Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

JEFFERY CARNES

Arabic Linguist, Army, Operation Iraqi Freedom

2008

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Carnes, Jeffery, (b.1977). Oral History Interview, 2008.
Approximate length: 1 hour, 34 minutes
Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Wisconsin native Jeffery Carnes recounts his service as an Arabic linguist with the 101st Airborne Division from 1997-2006. Carnes served with the NATO peacekeeping force in Kosovo and took part in Operation Iraqi Freedom 1, participating in the initial assaults into Al-Najaf, Karbala, and Bagdad. Carnes begins by explaining his daily duties during his tour in Iraq, including: supervising Iraqi translators, providing cultural and linguistic support for US field commanders, and taking park in cordon and search missions. Carnes then discusses the changing Iraqi perception of US occupation troops as well as the transition from conventional warfare to peacekeeping and counter-insurgency measures after the fall of the Ba'ath regime. Carnes also describes several unforeseen issues the US military faced during Iraq's reconstruction, the necessity for cultural knowledge as well as linguistic, and his own personal path into the military.

Carnes then discusses the identity of the enemy and relates several interactions with insurgents. Lastly, Carnes covers his transition from active duty to the reserves in 2004 and speaks at length on his personal views of contemporary US military operations Iraq.

Biographical Sketch:

Carnes (b.1977) served as an Arabic linguist with the 101st Airborne Division on active duty from 1997-2004, then as an active reservist from 2004-2006. Carnes deployed oversees for operations in both Kosovo and Iraq.

Archivists' Note:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript, if possible.

Timestamps reflect the entire length of the interview, which was filmed in three parts.

Interviewed by Jeff Kollath, 2008.
Transcribed by Ellen Brooks, 2016.
Reviewed by Tristan Krause, 2017.
Abstract written by Tristan Krause, 2017.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of Interview]

[Part I]

Kollath: Hi Jeff.

Carnes: Hi.

Kollath: Why don't you start off by telling us name, and branch of service, years of service, who you served with, hometown, that kinda stuff.

Carnes: Sure. My name is Jeff Carnes and I was an Arabic Linguist in the United States Army from 1997 until 2004, and then I went into Reserves from 2004 until 2006. However, I was activated during that whole time. And I'm originally from Jefferson, Wisconsin. And my job in the military was an Arabic Linguist, where my job was to provide both linguistic and Arab culture support to the commander, through various ways, in order—so he or she could make decisions on the ground about the operating environment that they're working in, specifically towards the civilians as well as some of the foreign military that were in the area. And in order to make more informed decisions about how to operate among all these different factors.

Kollath: Why don't we start off with—why don't you tell me about a typical day. You know, if there was a typical day, but a typical day in—out on an operation.

Carnes: Sure. Um, when I was in Iraq, it depended. The first part of my deployment in Iraq I was attached directly to an infantry battalion in the 101st. I was attached to 2nd Battalion, Five-0-Deuce [502nd] Infantry Regiment and there what I would do is, I would get up pretty early, I would find out what the commander wanted me to do that day. And then either go out on a patrol with the infantry, it might be a night cordon and search operation, where you would cordon off an area where there was a target, someone that you wanted to detain. And I would go with them and verify this person's identity and make sure that this is the target that they wanted. I would also do things such as, we would have people coming up to the gate of our CP or our TOC - Tactical Operations Center - and I would be dealing with that a lot. With people coming up saying that they wanted—that they had information for us, that they needed help, that they could help in x, y, z way.

The second part of my deployment in Iraq I was—I was assigned to the Five-O-Deuce Infantry Regiment, a brigade size element that operated in Mosul, Iraq. And what I did there is I helped manage three teams of Force Protection. And what we did there was go out and find the information that was needed in order to keep troops safe. And how we would do that, through various—we would do that through various methods. And my job was to manage them as well as to be kinda the link between my job and the civilians as well as to the on-the-ground commander, who was Colonel Anderson.

Kollath: Talk about your relationship with Iraqi civilians and how you were able to do your job.

Carnes: Sure. It kinda depended, actually. When I learned Arabic in 1998 and 1999, I learned the standard Arabic. However, when I got to Iraq it was a totally new dialect to me. It would be kinda like learning standard English and going to Appalachia, the deep South, maybe Northern Wisconsin. And so at first I really wasn't able to communicate. But the fortunate thing is that my job during the very beginning of the war was very simple. It would be finding weapons, verifying identities, so on and so forth. So I didn't need a high amount of language skill. However, as my language skill progressed and what I had to do became more difficult as we transitioned from a high intensity conflict into the what is now—what was considered peace-keeping in 2003, then I forged more, or closer, relationships with the Iraqi people. And I felt like I was almost, near the end, I was almost their advocate. Where I'd go tell the commanders on the ground, "Well if you do this, this is how the people are going to react." And what I would try to do is mitigate the negative reaction of the people and try to get a positive reaction out of doing something like, getting a few bad Iraqis off the street.

Kollath: Did they—how were you received? I mean, you said you kind of became their advocate but how were you received, how was your unit as a whole received from the beginning towards the end?

[00:04:41]

Kollath: Sure. Well in the very, very beginning, I was in Iraq during the very beginning, during Operation Iraqi Freedom I. So I would see—in—our first mission was in Anudjov, then Kabalah and Baghdad. And you would s—I would be following the mortar men in. So you'd see the mortar men shoot off the mortars, the infantry would start clearing and I would be right behind, usually with the battalion commander. There was almost, like, a curiosity. For most Iraqis they've never seen a foreigner before. And then when they heard me speaking Arabic they were absolutely amazed. I mean, they've never heard—they've never seen a white pers—a lot of them have never seen a white person. Let alone someone who could speak their language.

Um, when—after the 'Mission Accomplished' banner went up in May 2003 and we started transitioning from that high intensity conflict and settling into Mosul, then things kind of changed slowly. Where we became—we essentially became the police force. We became the military, we became the government. And as a result there were a lot of very mixed reaction to how I was perceived. Most of the time people were still absolutely amazed that I could speak Arabic and I was able to communicate with them. And I would try and work on their behalf. They wouldn't know what I was saying in English but people would be coming up, speaking to me in Arabic, I would speak to them in Arabic and then I'd go turn around and talk to the Americans in English. And for the most part they saw me as a personal advocate on their point. However, after a while we started being perceived as the government. And that was a really unfortunate thing. By the time I left at the end of 2003, that's when the Insurgency started up, especially in Mosul. Right after I left was when the Mess Hall in Mosul was bombed. And that was the first real major suicide bombing of American forces. And so things really started to change at that point, where it went from people greeting us, people wanting to touch—physically touch us to more of a stand-offish attitude. And you could see a few stares, you know, dirty looks, within the crowds.

Kollath: What did you guys do to calm—to help ease those tensions? Or could you ease those tensions?

Carnes: Well, a lot of it was, actually, I was used by the command in order to ease those tensions. I would go up and ask people, "Well, what are your problems?" So on and so forth. For example, it was through our effort that during Ramadan, the month of fasting in the Islamic world, that there would be a cannon shot off at sunset and that was the cannon—the cannon was used by the people of Mosul to signal, "Ok, you can break the fast now. Now you can start eating." Well, we had to advocate on the behalf of the people in order to have that tradition keep going. In order to show cultural sensitivity that, hey, this is not a bomb going off, this is just a ceremonial cannon, like something we would shoot off before a Badger game, for example. Or church bells during Christmas and Easter or even a wedding. So that was a lot of what I ended up doing was trying to make sure that—I mean, the people couldn't have everything they wanted, but trying to at least find a way to sort through what we needed to do in order to accomplish a mission while at the same time trying to really avoid getting in people's personal lives.

Kollath: Do you think—how difficult was it—I mean you have a particularly unique perspective.

Carnes: Mm-hm.

Kollath: Knowing Arabic when you went over there. How were you able to communicate something about the culture—were you able to help your fellow soldiers understand the culture a little bit more, through your knowledge of the language or was it just kind of a—or were they as wide-eyed about Iraqis as Iraqis were about Americans?

Carnes: Um, it depended on the person actually. Um, I was very fortunate that the 101st, we kinda got it. There were other units, such as 1st Armored Division down in Baghdad, 4th Infantry Division in Tikrit, they kinda didn't get it. A lot of it is just the way that army training was set up. In the '90s, even though we had Bosnia going, Haiti, Kosovo, you go to major training centers such as Fort Irwin, Fort Polk, and it was still kind of a Cold War mentality of tanks rolling across a battlefield. And so, a lot of unit—a lot of commands just didn't get it. That this is going into urban areas, this is dealing with people - even though they were doing this in Bosnia and Kosovo and in Haiti - that we had to transition so quickly to taking out the Iraqi Republican Guard and Special Republican Guard, Iraqi Army, to all of a sudden dealing in a peace—pseudo-peace keeping situation.

So that was a really hard part and that people that—a lot of the command saw the Iraqi people as targets. Everyone was bad. Obviously we know that that's not true. I mean, in any culture, we have some bad apples, but—and my job was to go find those bad apples a lotta the time. And make sure that the Infantry would go and either detain, neutralize or kill them.

[00:10:05]

There were other comma—in my command was a little different, both in the 501st Infantry Brigade and the 101st Airborne Division. General Petraeus and Colonel Anderson understood that there's more to this than a tank rolling across a battlefield, or taking out an entire city block. And so, I would do things, even when we were in Kuwait before moving into Iraq, I was giving training to some of the Infantry companies on the very basic commands. How not to—how to search, who not to search, how to do it, so on and so forth. For example, the sensitivities of searching women.

When I got in Iraq, that—I was still doing that training to an extent. Where I would go out with the Infantry and explain, "Okay, this is what you do. This is what you don't do." So on and so forth. On the other hand, I saw some very smart things happening out of the 101st. For example, the Iraqis, they're in general a very smart people, they're a very smart culture. After all, that's the cradle of civilization within the Rafidain [??] or between the Tigress and Euphrates Rivers. They—the Iraqis knew that we were just another foreign force coming in. And they were trying to take advantage of us. However, especially Colonel Anderson, would really—he got it. And he really understood how to deal within the Iraqi culture. How, for example, the Iraqis would accuse us of looking at their women, or that we would be using our sunglasses, these Wiley-X [??] sunglasses that somehow had X-ray vision in order to look underneath women's clothing. And all this other stuff. And he would say, "No, that's not true." And the Iraqis would say, "Yes it is." And he would say, "No, it's not true. You know that's a lie. Stop propagating these rumors against us." And there would be some grumbling after that but after that the rumors would stop, magically. He understood how the Arab culture worked. And I was a small part of that. Being the advocate, the constant reminder to his staff of this is what you have to do in order to accomplish a mission. Maybe not in the next week, but say, five years from now because after all, that's how the Iraqis are thinking.

Kollath: When you—as a Linguist you are likely assisting in gathering intelligence. What kind of information are you seeking to get from, the folks that you're either detaining or running into in the streets and that kinda thing?

Carnes: Um, I can't answer that question.

[both laugh]

Kollath: Let me try to rephrase it. You—oh I'll think about how I'm gonna rephrase it I guess.

Carnes: Okay, here, I'll rephrase it for you. Okay, well what I'd end up doing, how I'd use my Arabic skills is all sorts of ways. I mean, I did everything from reading newspapers, assisting—we also had local Iraqis that were strictly interpreters. They didn't have a security clearance, they couldn't see any sensitive information. And it could only be used for certain purposes. But I would help supervise what they were doing basically doing a quality—Q-A-Q-C, Quality Control, Quality Analysis, to make sure that their translations of newspapers were accurate. So we had an idea of what the Iraqi print, as well as the Iraqi TV, were both saying.

I would also provide linguistic support. For example, go out on a Cordon and Search mission, with the infantry and translate for them as well as make sure that the situation didn't get out of control. After all, you go knock on someone's door in the middle of the night, even in the United States, people are going to be very upset. Um, men and women are going to be screaming and yelling, kids are going to be crying. It's a very chaotic scene. And my job was to both translate—translate, or in this case, I would actually be conducting all—everything in Arabic the whole—I would be the one directing all the Iraqi family into certain places, I would be directing the infantry, "Okay, take all the family put 'em in this room. We'll take the target, put him in this room. Search the target." Generally, ninety-nine percent of the time—we only detained two women the whole time I was in Iraq. So, we would try and make it as discreet as possible so it wasn't as hard on the family. And so that was a good share of what I did.

[00:14:46]

I would also translate in security meetings, governmental meetings where there would be an interface between, say, the American military and the Iraqi police. The American military and the provincial government, the American military and the political parties, so on and so forth. And near the end I would actually be the primary interpreter in a lot of these meetings. Partially because the Iraqis, when they saw mine and some other—and my boss' Arabic skills, wanted us because they didn't translate in Iraqi translating accurately but they saw me as an impartial way, as an impartial person to the translation.

Kollath: Did the nature of your position change from when you first got there then as the insurgency started to pick up? As far as how—from an operational standpoint? How did things change?

Carnes: Sure. I mean, in the very, very beginning, like I said, um, when the 101st went behind—3rd Infantry Division cleared out all the Republican Guard, and then the Special Republican Guard once we got to Baghdad, and they left the cities alone. The major cities alone. The Brits, they took care of Southern Iraq, Basra, Nasiriyah, Al Kut, so on and so forth. The 101st, our major operations were

Najaf, Karbala, the two holy cities to Shi'ite Islam as well as various parts of Baghdad. And what—and as well as some other cities as well, such as Hilla, Ancient Babylon. What we did there is very—it was very military. It was clear out the forces, try and find any kinds of weapons that we can find and then haul the weapons outside of whatever city and blow them up. So, I mean, I was driving around with a Humvee, it was absolutely ridiculous. I was driving around Karbala with a Humvee full of hand grenades, land mines and AKs. I'm just driving around trying to pick these up. And people were just giving them to us.

Um, we were also trying to find out information about the Ba'ath party. Where the top fifty-two, the deck of cards, where they are. That was also a major part of it. And trying to find out where they were, as well as some stuff on Weapons of Mass Destruction. You know, where the WMD is, did it exist, how it's being used, was it moved, so on and so forth. But for me, that was a very low priority. There were people on a different level doing that. My job was basically very tactical, very simple. When we got to Mosul - we ended up getting there and it was kind of interesting 'cause when we got there was right before President Bush flew in and the 'Mission Accomplished' banner. Um, after that, we and the Iraqis, all of us kinda looked at each other and said, "Well, now what?" And no one really knew.

One of the real problems that we didn't foresee - we being the American military, the American government, and the American people in general - is what happens when a command economy is destroyed. Um. We—the government controlled everything. There were ration cards in Iraq for the basic staples of flour, of rice, so on and so forth. The government gave out pensions. The military was the largest employer in Iraq. What happens when all this is destroyed? And that was a real problem that we faced. And no one really knew what to do. It was a problem that we didn't anticipate. And we, being the Five-O-Deuce Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division, that was our job, was to try and make sure people are happy. Because if people aren't happy—then the—then they start blowing things up. And when you have—and, the Iraqi economy was a war economy for decades. From the time Saddam Hussein came in power, late 1978, early '79. There were more munitions that I personally saw than you can ever imagine. You could—I am not joking when I say I could probably fill up every single building on the UW Campus with weapons, of what I saw. And that's just what I saw.

And when you're dealing with things like that, and you have people who are unemployed, underemployed, they don't have food, food prices are rising, gas prices are rising and there's all these munitions around, and you have bad guys running around saying, "Hey, I'll give you 5,000 dinar (which would be a couple bucks), in order to plant this on the side of the road." That's when it started. And that was the real—that's the real tragedy of what happened. And it was something we didn't anticipate. What happens when you destroy an economy that's run by the government and you don't have the ability or the knowledge in order to set it up again.

[00:19:47]

Kollath: So, were we prepared militarily but not for what comes after the military aspects of everything? Would you agree with that statement?

Carnes: Oh, we were complete—I mean, it was a beautiful operation. I mean, it was—it wasn't the left hook of Desert Storm, but it was still incredibly elegant. That you had it - from my perspective, from a divisional perspective - you had the 3rd Infantry Division, which is a Mech Division, just burning through desert as fast as possible. Just wiping out the Republican Guard, which are heavily armored units. And you had the 3rd Infantry Division leave the cities alone. After all, armored personnel carriers and infantry fighting vehicles and tanks do not work well in cities. We've kind of found that one out now. The 101st were very—we were very light. I mean, I was—I had a Humvee and it was a rarity. Most of the men, or most of the combat arms types, they were used to walking. You know, getting air assaulted and dropped and then you go conduct your mission. So militarily it was beautiful. They had the 3rd Infantry Division wipe out the Iraqi military as fast as possible. We come in, do clean-up, and try and get rid of the elements that were remaining within these cities.

Um, in terms of the planning - and that's the real debate, was there a plan, was there not. So on and so forth. And that debate's still going on now, years later. The problem is, we didn't understand the scope of the problem. Even if there was a plan, we didn't understand how—what happens when you take out 400,000 jobs out of the Iraqi military. I mean, some of those jobs need to go. I mean, the upper echelons of the military and basically the whole Officer Corps of the Iraqi Army, the Republican Guard and the Republican Special Guard, they all need to go. They were so corrupt that you couldn't operate a professional military. As long as you st—for example, in the Officer Corps - in the Iraqi Officer Corp - if you stayed in for three years, if you survived, between Ba'ath Party purges as well as wars and conflicts going on, you got promoted. So twenty-one years, you were to a Brigadier General. Well you might be a Brigadier General doing the work of a major within the American Army, because Saddam Hussein and all of his cronies, ended up taking all of the key duty positions. So there was a real disparity between rank and duty position within the Iraqi military.

Um, so there was some—I understood when we disbanded the military. We, being the Americans. Well when you don't give those people jobs. That's when the problems start. When you have soldiers with various degrees of combat experience, or military experience, most of whom only knew what the dangerous end of an AK-74-Rifle was, but you all of a sudden take away their job and their family can't be supported anymore. And they kinda know enough to be dangerous and you have all these munitions sitting around, then it's a dangerous situation.

As well as the government. We had no idea how the Ba'ath party was set up. That was a good share of what I did in the beginning, figure out what the heck this Ba'ath party was. The Ba'ath party trickled down all the way to having one Ba'ath party member, called the Mukhtar, who was basically the commander of a hundred people, which would be a few city blocks, or maybe part of a village. This Mukhtar basically was the informant for the Ba'ath party. They were also the ones who gave out all the ration cards. And they were the one—that was a real conduit between money, food, pensions, so on and so forth. And people's lives. Most of these people, were they despicable human beings? Yes. But when you take these positions out or you destroy the layers between the Mukhtar and the people in the Ba'ath party who gave out the food, that's what we did. Inadvertently, we ended up cutting off the lifeline for thousands, if not millions, of Iraqis. And so, I mean, it wasn't like they were starving, it wasn't like, you would see in sub-Saharan Africa and say, like Niger. But people were having a really tough time. And when you have bad guys filtering in, then that creates a really dangerous situation, which is what we saw and what we're still seeing today, unfortunately.

[00:24:42]

Kollath: Um, Donald Rumsfeld has that favorite quote, says, "You go to war with the Army you have, you don't go to war with the Army that you want." Do you think that we had prepared, equipment-wise, militarily—did you have everything you needed to do your job?

Carnes: Uh, yes and no. On the one hand, I do agree with what Donald Rumsfeld said. I mean, to be honest, you do go. As someone who was in a rapid deployment unit, the 101st as well as other units such as the 82nd Airborne, 1st Cav out of Fort Hood, 10th Mountain out of Fort Drum, New York, so on and so forth. These units, you're prepared to go. You would have various cycles. So, and they would be named typically after colors. So in the 101st it would be black cycle where you're on the readiness cycle. That if you got the phone call you were going. You had the gold cycle, which was a training cycle, and the white cycle which was more the administrative, you could take leave, so on and so forth, cycles. Um, so we were—what you had is what you went with. And I saw that when the 101st—when 3rd Brigade out of the 101st reconnaissance [??] the 187th Infantry Regiment, they deployed to Afghanistan, it was literally that whole phone call in the middle of the night in December and early January, 2001, 2002, saying, "Hey, you're gonna go." And there were people showing up and you went with what you got. And they load up the C-5s, I witnessed it personally. So what Donald Rumsfeld said was a true statement, you go with what you have.

However, saying that, there was a big time difference between 2001 and 2003. And reading—like, I got to read basically what civilians got to read about, you know, the ideas of when did Iraq—the idea of invading Iraq start. And it seemed like it really did start after 9/11. And 2002 we knew it was going to happen. The real problem was, is two-fold. One, that we didn't transition into a war economy like we did after World War II. The famous speech that President Bush speech gave ten days after 9/11 said—President Bush said, instead of, "Hey, we're going to war. We gotta tighten our belts" was, "Everyone live their normal lives and go shopping." So as a result, everyone went shopping but the military. That the military didn't start cutting down or start going into other sectors of the economy or increase taxes or so on and so forth, in order to create more up-armored Humvees, in order to create more of the IBA - Interceptor Body Armor - so on and so forth. So that's one part of it, is that basically our society did not sacrifice. And still isn't sacrificing so to this day we have troops that don't have enough of what they need.

On the other hand, a lot of my training is the thirty cubic centimeters of gray matter in my head. And that's a lot—a key part to my job, and really a key part to Iraq and Afghanistan. It's not just, you know, like in Vietnam, you see Charlie and you shoot him. I mean, that's not what Iraq is all about. That wasn't what Bosnia was all about, Kosovo, and Haiti. I know, I was in Kosovo. The training is a really key element, and that's really where the American military failed itself. Where the American military was obsessed, it still is obsessed with statistics. And we would see boards up, and it would say, you know, how many people have completed their PT test or their physical fitness test. How many have done the twelve mile rook march which you had to do each quarter. All of the NBC training, the Nuclear, Biological, Chemical training. And all that stuff is good because everyone's a soldier. But we never transitioned in the '90s from the Cold War mentality to what happens when you're fighting in urban environments. Thinking in the more special operations mentality of trying to find the bad guys within a sea of good guys. Or neutral guys. And so, when it came to things like, cultural sensitivity training, searching civilians, running check points, establishing hasty check point, in my case - advanced language training, you didn't see a lot of that. And you didn't see a lot of it. Now you kinda see it. Now being years later. But even in 2004 and 2006 when I trans—when I was an instructor in the Reserves, there just wasn't enough of that training. And really, that's where units all the sudden ended up on the ground. And when they're thinking, you know, diamonds and rectangles on a map of blue forces, allied forces and red forces, enemy forces. And it doesn't work the way it works out at Fort Irwin or Fort Polk. And that's way—that's the way that field grade officers were trained. That's a problem. And it's still a problem to this day where we don't understand what we're doing over in Iraq.

[00:30:08]

Crew: We need to change tapes.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

[Begin Part II]

Crew: We're rolling again.

Kollath: Uh, let's see. Why did you join the military Jeff?

Carnes: Why did I join the military? You know, there's a lotta days where I still ask myself that question. Um, there were a few reasons. So, I was—in 1997 I finished my sophomore year at UW. And I started off as math and physics major, ha ha ha. And then I took physics and that was the end of that. At the same time I just happened to take Russian because I had to fill my language requirement—

Crew: Hang on one sec—

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Crew: Okay, all set.

Carnes: Okay. So why I joined the military. Hmmm. That's a question I ask myself almost every day. It really was the best decision of my life. But it was a whole long story of why I joined the military. I joined in 1997. I finished up my sophomore year at college. I started off as a math and physics major and after I took physics that was the end of that. I took Russian to fulfill my language requirement. I didn't want to take Spanish, I didn't want to take German, I wanted to take something a little more challenging so I took Russian. And I fell in love with it. And so I switched to Russian, much to my parents dislike. Well, I was kinda thinking about forward, in the future. And what am I going to do with this Russian degree. And this was still during the '90s and the Cold War was—people were still trying to figure out what the poli—the geopolitical situation was. So Russian was still relatively valuable. But I've always wanted to go into Federal government. Well, with a Russian degree, without a lot of experience from the University of Wisconsin, which is a great university, but not one that's highly attached to the government. I knew that my—my opportunities in order to find a job were going to be rather scarce. I was always made the joke that I could take my degree from here and use it as kindling on my burn barrel, you know, when I'm homeless.

So, at the same that I'm taking Russian there was this—there were two veterans in the class. And one guy, he was a real character. And he was talking about the Defense Language Institute, which is out in Monterey, or DLI. And he was talking about DLI, talking about how it's such a great place to learn languages, he just didn't want to reenlist in order to go to DLI. So he got out and decided to learn Russian at UW. So I started asking him some questions, I asked some professors questions, they didn't really wanna talk about DLI. They said, "Oh, it's a great place." And then they'd change the subject. So I started looking into it, and I thought, well, for my future this seems like a pretty good idea. And considering the fact that, with the GI Bill and everything else, that I can come back here eventually and finish up my degree and get a little bit of adventure. I guess I'm a little bit of an adventurous type.

And so, the Army, in its infinite wisdom, after I took the aptitude test to see if I could learn a language, decided to put me in Arabic. And all that Russian went out the window. And this, mind you, was the late '90s, where no one really thought that there was gonna be a war again. It was the shiny, happy '90s and everyone's happy. And so, when I'm taking Arabic it was more of a novelty. It was still one of the larger language programs at DLI, but Korean was still a little bigger. So, um, and so I ended up just taking Arabic, that's what the military put me in. Went through all my training and then ended up at Fort Campbell. And so, kinda indirectly through UW, and through the Russian Program, I ended up going to Iraq of all things.

[00:34:10]

Kollath: Um, so you—well that answered my questions about Arabic so. What—when you got into Arabic, what about it did you like? Was there one particular thing, many things, that you liked about the language?

Carnes: Oh, well, as a linguist, and as a true linguist and a researcher, it's fascinating. Just how—I mean, everything about Arabic is bizarre. From how it sounds to how they forms words to how they form sentences, how discourse works. Or you know, culturally there's a lotta things about the whole language as well as the people that are so different from Americans. And that was a real draw to it. The first day of class, after they introduce you and introduce all the policies and put the typical Army scare in you, they sit you down and you're in sections of ten students. And they put you—and the instructor comes in the room and he starts speaking Arabic, [Speaks Arabic]. And it was Arabic for the next hour. I mean, and it was a lot of finger pointing [Speaks Arabic] "Hi, how are you?" [Speaks Arabic] "My name's Abuhasan." [Speaks Arabic] "What is your name?" [Speaks Arabic] "What is your name masculine? What is your name feminine. And it was just a lot of pointing and it was absolutely fascinating. And I mean, and I caught on really quickly. And I just absolutely fell in love with it. Once I got a handle on Arabic itself, because we would be going to class—we were in the military, but it was kinda like college with a uniform. You'd go to class, you'd go to formation, you'd start class at 0755, you'd go until about 1500. So it was about six hours a day of Arabic. And I just fell in love with it.

And then I started reading about Arab culture and there's a lot of things I don't agree with in Arab culture but there's a lot of American things I don't agree with. And just watch reality TV and you can see that there's all sorts of things that typical Americans will not agree with. But I was just absolutely fascinated how their society, and how their language, and how their culture, which are all intertwined, are set up. And how different from Americans. So all the sudden when 9/11 happened, all of a sudden I became one of the most valuable people in the military. I mean, there were other people like me who learned Arabic but they didn't have the understanding of the culture or people. They might have had the language skill but they didn't have something. You know, they didn't have the ability just—or the sheer nerve just to go up to somebody on the street, start speaking Arabic. I would go to a couple of the Arab grocery stores in Nashville and just start speaking Arabic. And people thought I was insane. But it became incredibly valuable.

As well as all my knowledge about the culture which was only just a small fraction of what I needed. I learned more in Iraq in probably two days, then in what I learned in years of book study. But I kept absorbing it and kept using it to my advantage. And ultimately it benefited everyone because I was able to say, "Well, you know, X holiday is coming up and so if you do Y operation during X holiday, Z is going to happen." And after that happened once, then people started to listen. And it was really helpful when that happened. I mean, it's unfortunate that bad things have to happen in order to have people finally listen to you, but, um, the language skills really helped. Especially when you have a lieutenant colonel or a full-bird colonel or a major standing right next to you and you're just going away, and they have no idea what you're saying and they've never heard someone speak in a foreign language like that in their lives, besides Spanish.

Kollath: Did you feel—going off of that, did you feel—I mean, you had, even as an enlisted man, have a sense of power or seniority over a lot of these guys, you know, officers—

Carnes: Um, it depended. It depended on what officer I was talking to. And most of them, yeah. I mean, I had—I had probably the authority of at least a captain typically. Also, a lotta times I just wouldn't wear rank. That was one of the things that we would do, is really, with the Iraqi people, is not wear rank. 'Cause when they started figuring out what our rank was and they saw that—the railroad tracks or the double bars—and they saw a captain versus a staff sergeant, they knew to talk to the captain because in Arab society you'd always try and make your—try and find the highest rank patron you can find.

So, I—so I ended up not wearing rank a lot so the Iraqis—I was a real anomaly to them. A lotta the infantry men didn't know who I was either. They just knew, oh, it was Jeff. And a lot of them knew me by my first name. Because I wanted the Iraqi people to be comfortable with who I was. And I wasn't this level of formality. In Arab culture you use your first name, typically. Or Abu-whoever - father of your first male born child. So for that reason I had a lot more authority with the Iraqis, partially because they knew that I—they could speak to me as well as speak to the Americans. And in terms of the American military, I had a lot of authority. And it was something that kinda wore on me after a while. Every day I would have to go into meetings, planning meetings of, well, what is the brigade going to do for the next week? Or the next few days? Or the next day? And my chief, my boss and I, would kinda flip a coin, who's gonna suffer through this meeting. And in the meeting, they would really listen to me and what I would say. I mean, not always. But—and it kinda ebb and flow, in terms of what their—how they would take my opinions, but generally when they would listen to me—generally they would get a positive result. Not always. Sometimes I made a mistake too. I made plenty of mistakes in Iraq. We all did. But when someone one day would go against my opinion or my chief's opinion or some other people's opinion and things went really badly, I wasn't afraid to say, "Well, I told you so." Also I knew I was getting out of the military at that time, so you know, what are they gonna do, send me to Iraq? That—you know, you can't do anything much worse to me. So I ended up really being just this kind of wild maverick a little bit. I said what I thought and I didn't care who I said it to. And in general I think it worked.

[00:41:14]

Kollath: When you were translating, when you were talking about the Iraqi people, did you ever leave something out—

Carnes: [laughs] Uh, yes. I would leave stuff out. The reason being, one st—one member of the brigade staff in particular did not understand. He did not get it. And he really—he was the one who should've gotten it, and he didn't get it. So he would say things that were border-line offensive. And they border-line offensive to me, if I translated them I—the reaction would be horrendous. So—and that's a real—I broke every single rule. That's a real rule that you're not supposed to ever change what you're supposed to do, you're almost a voice box. Actually I would put my head down when I would translate. I'd just put my head down and it felt like English was going in one ear and Arabic was coming out of my mouth, and Arabic coming in the other ear and English going out. There were times I'd have to fix it in order to not make a situation go really bad really quickly.

Kollath: Was there a specific incident that you can recall where that happened?

Carnes: Um, there were a couple. For example, in Arab families, when you're talking to men, you never ask about the wife. You always ask—you know, in Iraqi dialect you'll ask [speaking Arabic] "How are you? How's your health?" [Speaking Arabic] "How's your family?" And you never ask [speaking Arabic], you know, "How's your wife?" Because if you ask that it means, "How's your wife. I saw her last night." You know. And that's really, no joke, that's what it means. Well, they would start asking questions like that and I would have to mistranslate in order to not offend someone. I mean, on the other hand, we were kinda put in a third category. We being foreigners. We were kinda put in this other category where, they understood that we were gonna make some foibles. But on the other hand, I didn't wanna—we should be impressing the Iraqis with our cultural knowledge that we're different than other foreign entities coming in to their world.

Kollath: When you're out talking to the Iraqis, especially with regards to the WMDs, 'cause you were over there right when—

Carnes: Right.

Kollath: —that was kinda the reason for us to be over there. Was that informa—were you able to get that information occasionally? And if you did, was it the kinda stuff where you thought it was legitimate?

Carnes: [laughs] No. No. People would come up and we'd call 'em Andes. Because they'd come up screaming [speaks Arabic] "I have information." And so the Americans, they learned when they hear "Andhi" you know, it wasn't good. You know, "Andes at the gate again. Oh, here we go." In Iraqi society—this is one thing that a lot of Americans didn't understand—that it's a very cut throat, very survival society. After all, they've been around for 5,000 years. From the Sumerian culture all the way up through the Arab conquest, through the Chaldeans, through the Ashurian, the Assyrians, through the Ottomans, through the Brits, and finally through us. They understand how it works. They understand that if you want to get rid of your enemy all you do is you go up and you say x, y or z. Or if you want some money all you say is this. We always have people coming up with - they would call it red mercury. And they'd actually bring up these vials to show you that it is. And I would say to them, "You know, isn't that poisonous for you? If you're touching it and it's just glass, wouldn't that kill you right now? And kill everyone in sight if you dropped it?" And through that then you would play the pow—then there would be a power struggle.

[00:45:12]

I would show my authority and power as an American who speaks Arabic over this Iraqi who's trying to get money out of you, or the other one that you would get is the secret meeting spiel. Because they did it during the Iraqi regime. That this person, lives in this neighborhood and knew exactly how the details of their house, they're have secret meetings in their house. At night. With people no one knows, in order to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime. And so what would happen? The Ba'ath party would go and search the house, go knock on the door, you know, take the men and torture them and/or kill them. Well, they did the same things to us. You know, if you didn't like your neighbor, you know, you go up to the Americans, "Oh, Abu-Mohammed, he's having secret meetings in his house." Really, what type of secret meetings? "I don't know." When do they happen? "At night!" Well, what were the meetings about? "I don't know." Well who attends them? "I don't know." Well how do you know that he attends them? "Well, we know everyone in the neighborhood and we don't know these people going in." Really, what are they talking about? "Oh, we don't know for sure, but they're trying to overthrow the Iraqi government and the coalition forces." And it would be so formulaic it was almost like they would—that there was a radio broadcast: This is what you tell the Americans. And for awhile the Americans were getting hosed, as we called it. You know, were—and you know, you'd go and arrest these people and you know, you'd take 'em, ship 'em off to you don't know where. And then, and then problem solved for the Iraqis, and to this day that's still happening, believe it or not, to an extent.

Well after a while we kinda wised up. Oh really? When do these meetings happen at night? "Oh, we don't know." Oh, who's attending them? "I don't know." What kinda cars do they drive? "I don't know." Well, how do you know these meetings even exist? And, "Oh, well, we see people we don't know." And then that's when you would display your cultural awareness, and in a positive way to make sure no one gets arrested, through some negative reinforcements. And that's where a lotta my job was, of, you know, you don't have any evidence. We don't know—we don't know these people. We've only heard this from you. How come you're the only one who knows this? And, oh yeah, by the way, if this person gets shipped to prison and we find out that they're innocent, we're coming after you. And then all of the sudden you would never see them again, magically. When they would show up—never show up again with their non-evidence. And so that was kinda the flip side to knowing a lot about their culture is, we—we being, we my teams, the brigade staff to an extent, figured out that these type of reports and these type of people were doing things for rather nefarious reasons. And if you wanna know why Abu-Ghraib prison filled up, that's a large share of why.

Kollath: Do you—kind using that as a jumping off point, overzealousness on our part, maybe? As far as when it came to information gathering?

Carnes: Um—

Kollath: Or just not knowing what was useful and what wasn't?

Carnes: Okay, are the questions going to be on the tape?

Kollath: Huh, no.

Carnes: Okay, good. So, okay. So I get what you're saying. Well here's what my opinion is. I've never been to Abu-Ghraib, I didn't meet General Karpinski, now Colonel Karpinski, who was the commander of Abu-Ghraib prison as well as the 800th MP Brigade. I didn't meet Barbara Fast, the commander of intelligence in Iraq. I didn't meet General Sanchez, the commander of coalition forces in Iraq, when I was there in 2003. Here's what my opinion is. What happened was, is that we didn't—we didn't understand. We didn't get it. Americans, we generally wanna do the good thing. And when someone—when an American says to another American that something bad is happening or that someone's bad, generally we're telling the truth. And generally we're doing it for positive reasons. Unfortunately in Iraq, the opposite is true. Where you'll do things—where you'll do things for very negative reasons. And that was the real problem that Americans didn't get at first. We assume when people are saying that former Ba'ath party members - that was somethings else that they'd throw in - were trying to overthrow the fledgling Iraqi government and trying to kill, maim or capture Americans, we took that as truth, instead of taking it for what it is and trying to see if other people are saying this and you know, maybe monitoring the situation.

[00:50:13]

So as a result, well what do you do with someone who is like that? Well, you go and arrest them, that's the natural thing to do. You kinda preempt the death that's going to happen. Well, when this happens, you know, every night, a few times a night, in every brigade's area of operations you start filling up prisons pretty quickly. And after a while it becomes really hard to prove or disprove what's going on. And so by the time you get to Abu Ghraib where everyone ended up, from what I understand reading the reports, it was just mass chaos there. It didn't help any that those particular units that were in command of Abu Ghraib - and it wasn't the whole 800th MP Brigade if you read all of the 15-6 investigations into it - you see that it was just mass chaos there. They didn't have enough Americans, the Americans there were inept. Abu Ghraib is in the middle of a town. It would be like building a prison out in the town of Middleton, or out in Waukesha. And you didn't put these people—you didn't speed all these detainees out to the middle of the middle of the desert and set up a facility out there like you're supposed to do. Speed them to the rear. I mean, during World War II we shipped German prisoners of war all the way to Fort McCoy. We didn't do that in Iraq. We kept them in Iraq and we kept them in the middle of town. Where in a situation that's not very safe. And that's a very big area. And Abu Ghraib was the infamous Iraqi prison as well.

So you had all these things coming together. Detainees that may or may not have deserved to be there. Paperwork being lost. Not enough Americans and Iraqi police, when we started to train up police and military, completely inept Americans. Not that all Reservists are inept, but these particular Reservists were completely inept. And you have it in an area that's going to get bombed at least every day if not two or three times a day. So it's just going to be a disaster waiting to happen.

Kollath: Trying to think of ways I can ask further questions so I'll just stop with this line for right now.

Carnes: Yes.

Kollath: Maybe I'll come back to it. Um, did you see much in the way of enemy fire when you were over there?

Carnes: Oh yeah. I mean—

Kollath: Is there a particular fire fight that stands out? A particular mem—particular incident that really you recall.

Carnes: Yeah, um, well there's two. One is when we cleared Al-Najaf, well both Al-Najaf and Karbala. It was the classic American military tactic on how to clear a city. It was beautiful. I mean, you had the mortar—you had the 11 Charlie, some mortar men, um, shooting off mortars. You had the infantry, the 11 Bravo, starting to clear forward. And then you had the support elements crawling behind. And it was just beautiful.

There's another time where I remember, and it still haunts me to this day. One of my soldiers, we got him ten days before we went to Iraq. He was stationed in Korea. He was this little, twenty-two year old, skinny, white kid from Georgia. And, you know, kinda red-necky, really nice kid, extremely hard worker. You'd direct him to do something and he could do it. Anything beyond that we were still working out at this point but—at this point in time, but he was a real go-getter, he was an NCO's dream. Well we decided to break the rules. Or I decided to break the rules one day. We had to go out from one battalion TOC - Tactical Operation Center - to another one. And at this time you had two vehicle convoys, which now seems absolutely ridiculous that we would do that. Now convoys are huge and fortified. But partially it's the 101st and you're used to working light anyway. And partially it was 2003 before the suicide bombings really got in force and the insurgency really wound up. Well, we —we followed one convoy and we knew once it got to a traffic circle this convoy was splitting off, we had less than a kilometer, less than a half—about not even a half mile from this traffic circle to this CP. And you hear gun fire at random times. Sometimes it would be celebratory gunfire. Sometimes it was just people mad and they'd bring out their AK and shoot.

[00:54:51]

Well, we heard a couple rounds, no big deal, you know. Like, I'm starting to radio in, "Hey, we're getting close." They need us over there. And all of a sudden my soldier slams on the gas. And I say, "Clark, what the hell are you doing?" "I'm shot." "What?!" You know. And I say, "Where are you shot?" "In the shoulder." Holy—and I said a buncha bad words. And we made it. I mean, he hit the gas, we were probably going fifty, which in a Humvee going from twenty to fifty is a real challenge. We get there, it just so happens that this fire nicked him in the shoulder. Right next to his body armor. Didn't cause a lotta pain—I mean, it caused him—yeah, it caused him a lotta pain but, you know, they removed the shrapnel, it wasn't a big deal. It didn't even really go into the bone. But that haunts me because I ended up getting someone hurt because I decided to break a rule. And it still haunts me to this day.

Incidentally, this kid was known as a bullet magnet, in the 101st. He was the most unlucky, lucky kid you could ever meet. This kid—we were driving one day through Mosul and, um, now it's come out where bridges or underpasses are one of the most dangerous places to go in Iraq, 'cause you have people standing on top of the bridge and dropping things in, you know. At first it would be rocks, then it turned out to be grenades and now it ended up being bigger things. That they would just drop into turrets and, you know, kill or wound hundreds of American soldiers. Well, we were driving underneath this underpass and some kid threw a rock. And it looked like something also fell from the top. And we heard some gunfire, okay, no big deal. So we were just drivin' along, and no big deal, and so Clark got hit in the head with a rock, in the Kevlar. And it kinda made him upset, you know, it kinda made me upset but whatever. You know, you're not going to be able to find these kids. Every now and then you would find 'em and that was fun to give 'em back to their family. In shame. And handcuffs.

And this particular time we come out, we come out of the Humvee and he's like, "What the—what's going on? Why is my whole side wet?" Pulls out his canteen, and it's got two bullet holes in it. Entry and exit. What?! So we got to the doors, mind you, we had soft skin doors. We had the m9 9&8 cargo Humvees, we didn't have up-armor. The bullet that happened to be fired the same time the rock got hit, went through the door, through his canteen, through the seat and into his gas mask. And so we have his gas mask and it has, like, the whole eye covering that's just completely shattered.

So, you know, that time—another time he was jogging, or running, on our base camp and one of the problems with celebratory fire is that what comes up must come down. And bullets are kinda small, you know, 7.62 millimeters is pretty small. And you know you always here all these—all these rounds going off and it's—we'd always ask ourselves, and we'd even ask the Iraqis, "Isn't that a little dangerous?" They'd say, "Ah, it is a little bit." Mind you, these are also the people who fish with hand grenades in the Tigress River. Well, one time he was running and he collapses. "What the hell? Why did I fall?" A celebratory round went into his shin, or it went into his calf. It was flying so slowly, the whole round didn't even penetrate his—I mean, it only got that far [hand gesture] into him. So he just drops like a sack of potatoes. Apparently gets up, swears all the way across the base camp, walks to the medic station - he's kinda going on endorphins right then and there - and says, "I got a bullet round." And all the medics are going crazy. So then, we get this message, I'm about ready to go to bed. And my chief and I - I'm not kidding you - we were dressed, running shoes on, sprinted to the medic station within fifteen seconds. And I watched them pull a round out of him.

Well, the third time he wasn't so lucky. He—this was after—right after I left. They were drivin' around in the city. You typically—in the cargo Humvees you typically put someone in the back, for rear security. Because it's a big Humvee, you know, you can throw a lot in there. They were going through a crowd and someone threw a homemade IED, Improvised Explosive Device, into the Humvee and fortunately he was wearing his body armor which saved his life. Um, but the problem was is that the plates are on your most vital organs, front and back. Well, this hit his side and so he had shrapnel all up and down his hip. And it also penetrated the intercepted the body armor here and he ended up losing a kidney. So, incidentally now he's at Fort Camb—he's still at Fort Campbell, he's still in the military but, um, that was probably the —when I got him shot and then hearing that as soon as I got back, mind you, about a week after I got back, was probably the two hardest things I had to deal with and still live with to this day.

[01:00:03]

Kollath: But he made it home safe?

Carnes: Yeah, he did make it home safe. Fortunately. So. Um, his parents were too happy with us. But, um, his brother really wasn't all that happy with us, at all. He's also in the Army. But he just kept pluggin' along.

Kollath: Um, I had my next question, and then I lost it. Oh, the enemy. Let's talk about the enemy.

Carnes: [laughs]

Kollath: Um—

Carnes: The terrorists.

Kollath: Yeah, I asked McNally this question too but, well, what were your thoughts on that? I mean, either from the initial one that you faced and then later insurgents. What was your opinion of them as fighters, that kinda thing?

Carnes: Well, the Iraqi Army first. The Iraqi Army that we faced in the very beginning, um, I actually felt very bad for them. In that pathetic way that you feel bad for these people. Um. It was amazing. We were expecting - we being the American military in general and the 101st - we were expecting a lot of stiff resistance, especially the closer we got to Baghdad. Well the Iraqis, they figured it out real quick. And they said, you know, "We're going home." And that's what happened, they ended up deserting. I felt very, very bad for them. I mean, I can't even imagine living in a country where I—I'm in the military and, beyond just refusing to fight, I mean, just not even considering it. I felt very bad for them. And actually I met scores of Iraqis coming through check points and they were military aged males, and come to find out they were in the Army. And they were scared that they were gonna be captured. Um, because that's what you did with prisoners of war. And you know, they know that if you get caught that is—might be a bad day. But they're non-combatants so, I mean, you felt bad for them. So.

I mean, and it really showed how inept this whole war machine that Saddam Hussein built up was. Not because they didn't have the equipment, it was partially training but that's a small issue. It was mainly just sheer morale and sheer will. After that, the insurgency, it was really odd. It was really strange when I was there. Because you didn't see—I mean, I only got to talk to a few true insurgents. Um, what we would call insurgents, terrorists, whatever the media calls them. Two of them—it's hard to really understand what a suicide bomber is, especially for Americans. Why would someone who values their life go blow themselves up. I mean, yeah, we can understand okay, they're poor, they're doing it for their family, their making the ultimate sacrifice for their family. But you don't underst—really get it, until you talk to them. They were a little crazy. I mean, beyond a little crazy. Like, I mean, so insane I wouldn't put a fork next to them. For fear of what they would do. It was a very, very scary situation to be anywhere near these people. We got rid of them as soon as we could. We shipped them to Higher as soon as possible.

Um, the other person was a really interesting gentleman. He was behind the scenes of what was going on. And, uh, talk about the most arrogant person you've ever met in your life. And you could tell that he was using people and that's how he did it. And he was even trying to use us. It was a really, really—he was trying to intimidate us, actually. The Americans. And that takes a lotta nerve in order to do that. He even showed up with his family tree to prove how important he was to his society. And that was a bit disconcerting.

Then you have the other people—

[BREAK IN RECORDING] [01:03:59]

[Part III]

Carnes: Good to go? Okay, great. So there were the other people. And—in terms of the enemy. And in Iraq, when we were kind of trying to establish authority that there was a lot of very, just angry people. Angry 'cause they weren't getting their food rations. Angry because gas prices were rising. Angry because they don't have a job anymore. Angry because, well, they're just angry. And it's summer, it's really—it can be really miserable when it's 125 degrees. And so they would just pull out their AKs—pretty much everyone had an AK series weapon. And they would just come out and fire at us. If we could find 'em, you know—you couldn't—and they would just completely deny it. We also—we had a running joke of what would happen when you found someone. That they would be holding a rifle in their hand, "I didn't fire at you all." "Yes, you did." "No, I didn't." "Yes, you did." "No, I didn't." "Yeah you did. That rifle is in your hand." "That rifle?" And they would put it on the ground, "No, that's not my rifle." "Yes it is, it was just in your hand." "No it wasn't." "Yes it was, it's still hot." You know, and then you'd take 'em in but for them that was their defense mechanism. They were born into a society of lies. That if they authority - either the Ba'ath party or us, being the Americans and coalition forces - if we started—if we called them on their bluff it was deny, deny, deny. Even if it's—they would deny to their death. I mean, and that's how it was. It was very frustrating.

Also too, there was a lot of turning to—turning—what is it, turning a blind cheek? Um. Turning a blind—you know—

Kollath: Turning a blind eye.

Carnes: A blind eye, that's it. There was a lotta the turning a blind eye. And what you would—what they would do was, some would say, "Hey, I have twenty American bucks." Or, "i have 2,000 dinar." Iraqi dinar, which would be about ten dollars. "If you go just leave this in the market, this bag." Or, "If you go set this up." And for them, they knew it was dirty money, they knew it was horrible to do, they knew that they were going to cause death. But they were able to still do that double thing, not all Iraqis but enough of them, to set up these IEDs. To just go and fire randomly in a market. To, you know, sit along the bank of the Tigress and go fire across the river at us. And they didn't have a lotta qualms about it.

Kollath: Is that a cultural thing?

Carnes: I don't know. And that's something that I still wrestle with to this day. When I travel in other parts of the Middle East, like Jordan, they're not—I mean, they show a lot of the Arab qualities of the different societies, so on and so forth. But the Iraqi society was just—it was such a survival—it was almost like Lord of the Flies. Where you would just go and you had to survive through life, through any means possible to support your family. Whether it's through supporting the black market, which is around the world. But it was different where, to go do something, to kill someone else was permissible. And it was—for whatever reason. And it's horrible that people think that way. And I think that the Iraqi people will, in fifty years, will really realize—I really hope that they realize how horrible some of the acts that some of the Iraqis have done, just as how we'll see some of the acts we've done - and we're seeing it now - how some of what some of the Americans - a very small minority, but some none the less - have done were absolutely horrible towards another human right. Another member of the human race.

Kollath: talk—how sophisticated were these insurgents that you were fighting?

Carnes: Oh, at first not at all. They were actually pretty horrible. Near the end, before I left, they weren't very good at suicide bombing. We had a guy and he just got really, really scared. And that's what we figured because he's on one of the overpasses over the Tigress River, because the bridges—it was a relatively modern highway system, so they would have on ramps, off ramps, so on and so forth. He blew himself up at seven in the morning on an on ramp. You know, because he was—he just didn't—he didn't wanna kill people—Americans, or the Iraqis. We didn't know where he was going.

In terms of setting up ambushes, oh they were horrible. They were horrendous at it. They didn't know how to do it. I mean, we'd see 'em ahead of time. The problem is—and the IEDs, a lot of 'em were really horrible. But they got better at it just through practice. And that's the real disconcerting part when we start seeing the IEDs. When we start seeing the explosions through the late summer of 2003. We knew it was gonna be bad. And now they've gotten a lot better at it. Just through sheer practice. I mean, for them—like for us in the American Army, if the US Army wants to do an exercise, we go in the back forty of Fort Campbell, or we go to Fort Polk or we do a rotation out to Fort Irwin, or whatever. For them—for them to do a training exercise was basically to go blow up some Americans, an Iraqi Police convoy, whatever. And see what happens. And they are unfortunately very sophisticated at it now.

[01:09:48]

Kollath: Is there a particular IED or a particular device that they used that you thought was, you know, either particularly crude or particularly creative just in how they performed the operation?

Carnes: Oh, I mean, you know, one thing that Saddam Hussein loved was artillery. He loved artillery. And I think that a lot of it was the trench warfare from the Iran-Iraq war, where it was almost like World War I that once the trench is stabilized and the forward line of troops was stabilized, the only weapon you really had left was artillery. So there were artillery and mortar rounds everywhere. And basically at first, all they would do is just hook up a wire and then run the wire across the road and you would just command detonate it, as we call it. Or you would, you know, just press a button. Similar to our claymore mines. And those were not terribly sophisticated. They started figuring out things after a while, like daisy chaining where you would chain in series or in parallel a series of these bombs. They started getting a little more sophisticated and they got more sophisticated in their tactics. For example they would set up one I—near the end, I wasn't there when IEDs were really being used. Mosul and Northern Iraq as well was relatively peaceful, compared to Baghdad or Tikrit.

And so we didn't see a lot of IEDs. But they learned their tactics well. For example, they knew that, if they would blow up an IED within X amount of time the QRT - or the Quick Reaction Taskforce - I believe that's what QRT stands for. Or the QRF - the Quick Reaction Force - would show up in X amount of time. And then they would set off the second IED. So they were learning those techniques. That to really, really wreak some havoc you go blow up twice. Or three times. And that was the part that was really disconcerting, where the target wasn't necessarily the first IED, but the second one.

Kollath: Um, can we—how—you're making this hard on me.

Carnes: I know I make it hard on you.

Kollath: [laughs] Um, I didn't talk about this with John [McNally] so I'll—but I want your take on it. The homefront support for you when you were over there, how much contact did you have with your friends and family? Did you feel like you were getting enough support from the country as a whole? That sorta thing.

Carnes: Oh, um, that's a very interesting question. And it's one that I have mixed feelings about. From my personal family I saw a large amount of support. When I deploy—everyone knew that the 101st was gonna go when Iraq started. And once all the other units started moving out to Kuwait, 4th ID, so on—well, 4th ID kinda got stuck in the Mediterranean for a while. But, um—because they couldn't come through Turkey. They knew it was just a matter of time before we were going to leave. My family was a bit upset but—especially since my grandfather passed away right before I left. So fortunately I was home on leave and got to go to the funeral. I didn't talk to them for almost a month, they had no idea where I was. We didn't have internet, we didn't have satellite phones, anything. So when I was finally able to get through to my family it was a very emotional experience for myself as well. That was the only time anyone ever - in the military - saw me cry. And it was—and, so at least everyone knew I was safe.

Once we finally got set up in Mosul, we were able to email. And so then it was a lot more instant communication then sending letters. Also that getting a physical letter in your hands when mail call happened everyday was such a morale booster. And I'd get letters from my family, from some of my friends. When you got a care package then you were—then it was a big deal. Then everyone would crowd around and then you would give people stuff. When I got the—one of my friends sent me a gross of homemade cookies. I was the most popular person in the unit for a couple days. And boy did I have to ration those cookies out. But there was a lotta support personally through me, through my social networks. In terms of when I got home, it was a really awkward situation. At that time I was getting out of the Army. Um, and then I transitioned from Active duty into the Reserves because I didn't want to get picked up on the Inactive Ready Reserve list. And I knew if I decided to become—to find a unit that did deploy, which is what I did, I was able to not deploy again. And partially for my own health and partially for my family.

[01:14:53]

When I got back though, I didn't get the parade. It was ki—we got off the plane all together, all these soldiers from Fort Campbell. My dad was there and he welcomed me off the plane. And it was very odd. And I don't know how to explain it besides that. I mean, there were people hooting and hollering on the plane and that wasn't me. I was just—I kinda cracked a smile when I got off the plane, I saw my dad, I waved my Kevlar at him. And then we went—we went home to my apartment. And he spent three days with me and went to Nashville, and you know, had a couple beers, had a couple really good meals. And the whole time I just wanted to be left alone. You know, I love my dad to death. I just wanted to be left alone.

And then after that, things kinda got bad for me for a little while. For every unit that deploys there's always some soldiers who stay home. And you're in a rear detachment, as they call it. Our rear detachment was horrible. I'm getting out of the military, I just get out of a combat zone, I'm trying to get everything set up to come back to the University of Wisconsin, trying to figure out how I'm going to get out of the military. All of this paperwork, all this stuff heaped on me. Finally I decided I sacrificed so much, I sacrificed sleep, I sacrificed so much for everyone else. Finally I wanted some time for me in the military to finally be able to just relax. I wasn't allowed that. I was a bit upset. I was a bit angry. And I ended up kinda just wanting to be left alone for a while. And I gained fifteen pounds and all I wanted to do is just sit on the couch, watch Springer and eat potato chips. And, you know, it's kinda funny and actually it was the most entertaining thing I wanted to do. I didn't want anything intellectually stimulating, physically stimulating, anything.

Well, when I got back to Madison, I was more like an oddity. People, they didn't meet an Iraqi war veteran yet. Or an Afghani one. And it wasn't—I mean I don't expect people to kind of bow down to me, red carpet, rose petals being put forth. But here people would always ask me, "Well, did you kill anyone? Did you shoot your weapon? And how was it? And how hot was it?" Well, there's a lot more to my story than that and I wanted to tell my story but being in a situation where there's not a lot of military around and—I would have to explain everything from one a sergeant was versus a private versus a lieutenant, to how the military structure was. I couldn't even begin to explain it. And so—and at that time as well, was the Abu Ghraib scandal and all of sudden it went from 'Support the Troops, Support the Troops, Support the Troops' to 'The Troops are Evil' and then 'Support the Troops' again. And the media gave—really turned on the troops for a while. And then kinda flipped back when they realized what they did. And it was really hard to watch all that.

I actually got a call from a—from Fort Campbell as soon as I got back. No, it was from Iraq - when I got back - saying, "Just so you know, something bad is gonna come out in the media." And it was really, really hard to take. That people were vilifying American forces, which, some of them needed to be, but it kinda made it look like, for a while - or maybe it was just me - that what we were doing was completely wrong. And what we were doing was horrible for the country, and what we were doing was horrible for Iraq. And I ended up asking myself for a long, long time - a couple years, to be honest - well, why'd I go over there then? I have no idea. Especially as the situation got worse. I told myself at first, well at least I did it for the Iraqi people and the people have a better life now. And then as the situation has gotten worse in Iraq I don't even have that excuse anymore. So now I hear it and now I feel like I was a political tool. Where you see politicians or—they always, both parties, wanna be seen right next to soldiers, shaking hands and 'We support the troops.' Well if you support the troops how come you don't support a new GI Bill? Um, increasing care to VA. Increasing body armor pro—and up-armored Humvee production? Increasing the amount of training dollars that go to the military? And so on and so forth. You don't see any of that. But you see people, "Well, I support the troops." And to me it's a real mixed message that, to be honest, both those who support the Administration and the war and those who don't are giving troops. And it's really hard to take. And it's still hard to take to this day.

[01:19:46]

Kollath: Should we stay or should we go?

Carnes: Should we stay or should we go? That's something that I question every day, to be honest. Every time I read something about Iraq. Um, and it's really odd when you read the news about Iraq, 'cause all you see are numbers. Twenty eight died, twenty three killed in suicide bombing, 160,000 troops in Iraq. You don't ever see really what's going on in Iraq. And that's something that people don't realize, all you see are these numbers. Well, now the numbers are useless. 4,000 American GIs have died in Iraq. So on and so forth. Um, the numbers don't mean anything. Well, as a result we don't have very good information - we being the American public - in order to make informed decisions. Because this is what the American public wants, basically something you can put on a PowerPoint slide or something you can say in a thirty second blurb on NPR or CNN or Fox News. So I have a really hard time just making up my mind, should we stay or should we go.

I think I always go back to my own opinion though. That we need—that we as Americans need to have the will to fix it. It's going to be ugly and we need to sacrifice tax dollars, we need to sacrifice American lives, and we need to sacrifice possibly some of our standing in the world, in order to fix it. Um, right now what we've been doing, especially since 2004 after Abu Ghraib happened, is it's a lotta status quo. And it's a lotta status quo in the military. Well we have to—this is the level that we came in at. We wanna keep it at this level. Or we wanna make it slightly better. And that's how the officer corps really thinks now. And how can I make myself look better, and how can I get out of my year or eighteen months out of Iraq with a promotion or with—you know—or alive. And it's a really unfortunate thing that that's how the American military is thinking.

So you have these two elements. You have the media not giving good information, you have the military that isn't really willing to make the sacrifices to—or do the high risk situations that may be needed. And you don't have the politicians who are willing to tell the American public and tell the world really, "Hey—" for example, "hey Abu Ghraib was really bad yes, but let's move on." If you say that the world will move on. But a lot of these things are perpetuated. For example, um, that Americ—every time an American is charged in Iraq with a crime it's always big news. Instead of saying, "Hey, this crime happened. At least we're admitting to it. Let's move on." These are all the things that are happening in Iraq, good, bad or otherwise. So now we don't have enough information and we don't have people that are willing to do what's right in order to fix Iraq, in order to pump enough money in, in order to force the Iraqi people to finally govern themselves. As well as to set up the economy that they need in order for them to survive. Mainly based on oil, to be honest. So I say, if we're not willing to do those three things, it's time to go. Because why else—all we're doing is we're just extending the inevitable, where when we pull out, eventually Iraq will stabilize but it won't stabilize to our liking.

Kollath: Uh, do you have—if there was one story that you haven't shared with me yet today that you think would be—that's particularly interesting, telling of your experience in Iraq, what would it be?

Carnes: Oh boy. There's so many things. I mean, there's a lotta things that were funny about Iraq. I mean, the Iraqi people are hysterical. They're very sarcastic. And they're not afraid to just pull a practical prank on you. I would have people come up all the time, trying to—trying to kinda finagle, like, "Would you like some whiskey?" Or you know, "In that house, they're very pretty. I'm sure that you can get one of those girls." So on and so forth. The Amer—the Iraqi people are just a very, very funny people and that's the thing that I think is missing. That all we see coming out of Iraq is all this hatred and death and so on and so forth. I mean, that's the part that's really not seen, that we don't see in the media. That's what I've seen. And it still goes on to this day. What happens when an American soldier shakes a—shakes the hand of an Iraqi person and smiles and everyone understands that, you know, hey, this isn't between—this interaction isn't my government versus your government, or my army versus your militia. This is you and me connecting, as two human beings. And that happens every day. And when that happens, then people's minds change. Unfortunately there's not enough of that that goes around.

[01:25:03]

Um, one real instance of what I saw - what happened in the very, very beginning - one of the kindest people I've ever saw was this guy Mohammed. He came up to us at a checkpoint and he—he was a really interesting individual. Um, he ended up—I was almost a therapist when I was over there. People would come up to me, Iraqis would come up to me and it was just the town outside our [???]. "Hey, look at my wound." They would show me—I mean, they would literally be taking off their shirts - in a very conservative, modest society - show me whip marks across people's backs. I mean whip marks that [hand gesture] deep. Of what they had to endure. Um, chain marks on their wrists, chain marks on their ankles. I mean, things done to parts of their body that I won't even mention. And they were finally able to come up and tell an outsider. So for me, I was almost their therapist.

Um, one guy in particular, he actually came up, he was the first Iraqi I ever met. And he showed me all of his scars, and we sat and he—and we just sat for a night.

And he was such an interesting guy. And he helped me with my Iraqi Arabic. He taught me all the Iraqi Arabic, all the slang, how all these words changed, how the sounds changed, so on and so forth. We just sat and talked all night. I ended up giving him my poncho liner - all soldiers call it their woobie - which is one of your prized possessions. And he gave me the knowledge in order to continue forth with my missions in Iraq. Um, the worse part was, for what he had to endure he was an Iraqi Shi'a and he was in the opposition somehow, that's still a little cloudy. And in the '90s he was jailed, he was put on a Stalinist show trial. Which was relatively rare, usually they'd just lock you up and throw away the key. Um, he actually got a trial, so he must have been somewhat important. And he had all these horrible things happen to him. They brought in his wife, he was strapped to a chair, the Iraqi Intelligence they raped her in front of him. 'Til she had a heart attack and she died, right in front of him. After that they hooked up electricity to his genitals, they chained him sometimes this way [demonstrates], sometimes the other way. They would do it for days at a time. They put him in a one meter by three meters cells for fourteen months. Fed him a glass of water and some rice a day. And then they just let him go, one day they said, "You're released." And he couldn't get a job after that. He couldn't do anything because, I mean—he hadn't—he was kind of a persona non grata. And he was telling me all this stuff. And I mean, he was telling me like you and I are talking right now. And so, I finally asked him, "Well, what do you wanna do now that you're free?" And he said, "Well, I just wanna go to Kuwait and start a family. Can you please help me?" And he just burst out crying. I mean, after years and years of just abuse and torture and taunting and having his family destroyed, his wife killed in front of him, the most despicable way you can ever imagine, that's all he wanted.

And hopefully I got it for him. We did put him on a truck and send him south, you know, on an American convoy. I don't know what happened to him, I really hope that he was able to find a new life again. But it's hard to tell. So, unfortunately one last thing is that there were a lot of Iraqis that helped us. A lot of Iraqis. And they were just genuinely good people. They would come up to us, they were our interpreters, people—I mean, they were also doin' it for other reasons as well, would set up local stores on our base camps or our FOBs - Forward Operating Bases. There were the barbers who came in and cut our hair. The barber we had was hysterical. He saw an American medi—and American TV that you—in the barber shop it was kind of a social thing. You must watch some more African-American type movies, where the barber shop was a place to hang out. And so he wanted some magazines so I'd always give him magazines. And you know, so—and then I'd always slip in a Maxim for him, so you know, just for his own use later. Um. Because that's what he wanted. And you know, you just form these relationships with these people. Incidentally I was invited to his wedding and I came that close to going.

Unfortunately all these people they don't have a happy ending. All of them either died, were killed or they had to flee to Syria or Jordan. Every single one. None of them survived. And that's the really unfortunate thing.

[01:30:03]

Um, when I came back from Jordan this past winter, there was an interpreter - an American interpreter - he spoke beautiful English. I was like, "How did you learn this American English?" Turns out he was from Iraq and he was one of these local interpreters. He worked for the Americans for four years. And, uh, he, uh, was given a green card. You never hear of a foreign national getting a green card before getting in country. And he fled with his whole family, he whole family got green cards because if he stayed in Iraq he was gonna end up dead. And so that was his ultimate reward for working with the Americans, was to come to the United States. And it was partially because so many interpreters and everyone else got killed that were trying to help us and doing a good thing for us. That—and unfortunately they ended up dead, so fortunately this interpreter is now living in Michigan and is able to start a life. Because, quite frankly, in Iraq right now and for the foreseeable future, it wouldn't be possible.

Kollath: Why don't we finish with—tell us about your thing underneath your [??] Jordanian sport coat?

Carnes: Oh, my corduroy jacket? Oh, this, this is a Shmag. Or a shmag [different pronunciation] or a kuffia. And there's two names for it. And what it is, is it's the head garment that you'll see most traditional Iraqi men wear it. As well as Arab men in general. Yasser Arafat is the most famous example of his black and white checked kuffia with the akquar holding it in place. This is actually - believe it or not - Special Forces issue. As you can tell it—most of them are white and black, white and red. The Bedouins one are—the traditional Bedouin ones is almost like a Scottish kilt where you're clan is determined by—or is shown by your kilt pattern. Same thing with the traditional Bedouin kuffias. Most of them aren't worn anymore. Um, well, this is a really warm garment. It's very, very warm. It's a great scarf for the winter. I like wearing it as well. Because you'll see some people wearing it as solidarity with the Palestinian people and it's a political statement. For me, it's solidarity that I'm wearing the military one that is an Issue item. And—but at the same time I'm showing that if—I am with you as an Iraqi and as an Arab.

Also too, my uniform—so I'd wear this at times, especially when I knew I was going to be doing some interpreting for some big wigs. Also, my uniform had an Arabic name tag. And so, it would say 'Carnes' in Arabic and 'Carnes' in English. And that way I was showing cultural sensitivity that, hey, you might be able to read some English, but I'm able to understand and respect you as someone who might not be able to by showing, hey, I know what—you can know what my name is too.

Kollath: And did you donate one of those to us here Jeff?

Carnes: This one? Yeah, I donated one. I donate—the BDU Top, or DCU top, that's donated as well. So—

Kollath: I think we're good. Thanks a lot Jeff.

Carnes: Oh sure.

[End of Interview] [01:33:56]