis?

Schellpeper: I mean, we could, I mean, yeah, I mean, they ate with us, and we all went to the same chow hall. I mean, we didn't go out on patrol together, or anything like that, but I mean, yeah, you know, you could talk to them. I know some guys were, like, they were brewing liquor, vodka, the Poles were, you know? They had their own little homebrewing operation going on. I think that was okay with their army. And some of the guys, American guys, would sneak over, and you know, they'd be like, "Hey, you want to get some liquor?" And they'd always--I never did it, but I know I remember hearing those stories, guys telling me, "Yeah, I got some moonshine from the Poles!" So, yeah. We interacted, and then the other thing was, I think that the Polish girls, they always said that they sunbathe topless on top of their hooches, or chews, or whatever. So, I think that was, like, guys are always, like, trying to go up where the female Polish soldiers were, trying to, like, catch a glimpse of them or something. So, but yeah, there was--I mean, there was quite a bit of interaction. And then towards the end of our time, the Poles withdrew, you know, they were out of Iraq.

Thompson: Did you form any relationships that still last today with any of those--

Schellpeper: The foreign guys?

Thompson: With the foreign guys?

Schellpeper: Oh, no, no. I did some bartering and trading. I never--I mean, I just remember, like, chance interactions. I never recall, like, having real in-depth conversations, and I thought they were really cool soldiers, I always thought that because they kind of just--like, they do what works, you know? And they are trying to have fun while they're in this shithole, and you know, so it was a lot different, you know, from the way that we-- us Americans operated.

Thompson: You talked a little bit about the accommodations. Could you expand on, sort of, that?

Schellpeper: Yeah.

Thompson: And the food and just the surroundings a little bit.

Schellpeper: When we first got to FOB Echo, we were in an old Iraqi army barracks, basically is what it was. It was just, like, a house. It wasn't even a house, it was just, like, a room, a big room. And we were probably more cramped there than I was in Basic Training or anywhere else. I mean, you know, we had a couple rows of bunks, actual bunks, not just the bed, but you know, actual bunks that were in these rooms. And, you know, we probably had fifty guys in this not that large of a room, and it was very tight quarters for our--they gave us, like--I think they each gave us an egg crate for a mattress, and I thought it was great at first, but then, like, about a week in, I had formed a mold into it, where it was no longer the egg crate, it just had worn thin. So yeah, I remember getting the egg crates, and then they gave us some kind of weird blanket too. I don't know where it was made; it's just like this fleece kind of furry blanket. Yeah, I don't know, probably from a Middle Eastern country or something, that they bought it, they contracted to buy it. So yeah, those were, you know, in our barracks, that's, like, what we were sleeping in. And it was our whole platoon in there, you know? Everybody, we were all together, and there might've been another platoon in there that was doing something, that was also staying in there, because obviously, our platoon was only like twenty-five guys, and there was more guys than that in there. So, that was the living accommodations at that time. Within a month or two, we moved to the cans, which we call them--which was, like, a small shipping container turned into, like, a home. And that was only two guys, you know, two guys stayed in the can. And a lot of, like, the guys that had been there previously, they were--that was, like, "Man, we've got to get in a can, it's going to be good once you get in a can, you know? You're going to get a fridge, and, you know?" And those guys did, like, the guys that had been there before, and they knew how to barter and figure it all out, they had some sweet set-up cans. They'd have the Xbox or the PlayStation, you know, watching movies. You know, they had refrigerators. I mean, I don't think I had any of that, you know, in my can. I don't think I really caught onto it. But, you know, once we got--and the can, I stayed with this guy, his name was Schultz, and he was an infantryman, he was in my platoon. And he was about the same age, and we had hung out a little bit before deploying, you know, we had done a couple things together. So, it was cool, and he was a really funny guy. I mean, he was hilarious, and yeah, I really liked him a lot. And then in those cans, it wasn't a bunk bed, it was just separated beds. You know, and when we kind of just set up the room how we wanted. I remember putting lots of posters up on the wall of girls, like, Megan Fox was big, I think then. So, we had that stuff, and all of this different stuff we just put up on the walls of pictures of America, of American things. And in between each can was, you know, sandbags piled up, and we had reinforced that when we got there. I mean, we did a lot of reinforcing of our protection of our--yeah, of sandbags. We did a lot of sandbags. And the purpose of that was, like, you know, by the time I was in Iraq, like, offensive operations had really slowed down a lot, and a lot

of it was, like, you're kind of just waiting for something to come to you, you know? You know, the rockets, artillery, that kind of--the indirect fire. That was the biggest thing you were worried about on the FOB, was the indirect fire. And so, that was really commonplace, you know, still. And so, we built the sandbags up in between the chews, the cans, thinking that well, if one gets blown up, at least the one next to it's not going to get blown up too. And that was very much the case within, like, I don't know, it was a month or so later when, you know, a couple rockets just completely obliterated a can that nobody was in, but people were on both sides of the other ones. And they were both--they are all--didn't get touched because of that, those sandbags. Yeah, so and then the Dining Facility, there was a large Dining Facility on FOB Echo. And it was probably about a five-minute, not even, a couple-minute walk away. The Dining Facility was really great. Lots of good food, you could get ice cream in there if you wanted. You could get tons of energy drinks. I mean, they really hooked you up, I mean, that's how I always felt. I was like, "Man, they're taking care of Americans over here," because you're just not in the best of circumstances, and I mean, they really--the US gave us so many more accommodations than the other countries that I saw, you know? I mean, later on when we went to Basra, I mean, the British, they didn't even have even close to the amount of stuff that we did, you know? So, and they didn't have--they had to pay for a lot of their stuff too. And we didn't have to--you know, we could just grab whatever drink we wanted. So, yeah. Dining Facility--yeah, it was good, the food was good.

Thompson: Does anything else about the FOB stick out to you? Anything memorable from that?

Schellpeper: Just lots of mortars, and rockets. I mean, that place--I don't know, like, I don't--I've seen a lot of YouTube videos too, I would look it up. Seems like there's just a lot of incoming there. So, it was lots of--you hear the sirens, "Incoming! Incoming! Incoming!" You know, whatever kind of loudspeaker system they had set up with the incoming. And that really got ingrained in my head. Yeah, I mean, yeah, that was--those were the things that really stuck out to me, is just the amount of indirect rocket fire, and running to--the first time I did it, I remember being really scared, because I mean, I was on the phone with my girlfriend, and it was--sounded like it was right next to me, and I mean, it wasn't, it was pretty far away, but just the first time you hear something blow up, that's meant for you or others around you, it always sounds a lot closer. And so, I remember, like, grabbing my Kevlar, like, my helmet, and just sprinting to the bunker, and all of these people just, like, laughing at me, like, "You're such an idiot man, you don't need that helmet. You'll be fine; they're not that close right now." And so yeah, that stuck out. And then we started--I mean, that was really became what our, like, mission was at FOB Echo. Like, if we were doing anything, we were going out to interrupt the indirect fire

teams. So, we had patrols set up all the time. You know, guys were just out on, you know--they'd set up an OP, and you would just sit out there. And we did it a couple times, where we'd have to rotate out for other platoons, because most of the time, the CSD platoon that I was part of, you know, we were doing the thing with the Commander, so we weren't really having to pull the legwork, but a couple of times when the other platoons, if they weren't able to cover down on that, then they'd send us out there, and you know, we'd sit out there in the middle of the night, in the pitch black, and have the night vision goggles, and you'd be looking around, looking for indirect fire teams. And so that was the biggest thing that was there, was just trying to, you know, interrupt that.

Thompson: Maybe take us through your typical day there. What your mission was, and what you did.

Schellpeper: Okay.

Thompson: And some of the circumstances that stick out in your mind.

Schellpeper: Okay. Our--well, in this—our platoon's mission was to protect the Commander, protect Lt. Col. Cardinoly. That was our mission. So, wherever he went, that's where we were going. And so, each day, we were going somewhere. And at that time, I mean, I guess that was, like, what the danger was, just being out on the road, just leaving the FOB, just being out, going around, I mean, that was where--because we weren't going after the guys, so we're like, we're just going to go out here, and pretty much put up a sign and say hey, you know, this is us, take a cheap shot at us, we can shoot back at you, but we're not going to come look for you. And so, we just drove around on these roads and just, like, scared shitless a lot of times, because there were still IEDs going off every day, you know, all the time. I mean, definitely not like they were, you know, year or two before. But, you know, for us, that was enough anyways. And so, we just drove around in these uparmored Humvees. I think they're called 11-14s, or something like that. And we had, you know, 50-cals, and 50-caliber machine guns that we posted on the top, we didn't have any of the mark--whatever, the Mark-19s, yeah, the automatic grenade launchers, we didn't have anything like that on our setup. We had, like, the 240 Bravos, and the 50-cals, and just the lighter machine guns set up on our Humvees. And we usually roll with, like, four or five trucks, you know, filled with everyone. And every seat would be full, and the Commander, Col. Cardinoly, some days we'd go to the Combat Outpost where Alpha Company was stationed. You know, some days we'd go to the JCC, that it was downtown Diwaniyah, we'd go see what's going on with Comanche Company, with C Company, and he was a TAC. Yeah, but so--and then we'd follow them out on their mission, you know? We'd go and rendezvous with this company and this day, they're going to go out and,

you know, clear this canal, or they're going to do patrol on this canal, and then we'd go walk around with them while they're, you know, doing it. And, like, we're like bodyguards. Well, I wasn't, because I'm, like, the medic, I'm just kind of walking next to Col. Cardinoly. But, you know, the other guys are, you know, in a circle, or in some kind of shape where they're just protecting him. They're, like, Secret Service for Lt. Col. Cardinoly. So, that was what we did, and we interacted, you know, like, with the Iraqi--the IA, the Iraqi Army a lot--the Iraqi Police. I mean, he would have to go speak with the Iraqi Police. And so, you know, I remember talking to a lot of--spent a lot of time at Iraqi Police stations, and yeah, I always think now, I look back on that and I say, "Man, if the stuff that was--the type of, you know, friendly fire contact that happens in Afghanistan, I mean, we were perfect targets for that, because we spent all our time with the Iraqis, you know?" But it didn't seem like it was as bad in Iraq that they were doing--was it the blue on blue, is that what they're calling it? Yeah. But yeah, so, we did that, we drove around a lot. We spent a lot of time on the road. I mean, sometimes, we would go up to different FOBs where different--our sister battalions were stationed. You know, we had just our battalion was at FOB Echo. We had our other numerous battalions that were stationed in other FOBs, in other areas. So, we'd go link up with them. Yeah, and oh, you know, I remember one of the things that we did up there was a roll call, we did a final roll call for soldiers that had--it was from, I think, 316 is the battalion, Field Artillery. They were driving around in a Humvee, this truck full of guys, it was, like, three, four, or five guys, I don't remember how many it was, and they, you know, drove into a canal, drowned. And they all couldn't get out, and they all died. And we went to a final roll call for that, you know, where they set out all of the boots, and they set out the weapon, and they'd call out the soldier's name, and that really stuck with me. Yeah, that really stuck with me, and just the whole thought, like, man, these guys just died drowning in a Humvee. Like, again, what are we doing right now, anyways? You know, it was, like, what are we doing over here? It was kind of, like, senseless. You know, like, we're not going after the enemy anymore, we're not trying to find them, we're just waiting for them to do something to us, or people are going to die from accidents. And I saw a guy even before we went, like, in Kuwait, and he died of a heart attack, you know, in Kuwait from the desert, the heat, or something. And it was, like, all of these guys, and the guys that just died from not even combat, just from being deployed. And so that was always, like, weird. Just, like, man, how does that happen?

Thompson: Maybe expand on that a little bit. How did that make you feel, did you—and did you talk with some of the other guys in the unit, and how they felt about the mission?

Schellpeper: Well, I think we just were, like, “Oh yeah,” I mean, we talked about the mission. And we were, like, “Man, this is,” you know I think a lot of time, we thought about, like, the end of Vietnam, you know? The guys, they were just, like, “What are we doing here? You know, we’re not going for the enemy, we’re trying to give it over to the Iraqis, you know, we’re trying to get them to take over responsibility.” But, nobody trusts the Iraqis, we looked down on them a lot of the time, you know, we were like, “Man, these people are stupid,” a lot of the time. And I mean, there are some that we obviously probably treated with some respect. But I think the whole thing, we just didn’t trust anyone, because we didn’t know who the enemy was, and I mean, we didn’t--yeah, it was just constant, like, unknown, like, what is the mission, what are we doing, and this is, like, when Afghanistan started to ramp up, and guys are like, “Well, I wish I was just in Afghanistan right now, you know? We’d be much better off if we’re actually, like, you know, doing our job and out there, you know, doing what we’re supposed to be doing, as opposed to just, you know, being babysitters for this FOB, or for the Iraqis, or for whatever it was.” So, I think, you know, we talked about that a lot. You know, I think the higher-ranking NCOs, they tried to like, you know, “This is the mission, this is what we need to do, we still have a very important job to do.” But yeah, and then I mean, once we--our platoon actually was in an IED, and people actually got hurt, and then it was really, like, “This is really fucking stupid.” You know, like, this is--sorry for my language. And then we were really starting to just question everything, and, like, “Well, why doesn’t the Colonel just take a helicopter? Like, what the hell do we have to go out and actually, like, be out in this for? Like, why do we have to put ourselves at risk just so he can have a meeting with the Captain later in the day? Just because he wants to, like, drive with his Humvees?” You know, there was a lot of, like, just anger, and, like, man, they’re being selfish, or they’re not looking out for our best interests. You know, like, the command, the chain of command, they’re still trying to play Rambo or something. So, yeah.

Thompson: You mentioned your unit was--your platoon was hit by an IED. Can you talk about that experience a little bit?

Schellpeper: Yup. That was the only, like, you know, major contact I had my whole time when I was over there. And for a lot of people, it’s probably not even that major. But for me, it was, like, the biggest thing. It was on November 1st, so we’d been there for a month or two. And we were going to Najaf, and here’s another example of somebody dying not in combat, but an American soldier had ran over--from our battalion, had ran over an Iraqi soldier with an MRAP, with a mine-resistant ambush-proof--I don’t know, I don’t think that was--something like that, it’s an MRAP, it’s a larger armored vehicle. And so, this vehicle had, yeah, killed a--they had killed an Iraqi soldier, so not in any combat. Killed him by accident, so the

battalion needs to compensate the family for this death, America, you know, is paying people when they get killed, you know, Iraqis. And obviously, the money that they're getting paid is nothing, you know, compared to what they're going to pay an American. And I don't have any qualms with that, but I mean, it was a very small dollar amount. And I don't know, you know, the Colonel, Col. Cardinoly was, like, "We need to go to Najaf so we can pay this death condolence. We needed to pay this condolence. Like us personally, we need to go there." And so, we're like okay, you know, we're going to go to Najaf. They say it's, like, a couple hours away, and it's going to be a drive. And I remember, you know, talking to my girlfriend, because I had bought an Iraqi cellphone while I was over there. And you could get pretty good reception in most of the places, and you know, telling her, "Hopefully, we don't get blown up, we're going to be driving for a long-ass time." You know, the more drive, the more likely you're going to probably hit an IED or something, you know? So we're driving, and we'd probably been—you know, we passed a couple little villages and towns, and probably been driving for, like, an hour or something. And yeah, then, like, you know, we have--I don't remember how many MRAPs and how many Humvees we rolled with, but yeah, the lead Humvee is--and you know, I don't remember exactly how it all happened, but I just remember, like, we're all--you know, when we're all sitting in the Humvee, and we have our headsets on and we're talking, so a lot of the noise is blurred out and blotted out. And I don't know if someone yells, or someone is, like, what they--you know, starts swearing, but I look up and, you know, like, two Humvees ahead, the lead Humvee is just, you know, this massive black smoke cloud. Just a huge plume going way up in the sky, and you can't see the truck at all. And I'm riding with my Platoon Sergeant. We have a new Platoon Sergeant by this time, his name is Sgt. Zeisy[??], and I don't know, I was just--he's like, "Doc, we get," and I was like, "What's wrong, what's going on, and what's happened to them, are they okay?" He's like, "I don't know, Doc. I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. As soon as we get up there, jump out of the fucking Humvee, and get over there, and see what the hell is going on." And I don't know if that was maybe, like, not the best idea for me to just run out there right away or what, but that was the plan, because they couldn't communicate with them over the radio, like, it was completely silent. So, I don't know how far we stopped, you know, from this truck. You know, I don't think we wanted to go in the kill zone or whatever. And you know, a lot of people had said, hey, well, we should've pushed them out of the kill zone, but I don't even know if that was practical, because the Humvee was just--it wasn't moving, it was completely--I think some of the axles were rocked and bent. I mean, it wasn't, like, completely destroyed, this Humvee or whatever. But it was damaged to the point where I don't think you could've pushed it anyways, you know, forward. So, I jumped out, and I ran towards this Humvee, and it felt like, you know, an eternity, it felt like I was running, exposed for a long time, and

yeah, it--yeah, it was crazy. It was scary, and I was like--all I could think about--because, like, in the medic training school, so many times, you know, they had actual videos of medics, you know, responding to these IEDs, and then the secondary would go off, and they would just get obliterated. And they're, like, "That's what's going to happen to you if there's a secondary IED." And so, that was, like, all I could think of is, like, "Well, there's going to be a secondary IED and I'm just going to get blown up into nothing." And I was thinking about that. I mean, I was--I think I was so afraid though about letting everybody else down, and looking like wussy, like, a coward or something, like, I just didn't want to look like a coward. So, you know, I just ran out, got out of the Humvee, ran down exposed. I mean, the guys in the other cars are saying that they're seeing triggermen, so they're engaging. So, I'm hearing small arms fire going on around me. You know, I don't know if it's coming towards me or going out, because I haven't been in enough firefights to know what the hell the difference would be anyways. So, I'm just a bunch of gunfire, 50-cals going on. And I run up to the Humvee, and I don't--I just thought, I was, like, "Holy crap man, this thing just looks mangled, and there's still just, like, smoke hanging all over the place." And I remember, like, I don't know if I actually felt heat or fire, like, I remember feeling fire and heat, but I don't think there was any. Maybe it was, like, my brain thinking this thing was just hit by an explosive so it's hot. But so I remember kind of like getting this door handle, I was on the back-left side, you know, cranking it open, and just gore. You know, just looking inside of there, and just everyone's sprawled out, and just blood all over the place. And I mean, I don't know what I thought, if I thought people were going to be dead, or I don't know. I just started, like, talking to people. The gunner, I think they told me that. I think someone told me that when I opened the door, because I was, like, "What's going on, you know, is everybody all right, what's going on, you know?" And someone was, like, "It's Schultz," you know, it's my roommate. And he's like, "He's fucked up! Schultz is really hurt." And he's laying just sprawled out there and, like, his legs are just covered in blood, and just ripped up, and I just--yeah, I just started putting on tourniquets onto him. And then the other guys get up there, probably within fifteen to twenty seconds after I get in. And I'm like, hey--I think I asked him to help me put a tourniquet on the other leg of Schultz. And, you know, we start unloading the guys, talking to them. Everybody's been hit, except the driver, who is just completely concussed, and, like, out of it, doesn't know what's going on. You know, the driver, he's in pretty good shape. The TC, that's on the--the Troop Commander, the guy that's riding shotgun, he's got a big piece of shrapnel on the back of his neck, and he's bleeding all over from his neck. He's screaming, he's in the most pain of everybody, because he's got a piece of shrapnel in the back of his neck. And the Lieutenant that was in the back-left, where the EFP actually hit, it was an EFP that hit them, not just one of the actual rocket rounds, but the explosively-formed penetrators, with

the copper slug, or whatever. It's, like, a five or six EFP pack that hits them. So, it's got all of these slug holes. One goes through the windshield, the bulletproof windshield, and just turns all of that glass into shrapnel. So, the Lieutenant's face is just ripped up, and just blood all over the place. And I don't know if he was talking or not. That was his injuries. And then the other guy, you know, I told the gunner, the gunners, he had a broken back, and then his legs were just--obviously, they weren't gone, thank God, but they were just cut up from shrapnel, and tore up. And then the guy in the back-right seat, his face is burnt. If he gets by--I don't know, his whole left side of his face is burnt, you know, ears, like, peeling because it's burnt so bad. So, we get them all out, pull up an MRAP, me and another guy somehow get Schultz onto a stretcher. Remember thinking, "Man, this is really heavy and really hard to carry," but you're, like, possessed you know, and your adrenaline's going. And we somehow lift him up, and get him on the stretcher, and then carry him into the MRAP. The other guys are somehow shuffled into the MRAP, and then I just start going down the list. You know, all of the things--all of the years, the two or three years that I've been training to be a medic, it all came down to that, you know, twenty- to thirty-minute period. You know everything that I had done. And if I hadn't learned that stuff, there's no way I would've been able to react to that situation, because it was just so fucked up, and there was--I mean, you know, there wasn't anybody dead, but man, it was just--you don't know how to deal with that stuff when you haven't seen it before, been around it. But I was definitely just, like, muscle memory. You know, just like they teach you in training, you just go down, you're just checking all of the things, you're checking for the bleeding, you're checking, you're talking to them. You know, you're cutting their clothes off, and you're redoing the bandages, and making sure everything's tied up. You know, starting the IVs, pushing the morphine, I gave morphine to Schultz and Sgt. Sheek[??], he was the guy with the shrapnel in the back of his neck, because he was just in the most pain out of anybody. Schultz just kept asking about his penis and his [laughing]--he's like, is it still--it's like the movies, "Is it still there? Is everything all right?" You know, asking, I'm like, "Dude, you're good, you're fine." And then he starts asking about his legs, because he can't feel his legs. And I'm like, "Well, that's because I've got these tight tourniquets on your legs, that's why you can't feel them." I'm like, "They're still there." Yeah, and it was just an eternity in the back of that MRAP. And you know, we're driving to the rendezvous with the air cover that we have, you know, with the Medevacs that come in. We had air cover, and they had just left before that IED happened, which was a really pain in the butt, because they could've definitely killed the triggerman if they had been with us. But yeah, so then we get to the LZ, or where we're going to meet up with the landing zone for the helicopter, and I remember feeling a lot of relief, running around, you know, without any of my--I had just, like, my body armor on, and didn't have my weapon or helmet. I

remember guys always telling me about that after, they're, like, "Doc, you look just so funny, so crazy," because in the military, you're always supposed to have all your gear on, you're always supposed to be trimmed up and ready to go, and, like, here I am just running around, whatever. And we have the Colonel there, just on any other occasion been bitching me out for not wearing my Kevlar, my helmet. And I'm yelling at him telling him what to do, and to call up the nine-line Medevac, and--well, I did before that. Yeah, I mean, it was crazy. And then, you know, the helicopters, two helicopters come. Both of them to pick up the wounded, we loaded up all five guys. I mean, even though the one guy hadn't had any physical--I guess, like, shrapnel or anything, or blast injuries, you know, he was concussed, and just disoriented. Yeah, and--yeah, it was crazy, just talking to the flight medics, you know, they come straight to me. Just, you know, I had played it out a million times, like, I knew this was how it was going to happen, and this is how I was trained to do it, and I wrote on all of the guys' arms and stuff, like, what medications and interventions I had given to them, and at what time. You know, and I had had help too, with some of the guys that were CLS, Combat Life Saver qualified, they helped me with some of the minor stuff, the stuff that I didn't think was as serious. And yeah, we got Sgt. Sheek's neck, kind of got something on there so it wasn't moving around as much, trying to get at--you know, I don't think we put a C-spine on it. No, we did. I think we put some kind of C-collar or some kind of neck collar on his neck, so he wasn't moving it around. But I just--yeah, he was just screaming the whole time, just the whole time, he was screaming. And yeah, then so we get the guys, and we unload them on--we get them onto the birds, and the birds take off, and, like, I just remember just feeling so relieved that it was--these guys were gone, and I started crying, because I was just so upset. Like, I wasn't bawling, but I was crying, you know? Just because I couldn't believe everything that just happened. And my adrenaline had been going a lot. So, I was coming down from that, you know? And then we had to get back in the Humvees and shit, and get ready to go back to the FOB. And I remember riding with some--I was with one of the Iraqis, and was, like, "Man, this is my first time that this has ever happened." Because he's sitting there, like, "Whatever, you know; I see this stuff all the time." He didn't even bat an eyelash the whole time. And I remember sitting there, and I was just shaking. And he put out his hand, and was just stable. And he's like, "Whatever." But he was, like, "You did a good job, you're all right, you did fine, you know?" I remember feeling good about that, and smoking cigarettes in the Humvee, and just trying to relax, and everyone's just kind of talking about what just happened. And, you know, when we got back to the FOB, we all kind of got out, and all of these guys, you know, are just patting me on the back, and just really--I don't know, they were just really cool about it because I mean, they just were happy that I think that they had a medic that--you know, like, I didn't second guess at all, I just jumped out. And I was, like, "Whatever man, I'm going

to help you if you need it.” So yeah, it was crazy. And then, we were all worried about the guys, because we didn’t really know what was going to happen with them, and how they were all turning out. I think we were most worried just about Schultz, because he had been so jacked up. And it was weird going back to my can, and he wasn’t there anymore, and just kind of sitting there alone, like, man, this just happened, and he’s gone, and you know, called my girlfriend. She’s like, “Well, you didn’t get blown up.” And I was, like, “Man, you don’t even know what just happened.” [laughing] So, yeah. And then slowly, the guys took--some of the guys came back and some of them didn’t. Schultz, he never came back, because he just couldn’t go back to duty. But Sgt. Sheek, he eventually came back, and Viegas came back, and Lt. Hoffman, they all just kind of slowly came back. And that felt good, you know, just having that closure, seeing them again. And yeah. I mean, that was, like, the craziest experience, you know, the whole time. And that’ll stick with me forever, no doubt about that.

Thompson: It certainly will. Do you keep in contact with any of those guys?

Schellpeper: I talk to Schultz sometimes, still. He’ll shoot me a text or something on the anniversary of the day. We’ll talk, he’ll say some stuff. Yeah, I mean, one of the guy’s wives wrote me a letter, it’s just crazy. Saying, like, thank you for doing everything you did. Yeah, it was crazy.

Thompson: So, that was towards the end of your deployment there?

Schellpeper: Oh, it was right at the beginning, it was a month or two in.

Thompson: Oh, that was a month or two in?

Schellpeper: Yeah.

Thompson: Okay, so talk about the rest of your deployment, if you--

Schellpeper: Yeah, well, and then from then on, I mean, we were just--you know, we were just nervous. And then we were scared, you know, then it was, like, this is for real? And you never know what’s going to happen every time you go out now. And they were all sure, you know, the Platoon Sergeants, like, this is just the beginning, this is going to be happening all the time now. You know, people are saying--Sadr--was that his name? Sadr?

Thompson: Muqtada.

Schellpeper: Muqtada al-Sadr, they were saying he had just, like, you know, left Iran, that he had just finished up some, like, training or clerical training there, and he was coming back to, you know, reorganize the *Jaysh al-mahdi* and

the JM was going to be back, and the Shia militias were going to start again. And none of that really, you know, panned out. I mean, things still happened, you know, but never to us again. Thank God. And I know, like, once it had happened, I was, like, man, I--you know, I wanted to do this, and I don't know if I--I don't know if I was happy for the experience or not, if I was just, like, wishing it never happened. But yeah, and then let's see, what did we do then? So, that was that, that was in, you know, November. The rest of the time, I think it was just, like, that took us probably, like, a couple months to really get back to normal after that, you know? Because it took a while for the platoon to restock up after. And we had new guys come in we had replacements, or whatever. We got a replacement for Schultz, and some of the other guys got switched out, I think, that were injured, eventually. They didn't stick with the platoon. And, let's see, yeah, and then we--I think in, like, March or April, we decided--like, something was happening with FOB Echo, they were drawing down. I think that was when the new--it was, like, a new kind of agreement between Iraq and America, like, the Americans were no longer going to be out in the cities, out patrolling, out doing things. You know, they were going to stay back, like, at the FOBs or something. I think that happened in, you know, March of that--of 2009. And so, our mission changed a lot, I mean, we thought we weren't doing a lot before that, but then after that, we really weren't doing a lot. You know, then we really--we didn't go out as much, we weren't out on these dismounted patrols with the companies, you know, going out there and following them, shadowing them, doing stuff. A lot of it, you know, because just centered around the FOB, and being on the FOB. And I think because of the drawdown in forces, or British forces in Basra, 2-8 was tasked to go down there to Basra. So, you know, in March or April, we did this combat from, you know, Diwaniyah to Basra, and Basra, you know, is on--just close to the border with Kuwait. I mean, it's on--the gulf? Yeah, it's on the gulf of--the Arabian Gulf. The Arabian Gulf - Persian Gulf, I guess it depends on how you look at it. But yeah, so driving down there was--that was, like, a whole--that was kind of like an operation in itself. You know, we had a really special way we were going to take, here's the checkpoints we were going to hit, you know, these were the groups we were going to move with. You know more kind of fear. Oh, well, this is what's going to happen on the way down, we're going to get hit by this many attacks. You know more stuff that never happened. Once we got down to Basra, I kind of just really started disliking my deployment, I remember. And I didn't like it that much before, but I really felt like we were doing a lot more in Diwaniyah than we were in Basra. I mean, because once we got down to Basra, the militias were less active, there was less enemy activity, and we were trying to reconstitute this whole FOB that had been completely under the control of the British, barely any Americans there. So, we had to do this, you know, it was just a lot of work. Like, I don't know, getting it under American control, I guess, and setting up things how the US has

their military installations setup. There's still a lot of, like, indirect fire there. There's still a lot of missiles and rockets, not as many as Diwaniyah. We had some kind of system there. I can't remember what it's called now, but, like, it would shoot down indirect fire that was, like, shot over us. So, like, you'd hear the, "Incoming! Incoming! Incoming!" And then all of a sudden, it'd be like—"brraaa!" you know, and it was this gun shooting up to blow up the missile in the air. And it made the loudest sound, you know, it was almost as scary as hearing that thing shoot, the incoming blow up around you, you know? It was so loud and crazy. And I don't even know how well it worked, but I mean, it seemed like it worked at the beginning, but then I don't know if they took it down, because it was within a month or two of us being there, a whole group of soldiers that were at a smoking pit, you know, got taken out and all were killed. You know, it wasn't in our battalion, it was one of the other units that was on the FOB. So, I think it was five guys that all got taken out by one rocket. It's just--you know, it was crazy, and they're all just smoking, hanging out on the FOB. Another example of guys dying, not even really trying to do anything, they're just smoking cigarettes, not even out on a mission. You know, not--nothing. So, it was just death, senseless death. And, you know, having seen guys get blown up a couple months earlier, it was like, you know, there's no difference between me and that guy that just got blown up and killed. You know, I'm not doing anything differently. I'm just hanging out, you know, doing whatever. And then the accommodations in Basra were also a lot more, like, primitive than the ones in Diwaniyah, because the British didn't have cans. They didn't have the little apartments. The thing that stuck out with me about their accommodations was they all slept underneath cinder blocks. They would basically build, like, a coffin out of cinder blocks, and then they would put a board on the top of it, and then they would put cinder blocks on top of the board, and they'd, like, bury--makes themselves a coffin, like a personal bunker, because they were all just so afraid of the IDF, you know, the indirect fire, coming in. You couldn't believe the amount of cinder blocks that these guys had built up inside of these tents. I mean, we had to dismantle them, you know, like, thousands of cinder blocks, you know, from every single tent of every single compound, just full of them. And we were always, like, "Man, you know, we're Americans; I'd rather sleep in some non-claustrophobic place and die than have to sleep in that shit." You know, I'm not going to sleep in that thing. You know, if it hits you right on the--it's going to kill you anyways, you know, who cares if these cinder blocks are here. So, and we gave the Brits a lot of crap, because they had stopped doing convoys by land. Like, they were doing everything by air, and they weren't leaving. And we were like, "Oh, you guys are wusses. Yeah, you don't--" And they're, like, "Oh, we don't give a shit about this place anymore. We just want to go home." And they definitely lived a lot--you know, they didn't have nearly the amount of luxuries that we had. I mean, a lot of their COPs, and you know, it's probably closer to what

Afghanistan would be like. You know, just cut off. They weren't having any kind of running shower; they were heating things up with the solar, doing the solar showers. They were just--and they didn't have nearly the amount of food and drinks that we did. They were so happy when we had our Dining Facility set up, because they could just take stuff for free, and they didn't have to pay for it. And they got all of the good Yank food, or whatever. And we worked with some medics. One from Wales was a female, and I thought she was really nice, and she kind of told me what governor meant. I was always wondering, I was, like, "What's governor?" She's like, "Oh, it's kind of like saying friend," a respectful way to an elder. "Hello, governor." So, that was--I just wanted to know what that meant, because of that movie *Snatch*, they always used that word. But so, we talked to the Brits, and we traded a lot of uniforms with them. You know, that was, like--it was so cool too because it was, like, a continuation of this prior grand alliance, you know, that had gone on from Great Britain and America for the last 100 years or whatever. And I just kind of thought about, you know, our forefathers, or whatever, doing the same thing with the Brits in World War I, and World War II. And we're doing the same thing with them now, trading our uniforms, and they've got some big sweet knife, and he's like, "Oh, I don't want to take it back, what do you want to give me for it?" And we did a lot of bartering with them. That was a lot of fun. Yeah, and then in Basra, our mission pretty much stayed similar to that of Diwaniyah, in the sense that we protected the Commander, and we followed him everywhere he went. And Basra was a much larger city than Diwaniyah, and it was, like, a lot--I remember it being much more dirty and polluted than Diwaniyah. They had a river that ran through the center of the city that was black sludge. And there was no water in it, it was just oil sludge that smelled horrible, and you were, like, oh, I know when I'm coming up on the center of the city, because I can smell it, you know? And people were walking through it. And you're always, like, man, how do these people do it? How do they live in this kind of stuff? Just the mud--I mean, it was just poverty, it was squalor. I mean, it was like that in Diwaniyah, but in Basra, it just seemed ten times that, just the squalor and filth was everywhere. And the dump, the city dump, like, surrounded the city almost. So, every time we're trying to get in the city, you know, the Commander had found a shortcut through the dump. So, we're driving through the garbage dump, and just people are living out in the garbage dump, the gypsies, like, like, the Iraqi gypsies, I don't know if that's the proper name, but there are these transient people that are living out in these landfills, and they're picking through and scavenging. I mean, the flies would just cover you from head to toe. You know, the second you drove through there, got out of the vehicle, whatever you did, I mean, you're whole Humvee, it'd just fill up with flies, crawling up your nose, and in your mouth, and in your ears. And yeah, there's a lot of filth in Basra. And yeah, I mean, I remember one of the things we started worrying about there in Basra was, like, some anti-

tank Russian grenade that had a parachute on it. People were, like, oh, this is the new thing, you know, they're going to be using this all the time, you know, watch the balconies, just because there's a lot of balconies or whatever in Basra. Like, they're going to drop this on top of us, and we're all going to die from that. So, you know, we watch out for these anti-tank grenades from Russia. And then another thing that had killed a Major--I think they said it was, like, the oldest officer killed in Iraq. And he had fought in Vietnam, which is, you know--and he was a Major now in the Army. And somebody had put an IED--one of the insurgents had put an IED underneath his Humvee when they were, like, leaving one of the combat outposts. And so, you know, now every time we're getting vehicles, we're looking underneath our Humvees to make sure that there's nothing placed underneath there. You know, when we're driving through any kind of congested area. I mean, we were already worried about someone maybe trying to throw a grenade in a window or something, but now maybe we're worried about some kind of, like, sticky bomb that's going to be stuck on there. So, yeah, that was--I would say that was some of the main things of Basra. And another thing that happened at Basra that was interesting was, while we were getting an IDF attack, we left with the Colonel to go try to find out where this was coming from for some reason. And we actually found this area. I don't know if he knew, or was given coordinates, or probably something. But we drove to this area where this--it was on a wall, you know, and, like, a metal fencepost was stuck horizontally along these--and it had two anchors on each side, and on this fencepost was just a line of rockets. You know, just set up, and it was like, I couldn't believe how ingenious the insurgents were. They had this massive artillery thing set up right here. And actually, a couple of them shot off while we were there. And they're heading for Basra, you know, the COB. And it was--you know, the Colonel's like, "Fun's coming your way!" And that was pretty crazy. And we obviously didn't touch. Because he was--one of the guys was, like, "Well, we got to kick it down, you know, we got to knock it over, we can't let it shoot to the FOB." And then another guy who had been there before was like, "Yeah, that thing's probably got an IED on it, you know, it's going to kill us all if you kick it over!" You know, so it was, like, call up EOD. EOD comes, they kick it over. [laughing] They did that, nothing happened, but it was funny. So, that was the last main thing that I remember experiencing in Iraq. And some good indirect barrages from artillery at Basra landed right in our area a couple times, and a couple guys had some real close calls, but nothing ever came of it. And yeah, and then we started getting ready to come home. Really excited for that. Just going back through Kuwait, going to--they had, like, movies and stuff set up, and you're back in Kuwait, and they had the tents set up. You know, it's funny, because when you're going to Iraq, and you see Kuwait, and you're like, "Oh, this is stupid, I want to keep going." And then you just, like, get back to Kuwait from Iraq, and it's like, "Oh, this is awesome! This is cake! This is great! I love

it!" And I had done one--during my time there for that year, I had, like, a one- or two-week leave. They were doing—it was called environmental--or some kind of leave, it was called EML. That's what we called it, I don't know what the acronym stands for. There's so many acronyms. But yeah, so we did EML. And the thing that sticks out with me about this trip, and that I bring it up is because on the plane ride from—I don't remember, it was from Iraq to Kuwait, they loaded this plane up with caskets, you know, from the soldiers that had been killed. And it had, you know, I don't know if it was two or five, somewhere in there, you know, it was a number of caskets in these silver metal caskets, just like you would see in a picture. And, you know, we're sitting there, you know, the people that are getting ready to go home for leave for a week or two, and then right there where your bags get packed usually, are the caskets instead. And it was just, like, oh man. You know, you just look at the casket, and you just sat there and looked at it. And it was right there in front of you. And it's just, like, who's in there, and whose family is that, and who's going to--you know, it was just crazy. It was—you really just saw the cost of the war, right there in front of you. It was really humbling. And you're, like, I don't want to be in that casket. But yeah, so that's why I brought that up, from EML. That was from the leave. So, yeah, fly back home, do the reserve of what we did coming there, you know, we take the planes. Actually no, we didn't take a helicopter, I'm sorry, we took a plane from Basra to Kuwait, took another plane from Kuwait to America. Had a--I remember just looking at the mountains in Colorado Springs, like, seeing that again. Just, like, not seeing desert again. You know, and seeing clouds. Because it's, like, the whole time you're in Iraq, like, you don't see a cloud. It's, like, either the sky is brown from you know, whatever, or it's gray. But it's never clouds there, from what I remember. I don't remember--a dust storm, I don't think it rained one time. But yeah, so just these mountains, and the green, and the fresh air, and it was, like, oh, it's just America. You know, it's just beautiful, and thank God I'm back here, and I'm so happy. And yeah, they had a big--one of the gyms, they had all of the families there. And it was the dumbest homecoming ceremony, though. We had to, like, run through a fog machine, you know, to run into the gym, while the music's playing. It's almost like a football game, you'd run out or whatever. It was, like, oh my God. But yeah, and then I see my girlfriend, she was there, she was the one that came there, I didn't want my family there or anything, because I was going to go back and see them for leave, anyways. And I just wanted to see her. So, she was there. Yeah, I saw her, and it was, like, a great feeling, happy. We were probably both crying a little bit. And yeah, it was a lot of fun. We got home.

Thompson: Must've been a big relief to finally get home.

Schellpeper: Yeah, it was a big relief, and you know, it was--yeah, it was--I felt, you know, like I hadn't done what I was going to do over there. Like, I was,

like, man, you know, I kind of was, like, “Did I do what I thought I was all going to do? You know, did I--what did I do over that year?” But I think a lot of it just comes down to, I was, like, “Well, the one time where I had to do my job, I did it, and that’s all that matters.” And, you know, if I hadn’t had to do it, maybe it would’ve even been better, because, you know, a guy right now probably wouldn’t be as jacked up as he is, physically. I mean, you know, he still just isn’t right, because his back was just broken, and his legs were so shattered. But yeah, so I just, you know, it was a relief, it was good to be home.

Thompson: Yeah. So, once you were home, what happened then? You had some time off, I’m guessing?

Schellpeper: Yeah, some time off, went home, hung out a little bit, and then it was like--I mean, for, like, a month, it was probably kind of just, like, mess around. You kind of could report maybe a little bit later for physical training, for the PT. Yeah, and I remember everything being just really relaxed, and totally informal. And it was really cool. But then, you know, after a month, there was this massive switch out from the chain of command. You know, everybody, like, left, all of the higher-ups left, and all of these new ones came in, you know, all of these new people came into the unit, and it was, like, a whole brand new unit. And it was, like, “All right, we’re going to Afghanistan, you know, like in this many months.” And then it was, like, the whole training cycle started back over again. And we started doing what we were doing when I first came in, you know, October/November, 2007. You know, we started doing that again. And probably, October or November of--yeah, of 2009. Yeah, I mean, it was, like, a month or two after we had been back, and it was, like, hey, this is going to Afghanistan, you know, don’t worry about Iraq anymore. And this time, we trained up for, like, light infantry. I mean, we did a really short qualifying field exercise with the Bradleys and the Abram tanks, but after that, it was all, like, you’re going to be in a light infantry battalion. You know, this is how you’re going to train for it. My time was coming up in the service. My date of getting out was in July of 2011. And I was--oh yeah, see, I think we trained up--yeah, we must’ve trained for over a year. Maybe we didn’t start training until January of--maybe it wasn’t actually in October or November. Maybe it was a little bit later. But yeah, I mean, whenever we did start training, you know, whatever. Did it all again, and then they were, like--I was going to stay in the CSD for the new command. And they were, like, “Hey, you--” because the stop-loss had been done with by that time. The stop-loss was in effect when we deployed, in 2-8. The stop-loss being that if your time of coming up with the military was any time within your deployment, or close to your deployment, like, you were going to stay on active duty, you weren’t getting to leave active duty, the government was saying no, you’re going to stay on active duty, no choice whatsoever about it. So, a whole bunch of

guys in our unit was stop loss when we went to Iraq. That was repealed--yeah, that was gotten--well, that was nixed, you know, no more stop-loss, you know, by the time that we're deploying to Afghanistan. So, they're saying, hey, if you--you don't have to sign up, but if you do, somebody else won't have to go in your spot, you know, or--I don't know, they were trying to give some kind of incentives. You can just come for the deployment. And I knew right away, I mean, I was--it was never my intention to stay career in the military. I always saw myself going back to college, and going on and doing something different. So, I always said, "No, you know, I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to sign again." And it finally came to the point where they were letting Commanders send guys out of active duty, like, ninety days early, if your unit was about to deploy, and they wouldn't resign. So, I was--had my ETS bumped up from July to April. And I was, like, "Man, that is the coolest thing ever!" You know, I was so happy. I mean, I was, like, "This is awesome!" So, you know, then I also didn't have to--they went to JRTC in Fort Polk, Louisiana for the deployment training. And I didn't have to go because I had already said I wasn't going to be on the books and stuff, and I got to hang back with the Rear Detachment, the Rear-D. And I basically just shammed for the last, you know, half a year of my time in the military. And it was pretty cool. I mean, nobody was really watching me. They were sending guys out to do, like, grass-cutting details, and stuff like that if you were getting ready to get out of the military. And so, I just got paid, and did not a lot during that time. And it was pretty sweet. So.

Thompson: What did you do after the military ended? After you finished your term?

Schellpeper: Yeah, well, I moved back to Wisconsin right away with my girlfriend, you know, in April of 2011. We moved back to Wisconsin. And I had already been accepted to the University of Wisconsin for the fall 2011 semester. So, I just hung out that summer, and just had fun, and just--yeah, I went on the lake a lot. And just enjoyed being out of the military, and it felt so relieving, and like I just had this choice again in what I was doing every day. You know, I just woke up and it was up to me, you know? I was doing what I wanted to do. And I started school, I started college, I was a poly sci major. Yeah, in September of 2011 at Madison, and I loved it, and you know, I always told myself when I was in the military, I was like, you know, you're going to get paid to go to school, you know, so your job is going to be going to school. And I was, like, you're going to love it. You know, and that's what you're going to do. And that's what I did. And I mean, I just, like, grinded and loved it because I didn't have anyone barking orders at me, and I was just always on my own schedule, and I did good in school, and I just graduated in August of this last month, of 2014. So, that felt good.

Thompson: So, you got to use some of the benefits, then?

Schellpeper: I used all of the benefits, and, like, the country took care of me. [laughing] Like, there's no doubt about it. I mean, like, the G.I. Bill, I mean, the unemployment when I wanted to collect it at the beginning, I mean, like, you know, the disability for the injuries, or, like, the--not combat injuries, but just injuries incurred during service. I mean, yeah, and they really took care of me, and it was a good deal. And I was, like, "Man, I wonder if every country is like this," because, you know, I always saw some code at the Madison VA, and it's like, you know, George Washington, you know, he said, "The willingness that future generations will have to fight wars, it all depends on how the previous generations' veterans were treated." And I thought that--that's not the exact quote, but it's something like that. And I thought that was real poignant, because, you know, you look back at our vets now, and obviously, the Vietnam guys, they got shafted. I mean, there's no doubt about that. And more than shafted, it's not even the right words. But for the most part, this country has taken care of its veterans, and that's why people continue to fight and sign up.

Thompson: So, you're enrolled in the VA system, and can you talk about that experience a little bit?

Schellpeper: I've had a really good experience with it. Yeah, I mean, whenever I've wanted an appointment, or whenever I've needed to see someone, my claim that I put in was taken care of in a decent amount of time. It probably took almost--well, I don't know what I guess is considered right, but I mean, it was less than a year, to the point where I was actually getting, like, monthly payments. And yeah, I--yeah, the VA system's been great, and whenever I hear, like, the horror stories and stuff on the news, I'm always, like, so grateful that I had a good experience at the Madison VA, because I mean, they're awesome there. And I'm getting ready to move out to northern Virginia, and I'll probably have to go to the D.C. VA, and I'm a little nervous about that, because I'm like--I've had such a good experience at the Madison VA. So, yeah. But it's worked out well.

Thompson: Did you end up joining any organizations, any veterans organizations, or any thing service-related there?

Schellpeper: Yes, I joined the VFW as an at-large member, Veterans of Foreign Wars. And I joined the American Legion at the Oconomowoc post. And I wouldn't call myself, you know, and active member at this moment. You know, I'm happy to be a part of it, and you know, pay the dues, and make sure that there's still people in the organization. But, you know, I just haven't done a lot. So.

Thompson: Is there anything else that you'd like to share with us about your experience? Any stories that stick out, any goofing off with your friends in the military?

Schellpeper: It was always goofing off. I mean, I don't think I--I mean, if anything, you know, when I hear on TV, or, like, I watch military history, all kinds, all the time, you know? I'm always watching history stuff, and you always see the guys talk about just the funny, goofy stuff, you know, that people are doing, and how--it's like, that's just what it was. I mean, we were just kids, and I mean, we were like eighteen, and nineteen, twenty, and we just--it was nonstop messing around, and playing around, and going out on the town, and getting crazy, and you know, just--it was just crazy. It was just fun, and the guys that I was in the platoon with just are always so light-hearted, and they were always so optimistic, because I'm never just--I'm not that kind of guy. A lot of the time, I'll look at it, you know, half-empty, which isn't a great thing, or I'll just get down about things, and, like, I was just always amazed at how happy everybody always was. And how they could just keep playing jokes, and it was just ridiculous. I mean, yeah, it's just funny. So, that's what sticks out. I mean, they're great guys, and yeah, I mean, it's always funny because, you know, you always hear in the media, like, "Oh, well, this generation doesn't care as much about the last generation, you know? Or, it doesn't care about the country, they're not ready to fight for the flag." And I think that the media has always said that as long as the media can--has been able to say that. Like, they said that about the Vietnam guys. During World War II, I remember reading a book written by Ernie Pyle where he's talking about a Major, an officer in Italy who's saying that, "You know, the guys that are growing up in America, they're getting shell-shocked, because they're just not tough enough. You know, they're not raised in a tough environment." So, there's always just been this idea that this generation isn't as tough as the next. And I think it's just crap, and that we all rose to the occasion, and if more had been asked of us, we would've done that too. So.

Thompson: Is there anything else you'd like to share with those listening right now? Anything that you would want them to know about your service or about service in general?

Schellpeper: I'm proud of my service, I'm happy I did it, and I don't regret it. And I would--you know, if the country needed me again, I'd do it in a second. So.

Thompson: Very good, well we thank you for your service, and joining us for this interview.

Schellpeper: Thanks for conducting the interview.

Thompson: My pleasure.

[end of interview]