

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JAMIE PIANTINO
Logistics, Air Force, Operation Iraqi Freedom
2014

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Piantino, Jamie, (b.1984). Oral History Interview, 2014.

Approximate length: 54 minutes.

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Jamie Piantino, a Madison, Wisconsin native, discusses her service with the 115th Fighter Wing Qatar, and Kyrgyzstan, and her return to civilian life. Piantino enlisted into service and talks about basic training in San Antonio (Texas), volunteer deployments to Qatar, and Kyrgyzstan. She provides a sketch of military life through several anecdotes and discussions of military food. She comments on her volunteer service while stationed in Kyrgyzstan. She discusses her return home, and post-service work at the VA.

Biographical Sketch:

Piantino (b. 1984) joined the Air Force in 2004, spending six years of active Guard duty, and two years of inactive duty. After being discharged, she became an operating room nurse with the VA.

Archivist's 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.

Interviewed by Andrew Thompson, 2014.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2016.

Reviewed by Robert Brito, 2017.

Abstract written by Robert Brito, 2017.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of Piantino.OH1945]

Thompson: Today is October 16, 2014. This is an interview with Jamie Piantino, who served with the 115th Fighter Wing during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. This interview is being conducted at the Madison Public Library in Madison, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Andrew Thompson. Jamie, let's start by telling me where you were--when and where you were born.

Piantino: I was born in Madison, Wisconsin. I grew up in Wisconsin Dells. Lived there for--till I was eighteen, and then I moved to Lacrosse to go to college.

Thompson: Tell us a little bit about your background and life circumstances at home in--in the Dells.

Piantino: Sure. I am the youngest of four girls. I have a twin sister, but I'm still the youngest. I have--so I have three older sisters. All of us, including my father, have been in the military in some form. My dad was Army Guard, and then he transitioned to the Air Force. My oldest sister was active Army. And my middle sister was Army Guard. And then Julie and I--my twin sister--we were both Air Guard.

Thompson: Were you also in at the same time?

Piantino: No. Julie and I were. She joined one year before I did. And my dad was. So we--all three of us were in the 115th at the same time. We overlapped a little bit. Jenny and Kelly, my two older sisters, we didn't serve together.

Thompson: Okay. And give us a little bit of information on your educational background.

Piantino: So I graduated from Wisconsin Dells High School in 2002. And then I went to Lacrosse. UW Lacrosse. And I graduated from there in 2007 with a bachelor's in science with psychology emphasis, and a double minor in sociology and women's studies. And then I worked for a couple of years, and decided that I wanted to go back to school. Went to Edgewood's accelerated nursing program. And so, graduated in 2011. Correct? Yeah. So, I've been a nurse now for a couple years.

Thompson: What led you to join the military service? The Air Force?

Piantino: I needed college paid for.

Thompson: College paid for. Okay.

Piantino: Yup. Like I said, my father had been in the military, and he used the education benefits. My sisters all did also. I didn't think I was going to join. I tried to do one

year of working full-time and going to school full-time, and it was just too much. I couldn't--my grades weren't very good. So I took a semester off of school. I did basic training. I did my technical schooling. And then I came back and finished college.

Thompson: Okay. Tell us a little bit more about your entry into military service. Just walk us through the whole process you went through from talking to a recruiter up until basic training.

Piantino: Sure. So, my dad had been pushing the military since I was in high school, saying it's a great educational benefit and that it--you just--it's a good benefit all around. He really benefitted from the military, so he wanted--he was kind of behind it for my sisters and I. So, when I realized that that was probably the way I needed to go to finish being able to pay for school, I talked with my father. And he was still in the Army at the time, and he kind of said, "Go for the Air Force. They have better educational benefits for you, and they treat women a little bit better in the Air Force than they do in other sor-- in other branches."

So I got in touch with a recruiter at the 115th. And my sister had just--my twin sister, Julie, had just gone through all of this a year prior, because she joined a year before me. So she was kind of a resource for me, too, about kind of what to expect. And I'd spoke with a recruiter, and I made an appointment in Milwaukee to go to MEPS and do the physical and take all the tests that they wanted. And then the recruiter told me that I could--I could do any job that I wanted in the Air Force. I had scored high enough. So I said, "What can get me home the fastest with basic tra--" I really only wanted to take one semester off of school. So basic training, I knew, was six and a half weeks, and I needed something that would be about six or six and a half weeks for training for sc--for the job. So the two options were either services, which is kind of doing--for the Guard, it's kind of being the kitchen people. Or logistics with supply. So I chose supply. I waited until after my twenty-first birthday. So I turned twenty-one in September, and then I went to basic training in October. I also wanted it to be a little bit colder in Texas when I was doing basic training so it wouldn't be the middle of the summer.

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So I did six weeks of basic training at Lackland Air Force Base. And then I actually stayed in Lackland for my technical training.

Thompson: Okay. And what year was this?

Piantino: I joined in 2004. Because I was active guard for six years. And then two years of inactive duty.

Thompson: Okay. So October 2004 you were in Lackland. Describe for us Lackland Air Force Base and basic training.

Piantino: So that was a time when there weren't as many people joining. So it's a very, very large base. Because it--that's the only place that the Air Force does basic training. So there are a lot of different areas that weren't being utilized because they just didn't have the people. So I got there. You know, you kind of fly in. You don't really know exactly what to do. They just kind of put you in a room and say, "Wait." And a--and a bus came from the airport and took us to the--to the base. And we waited. And you don't really talk. They don't want you to talk. You just kind of sit in a desk and look forward. Then they start to get us into groups. And you just sit there. It was a lot of sitting, and a lot of just waiting for other people to get in. And then we got into our flights. And taken to the dorms. And kind of that first night was chaotic. You know, it--you don't really--again, they--they're not telling you a lot about what's going on. You just kind of get shuffled through. And so they had us quick shower, but you didn't have enough time to really shower. You know, so people still had soap in their hair, and they don't--and then people are in yelling at you, telling you to get dressed, and get into--you know, get into this other room. And it was a little bit stressful.

But I kn--having had family go through basic, I had an idea of what to expect. S--and also, being a little bit older--I was twenty-one. You know, there's girls who are seventeen at the time, and they're all freaking out. And I'm just keep your head low, and be quiet, and just get through it. That's kind of my--that was my motto through the whole thing. I do like to focus, you do meal-to-meal, and then Sunday-to-Sunday. That's how you kind of count down your days. So, that's how I got through it. And you get mail ev--like couple times a week. My mom--she was never in the military, but she was the most amazing supporter of all of us every time--any time we deployed, or when we were in basic training. She wrote a letter every single day to make sure you always got mail. Whether, you know, it was just a, "Hi, I'm thinking about you. Hope you're doing okay." Or an up--update about what's going on. But she always made sure that--that you got a piece of mail when it was mail day, so.

Thompson: That's great. I suppose with quite a few family members in there, she knew exactly what to do.

Piantino: Yeah. Yeah, she did. She's amazing.

Thompson: You mentioned you were in a flight. Can you describe what that is, for those that might not know?

Piantino: Sure. So the Air Force is different than the Army and the other branches. A flight--it's basically just your group that you train with. So, you had--whenever you marched or went anywhere, you were in lines of four. Like, four across. So you had flight leaders. The people that -- basically the drill sergeant just kind of picked four people and said, "You're going to be a leader." And then if they didn't--weren't up to par, then they got kind of booted out. But--so they would

lead each of the groups, and they were kind of in charge of making sure the people behind them were on point and tight. And those are the girls that you hopefully graduated basic training with.

Thompson: How many are in a flight?

Piantino: It varies. I think--I think ours was like twenty-five or thirty girls. I-- again, it was a small. And then we had a brother flight. So some men that were going through it. So if there were--like when we did Warrior Week out in the field training, they came with us. And, so, we did a lot of trainings simultaneous with them, but then there were things that we did on our own. But you kind of get paired up with a brother flight and a sister flight.

Thompson: So your flight was all females?

Piantino: Yes.

Thompson: Okay.

Piantino: Yup.

Thompson: Is that typical for Air Force training?

Piantino: Yes.

Thompson: Okay. You mentioned Warrior Week.

Piantino: Um-hm.

Thompson: What is that, and maybe you can talk a little bit about what you did in basic training that--that may have led up to Warrior Week and--

Piantino: Sure. So Warrior Week is kind of the culmination of basic training. And you basically just go out into the field. And you--it's kind of--kind of enacting war, but not really.

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And you carry around a weapon, and you sleep in--in tents. You have to put up tents. You--there are areas where they have gunshots and things. So you have to be acting as if you are in war. You know, you're carrying around your weapon, and you have your helmet on, and you've got your Kevlar, and--it's just survival skills more that they--that they're trying to teach you before you graduate. So.

Thompson: What kind of weapon did you carry during Warrior Week?

Piantino: I think I was an M-16. I don't know. We also go to the shooting range. I didn't qualify to carry a gun. So, I mean, I had a gun, but it wasn't loaded. Or a weapon.

It wasn't loaded. But that's where you learn to--you--everything's so quick. You know? You have like a half a day to learn about the weapon, and then they quick try to teach you. Take you to the shooting range and try and teach you. So once I got back to my home base, I learned how to shoot. And I qualified to carry a weapon. But then, that first time, I didn't get to, so.

Thompson: Okay. So, after basic and Warrior Week, you graduated.

Piantino: Um-hm.

Thompson: Did your family come down for that?

Piantino: Yes. My parents came down, and my twin sister came down, and my grandmother. And we were able to--so they--we had like a little ceremony. It's almost like a parade where we march in front, and everybody's in the bandstand, and we march in front of them, and then we graduate. And then you get--I think we got three hours off base to be able to go out to dinner with them, or do whatever. So almost everybody goes down to the River Walk at--in--where is the--Lackland is in--

Thompson: San Antonio?

Piantino: San Antonio. Thank you. I just got--

Thompson: I wasn't sure about that.

Piantino: Yeah, sorry. I was--sorry. San Antonio, Texas. So everybody goes down to the River Walk. So it's just swarmed with people. And ev--and all the trainees, you're warned, if you're late, if you break cur--anything, you will be shipped right back to week zero and start all over again. So people are pretty anxious. You--it's hard to relax and actually enjoy your company.

Thompson: Did anyone actually get shipped back to week zero?

Piantino: There was rumors that pe--that people had. I didn't want to test it. So I think we were probably at least a half an hour early coming back, because I was just like, "I don't want to--I don't." I get nervous. So came back. And I think there was one other--some more activities the next day. Some family activities. And then they left. So it was just a quick little couple days. And then the next day, I basically just went from one side of the base to the other side of the base. And they do the same thing where it's like a little bit of scare tactics. You're on a bus. And, "If you do anything wrong, you're going right back to BM--" They just constantly threaten that until you get to the technical school portion of it. And then it's a little bit more relaxed, but still very structured, and, I mean, you're in the military, so.

Thompson: Okay.

Piantino: That was another six weeks, then. And I learned my job.

Thompson: Which was?

Piantino: Supply. So I was logistics. So they teach you--there's several different branches, I suppose, of logistics. So they teach you all of it. And then when you get to your base, they assign you what specifically you will be working with or working in.

Thompson: Once you got to your final unit?

Piantino: Right.

Thompson: Okay.

Piantino: Um-hm.

Thompson: So tell us about tech school. How was tech school? What sorts of things did you learn? What kind of training did you do?

Piantino: It was--it was okay. Again, I was older than most of the people I was with, so I knew how to study. And I knew how to take tests and things. There were some girls who had a harder time with it. And my--our instructor knew that my dad was military. And, so he put a lot of pressure on me to make sure that the other girls were doing well. So I would try and help put study groups together, and try and ex--you know, I don't know. Just try and explain the process in words that they--or in terms that they could actually understand, so that we could all graduate together through tech school. There was one guy who got washed back. He didn't--he just wasn't getting it. So he got--they call it "washed back," when you have to start over again. And if you get washed back--I think it's two or three times--then you have to pick a different career. You don't get--because you're--obviously something's not clicking. You're not getting it, so. So we had one person wash back. While I was in school, I actually became very, very good friends with Tyrone.

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He--I met him in Texas, but he was part of the 115th. I didn't know him going into it. The very first day, they had us introduce ourselves, and say where we were out of. And so he introduced himself before me, and he said, "I'm from the 115th in Madison." And I'm like, "Oh my God, me too." And then I'm like, "Oh, I just spoke." Like, I spoke out of turn, and I was like, "Oh, sorry." You know? But I got really excited to meet somebody that I'd be working with. And we ended up, through our entire careers. We deployed together. And we just had kind of a healthy competition between each other. We were good friends. So that was--

Thompson: What was Tyrone's last name?

Piantino: Marshall.

Thompson: Marshall. So what kind of things did you--did you do during tech training?

Piantino: So, it was mostly eight or nine hours of class time. And then you had PT after class. And then--so usually around six in the evening, eighteen hundred, we would be released for the rest of the day. But we were up again at oh-five hundred. So, some people would go study. Some people would just relax and hang out. Because you had a little bit more liberty to be able to like go to the store, or just kind of--you had to stay on the side of the base that has the tech school, but you--they had like a pool hall, and different activities that you could go do instead of just constantly being on lockdown or feeling like you're on lockdown. And as you graduated through your weeks, you got more and more liberties. So towards the end, you could go off base in the evening or on the weekends. So people took advantage of that.

Thompson: And you took advantage of that?

Piantino: I only did once. Because it was expensive to get a cab to go anywhere. So one weekend, a group of us went down to the River Walk and had dinner. But otherwise I just kind of stayed around and studied. And just--I just wanted to get home on time, and make sure I was doing what I needed to do.

Thompson: Outside of the classroom, did you do any hands-on training with any of the equipment, or--

Piantino: That was--that was kind of built-in. So it was a eight or nine hour school day. So some--a lot of it was sitting in a classroom having instruction. And then we--they had simulated warehouses where you would go, and practice, and do the job, basically. But in a simulation situation.

Thompson: Okay. Do you have any stories that stick out from either basic training or tech training that you'd like to share? Maybe some things you got in trouble with, or anything along those lines?

Piantino: There was one day I got in trouble. In basic training. They had--we had these locked drawers that you were supposed to keep all your personal items. And we had to carry around a piece of paper that had the serial numbers of our money. If we had cash money, you had to write your serial numbers, and then you had to cross it out as you spent it. And there was a fire drill or something. And I forgot to secure this drawer. And so, I ran out to do the s--the fire drill. And then we were in the day room afterwards. And the drill instructor--drill instructor said, "Pull out your piece of paper." And she started reading off serial numbers of money. And she's like, "If that's yours, stay standing." And I'm looking. And I'm like, "Oh my God. It's mine." And so I'm just standing. And I was like, "What am I going to--"

And so I got read the riot act about keeping things secure. But sh--they also had my debit card, which was in that box. And sh--you know, "How much money do you have in here? What's it worth to you to get it back?" And so I had to do pushups for it. Which was--it was embarrassing, and it was awful, but. It was actually kind of neat. One other girl stood up and offered to do half of them for me. So that was kind of--that was kind of nice to be able to have a little bit of comradery there, but it was re--it was. Get singled out.

Thompson: Do your drill instructors stick out in your mind? Do you remember them?

Piantino: I do. Sergeant O'Brian. She was from Wisconsin. She --it was funny. Because, you know, they--it's like that break you down to build you up. So she was very tough at the beginning, but then once we were towards the end, she would--she's telling us how proud she was of us. And she was from Milwaukee, I remember that. Because she was like, "Oh, you're from Wisconsin, too." And, so there was one day that I actually chatted with her a little bit. But, yeah, Tiffany O'Brian was her name. I can't remember our--I know he was a tech sergeant for our brother flight. I can't remember his name, though.

Thompson: You just had one drill instructor?

Piantino: Well, one primary.

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And then there was one female who would help out. Because she didn't have her own flight at the time. Again, there wer--there wasn't as many people coming through. So she would come in, and wore little click things on her--on her combat boots. So you would hear her coming through the bay. And it was like, "Oh, God, what is she going to do now?" They just--you never--you're just laying in bed. It's early in the morning. And it's not quite time for reveille, but it's--you know you're already awake. You're ready to go. And you just hear the "click, click, click." And it's like, "Oh, what?" And sometimes it wasn't anything. She was just walking to the office for our drill sergeant. Sometimes, though, she'd just start screaming, and tearing things up. Because they could do that. They'd come in, and if they flip your bed, --you better get that made back up, you know. Sometimes it's hard not to laugh when they do inspections and stuff, because there's--there was one guy. He would--he'd like hang upside down from the bunkbeds like a monkey. And make all kind of funny--like to try to get you to laugh. And you can't laugh. But it would be like--especially if he wasn't doing it to you, and you'd--somebody down the--you're just like, "What is he doing?" And it's like, "Where's your crack pipe? Where? You know, you must be on crack if your locker looks like this." And you're just like, "You guys are crazy." And I know that they're laughing about it. But you can't laugh.

Thompson: Other than Tyrone, were there any other folks that stood out that you're friends with still, or are memorable in any way?

Piantino: There was one other female who I was--we were actually, we were in the same BMT cla--flights. We didn't like each other at that time. Because it's a--it's a--that's a really high stress environment, and I don't know. I didn't want to be friends with anybody. I just wanted, again, just get through this. I didn't care. And she didn't care for me because there was one night I was on guard duty. So we had to take turns staying up part of the night and watching the door. And she was getting up to go to the restroom, and I--she didn't have any shoes on. And I told her she had to put shoes on. Because that was a rule. And she's like, "I just have to go in." I'm like, "Nope. You have to put your shoes on." So she didn't like me since then. But then we were in the same tech class together, and we actually became pretty good friends for a while. We tried to stay in touch. She was from Buffalo, New York. Patricia McGowan was her name. But we fell out of touch after a couple years, so.

Thompson: Sure. How was the food in basic training and in tech training?

Piantino: You don't really eat it. I mean, you get like--so you sit at a table with four people. And you--so it's the whole room full of people. And then if the--if the table in front of you, people start getting up, you have to start getting up. And you can't be--you better not be one of the last people at the--at the table. So you scarf it down just as quickly as you can. And you have to drink three glasses of water, which was lukewarm water. And then you could have maybe a Gatorade or a milk or something, but you had to have three glasses of water. Because hydrate or die. That was, you know. So if the first person got up off the table, people would be glaring. Like, "You sit down. Sit down. Sit down so we can actually eat for a minute." And somebody would be like, "Oh, I got to get up." And they'd get up. And then you all got to get up. So, the food, I don't know. Basic training I can't remember. The tech school was a little bit better. You had--if you got up early enough, you could go to the cafeteria. You could have a leisurely little breakfast. If you wanted to sleep in, then that's your choice. You don't get as much time. So, the food wasn't bad, though.

Thompson: Did your family come down for graduation from tech training?

Piantino: No. No. There really wasn't anything for that. It was just kind of like, "Okay, now go to wherever you need to go."

Thompson: Okay. So you came back to Wisconsin then?

Piantino: I did. Um-hm. I came back. It was during--I think it was right around New Year. Or maybe--some--it was the winter. It was around New Year's, I think. So I was on break from college. And then I just picked up for a second semester for school. And then I did my one weekend a month, two weeks a year in Madison.

Thompson: Okay. Talk a little bit about that experience with the unit here in Madison.

Piantino: So I was assigned to the warehouse, which was fine. I liked it. I actually really enjoyed the people I worked with.

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There weren't a lot of women in logistics. So sometimes I felt a little bit like they would leave filing jobs for me to do. I was like, "You know, I can do things more than just file paperwork." And I'd give them a hard time about it. And they knew it. Because I've always been one where I'm like, "I can pull my own weight. I'm not a weak little girl. I can do this." And so we--but we worked together. We did a lot of deployment readiness bags and things that--because if you deployed, you had to have--they got--there were A, B, and C bags. So there was a cold weather bag. There was a chemical warfare bag. And then there was just kind of a basic sleeping bag, canteen, stuff like that. And there was constantly things that were outdated, or needing to be updated. So we--and there was, I think, something like 1,100 people at--on the 115th at the time. So we had to maintain all of those bags. So it felt like every drill weekend for a couple years it was just going through and replacing things, and taking things out. It's kind of what my deploy--or that's what my job was here, when I was at the 115th. When I deployed, though, I still worked in a warehouse, but I was actually retrieving parts for the mechanics. If--so if an airplane broke, they would need a part. Then they would order it through us. And sometimes we had it in the warehouse that we maintained. Sometimes we didn't. So if it was there, then we would go fetch it. Give it to them. And there's a whole process with that. But sometimes we just had to order it and get it from the States. So it all depended on what it was.

Thompson: How many people worked in the warehouse who were in Madison with you?

Piantino: We had I want to say like eight to ten. It kind of fluxed a little bit. And if it was a busy--like if we knew a lot of people were going to deploy, then they would pull pe--extra people back if we needed to issue out things. But there was usually about eight to ten people working back there.

Thompson: Okay. What rank were you at this time?

Piantino: I, well, I separated as a Staff Sergeant. So that's an E-5. So--and I came in as a Senior Airman, so that's an E-4. So I only went up one rank.

Thompson: How was the experience as a--as a college student and also an airman, and serving in the Air Force? Was that different from your peers?

Piantino: No, because a lot of them were going to school, or had gone to school. A couple of the older guys, they didn't. They were--so for Guard, there's AGR, which is basically like full-time Guard member. So it's kind of like active duty, but it's called AGR. So they worked at the base Monday through Friday, all the time. And then also worked on Guard weekends. So those guys were kind of career, lifers. Air Force life, you know. And they weren't--they didn't have college credit, but

they were high ranking as enlisted, so it didn't really--I guess, for them, it didn't really matter. But a lot of the ones who came on the weekends were college students like myself.

Thompson: Just for anybody who doesn't know, what does AGR stand for?

Piantino: I don't even know, honestly.

Thompson: But they were the--they were the full-time staff.

Piantino: Full-time, yeah. Full-time and they maintained the base all the time.

Thompson: Okay.

Piantino: Um-hm.

Thompson: So then let's talk about your deployment. When did you find out you were going? How did you feel about that?

Piantino: I actually volunteered for it.

Thompson: Okay.

Piantino: So, I was graduating from Lacrosse in 2007. And I didn't have a job lined up. So I kind of was looking for a deployment that I could kind of bum around for a little while, while trying to figure out what it was I wanted to do as a--for a real life. So, they said that there was a deployment to Qatar, which is a tiny little island outside of Kuwait. And it was just going to be a forty-five-day deployment. And they needed somebody who did my job. So I said, "Okay, I'll go." I didn't know what to expect. And, you know, I had never deployed. It was actually--it was really nice. And I feel bad for saying that, because I really liked my deployment. It's apparently the base that the Marines and the Army go to for R&R if they deploy to Iraq. So it wasn't too bad. You know, I t--I spoke with friends. You know, we would email or whatever, and they'd ask me how things were going.

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And I'm like, "Well, my bunk is behind the Dairy Queen and the Olympic-size swimming pool." And they're like, "Wait, are you at war? Or where are you?"

So, it really was not a bad deployment. It was really hot. Like, that was probably the worst part of it. It was something like over a hun-- like 120 degrees most days, with like eighty or ninety percent humidity. But, the job wasn't tough. It was twelve-hour days, six days a week. Which was--that got long. But I worked second shift, so I worked in the middle--I think I came in like seven p.m. to seven a.m., which is daytime here, so I could email friends, and they would actually be able to email back if we had downtime, so we could actually talk. And, yeah. I met some really f--nice British Air Force members, and I met so--I just--I had a

nice time. It was fun, for being at war. But then I ca--I was able to work out a lot. I got in shape. Came home. There was--and there's a couple of people who had deployed. Not to the same place, but to other places. And quite a few of us lost weight. And they--the people who were at home laughed and teased us. They're like, "Well you guys are like the poster children for deployment. You all get in shape, and you get--" But I'm like, "Well, there's nothing else to do. You work twelve hours a day. There's--and then they have gyms. So you go to the gym and workout, or go swimming, or do whatever." So.

Thompson: Did you deploy with any friends?

Piantino: No. I didn't know anybody.

Thompson: Did you deploy with other folks from the 115th, or did you--

Piantino: No.

Thompson: You filled in with other--

Piantino: Um-hm.

Thompson: --other units?

Piantino: Right. So a lot of the people that I worked with were active duty. Th--and there were different groups that I kind of just joined up with. So they knew each other. And then there were a few of us that were just kind of singles that came. So, I--yeah. I didn't know anybody. So that was a p--that was a little bit of the stress going into it, too.

Thompson: Was there any friction between the active duty folks and the your--and the Guard folks?

Piantino: A little bit. Yeah. Yeah, there always is. You know, they don't feel like we're real military, and--which is fine. You know, I--we worked just as hard as everyone else did.

Thompson: Didn't bother you at all?

Piantino: No. No. I'm like, it's just noise. And I mean, I got scolded. The--one of the first weeks I was there, because I guess I'd--I stepped out in a way that I went and spoke directly to the Master Sergeant about something instead of asking my direct supervisor. And I--because in Madison, it's okay if you go talk to somebody else. It wasn't anything big. I asked--because we were allotted, I think, two or three times a week to be able to leave work one hour early to go workout. And I asked if it was okay if I left to go workout. Because it was kind of some downtime. And he chewed my ass about it. And was like how dare I jump the chain of command?

And I was just like, "Sorry." I just wanted permission, and I didn't know where my supervisor was at the moment. So, I didn't do that again. I--

Thompson: Learned your lesson.

Piantino: Yes. I learned my lesson, that they take those much more seriously when it's active duty, so.

Thompson: Tell us a little bit about the process of getting from the States to Qatar. How did you--did you do any training beforehand?

Piantino: No, not really. I think I was working at the base full-time, a little bit. Again, because I had just graduated college. It was only a couple of days, though, because I graduated in May, and I think I left like a week later. And we had it all planned out that way. So I left from Madison. And they had a little send-off. Like my Chief of Logistics was there. And the Colonel was there for logistics. And so they just go--and a couple of the people I work with. They say good-bye. And they're also there when you come home. To welcome you home. And I flew to--I think I flew to Maryland. And then from there, I think we went to Turkey, but we couldn't get off the plane. And then we landed in Qatar. So Turkey was just to refuel. And then--it was a long--a long day. A long two days, I think.

Thompson: What were your first impressions upon arriving in Qatar?

Piantino: It was barren to me. It was very dusty, and kind of looked just kind of gray and dirty. But it was interesting, because I did leave the base once.

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I went on a trip once. And Qatar is actually a very wealthy country. But they have third country nationals who--so basically, if you come from a different country, you're going to--you know that you're going to be poor. Your children are going to be poor. But your grandchildren might get a chance at having a good life. So, to me--because the third country nationals were the ones who kind of--were like the janitors on the base, and clean. But to have that kind of insight to say, "I'm going to live really poorly, and maybe not a very good life. My kids aren't going to have a good life. But then--then we'll do well." Because the people who are first country nationals are very wealthy. And they have very nice cars. And they have, like right outside the base, huge like malls, and office buildings, and it was--it was a little shocking to me. I mean, I knew the country was wealthy, but I didn't realize that gap there. So, one guy that--that I deployed with, though that everybody rode on camels. And I was like, "Are you serious?" Like, he--I like--do you think it's like Aladdin? I--but. Yeah. So he was really shocked because he saw like Lamborghinis and all these really fancy cars. I'm like, "Did you not do any research on this country before you came?" But that's all right.

Thompson: How were the facilities at your base? How big was the base and describe that a little bit.

Piantino: It was a--it was a really big base. Because there was American airmen. There was British airmen. There were some Australian airmen. Maybe some French? But there's--so there--it was kind of separated into two areas. There was the areas that were--that housed, like where you--the housing was. And there was restaurants and some shops. And then you had to cross into another area where the airfields were. And, and like the warehouses and things like that. So I'm not exactly sure how many people were there, how big it was. But it was--I was busy and bustling around. I--the gym was really nice. You know, the services department, that I thought was only people who went and cooked, actually they did a lot of different morale-boosting things. I was--played volleyball. They had like a volleyball tournament for Fourth of July when we were there. And they had different, like, leagues. And they had trainers for you, if you wanted to try to get in shape, and so.

Thompson: Did you carry any weapons while you were there?

Piantino: No.

Thompson: No. How was the food?

Piantino: Not good. That's part of the reason I lost so much weight. I had started--it was too hot to want to eat anything hot, in my opinion. So I didn't--I was mostly just eating salads. And then one day I found a huge, like three-inch giant bug in my salad. And I said, "Okay, I'm done eating salad." So I ate individual peel-pack things of Special K Smart Start--and Smart Start. And I would have a banana every once in a while. But it freaked me out. I was like, "Nope, I'm--" Because I was looking at it. I'm like, "I didn't put roast beef on my sandwich--on my salad." And I'm looking closer. It was a huge bug. And the food came from--it wasn't American soldiers or airmen preparing the food. It was the third country nationals who prepared the food. The airmen just served it. So I just said no. I'm just going to have cereal that's already packaged and I know is safe. And I didn't like the milk. So I would just eat it dry.

Thompson: How long did you do that for?

Piantino: Forty-five days.

Thompson: All forty-five days?

Piantino: Yes.

Thompson: Wow.

Piantino: Yeah. It was like the second day that I found the giant bug in my food.

Thompson: Oh, wow.

Piantino: Yeah. It was fine. I mean, again, that's part of the reason I ended up--I think I lost like twenty pounds in forty-five days. I was running, and then eating nothing but cereal, so--

Thompson: Good for you.

Piantino: Yeah.

Thompson: You mentioned that there were other coalition forces there. Did you interact with them at all? Did you make any friends, or?

Piantino: Yeah. I made friends with some British Air Force guys. They were fun. So we would just go. There was a little area where you could play cards and stuff, so we'd play cards a lot. And drink tea. They worked opposite--or the same kind of shift that I did, so they also worked twelve-hour shifts. I think theirs was a little cushier, though. They seemed to be off more than I--than I was. But, yeah. And they--and I stayed in touch with them for quite a while, actually, after I deployed home.

Thompson: Are you still in touch with any of them?

Piantino: We connected on Facebook about two years ago, and we were chatting a little bit, just to say, like, "Hey, how are you?"

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And--but then it kind of trailed off again.

Thompson: Okay. So, then, tell us about getting back to the States and what you did after your first deployment?

Piantino: And I came back home, and I started working as a group home counselor in Lacrosse. So I worked with delinquent teenagers aging from thirteen to seventeen. That was--it was kind of stressful. It was like--I think I worked just over a year doing that. But it was--you're a glorified babysitter. And I didn't like it. I was thinking about going back to school to get my master's. I really thought that I wanted to do--get a degree in marriage and family counseling. And then I was--I also love to cook, so I was throwing around the idea of going to culinary school. And I ended up moving to Portland, Oregon. Oregon. And I lived out there for a year. And I was able to make arrangements with the 115th and the Air Force base in Portland, so that I could do my drills with them, but still technically be assigned to the 115th. Because I only had a year left with them. So instead of doing all the paperwork to transfer to this other base, I just drilled with them. And I can't remember what unit they were, but. And I also was able to--like, if I came home for a week, I could make up some drill days with our--with the 115th. So I could kind of be almost ahead for the next year. So I did that. And then came back

to Wisconsin, because I realized I wanted to be a nurse. And I still had GI bill benefits, but it would on--they only work if I was back in Wisconsin. So I came back to Wisconsin to go back to school.

Thompson: Okay. Now, when was that?

Piantino: Two thousand nine, maybe? In between there, though, I did deploy one more time to Kyrgyzstan. So, there was a--gosh, my years are--too many years. Two thousand four I joined. Two thousand seven I deployed to Qatar. It must have been 2008 or 2009 I deployed to Kyrgyzstan. And then I moved to Portland after that. So I was in Kyrgyzstan for five months.

Thompson: Okay. Let's talk about that. How was--how was that experience?

Piantino: That was okay. I actually liked it a lot, because I got in touch with--the chaplain services had this volunteer program on base there, and you could go do all these volunteer opportunities off of the base. Because Kyrgyzstan is a very poor country, too. So I did Habitat for Humanity. I visited orphanages. I visited hospitals. We did these lunches with babushkas. It's called grandmas. And I ended up--when I started, I didn't have any intention to do it other than just to keep my free time occupied, and pass the time. But then I found out that you could get a medal for volunteering. So I ended up volunteering over 120 hours while I was there, and I got a volunteer medal for deploying. So, it was kind of neat. You know, because it was one up on Tyrone. Because he also, actually, deployed to Kyrgyzstan at the same time. He and I went together. So, we--we would--we would compete with, like, PT tests, and who could score higher. And so I was like, "Well, I'm one up on you on medals." Because you get ribbons and medals for deploying to OEF, OIF. And I said--he goes, "You can keep your volunteer medal. I'm not doing that." So, that was--but it was really neat to--even Habitat for Humanity, the difference that they did. Like, we were making houses out of cement, and mixing straw and mud together to be insulation. And just seeing something like that, versus what Habitat for Humanity is in the States. So, it was--that--that was a really cool experience, to be able to get off the base, interact with the local people a little bit, and help.

Thompson: Certainly a unique experience to--

Piantino: Yeah.

Thompson: --be able to volunteer doing those sorts of humanitarian things while you were--

Piantino: Um-hm.

Thompson: --supporting a war [inaudible].

Piantino: Right, yeah.

Thompson: So, were you doing the same job in--in Kyrgyzstan?

Piantino: Yeah. I did the same job throughout my whole six years. Which was part of the reason I wanted to kind of separate. I got bored with it. And I had asked if I could maybe even just move around in the logistics department, but the other jobs were kind of being held by people who worked there full-time.

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So, really, the only area that there was for the part-time Guard was in the warehouse. And I just--I kind of got burnt out on it, you know? So I separated. And I thought I would re-join after I finished nursing school, and be a nurse in--in the Air Force. But I ended up getting married and having a baby. And so I decided--I'm actually still kind of playing with the idea of re-joining the military, but I'm thinking maybe a different branch. As I'm now an operating room nurse, and the Navy is in desperate need of operating room nurses. So, I'm toying with the idea now that my son is a little bit older, so.

Thompson: What led you to decide to go back on deployment? Was that a volunteer position, or were you called?

Piantino: Yup. I--yup, it was. I--well, I wanted to see another part of the world. And I didn't like my--the job that I was in. So, the money is always good to deploy. And there are people who are--they call them "Guard bums." They just go from deployment to deployment to deployment. And not, you know. But--I--and I thought about doing that for a little while. But then I found--then I decided to move across the country. But this one, I really liked it. You meet some really interesting people when you're--when you deploy, and people that you wouldn't necessarily ever get a chance to meet anywhere else. And you see a different part of the world, and how people live. And, like I said, I--the humanitarian effort part really was appealing to me. And another person who had deployed to Kyrgyzstan, I worked with her at the 115th. And so she told me about that. And so that's why--that's how I knew to get involved with it right away. So, that was--that was a reason I chose there. And, of course, I chose, also, deployments that weren't, like, in Iraq. And in Afghanistan. I chose supporting roles.

Thompson: So you got to choose where you--where you [inaudible].

Piantino: Yeah. Some people did--like, when my sister deployed, she went to Iraq. She was kind of "voluntold." So, it was technically a volunteer deployment, but they were like, "We really--" She wa--she loaded bombs onto planes. They needed that job. They needed her there. So, her whole unit, or her whole, like, section, was going. And so they were like, "You're going too." So mine was--I was never. It was purely, like I was seeking out deployments, so.

Thompson: Sure. Tell us a little bit of your first impressions of Kyrgyzstan, and the facilities there.

Piantino: The country was dirty. It was--there was a lot of trash and litter all over the place. Not a lot of grass or greenery. There were certain areas where it was. They were trying to, like I--make it look a little nicer. Because there was some big conference or summit going to happen while we were there. So they had--they were trying to kind of pretty up the area. There's a lot of corruption in that country, so money was being funneled to other places. But the base itself was nice. Temperature is similar to Wisconsin. And we were there in kind of like what would be fall and into the winter. So they do get snow there. But it was--it wasn't bad. It was kind of--no. It wa--that's not when I was there, sorry. I was there in the summer and then coming into kind of the fall area. So it started to get cool at--towards the end of my deployment. But we--I didn't see it snow. But I was told there's snow there. But, yeah, you get off the base and it's dirty.

Thompson: Do you have any memorable stories from your either your time in Qatar or Kyrgyzstan?

Piantino: Hmm. Not anything that's really, you know. It just, kind of, overall, it was a good experience, I think.

Thompson: Okay. So, then you came home from Kyrgyzstan. You moved to Portland.

Piantino: Um-hm.

Thompson: And what happened then? Just finished out the career, or?

Piantino: Yeah. Sorry. Yeah. The--I finished out my time. And then I was--so two years inactive duty. And just--I worked out there. And then came home, so.

Thompson: What kept you going through all of this, in your military career?

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Piantino: I thought it was fun, you know? And again, like meeting people that I didn't--wouldn't have otherwise met. And it's from all different walks of life. And different cultures, and different backgrounds. You know, instead of being in this, like, cookie cutter, fairly white Wisconsin. You know, I grew up in the Dells. There wa--there wasn't a lot of diversity there. I went to Lacrosse. There's not a lot of diversity there. So it was kind of nice to be able to experience a different, you know, environment.

Thompson: Okay. Did you ever--while you were on deployment, did you have any leave, or were you able to travel a little bit at all?

Piantino: No, not rea--I mean, there were the times to get off the base. But those were--I u--I didn't sleep a lot. Like, especially when I was in Kyrgyzstan. I would work

twelve hours, and then maybe catch a quick nap. And then go and do Habitat or something. But you didn't get, like, you have three days to go do something. It was more like you have a couple of hours, but it's in a structured way, so.

Thompson: Was there anything else that you would like to share with whoever might be listening, and--about your time in the military?

Piantino: No.

Thompson: Not really?

Piantino: I--no, I think that probably covers it.

Thompson: Are you involved in any veterans' organizations, or are you still active in--in supporting family members and that sort of thing?

Piantino: I am a member of the VFW in the Dells. I don't really know what that means. My dad just wanted all of us--because all of my sisters and himself, we're all veterans. So he wanted us to do that. I work for the VA hospital. I love that population. They--they're just my favorite. I didn't think I would like it, but I can really relate to experiences. I mean, not--not--I was never, pardon my language, I was never in the shit, as some people have been. But I can still understand, you know, what it means to be in the military. And I feel like that helps me kind of connect with my patients. So, I do that. And then, you know, my sister is pretty active with different organizations, with the--like, supporting. And so if she tells me about them, then I usually try and help support it. Or participate.

Thompson: Okay. How is your life different now than it was sort of before the military? Do you feel it's different at all?

Piantino: I do. I feel like I probably grew--I grew up. You know? And I go--again, I got to see parts of the country I never would have seen had I not deployed and been in the military. I ju--I think--I don't have any regrets about it. And I, you know, considering I went into it feeling like I had to go into it, I was pleasantly surprised by my whole experience.

Thompson: That--kind of on that line, was there anything that surprised you along the way that maybe you weren't expecting?

Piantino: I didn't think I'd like it. I thought I would--I thought I'd be miserable the whole time. But I--you know, there weren't--it wasn't all rainbows and sunshine. But there were parts that, you know, that w--it wasn't awesome. But you kind of get through it. And then, all of the sudden, you're like, "Oh, I did that." You know? So, I think that it was just overall, it was a good thing.

Thompson: Well, if--I don't know if there's anything else you'd want to share, but, thank you

so much for--

Piantino: Yeah, absolutely.

Thompson: --for sitting down with us and sharing your story.

Piantino: You're welcome. Thank you.

[End of Piantino.OH1945][End of interview]