

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
MICHAEL TREPANIER
Chemical Operations Specialist, Army, Iraq War
2006

OH
874

OH
874

Trepanier, Michael. (b. 1978). Oral History Interview, 2006.

Approximate length: 1 hour 33 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Michael Trepanier discusses his service in the Iraq War with the 1st Cavalry Division, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 12th Regiment, 2nd Battalion, Bravo Company in the Baghdad area as a Chemical Operations Specialist and a driver and gunner. Trepanier discusses his reasons for joining the Army after 9/11 and his basic training at AIT at Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri). He outlines his month and a half training in the Mojave Desert and explains his confusion at the length of training before being told they were being sent to Iraq. He describes being stationed at Abu Ghraib and working with a tank unit, as well as working closely with Estonian troops during his time in Iraq. He briefly discusses his duties doing patrols and cordon and searches. Trepanier then discusses the difficulty in the Iraq war of determining who is “the bad guy” and the confusion of the changing attitudes of the Iraqi public towards American soldiers. He explains his theories on the Iraq war, why it is so difficult and confusing, why the anti-U.S. resistance is so strong, and why leaving the country early would not have been a good idea. He ends the interview discussing the training of the Iraqi National Guard, and the danger of double agents.

Biographical Sketch:

Trepanier (b. 1978) served with the United States Army and Army Reserve for five years, serving fourteen months overseas in Iraq. He has since worked for some departments of the Wisconsin State Government, including the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Financial Institutions.

Interviewed by John Weingant, 2006.

Transcribed by Joe Fitzgibbon, 2014.

Reviewed by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Abstract written by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Interview Transcript

Weingant: Well, it's what, April fourth and it's about 9:30 and we're visiting here with Michael—say it for me.

Trepanier: Trepanier.

Weingant: Yeah okay, you don't have to be that close.

Trepanier: [laughs] Okay.

Weingant: Trepanier.

Trepanier: Mhmm.

Weingant: And we're going to be talking about his experiences in Iraq. But before we do that, Mike just tell me a little about your—the early years, we'll call it. When were you born, where were you, where did you go to school?

Trepanier: Oh okay. Well, I'm a weird case—I was actually born in Seoul, South Korea and while I was young I was abandoned at birth, so I was put in an orphanage for a few years and was adopted by Caucasian parents in Wisconsin. Grew up in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Went to Goodrich High School in Fond du Lac, graduated in '96, 1996. And then I went to UW-Madison, University of Wisconsin-Madison and graduated there with two bachelors in the year 2000. And from there I worked at the Wisconsin State Legislature for a state assemblyman from Fond du Lac from 2001 through 2003 and during my tenure there, September 11th—9-1-1 or 9/11 occurred, which was a big terrorist event. And from that point, that's when I got my interest in the military and I started my military service in January of 2003.

Weingant: Okay. So what, you joined a National Guard unit, or what?

Trepanier: I joined active duty Army.

Weingant: Active-duty Army, okay. So you—okay. What was your major in college, Mike?

Trepanier: I had two—two majors, I had a major in Political Science and the other one was Communication Arts.

Weingant: Okay, I can see where you're going already. [Trepanier laughs] Good enough. Okay well tell me about your—you went on active duty immediately?

Trepanier: That's right.

Weingant: Branch?

Trepanier: United States regular Army.

Weingant: Okay. Infantry?

Trepanier: No, actually it was—when I was trying to choose what kind of military occupation specialty I wanted, you know, I knew in the back of my head that I wanted to eventually get back to the civilian life, I never had any intention of staying throughout the military through retirement years, so I wanted to pick out something that I thought would give me some expertise in the civilian world as well, so the one I chose because of September 11th and the big hoopla that was occurring regarding chemical and nuclear and biological weapons was that kind of occupation. So I think the actual job title I had was Chemical Operations Specialist, which is known by most as a NBC person, nuclear, biological, chemical.

Weingant: Where did you go for your trainings?

Trepanier: I did my training at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, so, and I did a OSUT [One Station Unit Training] program which combined basic training and your advanced individual technical training in the same, in the same course.

Weingant: At Fort Leonard Wood?

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: Well that's Corps of Engineers, isn't it?

Trepanier: They have engineers and military policemen as well besides the NBC.

Weingant: Okay.

Trepanier: And they also have their drill sergeant school there, too, so—

Weingant: Is it still as hot and miserable there in the summer [laughs]?

Trepanier: It's, it's very cold—

Weingant: Yeah I remember that.

Trepanier: —in the winter and very humid in the summer, so they—

Weingant: There is no good time of year at Fort Leonard Wood.

Trepanier: Doesn't seem to be, no [Weingant laughs].

Weingant: Okay. Any experiences there you'd like to share with us, or?

Trepanier: Yeah, I mean it was a long program. As I said there was basically no transition point where—you were in the same environment for your basic training as well as your advanced individual training, to learn your actual job specialty, so— basically I remember them saying, "Congratulations from graduating from basic training, now everybody close your eyes—"

Weingant: [laughs] You couldn't tell the difference.

Trepanier: “—Open 'em up and now get down on the ground and do some push-ups, you're in AIT [Advanced Individual Training],” so, well [Weingant laughs] that was nice [laughs]. Yep.

Weingant: Well let's get out of Fort Leonard Wood, what happened then?

Trepanier: Well at that point I was stationed at Fort Hood, Texas. And I remember—it was interesting because, for me personally, being that I was born in Korea, I really, really badly wanted to get stationed in Korea when I first joined.

Weingant: That would have made an awful lot of sense.

Trepanier: Right, 'cause, you know, I didn't have an extraordinary amount of money, and, you know, just the plane costs alone to take a vacation there would be in the \$2000 range.

Weingant: You have relatives there?

Trepanier: Not that I know of.

Weingant: You don't know.

Trepanier: Right, exactly. Since I was abandoned at birth I don't have any actually knowledgeable connections to anybody, but I really wanted to go there and I thought, "What better excuse to go than join the military?" But while I was in basic training and AIT, we were trying to figure out where we were going to get stationed. As soon as I found out I was going to Fort Hood, I immediately protested 'cause I badly wanted to go to a different unit which would be located in Korea. So at that point I tried to do a lot of switching with people. And realized that they just wouldn't let me. And I was kinda confused at the time why they wouldn't let me switch, but then I realized later that while I was in basic training, that's when the Iraq War actually started, because I was in training from January 2003 through about June—I'm sorry, through May 2003 and in between that point—

Weingant: This is Fort Hood?

Trepanier: No, in Fort Leonard Wood I was in the training environment—

Weingant: Oh, okay, we're—

Trepanier: And right, going back, sorry—

Weingant: That's okay.

Trepanier: But that's when the Iraq War started, was while I was doing training, in March 2003 we invaded Iraq. And I think that's what led to the inability to do a lot of switching, 'cause they basically said, "Look, there's a reason why you're going there." And so I got to Fort Hood, Texas in May-June of 2004—I'm sorry 2003—

Weingant: Yeah, 2003.

Trepanier: —and probably within the first month I got there they said, "Well, welcome to Fort Hood, by the way, we're going to do a month and a half training in the Mojave Desert of California." And I said, "Well, what are we doing that for?" I said. You know, we do this kind of training like once a year. I'm like, "Wow, that stinks," because you know I wanted to—

Weingant: This is June? [laughs]

Trepanier: Right, yeah.

Weingant: You're going in the desert, yeah, okay.

Trepanier: And I remember saying—I remember people telling ya, "Well basic training stinks but as soon as you get to your regular unit, life gets better, a lot better."

Weingant: Doesn't sound like it.

Trepanier: And then, basically they said, "Yeah you're going spend overnight sleeping on your vehicle, you're going to get one shower the entire time," and I'm like, "Man, this regular Army stuff—it's—I don't know where they said it was a good life, but I haven't heard anything good yet!"

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: So, well we went there and it was as hot as sin, it was the—I mean, it was so hot—

Weingant: This has to be July now.

Trepanier: Right. That basically, you know, you didn't want to move. You'd sit on a chair, and you'd sweat so bad that you know, the chair would get wet.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: And you didn't want to move, because you knew it'd just get worse, so it was really tough, but we did a lot of war training there, did a lot of different war scenarios against OPFOR [Opposing Force, a military unit tasked with representing an enemy, usually for training purposes in war game scenarios] and when all was said and done, I think there was a lot of feeling that we knew something was coming up because people that had done these things in the past said that it was a lot more intense this year. And I was trying to figure out why, and then they also said—

Weingant: We hadn't invaded Iraq at this point, correct?

Trepanier: Well we had already invaded Iraq—

Weingant: Okay, well—

Trepanier: —when I was there and they said that when the war first started they were slated to go during the invasion but then were told, "No, hold back, you're not going." But since the war was continuing, they felt like something was going on. So, at the very end of the training in the desert, our brigade commander, a full-bird colonel [unofficial name for colonels to differentiate from lieutenant colonels], O-6 [a colonel's pay grade], walks up to us and gives us a huge speech and says, "Yes, there was a reason. Typical training in this environment is a month, you guys spent a month and a half here. The reason why is because you're going to Iraq." So as a new guy, that, remember, was told in the very beginning, "Life gets so much better," I'm like, "Wow, I can't believe it I just walked from this basic training, terrible environment, to this desert training, to go to the real desert in the real war, so it was kind of a shock. Now, let me—I forgot to mention—the unit I was stationed with in Fort Hood was, I was in Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Regiment, so 212 Cav [as in Cavalry]. 2nd Brigade—

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: —and during the war it was also known as 2nd Brigade Combat Team.

Weingant: They have that here, yeah.

Trepanier: In the 1st Cavalry Division, which is a pretty historically well-known division. It's, as far as I know, the patch that we wear on our left shoulders to identify ourselves—in the modern-day era is the largest patch in the military and everyone [laughs], everyone in the 1st Cav likes to point that out, so they—

Weingant: There's one at the museum, is there not, downstairs? [Wisconsin Veteran's Museum in Madison, Wisconsin]

Trepanier: Oh yeah, yeah.

Weingant: Thought so.

Trepanier: So there's a lot of pride to go with that and there's been a lot of different movies that have portrayed the 1st Cav Division as well, so—

Weingant: In other conflicts.

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: Yeah.

Trepanier: Right. So, in fact, they were the first division to invade Iraq during the First Gulf War on the ground.

Weingant: Hmm, I didn't know that.

Trepanier: Yep, so General Schwarzkopf [Herbert Norman Schwarzkopf, Jr.] at the time, who was leading that charge, had said—I think his words were something on the lines of, you know, "Let's bring America's first team." And that's the motto, we're America's first team. So, I think maybe a lot of people thought that we were told to hold off on—on going to Iraq the second time with the first wave of troops because, I think maybe there's a—people didn't want us to invade twice, where other divisions weren't going to get their credit. So there's a lot of belief that that occurred.

Weingant: A little politics, too, I'm sure, yeah. Okay, you're ready to head out to Iraq now?

Trepanier: That's right.

Weingant: Okay.

Trepanier: So—we had a few months where we did—the kind of unit I joined now, I'm in a very flexible military occupation specialty. During this time, they tried to make it where every company in the Army has what's called an NBC NCO [nuclear, biological, chemical non-commissioned officer], which that would be the job that I'd fill the slot of.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: And so basically, I could have gone literally anywhere in the entire military. Every company has an NBC NCO, and every company has a Supply NCO.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: So it's a very flexible job.

Weingant: Again, what does NBC stand for?

Trepanier: Nuclear, biological, chemical.

Weingant: Okay.

Trepanier: And so I could go anywhere. And the kind of unit I got assigned to was a tanker unit, nineteen kilos they were known as. So—when we were going in, a lot of the training that we were learning had to do with more ground-pounding, where you'd be on your feet more doing things off your vehicle, more infantry-style. So we spent a considerable amount of time training from June-July—I'm sorry, July—because that's when we got back to Fort Hood from the desert of California. Yeah, so from July onward all the way through the end we spent, like two weeks at a time in the field, then a week off, two weeks in the field, week off, for, again a very joyous time in my life [laughs] where the relaxation never occurred.

Weingant: What specifically are you doing, Mike, as this NBC officer, or, NCO?

Trepanier: Okay, well, an NBC—

Weingant: You're kind of a lone ranger in your company—

Trepanier: Yeah.

Weingant: —right?

Trepanier: Yeah.

Weingant: And are you looked upon to organize the training?

Trepanier: Yeah, yeah. To organize training as far as nuclear, biological—weapons are concerned, so, basically—

Weingant: Surely _____ [??]

Trepanier: I helped with—I'd help with—

Weingant: We thought ahead anyway.

Trepanier: Right, as far as the fear was that there were—you know, Iraq and Iran, its neighbor, had a chemical war—

Weingant: Yes they did, yep.

Trepanier: —In the early '90s as far as I remember, that could be wrong, but—

Weingant: No you're right.

Trepanier: And also Saddam [Hussein] is well known to have gassed his own people, the Kurds.

Weingant: Yeah.

Trepanier: So there was a considerable fear that there were lingering weapons as well that we could face, and not many people realize this, but actually chemical weapons that are placed—can resurface if left dormant, and become just as effective as it was. So for example, you could have a chemical somehow placed in sand—

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: And uncover it ten years later, and it could still kill you just as effectively, so major concerns—

Weingant: You mean it could be ruptured and release the—

Trepanier: Right. Release back to the wind and get you, so—that's why I was there, to help you do avoidance and then—of it all together, otherwise if there was something possibly there, the detection. And, even worse, if you actually got hit by something, then basically, taking it off of you—

Weingant: You mean trying to rescue—

Trepanier: Decontaminate.

Weingant: Decontaminate, sure.

Trepanier: That's the word I was looking for, right. So those were the three emphases that I—my job had, points of emphasis right there, so—

Weingant: So it was not just instruction, but also you were responsible—

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: —for protection and—

Trepanier: Right, so basically we had a lot of decontamination and a lot of preventative kind of equipment like—

Weingant: Well it had to be a huge concern—

Trepanier: Like pro masks, NBC pro masks [gas masks] and such, and MOPP Four [Mission Oriented Protective Posture, is protective gear used by military personnel in a toxic environment, Level Four is the highest level of needed protection, and all equipment is worn.]. So we would train extensively in how to put our equipment on, detect stuff with equipment, and then decon [decontaminate] yourself if something really bad happened.

Weingant: Sure.

Trepanier: Right, so that's what I was tasked to do—in essence though, a lot of us NBC NCOs always have had disappointments because in combat arms units in particular, they're so concentrated on doing their jobs, that they often push us aside, and say, "Look, we don't care about you."

Weingant: Been there, done that. I know what you say, yeah.

Trepanier: Right. So often I ended up just becoming an extra arm in the administrative area. So other jobs that I partook in, considering that more or less I just was in a sense, supply, [Weingant laughs] that I would order the supplies of the NBC equipment, but they'd stay in their boxes 'cause none of them wanted to touch it. Yeah, I would organize the masks that they wore, you know, I'd fit 'em with the ones that would fit their faces, but after that I would—I'd just keep 'em in their cases and no one would ever touch 'em. And also, I would do what's called "training room NCO job," which is basically your admin person on the enlisted side in the company that would help your officers and your senior NCOs do paperwork as well, so that's what I did back in the rear before we invaded—I mean, before we went to war ourselves.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: So—as I was saying, basically what we did was we learned how to do more of the urban warfare training that the military was telling us we would partake in more than just jumping on a tank and blowing things up, which is what the, you know, the tanker training up to that point had been because they were training for conventional wars, where this was different. So we spent a good many months doing that and then January 2004 we—our boots hit Kuwait, and two weeks later we went to Iraq.

Weingant: Okay. What was your rank at this point?

Trepanier: I was a unique case because I entered the military—I was twenty-five when I entered the military, and I had already had my four-year degree, but I enlisted. And because of that, the Army at that time had a rule where I could actually skip

ranks, get waivers, and I was automatically an E-4 Specialist [enlisted pay grade equivalent to corporals]—

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: —from the day—from day one.

Weingant: This is back to Leonard Wood.

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: Mmkay.

Trepanier: Right, so when I entered Iraq I was a Specialist, an E-4 Specialist. About six months into the tour, my commander had placed enough faith in me where he allowed me to laterally get promoted to corporal, which is your most junior non-commissioned officer spot in the Army. So from that point on I was a corporal, which made life quite a bit better for me. So, the first area that we were stationed at was Abu Ghraib [West of Baghdad] and at the time that we entered, our commander—now, how accurate this is historically, I don't know, but we remember, you know, my company—I'm sorry, my battalion commander was telling us that there in the Baghdad area, the First Cavalry Division was given charge of the greater Baghdad area.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: So anything around Baghdad was considered our area where we were in charge. And at that time we had replaced the First Armored Division in country, and then they finally got to go home eventually. But, yeah we were told right off the bat that there were seven "red zones," like danger zones that were considered big kill-zones for troops. And—

Weingant: That we would inflict, or receive?

Trepanier: That we would receive as far as attacks go. Seven bad areas in Iraq, or in the Baghdad area. And we were told that four of those areas were my specific battalion's—

Weingant: Oh great.

Trepanier: —area. Right, so I'm like, "This is just getting—"

Weingant: Nothing is really getting better.

Trepanier: Right, I'm just like, it just—

Weingant: Out there in the Mojave or Fort Leonard Wood, or wherever.

Trepanier: It gets worse and worse and worse, right, so—

Weingant: [laughs] How about you stop—just stop for a minute, here Mike.

Trepanier: Mhmm.

Weingant: How much time has elapsed since you've entered the Army, enlisted—

Trepanier: Uh huh.

Weingant: And now you're in Baghdad, how much time, all this training?

Trepanier: Let's see here.

Weingant: We talking about a year, a year and half, or what?

Trepanier: I'd say almost exactly one year.

Weingant: Okay.

Trepanier: After I first—

Weingant: I just wanted to get a sense of that.

Trepanier: —Yeah, after I raised my hand, it took a good, took a year of just hard training, training, training, training, and finally there I am.

Weingant: Mhmm. Okay got it. So now you're a corporal.

Trepanier: Right. Well—

Weingant: Is that an E-4?

Trepanier: Right, right, as I said, the most junior NCO position in the Army. It's a lateral transfer. You get paid the same as a specialist but you have the abilities to take a lead position in tasks where specialists typically aren't. Let's see here. So, Abu Ghraib and a place, a bordering area called Amiriyah were my specific battalion's responsibility, you know, our area of responsibility, otherwise known as our "AO." [Area of operations] At first we were taking care of Amiriyah but then for some reason we got pushed out of there and more into the Abu Ghraib area. When we first entered that area we were told that we had entered literally the absolute worst ghetto of the entire country.

Weingant: Help me with something, I always hear Abu Ghraib as a prison.

Trepanier: Right. There's a distinction.

Weingant: It's also a—

Trepanier: It's a village area as well.

Weingant: Okay so you're drawing a bigger—

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: —piece of geography than the prison.

Trepanier: Right, and in fact, the prison was not something that we were touching at all. That was considered almost its own entity. The prison is something else, the Abu Ghraib greater area is something else.

Weingant: Now I understand.

Trepanier: So—so basically we were told that the poverty rates were extraordinarily high, and on top of that, it didn't look like it was getting better, and the unemployment rates were over seventy percent there. So obviously—

Weingant: Is this a Sunni area?

Trepanier: Yes. Highly dominant. This is right in the Sunni Triangle.

Weingant: Okay.

Trepanier: The entire Baghdad region was all in the Sunni Triangle, so it was known in the history books probably, or will be, as the "Sunni Triangle of Death." And that's because, you know, I don't know what the percentages are, but a very, very vast majority of the deaths that occurred to foreign troops in the country, to include American troops, occurred within this triangle.

Weingant: Mhmm okay.

Trepanier: Let's see here. When—by the way, my battalion was made up of about 175 people, that's an approximation. It was actually kind of known as a smaller group compared to a lot of your other battalions, a lot of other ones were—

Weingant: I was going to say, that's a big company [laughs].

Trepanier: Well—my battalion was really large, but—let me start that again. The battalion was small compared to other battalions, 175, and my company was really small. We had maybe sixty people in it. Where there's infantry companies that would have, like, a good 120 people.

Weingant: Right.

Trepanier: And here we are with sixty, so, but tank companies and battalions are always historically a little smaller. 'Cause you only need four people, and you've got an entire tank. So imagine the fire—I mean if you had 120 people in a company, and four people per tank, you'd have a huge company of tanks. So, you know, you'd almost consider that too excessive for the firepower. You couldn't control that, you know, with a small unit.

Weingant: So it's a matter of control.

Trepanier: Right, so you'd have a—so we had a smaller company when it came to the personnel. We had a headquarters company which had scouts, mortars, medics, and infantry—and these were ground infantry, ground pounders. And then we had—Bravo—Bravo, I mean, I'm sorry an Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie company that were all tankers. Except for, as I said the supply and NBC guys. So that was the makeup of our battalion. And when—

Weingant: So did you have a colonel or a major—

Trepanier: We had a lieutenant colonel, an O-5 that was in charge of us, his name was Colonel Tim Ryan. And so when we got there, too, a thing right away happened that was kinda weird, is that the Army itself was in the middle of a transition where they were saying that in the past you'd have a whole unit of heavy armor, you know, you'd have a whole unit which is the tanks, you'd have a whole unit of infantry, you'd have a whole unit of—the back, you know, the support. And when we would go to war like this, you'd have to borrow different people from all sorts of different areas and assemble them together to get a full war effort, you know, to cover all your ends of what you need for the war. And I said, "It's just too confusing, because no one knows who they belong to, where they go, you're always trying to mess with those logistics," so the Army decided to get into a transition where they wanted to create permanent units, where you weren't just a tanker unit, you weren't just an infantry unit, you were a blend of different people within a unit because then, you—at that point as a unit could go to a war and not have any confusion of who you belong to.

Weingant: You're a cohesive unit, sure.

Trepanier: Right, you just had a big cohesive unit that could just go on the spot without having to worry about reorganizing.

Weingant: And you trained together before you even went there.

Trepanier: Exactly, so—

Weingant: That seems to make an awful lot of sense, we can't do that can we?

Trepanier: Well, that's what happened, is that we were in a transition.

Weingant: Yeah, so you fell into this.

Trepanier: Right so when we first went over there, we were a big tank unit, you know, a big tank battalion. And suddenly they said, "Well, sorry, we've got to split you up." And so our Alpha Company right off the bat got switched out with another battalion and they need tankers and tanks, so, they took our Alpha Company away from us and in exchange we got an extra company of mechanized infantry. Who—those guys would drive the Bradleys [Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV), an armored fighting vehicle of several variations used by the US Army], so we were in the M1A2SEP Abrams tanks [SEP (System Enhancement Package), third generation variant of the M1 Abrams tank].

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: And also historically, my brigade, just for a historical note, 2nd Brigade Combat Team was the first brigade in the entire military to receive the M1A2SEP tanks, which is the—improvised from the M1A1 Abrams. So basically, today, our best tanks we have. So it was interesting and on top of that, when we got there we were told, "Hey you still need more infantry guys," we're all like, "Man what's going on?" and so I don't know where we got fifty more guys and they happened to be from the army of Estonia [an eastern Baltic republic]. And Estonia is a country that was formerly part of the Soviet Union, then really worked hard to become an independent state, which they—

Weingant: Don't call 'em Russians [laughs].

Trepanier: Right. They got the right to do that and ironically—

[Break in recording][00:31:13]

Weingant: Just mentioned while this was off that they spoke English.

Trepanier: Right, yeah.

Weingant: At least their command.

Trepanier: Yeah, they all spoke English.

Weingant: Really?

Trepanier: Their first military was trained by the US soldiers, US Army in particular. And—

Weingant: In Estonia?

Trepanier: In Estonia. To train them—

Weingant: I had no idea.

Trepanier: Right, so it was interesting because when we met 'em, they did all the same things we did, and we couldn't understand how we were so similar until finally someone pointed that out, that we trained them, you know, to become a military. So, no doubt, it was so similar.

Weingant: This would have never have happened twenty years ago. [Both laugh]

Trepanier: Right, right.

Weingant: I had no idea.

Trepanier: Right, and they were a unique group, too, because they wouldn't do very long tours at all, they were doing six month tours.

Weingant: Mhmm. Active duty tours—

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: Six months?

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: How do you train someone—

Trepanier: Well, they would do six months in country in Iraq—

Weingant: Oh.

Trepanier: I'm sorry. So they would do six-month tours and basically they didn't have to— they say, "Who wants to be a hero? Who wants to fight in a war?" And they'd have no problems, fifty guys—

Weingant: They'd put the time in, go home.

Trepanier: Anybody that wanted to raise their hand could go. And they had no problems recruiting. Sixty—because, I mean, this would be like their first war as an Estonian army, so this is historic! I mean, who wouldn't want to be part of that for them? So they had no problems recruiting people.

Weingant: But they didn't want to get shot at.

Trepanier: [Laughs] True, but who does, right? But they—I mean, we're talking history here.

Weingant: Yeah.

Trepanier: And they had no problems, so every sixth month, a new group, they'd say, "Hey, who wants to go now?" Again, no problem. People—when we had a morale issue, it was so much different because so many people from the, you know, the US military, you know, you had people that had their questions wondering if they wanted to go or not, was this the right thing—the Estonian people had a complete different outlook. They were all, "Hey, we're really glad to be here, this is a privilege." It was really interesting.

Weingant: We have a job to do?

Trepanier: Right, yeah.

Weingant: I misinterpreted.

Trepanier: Yeah, so they really kept the morale up.

Weingant: I take it you're impressed.

Trepanier: Yeah, I was very impressed by them. They were very highly trained—

Weingant: Good attitude.

Trepanier: Great attitudes, fluent in English, I mean, the best of the best.

Weingant: Did they mix with the Americans?

Trepanier: Well, they stayed in their—I mean, as far as socially?

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: Yeah they did. They did a really good job. As I said, they spoke English, so it was really unique. It was a great experience, and by the way—

Weingant: I'm impressed [laughs].

Trepanier: This group of Estonians was the only contingency of Estonians in the entire country of Iraq, so, it's funny because these guys have a direct connection to the Estonian president, 'cause they're the only ones there from their country—

Weingant: Yeah, I'll bet.

Trepanier: And here they are stationed with our battalion.

Weingant: What, sixty guys?

Trepanier: Yeah.

Weingant: Okay.

Trepanier: And all the way through our tour, we actually, it was crazy because by the time we left Iraq—my battalion in particular—we had been through our third group of Estonians, our third wave, because they had short tours. So it was pretty interesting in that aspect that up to that point, my battalion was the only battalion in the entire military that had been with these Estonians, so it was part of—we're part of Estonian history.

Weingant: An aside here, Mike, I'm curious for your observation. They had three groups that are consecutive. Obviously they talk to each other when they get back.

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: Was there any change in attitude between the first and the last group?

Trepanier: No, none.

Weingant: Interesting.

Trepanier: Estonians were extremely impressive.

Weingant: What's your knowledge of the command structure there, did they operate as a—obviously as an integral unit into themselves, right?

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: And they were commanded by what, what rank? Captain?

Trepanier: They had their—now that was slightly different, they had different ranks. They had the basic same structure where you had enlisted people and you had officers, and they were typically about the same, because, again, it was based off an American system. But the actual—

Weingant: I just wanted to know how they blended in.

Trepanier: Right the actual titles were different.

Weingant: I'm not too worried about that part, Mike, I was just curious—

Trepanier: But it was equivalent.

Weingant: [inaudible] at some level here, that, and sometimes it doesn't work out very well.

Trepanier: Right, no it was basically the same. I mean, a company-level guy would be their commander, would be equivalent to an O-3 Captain, and he had a senior enlisted advisor, and worked with absolutely—I mean, we knew who their top enlisted guy was, we knew who their top officer was, so it was almost like they were the same.

Weingant: There wasn't any feeling on—now, I'm asking this—was there a feeling on their part that perhaps they got the scuffy jobs, or did we integrate them in—

Trepanier: No, in fact, you know, a lot of them were concerned that they'd get nothing to do because—

Weingant: Huh?

Trepanier: —because at the same time that they were very similar to us, you know, we knew that—it's still not the same. They don't know exactly what we do, they don't do the exact same systems as far as the radio contact, you know we didn't know how they'd react if a fight broke out, if they'd react the same way we would. So there was—pretty much the same, but again, it's not the same because you don't train with them. So you don't exactly know what they're doing.

Weingant: Yeah, yeah.

Trepanier: They just got plopped in.

Weingant: I can see all sorts of potential problems.

Trepanier: Right, so that was the concern, so they said—they knew that, and they were concerned that, "Aw great, we're not gonna—you guys aren't gonna give us anything to do." One of the many—

Weingant: Or we take simple tasks.

Trepanier: Right. We did a lot of cordon and searches [tactic to section off a particular area and search it for weapons, enemies, etc.] of properties in the very beginning, typically what we'd do is we'd have those guys stand in a circle outside and do [laughs] nothing except look for potential problems from the outside looking in, and we'd have our infantry guys raiding houses and all that, doing some of the more dangerous work, but—

Weingant: And they protest to that? That—

Trepanier: Well they didn't protest it, but I think as time went by, gradually, in a natural process, where we got to have better ideas of how each other worked, then we started integrating them more and by the end of it, we had reversed, where we

were doing more of the watching and they were doing a lot of the pounding [Weingant laughs]. So, it was—

Weingant: There you go.

Trepanier: —it was pretty amazing and as I said, we were very impressed by their knowledge of war tactics.

Weingant: Interesting. Can you give me an example of a situation that you saw where they went in, or you guys went in, and—

Trepanier: Well, there were three typical things that we did when we were over there. The first one being that we did patrols. So basically just like your policeman in your local town, you just drive in certain areas, you try to vary it up, but in the general, you'd cover the same areas. Over and over and over throughout the day. The second responsibility we did were like, OPs, observation points, where you just sit in a spot and cover an area with your eyes and look for trouble in case it happened. And the third thing we did was the cordon and searches where we actively had intelligence telling us there were bad guys in this area or that area and we need to get 'em. And so as far as all these went, the Estonians were given their ability, where they'd do an observation point on their own as a unit, or they would do patrols with us, where they'd go on their own patrol and we'd zig-zag all covering the same areas, so we'd see 'em and wave to 'em all the time. And then when we did these huge battalion-sized cordon and searches, one time they'd be outside, you know, looking in just covering perimeter security, other times they were inside. And as I said, at the end, by the time we streamlined the process and figure out these people are best doing this, these people are best doing that, the tankers typically would just do the outer cordon and the inner cordon with the vehicles, and then our infantry company mixed with the Estonians, who were infantry as well, they'd do all the ground-pounding.

Weingant: Okay. All the Estonians were infantry?

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: Okay. So they had no tanks.

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: Okay. I've gotta ask you this, Mike, just backing off for a moment here and looking at your total experience. One of the things that people like yourself that are in Iraq or Afghanistan, initially, it's really hard to tell who's the bad guy, who's the good guy.

Trepanier: Right, right.

Weingant: Do you sense, you and the rest of the guys getting better at it, you just know—that's a bad guy.

Trepanier: Actually, no—

Weingant: In some sense?

Trepanier: You're absolutely right, that is probably one of the biggest problems with this war in general, is that you just don't really know. In fact, I would argue that it would be worse than Vietnam, because at least in Vietnam, you maybe had some problems with the guerilla fighting in aspects but they still had cohesive units that would fight against you, that would surprise attack you and that's unit fighting on unit.

Weingant: Battle as a unit, company, or whatever.

Trepanier: Right. You know, after the initial invasion the Iraqi national army fell, or whatever it was officially called.

Weingant: Well, dispersed, let's call it that.

Trepanier: Right, dispersed. [Both laugh] Well, you don't really have set groups anymore. You got some groups that *try* to act as units, but, for the most part you're fighting what I'd call the "phantom" opposition.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: So you knew they were there but you couldn't see 'em.

Weingant: Or is it that guy or that guy, or both?

Trepanier: Right. And the clarity never occurred, it never focused.

Weingant: Did you get any better at it towards the end?

Trepanier: No.

Weingant: It strikes me as an ongoing thing, that's what I'm hearing from you guys.

Trepanier: Yeah and that's one of the biggest challenges to date, is that it hasn't gotten any better. And I was in a very, very unique situation because I was in Operation Iraqi Freedom too. And it was at the point that we entered country that the actual transition of the sentiment of Iraqi people changed. So when we first came in, we really seemed to have gotten a ton of support from the Iraqi people. Where—

Weingant: Shiite and Sunni? And Kurds?

Trepanier: Shiite and Sunni mix, you know, I mean basically people that I had talked to that when we first initially invaded Baghdad, had little to no opposition. People in the streets kissing the soldiers, kissing the others servicemen, you know, like the marines, airmen, the sailors, what have you. Little to no opposition. And things seemed to be have been hunky-dory, but—

Weingant: Just help us a little bit here, that would be in 2004?

Trepanier: Right, January 2004 when we first entered.

Weingant: And then this gradually changed?

Trepanier: Right, so—

Weingant: Or was it abrupt?

Trepanier: Well, it was—

Weingant: Fairly abrupt, wasn't it?

Trepanier: It was pretty abrupt, pretty abrupt. So when we first got there, we had heard from the people we were replacing in the First AD, First Armored Division, that things have slightly gotten worse here. And when we were first came here, it was very quiet, everybody was happy, but then out of nowhere, a few improvised explosive devices, like road bombs and stuff started to occur. Mortar attacks, small arms fire, it happened from time to time. RPGs, rocket-propelled grenades, you know, little things like that. Landmines, but they said that right near the end, when they were getting ready to leave it started getting worse.

Weingant: Give me the year, or a time.

Trepanier: As I said, like you know, end of 2003, beginning 2004.

Weingant: Okay.

Trepanier: So, when we first got there, they said, "Be ready right off the bat, there's going to be a lot of battling, because they're probably gonna want to tell ya, 'Hey welcome to Iraq. You're not going to push us around.' and wanting to make a statement." And in fact right away that was true. Right when we first got there, they tested us, in our area, and we came under attack quite a bit.

Weingant: Organized attacks, or sporadic?

Trepanier: Sporadic attacks. Again, against this—

Weingant: Could be a mortar, could be a roadside bomb.

Trepanier: Could be, yeah, could be an RPG flying through the air, you just didn't know where it was coming from, you had no idea. But I'd say right off the bat, you know, we fought people off well. Found the guys that attacked us and I'd say—right after that got pretty quiet, we were like, "Yeah we kicked some butt, we're really happy with ourselves. Morale's high, no problem. And let's get to helping them now get out of the poverty, try to help 'em rebuild this community, because if people are out of poverty, they find opportunities to get jobs, they'll have more things to worry about than just fighting us."

Weingant: And that whole area had to be lacking in schools and hospitals—

Trepanier: Big time. Everything! They were lacking everything, they didn't have consistent power, their water supply was low, it was just a horrendous area to live in. I mean, we're talking people that were literally still living in like, little teepees, you know? So it was tough. Tough for them to make a living. But as I said, basically, we had some problems with them initially, but things got better. But then in April, March to April 2004, that's when we noticed the major, major transition where—it wasn't just a small period, this was a statement time where they said, "You know what, we don't want you to be here anymore. And we're going to let you know it." And, remember, that doesn't—

Weingant: Who's "they?"

Trepanier: Whoever this "phantom" enemy is.

Weingant: Okay.

Trepanier: We'd like to believe—

Weingant: We don't know if it's Shiite or—

Trepanier: You know, we don't—I mean it's likely Sunni, because we're in a Sunni dominated area. Is it a lot of foreign fighters? Probably. Probably people that seeped across the border as well. We had notice when we caught a bunch of people, a lot of 'em were from God knows who-where. God knows from where, but they weren't Iraqis.

Weingant: Still Arabs but not Iraqis.

Trepanier: Right, exactly. So, you know, we were—in April was the most significant month of operations for us as far as fatalities occurred that we were responsible for. April, it was known as the "April Battle." And in that month alone, I remember I had about 175 people in my unit—well, increased a little bit with the additions of,

you know, extra people. But—we were, supposedly in the month of April 2004, responsible in our area for about 1400 deaths of the enemy. And it got so bad we actually incurred a mandatory curfew and basically locked down the city. We said, "No one's coming in, no one's coming out, and there better be nobody on the streets past a certain time." I don't know, I don't remember what time it was, maybe seven, eight o'clock at night, but—

Weingant: This is still in April? Still in April?

Trepanier: Yeah this is in April, I mean, so we had major battles. Actually, at that time there was a guy named Muqtada al-Sadr [powerful Iraqi Shiite cleric, former head of Sadrist Movement political party in Iraq. Left politics in February 2014 and dissolved the party] who, ironically, he wasn't Sunni, he was a Shiite! And he had major problems with us as well. And this added to the confusion, where we're like—before, a lot of us thought, "Hey, it's just the former Saddam loyalists that hate us."

Weingant: That would have been my first thought.

Trepanier: That were Sunni, part of the Ba'ath Party [political party through which Hussein ruled Iraq], but now suddenly you got this big Shiite that hates us too. And we would have thought that the Shiites, who had been persecuted forever under Saddam, as a Sunni—

Weingant: Right.

Trepanier: —would have been on our side, but instead now suddenly we got the majority ethnicity having one of their leaders telling us, "We hate you too."

Weingant: While you're on that subject, Mike, let's jump ahead, what did you find out, is it Al-Qaeda, or what? What's the cohesive driving force here that the Sunnis who hate the Shiites—

Trepanier: Well—

Weingant: —hate us, together?

Trepanier: As I said, again, that's—

Weingant: Or was it outside?

Trepanier: Right, I mean that's the thing, is that, you know, the actual focus, the theme of the enemy is still unclear. They seemed to be unified by just saying "Anti-U.S. [United States], period." But I think there's something greater than that at play, but it doesn't seem to unearth, rear its ugly head out.

Weingant: So the guys who are doing the combat, the "grunts," if you would.

Trepanier: Right, we just—

Weingant: Their big thing is that they just hate U.S.

Trepanier: Yeah that's as far as we know, yeah.

Weingant: That's your feeling.

Trepanier: Right. And basically it's just like, hey, as far as we were concerned, as the far as the U.S. forces, look, a guy carries a gun, points it at you, you shoot 'em. Hopefully—

Weingant: Hopefully you shot him first.

Trepanier: —those were the people—right, but I mean, hopefully these guys just stop coming and give up, but the problem is, is that throughout the war they just keep coming [laughs]. So anyway, the "April Battle," we ended up fighting one group in particular that, as I said, they were still kind of phantom warriors, but that was the one period of time where we had a distinct group, it was—I think they called themselves the Al Mahdi [sp??] army, they were guys that wore a lot of black garb and a lot of green things, like headbands—green headbands.

Weingant: Boy that would help a little bit [laughs].

Trepanier: So, like, people always talked about the rules of engagement, what are the rules of engagement—they changed many times. When we first got there, basically, you could not shoot at anybody unless it was clear your life was in danger, and they'd have to shoot first. We couldn't even shoot our weapon in the air as a warning shot. That was illegal according to our rules of engagement. So we're like basically, "Okay, we're sitting ducks, great." So basically—

Weingant: Put a circle on your back?

Trepanier: Right, that's what we thought. But this was the one time during the war where they really changed ROE [Rules of engagement] in our favor and said, "You see a guy in black wearing a green headband, blow him off the face of the planet, he is here to kill you." And that, as I said, in that April Battle, those guys just got obliterated. And it was really unfortunate too, because during this time period, the one thing that people had in our specific area for employment was their daily market, where you could buy little small goods, that's where you bought your food. That was in one of the main streets and that's where everybody was, all day. That's the one place you could count on for a ton of people there. During the April Battle, we took out their entire marketplace. I mean, we literally blew it to

smithereens, said, "Now you're screwed." But, I think that was unfortunate, because in an area with high poverty, no jobs, seventy percent unemployment, you just took away—

Weingant: What little bit of—[Trepanier laughs] economic—

Trepanier: Right. So—

Weingant: What was the reason for obliterating it? I can guess, but—

Trepanier: A lot of people were, you know, firing from those areas, so there was a reason why we did it, 'cause a lot of people came from that area that were fighting us.

Weingant: Lot of bad guys there during the day.

Trepanier: Right, exactly, so—but one thing that we did to remedy that was we agreed with the local tribal leaders to build 'em a new marketplace, to help 'em out, but another—

Weingant: Did you do that?

Trepanier: Yeah, we did, we did and we made—

Weingant: And did they reinfiltate? Bad guys?

Trepanier: Well that's the thing that was interesting, is that while we were trying to build it, they kept trying to blow it up. And we're like, "We're trying to do something nice for you, and then you blow it up." And they kept attacking the infrastructure that we were trying to build for it. We were trying to—you know the old marketplace was just on a road, and just a small paved out area on a road—we wanted to create a place in the central part of their city off the roads, where—because most of their people walked to the marketplace—and we wanted to create an area with lights so they could be there at night, and have opportunities. It could be a general gathering ground for events. We wanted to create a really nice area for 'em and they kept attacking it. And so [laughs], that was the other points of confusion we had with this phantom enemy, is we're like, "Whenever we try to do nice things, they attack us too."

Weingant: They don't want you doing nice.

Trepanier: Right, exactly, 'cause it ruins the mystique of the U.S. as just bad people. So it was a very confusing war. It still is a confusing war, it probably will always be known as a confusing war because you just didn't, you know, every time you try to draw distinct lines on any issue, there was just too much grey in between, every time, every issue you can think of, it wasn't black and white. It's nothing but grey.

Weingant: I hear ya.

Trepanier: You didn't have a distinct enemy, and they didn't have a distinct voice. But the one distinct thing that you could get out of it was that they're just anti-U.S. So I come, I've done my own retrospective thinking about it, and I always think in the lines of if you're a Muslim, and you're very devout, strict Muslim, very conservative socially—and you have the country that's responsible for Hollywood, that's responsible for a very large portion of porn throughout the world, a lot of the things that they consider, you know—a lot of greed, a lot of people that are living a life much more glamorous than just living a life of just got to get enough supply for what you need, not for the greater pleasures—you know, you got the king of all countries, the US, as far as this capitalist idealism, as far as social liberalism, out there, and they're looking at us as a direct threat to their way of life. And I could understand from a devout Muslim's point of view, "Holy cow, if they invade here and turn this into America, all our beliefs that we've had for *centuries*—not decades, centuries—are gone. And I guess we look at it as, "Hey, we just want to give you stability to do what you want to do," but with an order, and also in a way that you become less of a world threat. But they looked at it as, "Here comes Disney World, here comes Las Vegas—"

Weingant: Here comes the drug scene, alcohol—

Trepanier: Yep, exactly.

Weingant: —women get to vote, all those things are—flying in their face.

Trepanier: Right. All the scary—all those scary things that they consider to be less desirable and that's kinda what they came out and said, "Look, don't let 'em come in, because this is exactly what's going to happen. All the evil sin." So I think that's a general quiet theme that they've had to—that has worked well within their people, in the resistance movement against us. But the thing is as I said, though—

Weingant: The next war in Iran, you know, that's exactly what's going on.

Trepanier: Right, but it's a joke because they hate each other within their own sects, [Weingant coughs] so it's kinda funny because a lot of these guys have multiple enemies because they hate this ethnicity group within their own group of people, 'cause they believe in a different form of Islam, just a slight variation, but that slight variation—

Weingant: They hate the other guy.

Trepanier: Yeah makes them hate the other person, but at the same time, they hate us, so it's like no—

Weingant: That's the one thing they can be cohesive on, though.

Trepanier: Right, but it's almost strange because it does seem to be, you know, you talk about the "Triangle of Death," [area between Baghdad and Al Hillah with significant Sunni population; saw heavy sectarian violence and combat operations between 2004 and 2007] I look at the triangle in the war, because the triangle in the war is, is that you've got this group in one corner that hates the other group, and hates the US. You got the other group in the other corner that hates the other group and hates the US. So they're both fighting the US together and then at the same time blowing each other up to smithereens. So, as I said—

Weingant: We kind of look at them all and address them simply as Iraqis.

Trepanier: Right, exactly, so we're fighting the general Iraqis that just are trying to usurp the stability that we're trying to bring in. But as I said it's been a struggle.

Weingant: In your view—and we're not going to get into politics, I don't even want to approach it—

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: —but if we weren't there, if we left, what in your view would happen to Iraq?

Trepanier: Well—

Weingant: Would it—as they sense, Afghanistan would return to fiefdoms and internal battles and—

Trepanier: Well my—

Weingant: —the drug wars, and that sort of thing.

Trepanier: My personal feeling has remained very strong on this, and that's that I remember watching a lot of public television where they'd have a lot of different documentaries showing people—especially special forces in the Army side—I remember watching those distinctively, where they were helping out the resistance against the Viet Cong [faction that fought against the United States and South Vietnam, famous for their use of guerrilla tactics] in the Vietnam War. And one of the things I distinctly remember watching is the disappointment decades after the war that these veterans had regarding having to leave before the mission's over, and the people that were helping us out as US forces, were left on their own. And as soon as they left, yeah, they were massacred en masse. And I'm, you know, if you've got these factions inside Iraq that have a consistent theme of "We hate the U.S.," anyone that's attached to the U.S. is fair game.

Weingant: It really [inaudible].

Trepanier: And there's plenty of people in Iraq that have tried to work with us, and I think more effectively than any other war that I've known—I think could get easily weeded out and obliterated, and fast. They seem to really know their neighbors well, everyone knows each other, everyone knows where their loyalties are—

Weingant: If you're a collaborator with the invasion forces—

Trepanier: Right, exactly.

Weingant: —of the United States—

Trepanier: I mean, you could wave at us and not even like us, but just wave at us to be polite, and you could—next day—

Weingant: You're a dead duck[laughs]—

Trepanier: You're a dead duck, so I really look at it as an area that would be greatly run in a tribalistic, anarchist—I'd say very much like most of the African countries you see today, where they all have a coup leader—a leader brought on by a coup—to take up the prior government and then suddenly, six months later someone massacres his army, and then you got a new tribe in charge. And it seems like every six months, you've got to rewrite the history books [laughs] because you got a new leadership.

Weingant: Your turn in lead.

Trepanier: Exactly. I look at Iraq as more like an African potential state that is just going to be run in a militant fashion by whatever group at that time has, you know, a concerted amount of power. That's the thing that I don't think people have really said enough in the major media, is that this is a country run by tribes. So it's funny, because you got tribes—

Weingant: Are there sub-tribes within the Sunnis?

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: And Shiites, and Kurds.

Trepanier: Right. Every neighborhood.

Weingant: Are there Kurds that can't stand other Kurds?

Trepanier: Right, I mean we're talking, I mean, it's funny. I don't know what to compare it to, you could say maybe the Native American tribes in America, I mean you got

every single area, every single village—major tribes of people. And they are loyal to their tribe before anything else and they're run with an iron fist. You've got a Sheikh that has all the money, and his family rules all and—

[Break in recording][01:02:24]

Weingant: Mike you just made a statement about how you're looking at this overall interview—

Trepanier: Right, well, I mean I'm looking at the overall interview as—I don't want to just assume that everyone's point of view on the general characteristics of the war are the same. And to be able to make any opinions about what I say as far as specific details, you need to also understand how I feel personally about the extraneous details from an overview as well, so that's why I'm into a great length of detail about things like the tribes and all that as well. Going to more specifics on the tribal influences, I can use an example of one of the major problems that my battalion particularly had problems with. And that problem was—is that we had a lot of intelligence that we worked with—we had anonymous lines, we had anonymous phone lines, anonymous ways that people could tell us, "Hey, here's a bad guy here. Come and get 'em." Without—anonymous, so they wouldn't get listed as collaborators, so they could get killed themselves as trying to help the U.S. forces—they could keep their identities quiet.

Weingant: How do you, excuse me, I've got to inject a point here—how do you know somebody isn't giving you a tip to get rid of their brother-in-law who they don't otherwise like?

Trepanier: See, that's exactly where I was going with that—

Weingant: Okay, go ahead.

Trepanier: —and that's, so that's perfect that you said that, because what would happen is that a tribal leader would say, "Hey guys, let's give 'em all the anonymous tips to the neighboring tribe that we hate! And if we get rid of them, whatever money's remaining out there, what little of it is, we can salvage it." So here'd you have a tribe saying, "Hey, oh my god, there's all these bad guys here." And then, you know, we'd go on a cordon and search and tear this other tribe up to pieces, as far as like, going through their stuff, going through their houses, taking people down that had illegal weapons, all this and all that—and then we'd leave, and then they're left at the mercy of this other tribe that has all their stuff still, that can totally bully 'em around now because we took all their [laughs] weapons.

Weingant: And probably some of their leaders!

Trepanier: And then what do you think those guys said? "Oh, that's it! Now we're going to give the anonymous tips right back to the US forces and let's have them take down the other tribe," so then we'd take that tip, and suddenly we realized, "Wait a second, they're using us to play against each other."

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: So, I mean, it's a very big frustrating thing, 'cause we were literally used as pawns to help each tribe help themselves. And, but the fact is is that's the life as they knew it. You can't just tell somebody, "Hey, we're breaking up your tribe." It doesn't work that way, that's the life as they know. That's their—that's the way they feel about family. So, it's tough because—how do you break a group down and say, "You are not a Sunni, you're not a Shiite, you're not a Kurd, you're not a Shia, and on top of that, you're not even part of your own tribe. You're part of Iraq as a whole. You are an individual. You have rights as an individual." When your jobs, your security—everything as you know it—is run by one of those factions. So how do you one day tell a group of people, "No, that's not how it works." And that's another challenge that we have, is that you have to change literally from grassroots—all the way down, all the way up—the entire way these people think, which is a major, major challenge.

Weingant: Now you've done your history, you've done your political science, is there any nation in the world, in modern history, that's worked?

Trepanier: As far—well, I think that's what made the US unique in our democratic—experiment, I'd call it.

Weingant: And we were certainly a collection of non-cohesive units.

Trepanier: Right, but I mean, the fact was is that we did have the cohesion to understand from the very start that we're going to follow a basic group of principles.

Weingant: It was a rocky road.

Trepanier: Right, right, but they did have, when we started, a foundation with the Bill of Rights and all that other stuff in the Declaration of Independence—all those things together, the Constitution itself—from the very start they had a foundation.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: And—when—

Weingant: I don't see that in Iraq.

Trepanier: Right, and we also had undiscovered country in the United States at that time, so it's not like you had a major group of people that had to change and convert because you started from scratch. These people, we're talking, Iraq has an area—historically, some people believe to have been where the Garden of Eden was.

Weingant: That's right. In fact, you were very close to it.

Trepanier: Where society occurred!

Weingant: Yeah.

Trepanier: First started—

Weingant: Yeah.

Trepanier: So we're talking—

Weingant: And who are we to walk in and tell them how to organize their country?

Trepanier: Right, centuries upon centuries—

Weingant: They don't need us—

Trepanier: Yeah, we're not talking two hundred years, we're talking *thousands* of years, and to tell them, "You undo yourselves," they don't like that [laughing].

Weingant: Well, we're getting into something better—it's better done over a couple of beers in talks like this [both laugh].

Trepanier: But—

Weingant: I guess I'd have to inject here that one of the big differences between the United States and—a nation such as Iraq, or Kenya, as you mentioned, is that an outside force is telling them, "You must democratize," —if that's a word—

Trepanier: Mhmm.

Weingant: Whereas the United States, in its formation—a very rocky one—but it was "We." Not England, not France. We wanted it this way.

Trepanier: Right, right.

Weingant: There's a big difference. We're looked upon as the big imperialist that are trying to change their religion and everything else that's sacred.

Trepanier: Right, so I mean when you're looking at the general experiment of a democracy in Iraq, you're looking at it as—I think you can make changes there, and I think

people are open to those changes. But the problem is right now, is that each faction of people—based upon the loyalties that they adhere to—is trying to say, "How do we best position ourselves in the power, you know, spectrum—"

Weingant: Mhmm, that we take over.

Trepanier: —"in this new system?" And the way that they've known to do in the past is through direct force. And that's what happening. And that's where America, or the United States is having a problem, because we're getting our nose in, and they're trying to say, "Look we're doing this for all of you," and all of them are saying, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever, get out of our way, we've got to get our power."

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: And basically we're just looked as a group that's getting in way of that and it's very easily—very easy for you to work the propaganda efforts within your own tribe to say, "Hey look at America, they're trying to help the other tribe out." It's very easy to manipulate that—

Weingant: Hey look, they just shot 'em up last week.

Trepanier: Basically every group in this entire operation has been able to manipulate that. "The United States is doing something for someone else, not for us. They're screwing us over, let's attack 'em." So—and, you know, as far as the individual goes, these tribal leaders that feel like they're not getting the good end of the stick, well they've got all the money, and—

Weingant: And the weapons.

Trepanier: Yeah, you've got a group of people saying, "I need food in my mouth," there's no other way to get it than by agreeing, "Okay, I'll shoot that American if you give me enough food for two months,"

Weingant: Sure.

Trepanier: Oh absolutely. And that's—so it's very tough because we had a lot of people attack us and sometimes you wondered whether their real heart was behind attacking us, whether they're just trying to put, you know, food in their mouths. And that's what makes it really difficult, too.

Weingant: Well, if you're willing to strap explosives around your belly and blow yourself up—

Trepanier: You've got a pretty desperate person.

Weingant: That's a pretty desperate person, yeah.

Trepanier: Right. So and many times, the stories were that it wasn't that they were so into their religion, it was, "This tribal leader promised me that my family—"

Weingant: I'll take care of your family—

Trepanier: Exactly. "—If I do this. And, heck, I'm doing nothing for 'em, I have to sit and watch 'em every day starve, and every day think less of myself as a human being, as a caretaker—there's got to be something else that I can do, and that's the only thing I can do to take care of my family, I'll do it." And that's what many of these guys—

Weingant: I think it's a very perceptive observation on your part. Okay. Well, let's move on, then Mike.

Trepanier: Okay. Well, if you wanted, just to let you know—when we first got there, we were slated to be there approximately nine months, my battalion, my brigade. We were, by the way, the first group, the first brigade in the First Cavalry Division to have entered the country, so we kinda led our division in there. [laughs] Let's see here. When we first got there, we were told to expect about a nine month tour, ten month tour—no problem, we'd be out of there. Well—

Weingant: Is that your battalion you're talking about?

Trepanier: Well, our brigade.

Weingant: The brigade, okay.

Trepanier: And when we were there we got extended because they just felt like they needed to keep a bigger troop presence in there, and at that time they're really working hard to create the first democratic elections there and everything was working towards that as the unison goal for the coalition forces to help Iraq out. And while there, we got extended not just once, we got extended twice.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: And the first time, we got extended—it stunk, but we stayed where we were, continued doing what we're doing, but the second time we got extended, we got extended to a full year—I mean, I'm sorry, past a year to—about March.

Weingant: Of '05.

Trepanier: Of '05, right. February—actually February to be technical, but in March we were still in Kuwait.

Weingant: Okay.

Trepanier: But, anyway, after the first extension and we headed into the second extension, we ended up becoming what's known as the Division Quick Reaction Force, the QRF. And the QRF is a unique group because their job is react—if you're looking at it at a small setting, let's say you have, you know, ten groups of ten people, all in a different area taking care of, you know a region, right. It's just putting it in relative terms.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: Let's say nine of those groups are in certain areas. Well, the Quick Reaction Force is, if one specific area has problems and needs immediate attention, needs immediate help, that one group races over to that problem area to take care of it, to reinforce. They're reinforcements, more or less.

Weingant: Okay.

Trepanier: A mobile group of reinforcements. Well that's what we were, but when we're talking Division QRF, we're talking anywhere in the greater Baghdad area.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: So, that meant anywhere they want us, where the worst fights were happening, there you go. And, you know, when we first came in country it was kinda funny 'cause you see all these pictures of the guys during the invasion, they're sleeping [laughs] in these big sand pits that they shoveled out with their E-tools [entrenching tool, a collapsible spade] and we're like, "Oh man, that life—"

Weingant: That sucks, that brings back Mojave [??]

Trepanier: Yeah, we don't want to do that. [Weingant laughs] And then we get there and suddenly this big base camp that we're at, the Army Corps of Engineers had done their job, and had built really nice base camps where you had trailers where, these weren't tents, these trailers. And they were nice.

Weingant: I bet they're air-conditioned.

Trepanier: Air-conditioned and everything, so we're like, "Hey, that is awesome." Two people, three, four to a room sometimes. But nonetheless, it was a roof over your head and it was really nice. Probably best living conditions that anyone's ever had in a war of this kind of magnitude.

Weingant: A lot better than the Iraqis, the citizens.

Trepanier: Right, and yeah! In a sense you could say so. It kinda—

Weingant: Most of 'em, anyway.

Trepanier: Yeah, kinda funny. But when we went on this Quick Reaction Force, we had to leave that existence and we were back to the way that they were during the invasion because we had to sleep on our vehicles. We had to go from this camp to that camp, or whatever they had available—

Weingant: Ah, okay.

Trepanier: —to us, which was typically just tents.

Weingant: So you're dancing around but--

Trepanier: Right, we'd spend two weeks here, two weeks there and that—then we ended up in places like Taji [north of Baghdad], Tarmiyah [also Al Tarmia], the Abu Ghraib prison itself—

Weingant: Were you in the prison?

Trepanier: Right, inside the prison. Fallujah [west of Baghdad], and at the very end, the Babil [also Babylon] Province. So it was a very—it was crazy how many different places we went to in a very short period of time. And parts of my battalion were even in parts of—like, Mosul [far northern Iraq] and An-Najaf [southern Iraq], too, so we're talking the crème de la crème of the nastiest places you can go to.

Weingant: I was gonna say, I recognize almost all of these and it's hotspots.

Trepanier: Exactly.

Weingant: On the evening news or whatever.

Trepanier: So, yeah that's where we were going.

Weingant: I'm a CNN [Cable News Network, a major news television channel] junkie.

Trepanier: Yeah, so—I know probably—as far as the gore goes, and a lot of those particular statistics, I'd say when we first entered country, in the Abu Ghraib area—as I said, well it's actually funny 'cause you know, it was pretty friendly but then, boom, the April Battle occurred. Right after the April Battle, it actually got really quiet, because we'd killed so many people [laughs]. That—for one month while we had this curfew it was like nobody dared do anything, so it was pretty peaceful. We thought, "Hey, we finally showed 'em, 'Don't mess with the Cav, we've got the heavy armor here, we got the muscle, don't mess with us or you're gonna get killed."

Weingant: Morale's pretty high.

Trepanier: Right. We were at—as service members, we were really happy with ourselves. Finally they learned their lesson—don't mess with the best. But then just gradually about a month after that the attacks started and that's when it really turned into the phantom attacks. You didn't have Al-Sadir's militia. It was just whoever, whenever, had no idea when it would happen, and I'd say, from that point on to the very end—and that, before we got mobilized as the QRF—I'd say about an average of three gun battles a day. So—just some random IED blow up, or some random RPG flies across the sky, or, you know, a random mortar hits base camp, you know, just random—landmine—I'd say about three instances a day. So you could just count on it, you know. So basically every time—I, my particular job—I forgot to talk about this—my particular job when I transitioned to Iraq—

Weingant: That's good, actually you're almost obsolete [Trepanier laughs]. Your original MO [Modus operandi] [inaudible]

Trepanier: Yeah, yeah [Weingant coughs]. And so I became in particular the gunner and driver for my company commander. And not on a tank. Typically in our—I don't know if that's reminiscent of all units, but in our unit our commanders typically went in Humvees [High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV), a military light truck used by the US military] and the reason why, they were faster, more mobile and required less maintenance. You could, you know, cruise all over the place at faster rates of speed to be a leader. To be a leader, and, you know, help everyone out to support everyone that you were in charge of.

Weingant: Did you feel vulnerable in that spot?

Trepanier: I particularly did, because, you know, you got the heavy armor vehicles that rarely went down as far as people inside—

Weingant: Well were you identifiable as the commander's vehicle?

Trepanier: No.

Weingant: Okay.

Trepanier: No.

Weingant: So you didn't have rank or anything else on the—

Trepanier: No, no.

Weingant: —'cause that would make you a big target.

Trepanier: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. But actually I, you know, it's ironic because those guys—the insurgents actually—you know, it's—boy, this will go on another tangent, but anytime you want to discredit it and think that these people had no brains, quite the opposite. Their intelligence was incredible. Perfect example was that when we'd go on patrols, different units had different numbers, different insignias on their vehicles to show this is this particular company, that's that particular company. [laughs] They caught on pretty well that this company only goes to this area, that company only goes to that area, and they're in different regions. So they knew exactly what vehicles went where, and how to blow 'em up at the right times with their IEDs. So it got to the point where we had to literally take our numbers off our vehicles and just drive blank Humvees with no insignias whatsoever. We had to paint all over our paint so they're just tan. Tan vehicles, period, to make sure they didn't know who we were and where we were going. Because otherwise they could literally have a suicide bomber follow you or go a different route and meet ya where you were going 'cause they knew exactly where you were going.

Weingant: Where you were going to end up.

Trepanier: Yeah! So it was pretty scary. In fact, even more so, there was one special group of people that they didn't attack and that was called the Civil Affairs and Civil Affairs is your modern-day—you could say village-building, nation-building kind of group. They're like the peaceful element of Special Forces, you could say, because these are the people that work on rebuilding the community and that could be anything, you know, that could be—

Weingant: Could be medical, school—

Trepanier: Could be medical, could be reopening a school, reopening a business, I mean, you know, helping them with their economics.

Weingant: They're leaving those folks alone because—

Trepanier: Yeah, because they said that these guys, there's nothing that they're doing bad [laughing] to us, they're only helping us, so let's take advantage of 'em and it would be miraculous because these guys would drive around everywhere and never get hit by anything. And we're just like, "Our vehicles have been blown up left and right every day, and these guys just drive wherever, whenever and don't get touched." But what did that prove? It proved that our enemy wasn't dumb.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: They knew exactly who to hit, and who was good and who was bad, so whether they really knew whether I was the command vehicle or not, I don't know, they probably knew. You know, they just didn't get lucky and just didn't get us.

Weingant: 'Cause they'll go for the commander many times.

Trepanier: Yeah, yeah, so—

Weingant: And here you are driving, it's like being a drummer boy [Trepanier laughs] in the Civil War.

Trepanier: Yeah.

Weingant: You're gonna get shot because you're right in the front and right in the middle.

Trepanier: Yeah, so—and in fact also that April Battle that occurred, probably at that point, I'd say about ninety-five percent of the people in our battalion had been involved with killing somebody.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: So, it was a very well-seasoned group of soldiers as far as really fighting to the death went.

Weingant: To the bad guy's death.

Trepanier: Right. So—yeah, as I said, about three battles a day, and it happened like crazy. Now, there—

Weingant: Mike, before you go on, give me a sense of casualties—at one point you threw out a number, fourteen hundred, I forgot what it was—

Trepanier: Right, in April.

Weingant: Yeah. You inflicted that number of casualties.

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: Give me a sense of how many casualties were inflicted on us.

Trepanier: Well, again, considering the kind of firepower we had at our disposal versus the enemy that didn't have an actual army, didn't have any enemy vehicles besides whatever—a little truck or something like that with explosives on it—they didn't have tanks, they didn't have any real war vehicles in a consolidated army against us. So and we were heavy armor, which is like—on the ground, as big a vehicle as there came for ground wars. Our casualty rate was fairly low compared to some

people. I almost feel bad for saying this, but I don't know exactly how many people died from my battalion, but I could probably name it on two hands. Which is—

Weingant: That's an extraordinary ratio.

Trepanier: Which is pretty good. I mean—

Weingant: Considering you don't—you look at five civilians and not know which guy's the bad guy until he pulls a weapon.

Trepanier: Right, right.

Weingant: Even now—

Trepanier: Right, and so—in the first and second stint of the Estonians, each stint, they lost one person. And the third group had been there not very long when we left, so they didn't lose anybody, but the first and second group did.

Weingant: Okay, I just want to get some sense of—

Trepanier: As I said—

Weingant: It's a very unusual ratio.

Trepanier: Right, I'd say, you know, a little less than ten, a little less than ten.

Weingant: I've interviewed people that have—this is Afghanistan, actually, but—I'm curious about the Iraqi bad guys. This one person made the comment that they weren't very skillful at using what weaponry they had, they would often times when they—in an ambush, open fire with the low-caliber weapon first, rather than hitting big time like we would—

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: —in our training and so on. Is that your experience with the Iraqis? I would think that they might have better training.

Trepanier: Right. Well, I'll attack that from two different angles. The first one being that to say that they didn't know about their explosives is ridiculous considering that they can detonate things with cell phones. Now, from my understanding—I've never done that myself [laughs] obviously, but, you know, I've been taught by people on the general principles on how that happens, how you can detonate a bomb through the use of your cell phone—which isn't the craziest technology in the world, but you still have to have a pretty good amount of intelligence of explosives to understand—

Weingant: Didn't just fall off the turnip truck.

Trepanier: Right, right, exactly, you know. And also I was told that kids for very long periods of time, when school was out, and their summers began—you know, they had their summer break too—they weren't jumping around on swing sets—

Weingant: 'Cause they didn't have 'em, they were [inaudible]

Trepanier: —they were going to explosives school. The summers for kids were spent learning how to shoot guns—

Weingant: Did you—

Trepanier: —and learning how to do explosives.

Weingant: —cover, in your combat experience and—training people?

Trepanier: Yeah we did.

Weingant: And who were they, were they outside of the country, or Al-Qaeda or what?

Trepanier: I'll tell ya, but I gotta finish that sentence, thinking half of that part with the weapons, okay. So I didn't think they were idiots at all. And then the second part is this, is that [laughs], I mean, if you don't have a tank, how do you expect to fight a tank? I mean, you're hiding your weapons, and you're hiding 'em in really unique places—for example, we found the biggest cache that can imagine of explosives—where? Buried underneath the ground of a river.

Weingant: Dried—dried up river?

Trepanier: Right. But, like, you'd have to like, get into the river to get down to find these explosives. Yeah, I mean—

Weingant: That's pretty ingenious.

Trepanier: Yeah!

Weingant: I thought you were going to say a mosque [laughs]—

Trepanier: Because, you know, you're sitting there looking in mosques, you're looking in houses trying to figure out, "Where are they getting these explosives?"

Weingant: Now how in the world did you find that, or was there an informant?

Trepanier: Just an informant, you know?

Weingant: Okay.

Trepanier: We just got lucky. But otherwise we would have never known. But, so I'm saying again: these guys aren't idiots. So, and if they don't have modern weapons systems because they can't hide those—what do you expect 'em to hit us with? So, when people say, "Yeah, what idiots, they couldn't take down our tanks," I mean—

Weingant: They don't have tanks.

Trepanier: Yeah. So how do you expect 'em to take one down? So, and I would also state there have been many battles where they had their own snipers take out our snipers, you know, I remember in recent months that like ten—something along the lines of like ten Marine snipers got taken down on top of buildings. Well who'd they get taken down by? Not by lucky shots. You got snipers getting taken out—

Weingant: Somebody else is [inaudible]

Trepanier: —by snipers.

Weingant: Sure.

Trepanier: Yeah. So, but here's—

Weingant: What's to prevent—you just mentioned you have to have a tank to fight a tank—you have to have explosives—

Trepanier: Right.

Weingant: —to fight a tank. What's to prevent them from having the explosives? That could take out a tank—

Trepanier: Well as I said, that's where we got lucky. I mean, as time got by, near the end of our tour there, they were getting better with landmines and really understanding how to blow out a tank, but it took some time for them to figure out how with improvised explosive devices, but—

Weingant: Can you return now to my question—

Trepanier: Yeah!

Weingant: —a few minutes ago, and I'm curious—

Trepanier: Yeah. Training them.

Weingant: [inaudible] training people. I was shocked to find in Afghanistan, for example, that the Pakistanis are very much involved in the training of bad guys.

Trepanier: Mmkay. We didn't actually like capture any, like, training camps or anything like that, or people that were in charge of—

Weingant: You didn't, okay.

Trepanier: But, but we did run our own—one of the goals that we found out after getting there for the mission was: we leave when we feel that the Iraqis are capable of defending themselves. Well, so when we found out that the president and the secretary of defense had that as main priority, we took it upon ourselves to help train Iraqi forces which were originally known as the ICDC, the Iraqi Civilian Defense Corps. And later transitions their names to the Iraqi National Guard, the INGs.

Weingant: This is separate from the police?

Trepanier: It's the same thing. Yeah, yeah, they're separate from the police. And we also helped recruit policemen, too, and we had a lot people that were retired US policemen that went and trained the police, but—we helped in the recruiting of 'em, at least, so—and they were a unique group, too, because I always called them the gauge for how much fighting we'd do. 'Cause when we first were there, and we were training 'em, let's say you started out with forty, fifty people right? Well, those forty, fifty people come to work every day, do this, do that and suddenly out of nowhere one day, two people show up for work. Well, then suddenly that day you'd have the biggest fight of your life [Weingant laughs]—well, why were they gone? 'Cause they were scared to death that they were going to get blown up. They knew—

Weingant: They were tipped off by their [inaudible]

Trepanier: Right, they were tipped off, hey—

Weingant: "This is not a good day to be there in the American camp."

Trepanier: Yeah, exactly. So—but I called it a good gauge not just because of that, I called it a good gauge because as more attacks occurred and more people *stayed* that were in the Iraqi National Guard, that meant we were making progress.

Weingant: Mhmm.

Trepanier: So instead of just like ten percent showing up for work one day, by time we left country, 'bout seventy, eighty percent of 'em would still stay at work despite a major attack attempt.

Weingant: Wow.

Trepanier: And so, you know, I felt really good that—you know, that might not have represented everywhere else in the country, but it meant that we *particularly* as a battalion were doing our job.

Weingant: And you were in one of the worst parts of the country.

Trepanier: Exactly. Yeah, so—

Weingant: It's not an easy area.

Trepanier: You know, it's been really tough, too because a lot of these guys ended up being double agents. They'd spy on us, get paid by us during the day, and they'd get paid even more at night by attacking us and telling 'em how to do it. So we were very—

Weingant: I was afraid you were going to say that they were among those people attacking you.

Trepanier: Right, I mean, I'm sure some of 'em were.

Weingant: Yeah.

Trepanier: So we were very, very cognizant of that as well. And there were many a times where we'd arrest people within the Iraqi National Guard because we'd get tipped off that they were double agents. So—that's another challenge, 'cause every time you try to do something nice, you end up bringing in double agents. I mean, they're everywhere.

[End of Interview]