

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JASON E. JOHNS
Army National Guard and Army Reserves, Iraq War
2016

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Johns, Jason E. Oral History Interview, 2015.

Approximate length: 1 hour and 51 minutes.

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Summary:

In this oral history interview, Jason E. Johns recounts his experiences serving in the Wisconsin Army National Guard and the Army Reserves during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Johns initially joined the Wisconsin Army National Guard in 1994 to assist with college tuition. He was stationed with the 229th unit in Platteville, and attended the University of Wisconsin-Platteville for two years and then University of Northern Iowa for another two years. After he received his undergraduate degree, Johns attended the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities and transferred to the US Army Reserve at Fort Snelling, Minnesota. After graduating, Johns moved to Washington D.C. and witnessed the terrorist attack on the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

Johns reenlisted in 2003 with the 229th Army National Guard unit. He attended basic training in Fort McCoy, Wisconsin and was deployed to Kuwait. He then was deployed to Tikrit, Iraq. There, Johns discusses assisting Military Police and infantry with missions. He discusses trying to locate mines and experiences with IEDS. Johns also discusses building the base camp at Tikrit and assisting with civilian escort mission. He discusses down time on base, and losing friends in battle. After being discharged, Johns discusses his welcome home, where he was received with a parade. He then moved to Wisconsin and worked in lobbying until 2011. He did pro bono work for several veterans' organizations like the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart. He now works in Veteran Affairs law. Johns also discusses dealing with Post traumatic stress and his reasons for working in Veterans Affairs law.

Biographical Sketch:

Johns was raised in Dubuque, Iowa and enlisted in the Army National Guard Unit 229th after graduating high school in 1994. He attended the University of Wisconsin- Platteville and the University of Northern Iowa. He then attended law school at the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities and transferred to the National Guard unit at Fort Snelling, Minnesota. Johns reenlisted to the 229th Army National Guard unit in 2003. He attended basic training at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, and was deployed to Kuwait and then to Iraq.

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 Helen Gibb, 2016.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2017.

Audit check and abstract written by Victoria Paige, 2018.

Reviewed by Luke Sprague, 2021.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH02066.Johns_access.mp3]

Gibb: So today is Wednesday, March 2, 2016. This is an interview with Jason E. Johns, who served with the Wisconsin Army National Guard and the Army Reserves during Operation Iraqi Freedom. This interview is being conducted at Mr. Johns' office in Madison, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Helen Gibb, and the interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program. All right. Shall we start with where and when you were born?

Johns: Yes. May 27, 1976, born in Dubuque, Iowa. We lived a couple of different places around there, but I grew up in Louisburg, Wisconsin. And so I went to school in Hazel Green, Southwestern. And graduated from there.

Gibb: And family, siblings?

Johns: Yes. I'm the oldest of five. I've got three younger sisters, one younger brother, all still around. And my mom and dad are still back there. My brother is still back there, as well as one sister. So yeah.

Gibb: And I noticed in your thing, you were hunting at an early age. Is that—

Johns: Yes, yes. I definitely—as soon as I turned twelve, I went and got my hunter's education course, which, back then, was once a week for like six weeks, I think it was. Yeah, started squirrel hunting, rabbit hunting, deer hunting, so. And now, I don't squirrel and rabbit as much anymore, but definitely still deer, pheasant, duck, turkey, so yeah.

Gibb: What was the education course? What did that involve you doing?

Johns: Once a week, like I said, they had—basically they had volunteers. I think like a hundred guys from the area. You just, [clears throat] excuse me, learn firearm safety primarily. And then, at the end of the course, you went off shooting. So yeah.

Gibb: What kind of firearms did you—

Johns: Shotgun and rifle.

Gibb: And school, high school?

Johns: Yeah, yeah. High school, Southwestern High School in Hazel Green, Wisconsin, as I mentioned. I was the oldest of five, so I worked, as well. I worked at a supper club nearby my house in Louisburg, where I'd bus tables on the weekends. But I was also very active in sports. I played football, wrestling, track, and baseball, as

well as was the lead in the musical my junior and senior year, which was the funny part about being the four-sport jock and then the singing part. But I was involved with band for the first couple of years, as well, because I'd been through junior high and everything else. But then with sports and work, [inaudible] too much. So yeah.

Gibb: What was the—what were you as the lead for? What were you in?

Johns: *Little Shop of Horrors*. That one, I was actually the, I guess you could call it one of the leads. It was Mr. Mushnik, which was the shop owner. And then in *Damn Yankees*, I was the devil character. So the opposite of, so the two leads. So yeah. [Laughter] Yeah, yeah. You wouldn't figure it, would you?

Gibb: So did you have, I mean, ideas about post-high school? Did you know what you were going to do?

Johns: Yeah. It's the story I kind of always tell everyone is I knew that I wanted to go into the military, but I also knew I wanted to be a lawyer, from a young age. Blame it on *LA Law*, I guess. I remember watching that religiously. So I went to a recruiter when I was a freshman, with my mom, and just to get an idea of what was available. And I told him exactly that. I said, "Well, I want to serve, but I want to go into law, too." He said, "Well, perfect." He said, "We offer scholarships if you sign up. We'll pay for undergrad. We'll pay for law school. And then we'll commission you, and give us six years active duty as a JAG officer." I said, "Perfect. That sounds like the best deal in the world." Well, between my freshman and senior year, when I was old enough to enlist, the TV show *JAG* came out on CBS, and I refuse to watch it to this day because what it did is, you know, it was very unrealistic. A lot of out in the field investigating, flying jets so on and so forth. So it made being a JAG officer pretty cool, sexy, if you well. So I went back to that same recruiter and he said, "We don't offer the scholarship anymore." And I asked why. And he said, "Well, we've had so many lawyers, who are already lawyers, sign up for the JAG Corps. So we don't have a need that we need to do the scholarship anymore." So I was like, "All right. What do I do now?"

[00:04:54]

I knew I didn't want to go active duty for four years and then school for seven years, so I joined the Wisconsin Army National Guard out of Platteville, which was the closest to where I was. I started college in Platteville for two years before I transferred down to the University of Northern Iowa. But yeah. So that was kind of my—and back then, in Wisconsin, you had fifty percent tuition reimbursement for being in the guard, so it was one way to—cause I was on my own and didn't want to pay for school, too. So I was kind of, yeah. So that's why it was one way to serve, but yet still be getting in at school. So.

Gibb: And do you have family who were already in the military?

Johns: My grandfather, who I didn't know that well, but he was a Chosin Reservoir survivor, with the 101st. And then my dad was, he never deployed to any combat. But he was 82nd Airborne, as well. So, and then a great uncle. Probably more influential, though, was, because my dad was like, "Yeah, I just did my four years. Whatever, right?" But my great uncle—I was very close with my grandfather, who was the only son. Had three sisters. And so he had to run the family farm in the forties. And so he wanted to serve. All of his friends and his cousins and everything. But we needed the food, too. But his cousin—so I guess you'd call him my third cousin, yeah—but Donald Lombardi was his name. And he lived across the street from us. And in fourth grade, I had to do an oral history interview, similar to this. [Laughter] And I chose him because he had served in World War II, with the army and was in the Battle of the Bulge. And so I was asking him all about that. And he kind of, his story ended quickly because he says, "Well, I was running through the timber, and we were under artillery attack. And next thing I know, I woke up in a French hospital with a nice young nurse." And he'd been hit by shrapnel. So he had a Purple Heart, which he showed me. Bronze star, which he showed me, of course. And then what he gave me—and I carried this thing around forever—was an old M44, the German machine gun. He had basically had a round, but he'd taken the gunpowder out, right. So it was still the brass and the round. Yeah. I think that was probably the first time I really, you know. I always knew I liked history. In fact, I studied history in college. But that was kind of when it started going towards the military, so.

Gibb: What did your family think of you signing—going to [??] sign up?

Johns: You know, back then, because I'd signed up in Wisconsin as delayed entry training, so you could sign up while you're still in high school, and then you leave for basic when you're done, and then you can go to the local guard unit and drill with them. So I signed up in August of '94, which was the start of my senior year in high school. Back then, you know, we were still relatively peace time, and obviously pre-9/11. And my mom was thrilled, actually, because she was—she knew I was going to be on my own with four younger siblings at home, with a difference of fifteen years between us, between me and the youngest. And so when she saw that they paid fifty percent tuition reimbursement, she knew that would help. So yeah. She was fine at the time. Later on, we'll come to that. But yeah.

Gibb: So you finished high school, and then?

Johns: Yeah. Finished high school, finished college. I was with the 229th all the way through college. And then, when I started law school in the fall of '98, up in Minneapolis, I tried to stay with the 229th, because I loved the unit, loved the guys. But it was getting too much to try and get home every month, because it's just under a five-hour drive back. Then it was four lanes [??], but still. It was getting a little hard to come back. So I transferred up to US Army Reserve Unit

right there in Minneapolis at Fort Snelling. And my initial six by two—this was '94 to 2000—so I finished up my initial six up there. And then, of course, you had your two years IRR. But then I graduated law school in May of '01, and moved out to Washington, DC, literally, what was it? August 17, 2001. And lived in Arlington. So, as you can imagine what happened on 9/11, I witnessed all that. I went—I hopped on my motorcycle, because I was working at a law firm. But obviously, they called us and said, “If you’re not already here, stay home,” kind of thing, because they were shutting down all of the bridges and everything, and the Metro. So I went up to the top of the hill, where the Air Force Memorial is now, and saw everything happen at the Pentagon.

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I went down to try and help, but of course I’m not in uniform. I was just IRR at the time. So without proper clearance, they wouldn’t let anybody else on there. So then I went back up to the top of the hill and watched the rescue efforts for a bit. And then decided to bring it home, see what’s going on. So chaos in DC at the time, of course. And then in Arlington, I got back home. And they were saying there might be another plane coming. I remember too, I should say, when I was going back home, I was living with two, another attorney [inaudible] in the house, and then a grad student at George Washington, who was from Britain. And she was still there. She hadn’t gone into class yet. My other roommate was already at work. We were sitting there watching the TV, and one of the towers went down. And she was just freaking out, of course, you know. And so we just kind of sat there, and we’re waiting to see what was going to happen. We just decided to start drinking, and yeah. So shortly after 9/11, obviously angered, I got back in on temporary duty status with the unit at Belvoir, Fort Belvoir, Virginia, to help with street duty out there, street security. It was an MP unit. I was [inaudible], but they could always use drivers and stuff. So I helped them out, and then, for the next year, worked in DC. But then I came back to Wisconsin to work on a political campaign for Governor McCallum at the time through the RNC. My plan wasn’t to move back to Wisconsin at that time. It was just to come back, get some campaign experience, and then go back out and see about maybe working on the Hill. But I liked being back. It was good. I got offered a job in the capitol. So I started there in December of '02. And again, it was like, hey, I’ll get some experience as a staffer, and then I’ll go back out to Washington. I just loved Washington. And then, in February 6, 2003, my old unit, the 229th—I saw orders, came across all legislators desks when there’s a unit mobilized in the state. And so I called the first sergeant, who was my platoon sergeant before, a couple of years before. I said, “What the heck’s going on?” It was a Wednesday morning. He says, “Well, we’re getting called up.” So on and so forth. And he says, “Where are you at now?” I said, “Actually, I’m in Madison.” He says, “Oh.” He goes, “I could use another team leader. I’ve got a slot for you if you want to come back.” And I says, “When do you need to know?” And he says, “We leave Friday.” I’m like, “OK.” So I was single then. Hadn’t met my wife yet, no kids. But talked to my dad, talked to some friends, and just decided that I still had a lot of buddies

still in the unit. I agreed to re-enlist. Called the first sergeant back. He sent me to a recruiter over on Wright [??] Street, Brad Byrd [??]. And that night, that Wednesday night, we were there for probably five hours, signing all the paperwork to re-enlist. I was at MEPS at five o'clock the next morning. I walked in and gave my name and social, and the lady's like, "Oh. Yeah. The adjutant general says we've got to get you right through." So went through MEPS again like a new recruit. Came back to Madison, packed up my apartment. My brother and my dad came, [inaudible] me pack up my apartment. Went back to the capitol. My boss there had a little going away shindig in the afternoon. Then I went out with some friends, and Friday, I was at the armory. Yeah. Byrd said—I don't know if it's still the case—but he says I'm the quickest contact to contract ever in the State of Wisconsin National Guard. So yeah.

So Friday at the armory. Saturday, we're at Fort McCoy. We were there. We were supposed to originally go over with the third armored division, but then Turkey changed their mind on letting ground troops come through. They only said, "You can use our airspace, not our—" Meanwhile, there was a ton of equipment and troops waiting off-coast. So we got delayed at McCoy. We were at McCoy from February 8 until the first part of May. But the thing was, we kept—they didn't know if we'd get the call tomorrow, right, that we'd got picked up by someone else and this and that. So we'd go home after the first month and a half. Yeah, basically, we got weekend passes. But you'd go home, and you didn't know if you'd be leaving that week. So it was, you said goodbye multiple times. And the joke got to be, "Yeah, see you next weekend," you know, not knowing for sure. Now of course, if you went back on Sunday nights, and on Tuesday they said, "We're leaving Wednesday," family could come up that night. But still, you just didn't know.

[00:15:07]

So we got picked up by the fourth infantry division. Meanwhile, we'd been up there training, all equipment, getting equipment sent over, which was starting to get a little monotonous, though. Four months at Fort McCoy, or three months. But yeah, we got picked up by the fourth ID. We got into Kuwait on my golden birthday, actually, May 27. And acclimated there for two weeks. And then we drove up to Tikrit, which was—fourth ID was based. The generals and the higher brass took over the palace in Tikrit. And then there was an old Iraqi Air Force base about five miles outside of town that we moved into, because we were combat engineers, combat support, combat equipment. And so they basically wanted us to build that up. So they said, "Why don't you make that your base camp?" When we got in there, it had been bombed to hell and everything else. So we were clearing out rubble for a while. And the old burn pits, which we'll see what happens there. But yeah. So we were, just set up cots in these little makeshift shelters there. And gradually started to build it up. But then, we started getting tasked out with MPs and infantry and kind of different missions all over. So did my time there. And it would have been, things were relatively quiet the first

couple of months. It was—you had the mission accomplished, but it was in June or July when things started to heat up. And it was no coincidence that it was when Bramer [??] announced that they were disbanding the Iraqi army. We knew immediately that it was a bad idea, me and the guys on the ground. We were like, “What the hell are they doing?” So it was about a month later, we started getting mortars, random mortars, IEDs, primitive ones, but starting to get planted. And I mean, it was really simple. That’s your only paycheck, and now you’re being told you can’t be in the army anymore. You walk down the street. How am I going to feed my family? And there’s al-Qaeda and whoever else waiting to pay us. So yeah.

So we were running. We ran checkpoint missions. We ran security on villages when MPs [inaudible] knocking down doors. So we kind of got tasked around, even though I was [inaudible] there were home [??] missions. But there were a lot of force support [??] missions, as well, where we were building up [inaudible] Iraq police stations, go out to a lot of different FOBs—Fort Operating Bases—and help get them built up. And then we were working a checkpoint just north of Samarra, and we were staying at an old Iraqi government building. We had—it was right off Highway 1, and we’d come in. We’d started, I want to say it was like on a Saturday or a Sunday, whatever it might have been. But there during the day, and back, you know. This is—equipment was tight, short. We didn’t even have—I should say, we got our flak jackets in June, but we didn’t get the Kevlar plates until right, probably early October. But they still made us wear them for the appearances, which we were pissed off about because, well, if they’re not going to do anything, why are we adding more heat? You know, more weight. But we were working this checkpoint. And it’s funny to think about it now. At the time, you just did it, right. But we would check it every morning to make sure the enemy hadn’t planted anything in there. We only had two mine detectors for the whole platoon, because there was just me and my platoon out there. And so we’d have the mine detectors, one on each end. And then we’d just walk. We’d feel the sticks and everything. And one thing, after a couple of days—because we had probes. You can tell when there’s a line of cars and somebody comes up, and they’re looking, and they’re not looking at you nicely. And then they turn around and leave. When we’d leave at night to go back to the little building we took over, there was no night security left. We had asked about getting some night security. And they said, “Personnel was too tight,” this and that. I said, “All right, well, the enemy’s watching us. Something’s going to happen.” And sure enough, about three days into it, they had gotten in at night, planted two anti-tank landmines. When we rolled in off the highway, I just missed one. An explosion went. And that rocked me, knocked me out. That’s where I got a little bit of shrapnel and my hearing blown out.

[00:20:03]

And then, when I came to, my friend John Scandlin [??] was in my squad. His vehicle had hit one. He was in a big dump truck, luckily. And, but his whole

vehicle was up in flames. And so my bells rung [??]. I had taken some from the concussion, my back. And I kind of stumble out of the vehicle. And he was trying to get out. He couldn't get out, and so I and another guy ran over there as well as I could, grabbed him, got out of there. We never did have a secondary attack, which was good. But John got medevac'd to Germany, because his foot got all mangled up. And then I convalesced in a field hospital for, I want to say about eight days, because my ears were bleeding and everything else. I couldn't hear anything, a lot of vertigo. So but yeah. So I returned to duty and finished my tour. We left in April, April '04. But it was right after that—it was really, that was kind of the start of more intense attacks and mortars and small arms and different engagements. Yeah. It was a two-week period there where I had—not after that, probably in December—where people didn't want to ride with me, because I was just unlucky, attracting these IEDs in front of me, beside me, behind me. But yeah, they called me Near-Miss Johns for a while. So, but yeah. We, you know, December was—the heat was crazy. It was overwhelming when we got off the plane in May, right. I mean, it would just knock you down. You couldn't sleep for the first month very well, and just as you're kind of getting used to it. Come August, September—I won't say you ever get used to it, but tolerable—and all, of course, our cold-weather gear is buried back in our containers back at base camp. We were out on a mission. It was the, yeah, it was the November mission in Samarra, November, December. And the rain started. And it just was a soupy mess, because the ground can't absorb it. We were in a tent, because the fourth ID was to launch a big clearing of the city. So we were outside the city, literally just picked a spot in the desert and just set up shop. And just water woke us up coming through. Coming through the tent, going through everybody's stuff. You went to step, and it just [squishing noise] mud. You know, vehicles stuck. But probably the worst part, though, wasn't just the rain. It was you just went from a hundred plus temperatures for six months to fifty-five during the day and thirties at night. And all our cold-weather gear was back at camp. But we still had a mission to do there. So we were freezing, freezing. Yeah. It was a mess. [Laughter] It was a mess. So, anyway. I kind of [inaudible] my narrative there, but yeah. [Inaudible] ask you questions.

Gibb: Yeah, I'm going to drive you [??] back out of there. [inaudible] going to take you all the way back to while you were in the university. [Laughter] Just I'm curious to know what it was like doing your, you were obviously training while you were in university. Whether that was, you know, whether that was a common thing amongst the students you were with, or sort of a little bit unusual.

Johns: Yeah. Definitely unusual. It wasn't, well, I mean, in the unit there was quite a few college students, because University of Wisconsin Platteville's right there. So it wasn't a surprise to people. I shouldn't say it wasn't uncommon, but it was uncommon with—like, I was the fraternity. I played rugby. And so I would say maybe two or three of us were serving. So it was a little unusual there. And then down at Northern Iowa, I stayed with the 229th, but I was two hours away. So I'd come back. They had a ROTC program there, but I'd already been in the unit, and

I wanted to stay with the unit. And I had a roommate who was ROTC. So then it became not as uncommon, but yeah. In general, yeah. But again, it's hard to—the National Guard pre-9/11 is not the National Guard of today. Yeah, yeah. I mean, and I'm not saying we didn't do our—we had our drill weekends. We had our two weeks in the summer, and you know, when we did different things around the state. But yeah, it was a lot more laid-back. It was, all right, be here at seven o'clock tomorrow for formation. We're going to do the same old—in the winter especially, right—we're going to do the same old classroom work. We're going to do the—we're going to clean our weapons. We're going to—that kind of thing.

[00:25:16]

I think and rightfully so, since 9/11, the op tempo is a lot higher. So back then, it was a good deal, right. It helped pay for college, and you got a little paycheck from the weekend. And so we got mobilized in '96 for duty in Bosnia. And that would have been probably April. And I was an RA down at UNI, and so I told them I wouldn't be back for the fall. We were leaving in June. Like, we had orders and everything. And but then in May, President Clinton decided to kind of start drawing down. And so our orders were cancelled. But here I was. School's out, and I hadn't registered for classes. I had quit my job. And I'm like, aww, dangit. So I did go back. I drove back down to the university and met with the registrar. They gave me an exception. I got the classes in. But then I was like, all right, where am I going to live for the summer? But I got it all figured out. But yeah. We did—I mean, that was probably the closest, up until 9/11, that there was even a talk of going somewhere, right, other than AT. So yeah. It was never really, you always knew it could. I mean, as soon as you signed up, you knew it could. But it wasn't realistic, right. It wasn't very likely. So therefore, the kind of we would have a drill weekend. And it was a chance for me to see buddies I hadn't seen in a month. And you're nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two. We'd stay up all night some nights, and then come stumble into formation, you know. But yeah. I'm sure that happens to some degree still now, but it's probably not as easy to do. So [laughter]. But it was good. It was good.

Gibb: You—where did you go in the summers? Were you just around here, or—

Johns: Typically—we did Nicaragua one year—but typically, it was McCoy, Fort McCoy. Or, since we were an engineer, we had a lot of heavy equipment. We would go do community projects. So like one summer, the Veterans Cemetery in Union Grove, we built that. Yeah. What they did is they rotated us all. We had three platoons in the company, and so we would all take turns going up for three, you know, like basically weekends. So every weekend of the summer got covered. And I say built it. I mean, we didn't build the buildings, but the horizontal work, like the earth moving and everything else. One summer, we did the big complex out here in Verona, the big soccer complex. That was just vacant field then. What was another one we did? Oh, over by Prairie du Chien, we did a big park over there, too. So if we weren't at McCoy, we were doing kind of,

showing the taxpayer they're getting their money's worth. So yeah. [Laughter]
But yeah.

Gibb: You, I mean, not that you would be anticipating anything, but you weren't looking to make a career out of the army afterwards.

Johns: It was always in the back of my head. But if I did, it was going to be JAG, right. So like when I was in college—and I did well in college, and I would get my LT or commander saying, “Hey, you want to go OCS?” Well, no, because if I went OCS, there's no guarantee I'd stay with my unit. Very unlikely I'd stay with my unit. And I was really tight with my guys. I liked being enlisted in [??] JAG. And then, when I was in law school, it was, “Hey, you want to go JAG for the guard?” And I was like, “No, no.” Plus, I didn't want to commit to that when I wasn't even quite sure what I was going to do after law school, where I was going to be. I knew I kind of wanted to move out east, but I always kept it in the back of my head that, all right, I can always look at the JAG Corps if I go active duty later or whatever it might be. But I also wanted to go into the Foreign Service. I studied public and international law in college, or in law school, and I took the Foreign Service exam. While I was working here, I actually took the FSE, and my plan was after I worked in the capitol, I was to go back out in April of '03. I was supposed to have my assessment, which is the next stage that the State Department does. But then they said, “Hey, we know that you're leaving.” I told them. They said, “Don't worry about it. When you get back, we'll do it at the next cycle, which would be the following April.” But when I got home, you know, it had been a lot different of a tour than you expected. And then, of course, getting wounded and everything else. So I just kind of needed to decompress. So I decided to stay in Wisconsin. So I kind of, I never did pursue the FSE. But that's OK, because I went down a different path. It worked out great. So yeah.

[00:30:33]

Gibb: We'll get to that. So you were at Fort McCoy for three months, you said, doing your training? What were the preparations like at that time, and were they preparing for this—

Johns: Yeah, very high tempo, because we were, when we went up there on February 8; it hadn't been decided yet if there was going to be an invasion. They were getting people—they hadn't had the UN and Colin Powell and, you know, the whole weapons of mass destruction. But they were building up, just in case. And so when that occurred, and then when the UN negotiations failed, and it looked like it was going to happen. I mean, we were, we went up there with the idea we could leave tomorrow. Right, I mean, we were getting equipment ready, getting it loaded on trains, getting all the weapons qualifications done. It was very high tempo that first month. And then, of course, the invasion happened, and we're still sitting at McCoy. And it was because the third armor got told to stand down, and so they actually came in later. But then it was all right, now what's going on? Are

we going? Are we not going? So then it kind of slowed down a little bit. But you've got to keep up. So we're doing almost like we were at a drill weekend. We were doing classroom work. We were doing equipment operations at McCoy, just pushing dirt around, doing this, doing that. Still doing weapons, you know, just keeping up on the weapons. Doing PT, of course. But it was more of a, almost like active duty posting at that point. We were just kind of eight to five, and then [inaudible]. So, but yeah, that first month, month and a half was go, go, go, go, go. So yeah.

But then, like I said, too, we were sitting there, and our equipment's already gone. Our equipment had been sent over to Kuwait. So it's sitting over there. We didn't know if we were going to get told to stand down, if we were going, and so yeah. It was kind of strange. It was also strange, too. I remember thinking, so we're here at Fort McCoy in February, which obviously is very cold, very snowy. And the army, in its infinite wisdom—there was an MP unit, a reserve unit out of Puerto Rico. And they sent them there to mob-up [??] to go to Iraq. So those poor bastards were freezing. [Laughter] Yeah, go figure.

Gibb: OK. And so, obviously you had been aware of sort of all the build-up. But how did that sort of compare with once you actually got over there? How much did that knowledge help you or, you know?

Johns: Yeah. I would say the mobilization wasn't so much necessary as far as, I mean, we had all been in the unit off and on for years, right. More on myself, still in, but in different units. So we knew each other. The cohesion was there. It wasn't like anything changed from the operating of our equipment and firing a weapon that during that time, it's not like you were learning it for the first time. So really, I think if there was anything that prepared us during that mob-up, it would have really been just getting in the mindset. The physical fitness as well, obviously, was very helpful when you hit the ground and it's 140 out. But no, in general, I think it was just getting, instead of being in the—and again to, and going back to what I was saying, military discipline, it was there for formation on drill weekends, but it wasn't necessarily there for the whole weekend. So it got you kind of back into that mind frame. So yeah, it was more, I think, of a mental preparation than a physical preparation, too. But not so much, I forgot how to fire my weapon. It's a good thing we mobbed up, you know. Or, I forgot how to drive that truck or that skid loader [??], that bulldozer. So yeah. I mean, it was more, we just wanted—we were getting to the point, after being there that long, it was either, send us over or send us fucking home. Right? I mean, it was getting monotonous. But yeah.

[00:35:11]

Gibb: And family. You said you spoke to your dad and—

Johns:

Yeah. Yeah, at the time—that was the thing was—I called a real close buddy who never served. And he says, “Why would you want to volunteer?” Right. And I said, “Well, Jason,”—his name is Jason, too—I said, and I tell you, and he lived in Texas. I said, “Dude, honestly,” I says, “I couldn’t—I don’t think I could live with myself if, you know, I’m sitting back here drinking beers and eating potato chips on the couch, knowing my buddies are over there.” And I said, “Plus,” I says, “I’m not married. I don’t have any kids.” I go, “You do. So in a way, I guess I’m going overseas so you don’t have to someday.” And he really, he still talks about that. My dad understood. My brother was younger at the time. I mean, he was, he’s five years younger than me, so he was probably a freshman, sophomore in college. He had a lot of anxiety about it but supported me, but had a lot of anxiety. My mom was pissed. She was pissed because I remember going home the night before I went up to the armory, to report to the armory, because [inaudible]. We’re sitting there. And it hadn’t quite dawned on her yet that I didn’t have to go. I’m not sure Dad explained it to her all that well. She knew I’d been with that unit for years, and she knew they were going. And she knew I was going now, right.

We were having dinner, and it came up at some point. Oh, I think it was because I was like, “Man, I couldn’t believe it took that long to sign all that paperwork last night to re-enlist.” And she’s like, “What?” And I looked at her, and I looked at Dad. And he’s like [hums]. She goes, “Wait, wait, wait. You volunteered?” I said, “Yeah.” She goes, “So you don’t have to go.” I says, “Well, I do now, but I didn’t.” And she slapped me. [Laughter] Yeah, yeah. She was very upset. I don’t blame her. I wasn’t mad at her at the time, right. But she was very upset. And then as time went on, I had [??] my tour. And back then, too, she started to kind of get used—I mean, dealt with it. I mean, she had to. But we didn’t have—it was hard on them because we didn’t have then, you know, we didn’t have Skype. We didn’t have Internet. We didn’t have, I mean, we didn’t have—the only communication we had back home was originally the original snail mail. Writing letters, which was sometimes the quickest because [inaudible] two-week turnaround. But we’d get a sat phone maybe once a month for fifteen minutes.

And then AT&T started putting up some computer tents roughly September, October. But we had to convoy to get to them. And so it had to be, I mean, it wasn’t just like you got back and went and did it, right. I mean, you had to go through a whole mission prep, and the commander would only authorize those every once in a while. Cause why put everybody at risk to use a computer? So I could get to an email maybe once every couple of weeks, too. So there wasn’t a whole lot I could do [inaudible] communication, which, of course, leads to speculation and what’s going on and hearing everything on the news. So it wasn’t near as real-time as it is now. But so that was tough on them. That was tough on them. I remember I got a sat phone on Christmas. And the day before, Chris had been killed. And it was just a shitty day. It was raining. It was muddy, you know, from the rainy season. And then of course with Chris, and it being Christmas. I called home. I waited. Well, it worked out because I knew everybody would be

around. Nine hours ahead in time. So I called, and my dad answered. We were talking a little bit. And then he goes, “How are you doing?” I said, “I’m not doing too hot.” I said—I just kind of unloaded on him. And then it got quiet. And then my mom was on the phone. She goes, “What, what did you just fucking say to him?” And I says, “Why?” And she goes, “He’s crying.” And I’d never seen him cry before, much less, I mean, heard it on the phone, I guess. But yeah.

[00:40:00]

So it was, and I says, “Oh, nothing. He just feels bad for me because—” And then I put on the other face, right? Because it’s mom. I’m not going to worry her if there’s nothing she can do about it. So I was like, “Oh, nothing. You know, just tired. I was on guard duty all night. It’s rainy. It’s muddy. Dad just must be feeling emotional.” You know, that kind of thing. And I think he might have eventually told her later. But yeah. So it was different then. It was different then. You know, we were still—we still burnt our own excrement and didn’t have, we didn’t have a whole lot of hot pans [??]. If we got back to base camp, eventually they had a mess tent there. But some MREs. Different war. You don’t necessarily say, like, somebody who went in ’07 or ’08 had it any better, right, necessarily. It was a different war by then. You know, there’s a lot more amenities from home. And doesn’t mean the engagements are any less worse. But just, it’s a different experience.

I think, you know, I look at it now, with having a wife and three kids, I can’t imagine. I didn’t appreciate it then, but I think about my buddies who were married, had young kids. And I mean, I’m glad to see now, for those [??] sake, of people who are married and have families, and that they can get on Skype most days and that they can email and that they can on the phone and whatnot. So that’s good. I mean, that obviously helps a lot, things [??]. And not just for the morale of the troop, but for the family. So yeah. [inaudible] you know what? You just think about Vietnam, or you think about World War II, and, “Oh, you’ve got a son over there?” “Yep.” “When’s the last time you talked to him?” “Two years ago.” [Laughter] So can’t complain. [Laughter] Right? I mean, “When’s the last time you talked to him?” “Well, when he got on the train.” Yeah. Different. Anyway.

Gibb: And so what was it like when your family [??] mobilized [inaudible] and got shipped over? What was that, what was the emotions, in a sense, for them?

Johns: Believe it or not, it was freaking excitement. [inaudible] stereotypical. It was excitement. It was relief. Because there was the big feeling among us of like, all right. Did we just waste the last four months of our lives to not go? And so yeah. For the most part, excitement, yeah. But we also—we thought because literally the week before we went, President Bush said mission accomplished. You know, things are done. Major combat operations are over. So we were kind of questioning, too, like, what are we going to be doing exactly? But it also fit if

we're going to rebuild, if we're going to build them up, if we're going to—engineers, right? And so we figured—we honestly did figure—we wouldn't, we might see the sporadic—Fedayeen or somebody trying to mess with us. But other than that, we figured we'd be doing reconstruction. So just happened to be over there instead of in Verona, right. So, but that definitely changed. Like I said, it started to pick up a little bit. You started to get the feeling. But October is when it really changed. So yeah.

Gibb: Once you got over there, was there anything that was particularly surprising or that you actually weren't prepared for? Apart from the heat?

Johns: Yeah, yeah. Well, there's no way you prepare for the heat, number one. I think you'll hear that from anybody who ever served over there. I wasn't prepared for the civilian welcome. You look back at it now, and you're kind of like, shit, did we squander something there? Because it was nothing but goodwill. I mean, you were rolling through towns, and thumbs up and kids running and chasing you. And there was a lot of goodwill that first year, you know, that first. Towards the end, it was starting to change, right, of our tour. But that first May to December, yeah. I mean, it was really, there was a lot of—they were relieved that Saddam was gone.

[00:44:47]

I think if—I don't know how we'd do it differently, right. I mean, I do know how we could have done it differently a little ways. But we tried to put democracy in a place where they don't know what to do with it. And I think eventually, yes, that should have been something we would want to instill there, if we're there and they want it. But I think for the initial few years, we should have literally replaced Saddam with another, someone to—because they don't know what to do with it. And so all they've known is what they're told. And so all they want is—they want their food. They want water. They want electricity. And a lot of them, again, the mentality was, OK, Saddam's gone. Bad man. So happy to have President Bush now. We're like, well, he's not going to be your president. So it was interesting. But there was a lot of happiness for it, because they thought they were going to get a better life. And then it kind of got screwed up. So yeah. It's probably even worse now. I don't know. It's hard, hard to figure out. I still believe in the why, but the how got fucked up. So. I think about friends over there, because I went back in 2010. Not in the military, though. I went back as [inaudible] and was involved in a group called International Law Students Association. And they sponsor the world's largest [inaudible], which takes place at The Hague in the Netherlands. And it's a hypothetical between two countries. But I'm on their board, and I judge the competition every year. And each country has its own competition among its universities, and then the winners go to Washington to compete against the rest of the world.

Well, I got asked by the State Department in 2010. They wanted to, as part of their reconciliation over there—they're trying to build up rule of law and everything else—if I would come over and help administer the first time they would do it. And of course, you know. Even with two young kids at home, my girl had just been born the year before. But yeah, I went over for two weeks in 2010, in December of 2010. And flew into Sulaymaniyah, went up to Irbil, which was, at the time, probably the safest part of—I mean, we had already pulled out the majority of troops. But I had a couple of escorts, and State came up. But it went well. You know, we had sixteen universities compete. And we had—I remember speaking to the students. I don't speak fluent Arabic, but I had translators. And I remember saying to them how great it was to be there because to have been there as a soldier and regardless of how you felt about the war, here you are now. Saddam didn't allow this. Hopefully, you can take what you learn in this competition and get Iraq back on the international stage. And it was a lot of cheers for that.

But the thing that probably struck out to me the most was, here's all these students. When I say "students," law students, as you know, you start right after high school with your legal [inaudible]. So a lot of these law students, they were judging not just there but everywhere outside of the US. They're eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two. And it was so surreal because here we are. We're in this hotel for three days in Irbil. Kurds, Sunnis, Shiites, no problems because they knew they were there to, you know. And I also had—I judged this one student who was from Tikrit University. And afterwards, he came up to me and he says, "When were you at Spiker?" And I told him. And he goes, "You probably knew me." And I says, "What?" You know, and of course this was seven years before. And he goes, "I used to run around outside the front gate and sell cigarettes and ice." Because we didn't have ice, and so we'd just buy big blocks of ice from the locals. And I'm like, "Get outta here." He's like, "Yeah, right out the front gate." So, and there he was. Yeah. So I kind of wondered what's happened to them now, especially with ISIS taking over Tikrit. And now we've got it back, but, you know. And then I think about some of the police we trained there in Tikrit, because they found eighty-two bodies. ISIS, when they took Tikrit, they had a mess execution at our base camp, at Spiker. Yeah. So I don't know. I often wonder. There's a couple I still keep in touch with on Facebook, but a lot have kind of fallen off the grid. I don't know if they fled or not.

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But you know, and then you think about in perspective, too, it's like—I was talking to the dean of Baghdad University. And this was in 2010, mind you. And he said since the war began, at his university, between students, faculty, and staff, he had 504 targeted assassinations against his people. Not just walking through the marketplace, one of those. It was literally, they were targeted by insurgents because they were at the university. And I'm like, and you guys are here? You

know, so the will's there. It's just, you don't always see it. I mean, on the news or wherever else. But yeah. That was an interesting return. But I'm glad I did it. And I thought we were going to have progress after that, but then ISIS rose up and kind of shit the bed [??] there. So I don't know.

Gibb: So let's talk a little bit more about what you were actually doing while you were in Iraq the first time, just in terms of the like day-to-day missions and those kind of things.

Johns: Yeah. Like I said, the first couple of months was mostly building up that base camp. We'd go outside the wire, but it was to go to the other side of Tikrit, to a quarry, and pick up gravel and keep the sand down and the dust down and whatever [inaudible] equipment was needed or supplies. So it was mostly running convoy missions back and forth. There wasn't a whole lot of combat missions, if you will, so to speak. And so really, the first couple of months was just building up the base camp, which was pretty monotonous. It was pretty monotonous.

But then starting in—and then of course that was, you know, wake up. We had ill [??] buildings that all the windows were blown out and the roofs, some of them were collapsed. Some weren't. We cleaned it out. We at least had kind of a structure. And that's where our cots were. And then eventually, they brought in some little twin beds that they shipped up. But we had one generator, and that would go down a lot. But [laughter]. And if you weren't on something on post, some mission on post you were building up—we were also rebuilding the runways, because they basically had just blown the heck out of them in the middle. So these big craters, and you've got to kind of rebuild everything. Because fourth aviation, all the Apaches were based out of there. And they used the hangars. And they wanted eventually to start running planes. So we were working on that.

But then, I'd say it was about August, July or August, when we started doing escort missions down to Baghdad with civilians, and then somebody else would pick them up over there [inaudible]. There was—we had three platoons. Well, four, when you count headquarters. But headquarters was always at base camp. But three platoons, all kind of had different specialties, different equipment, different MOS's. So some were—like third was on riverboat duty. They were down there helping those guys out on the river in Tikrit. And then we, my platoon, we got down to Balad. We started FOBbing [??] a lot more. We were on force protection, so we were going to Balad. Before it was the big air base that it is now—and we were kind of, we were building up berms [??] around it to help build up the perimeter. We were going to police stations around there, special forces safe houses. We were putting up jersey barriers in constantina [??] and kind of trying to help with bomb proofing. And then we'd get the random check point, where they just wanted a checkpoint, but they didn't have the manpower. So they'd say, "All right, you guys doing check point this week." So we'd go do a

check point somewhere. Sometimes they were roving. Sometimes they were set [??], like the one we were at in Samarra, where I got hit.

And then we had, what other missions did we have [??]? We did do some rebuilding in Samarra. Patrolled Samarra a couple of times. In Tikrit, we had the—as I noted in there—[inaudible]. We built up the police station. We built up the protection around the police station. Then we destroyed the Baath party headquarters. And then we cleaned that all out. And then there was some demo missions, too, with the statues. Anything basically Saddam on it was getting blown up or pulled down or whatever. What else? So Samarra. Samarra was probably the biggest operation that we were part of. And it was the biggest probably operation at that time that fourth ID had ever done. It was called Operation Ivy. We built up for about two weeks. And then they stormed the city and went house to house, just clearing out.

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And our job was to man the perimeter of the city and just take care of any rats squeezing out. So that was probably the biggest, biggest one, as far as number of troops on one mission, all right. Otherwise, it was platoon here, platoon there, squad here, squad there. But yeah. So it was a little bit of everything at that time, you know. A little bit of everything. And so yeah.

Gibb: You said the IEDs and [inaudible], that wasn't really a big thing in the beginning? Or it wasn't something—

Johns: No, it wasn't. It wasn't. And again, it goes back to our theories from being on the ground. I mean, they just got their ass kicked. They were kind of licking their wounds. But there was also—the army hadn't been disbanded yet. So I think it was kind of a lull, if you will, that we happened to get there right at. And then once they regrouped, and then, of course, once a lot of the, well the Iraqi Army folded into their ranks. Things started picking up in October. It was September into October, right around Ramadan, which was ironic, because we had declared a ceasefire to honor their Ramadan. But then, we got attacked anyway. So but yeah. It was right about then. Then, too, it was still phone-activated or somewhere, as primitive as standing behind a building and just pulling a string. Or radio. Radio-operated. So yeah. That was really the big, that was probably the biggest thing, the most common thing. But I would say even more—I would say as far as most deadly. Then there was the occasional RPG, small arms, but those were more—they weren't taking us on so much as they were just trying to harass us with some bullets or an RPG out of nowhere. And then they're gone. Mortars was the big, their big harassing thing. They weren't very accurate. But you could set your watch by it. You know, every night, they'd just start coming in. And they'd do that at night so they could try to not be seen as well. But they weren't as skilled in them as, like—if you talked to a Vietnam vet, he's going to tell you the MVA [??] was spot-on.

But these guys were, I don't know if they hadn't been trained, if they just were too much in a hurry and didn't want to get killed or what it was. But they had access to tons and tons and tons of ammo dumps that we didn't even know about, right. But they would literally—one instance that you can use is, so there were these dump trucks that the civilians had because, obviously, we're with the US government and we hire civilians everywhere we go. And so they're hiring all these local civilian contractors and to rebuild stuff. But the dump trucks were orange or they were yellow or they were just weird, funky colors. But they'd be constantly on the road. They'd constantly be going by your FOB, wherever it might be. And so what they started doing there was literally, they'd have somebody in the back of one of those dump trucks. And they wouldn't even be aiming. They wouldn't be—they would just [clicks mouth]. You'd hear the mortars coming in. It almost got to be, since they're so inaccurate. But it was still, you know, you still had to run to the bunker. But it almost got to be where you almost took them for granted. But you didn't want it to be that one you took for granted and that's the one that hit you. But yeah. But they would do that, and that truck's moving. So by the time you even remotely try to figure out where it came from, they're gone. So yeah.

Gibb: What was just the general threat level that you felt at the time? Was it, it was a consistent thing or is it —

Johns: You know, no. It wasn't consistent like I would say if you were on patrol in the jungles of Vietnam. If you were at base camp, you were pretty relaxed. I mean, because at Spiker, we were set back from the main road. It was wide open, right. They would have to launch a full-blown, battalion-size attack to even be remotely a threat. Mortars couldn't really reach us, because we were far back enough from the road. So base camp, pretty relaxed. FOBbing [??], depended. If you were outside of a town, pretty relaxed, but, you know, a little higher. Your guard duties, you're pulling perimeter.

[01:00:02]

If you were in a village or a city, constant, right. Because you didn't know where a bullet would come from or whatever. But it was really when you went outside the wire is when it elevated. Then, you're constant because you're driving. You don't know what, you don't know what's this, you don't know what's around that corner. So it's more—it wasn't 24/7, thank God. But it was when you were, I would say the most heightened was outside the wire, if you're on a mission, on the road, mobile, going through a town, whatever it might be. Patrolling, doing a check point. So yeah.

Gibb: And down time. How did you—did you have any, and how did you spend it?

Johns: Yeah. No, we did. We did. At base camp, mostly. The down time we'd have FOBbing would usually be, obviously, at the end of the day, if you weren't on a night op. And that was really just sitting in your cot playing cards the old school way, right. Because any generator we had there was one that we had to bring with us. And it wasn't going to power everybody's little DVD stations and, you know. So it was really just enough power for the lights. Now back at base camp, as we got more bigger generators in, in our barracks there, where we had our little twin beds I was telling you about, they brought in—we had little TVs. Not cable, but little TVs. And it was set up. I'm dating myself, because this was before iPhones, right. We didn't have the digital cameras then couldn't hold up to the desert, so we still took disposable. Like, if you look at all my pictures, there's film, you know, that I would mail home. And then when I got home, there's disposable cameras. Then I got them all developed, and then I had to scan them into the computer. I was talking to this third-grade class one time, and they were like—I was showing them pictures. "Why are your pictures so fuzzy?" And I'm like, "Well, you see." But yeah.

So we had little TVs. We had a few little TVs, and then, you know, some PlayStations. So we'd play video games back at base. We would, we had a sand volleyball pit we made up. One couple that cooks, they always had a lot of time on their hands. They made like this little golf course in the dirt, right. I mean, but it was like, they put like a pan and put dirt around it. [inaudible] And they had like two clubs. But it was a lot of sand volleyball. It was a lot of sitting around, smoking and joking, playing cards. We had, we'd do little boxing matches every once in a while. And then work out. And so we didn't have—I know, as of '08, I talked to a motor sergeant who was there in '08. Back at Spiker they had a swimming pool and movie theatre and Big Macs and everything else. But not then. But it was the old, which I'm kind of glad about in a way. It was the old school camaraderie, so to speak. You didn't have a whole lot to do on your down time, as far as access to things, so you talked and you played cards and made shit out of each other. And so yeah. That's about it, really.

Gibb: I'm just thinking down here [??]. Is there anything—what else did you want to cover? Swimming in Saddam's pool?

Johns: Yes. That was fun. Yeah.

Gibb: Seems to be a story there.

Johns: So yep. When we first got into Tikrit, we went over to the palaces. And the fourth ID had just started moving in there. And so we were going through the different buildings, trying to determine the extent of damage from our attacks, what was safe, what wasn't, and hauling out any rubble. And in his, I guess you'd call it his fitness palace, there was his pool. And no one had been in it for a while, so we got down to skivvies [??] and we swam in his pool and used his bathroom and did bad things to it. [Laughter] So yeah, that was cool. It was surreal for me, because, you

know, I grew up in a small town in Wisconsin. And there I was in the cradle of civilization, swimming in Saddam Hussein's pool. It was pretty, it was pretty cool. Yeah. And then of course in his palaces, and just being where he was there. And knowing everything about him.

[01:04:54]

And it was unique for me, too, because, you know, on my team, most of the guys, you know, were younger. They were either still in college or never went to college. And here I was, enlisted man. But I already had my law degree for three years at that point, two years at that point. And I'd studied public and international law. And I'd been involved with that. And so I knew the Geneva Convention. And I knew the UN Charter. I knew all these laws of war. But yet, you had to [??] get through it, take care of my guys. But there was always kind of that thing to. [Inaudible] like my commander would call me into his tent every once in a while and be like, "All right. So you're the most educated grunt I've got over here," he says. Because he was just a, he was an engineer, but he wasn't, he didn't know anything about this and that and Geneva. [Inaudible] "I'm thinking about doing this and this and this. What do you think?" "Well, sir—" And this is what I try to tell students now, that I go on lecture to, or that I'm judging or working with, as I said. I said to him, "Well, sir, on paper, express interpretation and reading of the Convention article. But we're here, and we're on the ground, and there's deference for that. So I think you're OK." And I ain't gonna lie. There's other times where I'm like, "Yeah, that's probably a violation. But you know what? Fuck it. We've got to do it and get out of here." You know, so it was that kind of dichotomy for me, too, of knowing this and knowing that. So yeah. It was interesting. I was kind of unique in that way.

Gibb: Yeah. How did you reconcile that? Was it just the fact that you had a job to do while you were there?

Johns: Yeah, really. And to get home. And I could also reconcile it in a way where there were no war crimes. It wasn't like we were slaying people like that. It's just, it really put into perspective something I'd only known as an academic before, and that all these academics and professors and diplomats, they're ready to attack and criticize based on just what they've known here, and never over here. And so it did, too, it did start making me look at all the rules of international law in kind of a different lens. Again, not the hard-core human rights violations. But the detainment. Or the treatment of a prisoner. The respect to someone's property and livelihood. All right, well, if we suspect that somebody was launching mortars from your house and we knock it down, on paper, yeah, we probably just violated something in the ICCPR. But in reality, it's your own fucking fault. You know, so you kind of can deal with it a little better that way. [Laughter] So and it wasn't just on a whim. I mean, if it was pretty clear, you know. Was there a time to have a trial and determine? No, right. But if the evidence was pretty overwhelming, you weren't going to sit there and debate what the ICCPR said about knocking

somebody's house down. You just did it. So yeah. So there was kind of that [laughter]. And that's what I try to tell students now, too, in teaching them and talking with them. And other colleagues. Still very much involved with that. In fact, I just got back from Mexico City last week. I was down there judging their national rounds. And it was cool, because I got to sit on the final round, championship round with an actual previous vice president of the International Court of Justice. And he was very impressed with what we were talking about.

But I try to tell everybody, "The rules of law are there. Public and international, you know, the conventions, the treaties, the charters. They're there, and they're guidelines that we should try to uphold. They really are. But don't read them as gospel, either, because they're so fluid. And they have to apply to each situation." You know, and it's like, it's hard. What frustrates me sometimes is when somebody says, "Well, how come the US is ready to take so and so to The Hague, right, or to the International Court for killing seventy-two civilians? Right. Whereas the US commits war crimes every day."

[01:09:58]

Well, are you talking about a drone? Are you talking about, you know, hitting the wrong place? Are you talking about—so you've got to look at it and see where the intent is, see what the, what was led up to it. Not just did it happen kind of thing.

Gibb: That's really interesting that it's given you [??] a, yeah, unique perspective.

Johns: It does. It does.

Gibb: [inaudible] Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about? [inaudible] about your time, time there.

Johns: No. No. I think, you know, it was, there's good days. There's bad days. You know, we lost Chris. We lost some other guys in the battalion that you always think about. But it's one of those things I try to tell guys, too, since I've been more involved in advocacy since, and helping guys. You can sit and think about it all the time and not do anything, or you can live your life and still think about it, but you're doing something. So it's [inaudible] you'll never forget, but also don't—they knew what they signed up for. It could have been you just as easy, which some people take that too much. Like, "Man, it could have been me. Oh my God, it could have been." Well, yeah. It could have been any one of us. So you've got to kind of keep that attitude. Which I didn't—for a few years, it was tough. I didn't. I hadn't gotten that attitude yet. I really hadn't. It's really been in the last few years with starting a family and talking to people and getting involved and doing different events. And so yeah. I mean, it didn't keep me from earning my living, but it just, it was always there a lot harder than it is now.

Gibb: How did you deal with it in the moment, while you were there as a unit? How did you sort of, you know, [inaudible]?

Johns: You know, yeah. It was—as a unit, really, there’s not a whole lot of opportunity or time for any mass grieving. You did, you had your ceremony. And that was it. You moved on. Mission, mission going [??]. But there was always little moments on your own and this and that. Or, smoking some cigarettes late at night. You kind of dealt with it that way. But it didn’t, you didn’t not get out of bed the next morning, right. You didn’t take your uniform off and throw your weapon down and say, “I’m done. Send me home.” So yeah. I mean, but it was good. It was good cohesion to do that. We did have one night where we got some black market booze and got really messed up and cried on a rooftop on a building somewhere in Samarra. [Laughter] We’re not even sure what we were drinking. So maybe that was part of it. But [laughter] it was literally—I’m not kidding you—it was a bottle. I think we paid like five bucks for it. We got three of them, five bucks each. But it was brown. And it had a label on it that looked like it was printed off on one of those old dot matrix printers. You know, the da dit da dit. And it said, “The closest thing to Scotch whiskey.” And underneath it, it said, “Made in Lebanon.” We’re like, “All right, whatever. It’s booze.” Because we couldn’t have anything over there. So yeah. So that was one night.

[Inaudible] So yeah, I can count on both hands the number of times I had anything over there, because A, it’s not readily available. But B, we were prohibited from having it. And but Fourth of July in ’03—so we had been working real hard the week before. We’d been out on some FOB missions. We get back to Spiker. And the LT’s like, “All right, good news.” And this is July third. He goes, “Good news. No missions tomorrow. You guys got the day off.” Like sweet. So we go outside, up to the gate. We get a bunch of booze from this kid. We come back in, and we go up to one of the old ammo dumps. The ammo bunkers there look like pyramids. I don’t know if you’ve seen pictures of them or not, but the Iraq army, they look like pyramids. But they’re just—store their weapons in there and everything else. Ammunitions. We knew that the Apaches were going to be doing a show for us on the perimeter that night. So we go up to the top of one of those. We’re drinking, we’re drinking, we’re drinking. And they’re shooting off hell fires and a 30 millimeter. We were probably up until four in the morning, feeling pretty good. And six o’clock, LT comes through and kicks us all awake. Mission came down. Mother fucker. You know, and this is the hottest point in the summer. It’s 140 degrees out. No lie. We’re just dying. Just dying.

[01:15:02]

You know, and it’s not like we drank a bunch of beer. We drank a bunch of stuff that was probably made in somebody’s back room. And so we’re feeling like ass. And I mean, you can barely focus on the road. You can, you know. Honestly, thank God—and it was the one time we got that bad, because we didn’t get engaged that day. We didn’t have any activity because, I think if we had, we

might have been hard to fire. So yeah, we learned a lesson there, though. Not just from being completely hammered, but trusting that you're not going to have a mission the next day. But drinking in that heat, right. So yeah. After that, if we ever got a hold of anything, it was maybe a snort here, a snort there. We never, ever got drunk again. [Laughter] Which made me very lightweight when I first got home. [I was?] at the bar. Let me buy you one. Let me buy you one. And then I don't remember the rest of the night. So yeah, anyway.

Gibb: All right. So maybe what about your return home, then? We can talk about that, what you've done since.

Johns: Yeah, yeah. We had a great welcome home. We had a great welcome home. Went through McCoy. We flew in through Portland, Maine, and then flew into Volk Field. And great. I mean, all our families were there waiting in the hangar, and got to see them. And then it was, okay. Your families can come up. You can spend the night with them. And then in the morning, we're going to start de-mobbing [??]. So then we spent the next six days doing paperwork, and we got released. When they were taking us back to the armory, we stopped at all these little towns along the way. And they were out in force, the local VFW and vets and people and flags and the whole way. It's about a two-hour drive, two and a half hour drive. Then we had the big parade in town. Yeah, it was really everything you'd think of in a movie welcome home. It was there, you know. And it was pretty overwhelming. And then, I mean like they cancelled school that day. All the kids were on the streets. Yeah, it was pretty cool. [Inaudible] did it right. And then shortly thereafter, a local—I kind of got in the political realm here in Wisconsin. I got asked to work on a campaign and did a congressional campaign in Lacrosse. And I was still thinking, I'm like, all right. Am I going back to DC? Am I staying home? What am I doing? You know. And all right, I'll do this campaign and figure it out. And then I met my now-wife in November. I went down to Iowa to visit some friends in Des Moines and met her at a party there. Yeah. Came back to Wisconsin, got into lobbying. Worked in lobbying until 2011. In between there, I started to get involved with the VFW post in Oregon. I was the commander there for a couple of years. And then started to realize, you know what? I can really do more here in the capital, since I was starting to build a career there. So I started getting all the [inaudible] committees, American Legion, the VFW, and MOPH, the Military Order of the Purple Heart. And I do all their pro bono lobbying here in the legislature. Which they love, because normally it's the old guy going to a hearing [??] once in a while. But now I'm here and getting—and I'm proud. I mean, I've got a lot of stuff done, a lot of stuff done. I've got a drawer full of pens of bills that have gotten passed for veterans that I'm really proud of.

As kind of leading up to that is that, in summer of '10, one of the guys I worked with on a campaign up in Lacrosse, he was the governor's campaign manager when he was still kind of [inaudible] running for the first time. And he called me in like July. And he says, "Hey, the County Exec was hoping you'd be on a phone call with him every couple of weeks, just kind of advise him on veterans things."

And I said, “Absolutely.” I had never even met him yet. So I did. Then when they worked on the bill to make the DVA a cabinet-level agency and got that done in July of ’11. And then the governor appointed John. Re-appointed, I guess you’d call it. And then appointed Mike to be his deputy. And I might still be there. It’s a dysfunctional family over there, no doubt about it. John, if you’re listening, I’m just kidding. But we all know it is. But the following summer in between, my wife got sick with our third child, William. And he came at twenty-four weeks, so it was a pretty tough time. She was still sick. Held out for about a month, April into May. But I said, “You know what? I’ve got to focus on my family.”

[01:20:02]

And I had so money in the bank, so I could. So I told the governor. I told John. They understood. And took the next eight months and got everybody healthy and got [inaudible]. He was in the hospital for four months, so we got him out of there. And he’s good now. Still a little pipsqueak. But, and then in January of ’13, I hung my own shingle, which is what you see now, with the lobbying of things. And then also now have hired another attorney, Chad. We do veterans benefits law. So we’ve gotten accredited with the Office of General Counsel. We’re part of the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims in DC. We’re barred with them. And so we do veterans kind of appeals within the VA. So you’ve got your [??] service officers who file claims for free. And, of course, if anybody walked in here, I would say, “Have you talked to a service officer yet?” And get them pointed in the right direction. But when you get to the point, if you do, where you’re now challenging the VA, and it’s administrative law hearings and it’s Board of Veterans Affairs and it’s moving its way up, a lot of service officers A, don’t have the legal knowledge to do that, or B, just have too much of a caseload. So then they’ll refer them to an attorney. There’s only five of us in the state that do it, and only two of us are veterans. Yeah. And so it’s also, too, where one thing I try to convey to everyone is the VA, you don’t get paid unless the—but I would never charge a veteran by the hour. I mean, I just wouldn’t. Most people don’t. You don’t get paid going forward. So let’s say a guy filed in ’05. Denied, denied, denied, denied, denied, denied. You win in ’11. He’ll get that back to ’05 in a lump payment of what he would have had as far as a disability check. The VA allows the attorney to take twenty percent, but nothing moving forward, right. Now he’s got that going forward, too, every month. I never charge more than ten or fifteen percent, depending on the financial status of the veteran. And that’s really only to keep the lights on. That’s not my moneymaker. You know, lobbying is. [But that’s what?] pays the bills. But that’s something I feel like I’ve been able to do and I should do. So yeah. Then, of course, I’ve been—in addition to lobbying stuff, I’m very proud to say that two years ago, August of ’14, I was elected by the national membership at the National Convention of the Military Order of the [??] Purple Heart to be their national judge advocate. I became the first 9/11 veteran to be elected to any major veterans service organization as a national officer in the country. So I’m in my second term of that now. And that’s unpaid. [Laughter] That’s volunteer. That’s volunteer. My expenses are, you

know, when I have to go somewhere and take care of something or whatever, but yeah.

So here I am. Been married ten years this summer, and I have twin seven-year-old girls and a soon-to-be four-year-old son. And things are good. Things are good. Got all my ratings. Finally I put off—I was the old—before I knew what I know now—I was the old mentality of, you know what? I've got all my pieces. I'm not going to go to the VA. Right? Some of it was pride. Some of it was just not understanding the VA. And thinking, all right, if I go get rating, I'm taking money from the guy who lost his leg. No. Now, I know it's sum neutral, and Congress is going to pay it no matter what. But I didn't go until 2011. Yeah, yeah. And it was starting to—some of it was mental health. Some of it was PTSD, and it was starting to get pretty bad. I had a buddy, marine. who lost his leg. [inaudible] service officer. And he kind of kicked me in the ass, and my wife did, too. And I finally went and got all my ratings and everything else. And got help. But he, I remember him lightly slapping me in the face. He goes, "All right." So, because we did it in January '11. And I was fortunate having him and knowing what he had. I had all my paperwork, and I was a Purple Heart recipient. And so by October, I had my connection. And he goes, "All right." He goes, "So, you're sixty percent service-connected rating." He goes, "That's \$1300 a month, tax-free." He goes, "It's now—" He goes, "That goes back to January." So let's just say, it started January '12 is when it started, right. He goes, "All right, so 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4." He goes, "Eight years." He goes, "Multiply 1300 times twelve, and then multiply it times eight. You stupid bastard." You know.

[01:25:03]

And he goes, and not just the money. He goes, "But I mean, you had to get to this point where you kind of hit rock bottom before you went and did it." When I say "rock bottom," I hadn't lost my job or anything like that. It was just emotionally and mentally, and I was very short with my children. And the typical. And so very angry, very angry. But, as you can see now, it's much better. And I've put all that kind of effort and anger and emotion into all the veterans' advocacy I do, and that's my outlet. Yeah. So it's a proud outlet. There we are.

Gibb: Well, I'm going to delve a little bit more into that. Tell me more about the lobbying and some of the things that you've been able to achieve. You mentioned [inaudible]. I'd love to hear more about what you've done in the state [??].

Johns: Yeah. So let's see here. We've got—when you look at the money that's gone to some of the veterans homes, I lobbied on that. Some of the bills—there's budget things that I'm always protecting, you know, with the benefits we have and the Wisconsin GI Bill. And the Wisconsin GI Bill, I got that changed to where it used to be that you had to be, had to have entered active duty service from Wisconsin. We got that changed for those who might move here after their service, as long as they've lived here for five years. Five years of tax returns, they can now use the

Wisconsin GI Bill. That's one I worked on real hard. We've got the Purple Heart Conservation Patron Bill for the outdoorsman, which allows Purple Heart recipients in the state to pay ten dollars to get to hunt and fish everything, which costs 160 for everyone else. We got the women veterans license plate. [Laughter] [inaudible] because there's a lot more.

Gibb: That's fine. Take your time.

Johns: Let's see here. So I'm trying to think backwards, in terms of legislative sessions. The credentialing in education. So I had a medic from up north who had done a tour in Iraq, and this was a couple of years back. And he came home, and all he wanted to do was go back home, become an EMT. And so he goes in to the Department of Safety and Professional Services to get his license. And they tell him he's got to do this whole year-long civilian qualification course, right. Education. And he says, "I already did something almost identical to that in the military." And they're like, "Yeah, but we don't accept the military education." And he goes, "And then do I have to do practical afterwards?" Well, and they're like, "Yeah, and you've got to basically ride along." And then he goes, "I just treated triage in a combat zone for, you know." So got that bill passed where now the state has to accept the equivalent training and education in the military and waive the civilian side, which is huge for a lot of guys and gals. So I was real proud of that.

What else? Let's see here. Doo doo doo. Oh, I lobbied on the budget to get—WDVA now has general purpose revenue, where it didn't have it before. So it gets twenty million from that. Let's see here. Worked on the property tax credit for surviving spouses, so now, because basically what you had was, if you're 100 percent nonemployable, you pay your property tax every year. But then, if you get taxes coming back, or I mean, if you owe taxes, they'll take off the amount, the equivalent of your property tax, off of what you may owe. Or they'll give you a credit for next year. So basically, in other words, for those who are in that situation, especially seniors, they don't have to worry about tax. They don't have to worry about their property tax. But the problem was, too, was you'd have these spouses who haven't had to worry about property tax for ten, fifteen, twenty years. Their spouse dies, who's the veteran. And now, all of a sudden, they're still living in that same house. They've got to pay their property tax. So what the law now does say is you can continue to get the surviving spouse property tax credit as long as you don't remarry. Right. And so boom. So that's nice. There's a lot of people who are going to appreciate that one.

[01:30:02]

And I could go on and on. [Laughter] Really, I really, I am so proud of some of this stuff. And I've got to think back on it all, right? Because it's like, oh, man.

Gibb: We don't need to go through all.

Johns: No, but it kind of gives you an idea of what—

Gibb: Well, I'm curious. How do these things—are they something that you see that you think [inaudible] people come to you?

Johns: Some are. Some are just knowing what needs are in the veterans community and being connected over here to find the right legislators to do it. Some have been, yeah, boom. My idea. Hey, I think this would be great. Some have been—I'll be at a veterans convention, you know, VFW or Legion or whatever. We'll put it to the membership to hear. What do you guys want to see this year? Give us some ideas. That kind of thing. Others are, believe it or not, some legislators come up with their own. Which you're like, hey, that's a great idea. I'll help you with that. Or their constituent calls them, and then a lot of them—I'm very proud to say, too, that regardless of Republican or Democrat, I'll get along [??] with both sides of the aisle. And majority of legislators over there, if they have a veterans constituent question, if they're working, if they're thinking about doing a veterans-related bill, they're going to call me first and kind of get my take on it. And, of course, work towards getting support from the veterans groups. So yeah. It's a little bit of everything.

Gibb: Are there any that haven't worked out? You know, either you're frustrated with, or—

Johns: Yeah, yeah. There is. There's some that have, unfortunately—it's easy for legislators to support a veteran's bill when no one's opposed to it, right. When it's really just the matter of something better for the veteran at the behest of the state, right. So maybe it's less on the license, right. Or a little less money in that pot, right. They're willing to kind of do that. But I've had one particular bill regarding asbestos and lawsuits, tort reform in the state, that was being pushed by the WMC, a lot of the insurance companies, a lot of the big manufacturers. And our groups all opposed it. So many veterans are suffering from or have been killed from mesothelioma. And, you know, it was the first time in probably twenty years that all three, the big three—so the Legion, the VFW, and the MOPH—were opposed to something, which is over 100,000 veterans in the state, right. So it should have never even saw the light of day. But since all those that wanted the bill write the checks—they contribute hundreds of millions of dollars. I fought that fucker for, right up until the last day of session. But then, it eventually passed. We got it amended, made it better. And then the governor signed it, without notice behind closed doors. It was very disappointing. Very disappointing. So yeah. So that was kind of a reality to wake up to—it was kind of disheartening, in a way. But yeah, it's politics. So.

Gibb: And is there anything that still needs, that you're still sort of hoping to get through that you're working on at the moment?

Johns: I've got to be honest with you. There's always something that's going to come up, right. Be something come up—might come up tomorrow, might come up six months from now. But really, Wisconsin, we're one of the best in the country to be a veteran. I mean, as far as, we've got tax credits. We've got the benefits. We've got the GI Bill. We've got different grants available. We've got, you know, with the property tax credit. There's so many things. I mean, we're right up there with being the most appealing to be a veteran in as Texas, California. Yeah, we really are. And so no, there's nothing like glaring right now. And in fact, I've told the groups we've been so lucky the last ten years, right, because of the veteran hurrah, if you will, that it doesn't matter who's in power across the street, whether it's Republicans or Democrats. If we've wanted something, we've got it, right. But as the wars wind down and sympathy kind of, you've got to watch it now, especially with the way budgets are. We can't get too greedy, either.

[01:35:01]

So I've been a lot more selective as bills come to me, ideas come from other people. And it's kind of saying, all right. What can we—can we get a lot of feel-good ones that aren't going to cost the state anything, and then get this one big one? Or do we want to ask for the whole freaking moon, and it doesn't really matter? Some of these don't really matter, but they're going to piss people off. Yeah. You don't want to abuse that sympathy or that, I guess patriotism, if you will, or support for veterans. Everybody wants to support their vet because we could find ourselves where veterans were after Vietnam, right. I mean, the reason it wasn't terrible in the fifties and sixties is because you had World War II vets, and they were legislators. I know I can't—I've got to imagine it was about the same here, but US Congress, from 1950 until 1980, was seventy percent veterans from World War II. But then, after Vietnam, that's why you had to see the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims get established. That's why you had to see a complete reform in the VA the last fifteen, twenty years. And so we've got to keep fighting. We've got to keep doing it and protecting what we have. But you also can't get too greedy and ask for too much more until the timing's right.

But I will say, like in the post-9/11 era, yeah. There's been a lot done. You know, most people don't realize the Wisconsin GI Bill wasn't around until 2006. So that's one of those things where, you know, you had the post-9/11 GI Bill, the federal, which would pay for four years of school. But the Wisconsin GI Bill—and that's if you deployed to a combat zone. If you never did, you didn't have anything over than if you were in the guard, right. Then, you could get the fifty percent tuition, which, when Governor Doyle then signed the GI Bill, it also raised it to 100 percent tuition if you were in the guard. If you serve in the Wisconsin—literally, you could join the Wisconsin Guard today, eighteen years old. They'll pay for your entire college, plus you get books and stipend and a living allowance. You may never leave Wisconsin. And then the GI Bill, which is beautiful and I wish they'd had it. Because I'd love to not have my \$100,000 of student loans from three years of private law school. But with the post-9/11 and

the Wisconsin GI Bill, if you're someone who did deploy, if you're twenty years old [inaudible] after deployment, you can go to the University of Wisconsin four years for free. All your books paid for, all your [inaudible] fees paid for, and you get a living allowance towards your rent. And then you go, "You know what? I want to get my law degree, or I want to get my masters, or I want to get my doctorate." Then you get the Wisconsin GI Bill to pay 128 credits of that. Now so, not a bad deal. Not a bad deal. So. Protecting those things and tweaking those things, and yeah.

Gibb: And so what about your practice here? Who are the veterans that you're seeing the most? Is it more recent? Is it sort of Vietnam catching up with them?

Johns: It's Vietnam catching up. Yeah. It's Vietnam catching up. Which is—it can be frustrating at times because records are hard to find, this and that. Or you'll see, you know, they'll tell you what happened, or you'll see what's going on with them. And if it's presumptive, right, if it's Agent Orange-related, boom. You can go help them. Look at [??] their claim. Done. But it's the guys who maybe tried the VA in 1981, right, and were told, "Get the fuck out of here. You've got nothing." So they never filed a claim, OK. Now, it's clear that they should have, but they were so, either just didn't want to or were afraid to, got pushed away, whatever it was. So now they're sitting here, and you're going, "Oh, man." And they're like, "What?" You're like, "Your claim is clearly service-connected, right. But we're going to file it today, March 2, 2016. You're going to start getting a thousand bucks a month starting today, March 2, 2016. Because it only starts from the day you file the initial claim." You have to tell them that if they had filed it on March 2, 1981, you do the math. And that's frustrating. So yeah. That's mostly, yeah. It's definitely mostly Vietnam is catching up. A lot of the younger generation, my generation, the guys who were just serving three years ago, whatever it may be [inaudible] twenty-six when I went over, twenty-seven over there. Twenty-eight when I got home. But I think about the guys who were in Afghanistan.

[01:40:00]

If you went to Afghanistan right now and you just graduated high school and boot camp, that means you were three when 9/11 happened. So [laughter]. Right. And so a lot of them, honestly, if you ask a lot of people in uniform right now that are younger than twenty-two, they learned about 9/11 in the books and watching the news, watching archives, not living it. Which is messed up to think about. But no, they [inaudible].

Gibb: About them in the VA, I guess.

Johns: Yeah. Young guys, they're getting caught before they're getting out. They're getting—they're a lot more tech-savvy, right, so they can go online, and they can go, "All right. So the VA has a thing called a fully developed claim now. I've got

my paperwork. I'll fill it out. Maybe I'll go talk to a service officer quick. Double-check it, send it." Right. A lot of the FDCs are getting approved pretty handily if you've got the clear documentation. If there's no basis for them to challenge it. And it saves them money, it helps with the backlog, so on and so forth. Now later on, those guys might be coming back and looking to get those increased, right. But right now, in general, they're getting taken care of. Now whether they're getting the help they need necessarily every time, right, or the medical appointment they need, is another story. But I would say the mass majority are getting the disability. And the reason being, too, is a lot of them, if they were injured on active duty, which they clearly were, they might still be on active duty. So DOD's already done the paperwork, done the medical. And if they get medically retired, they can take their DOD medical retirement papers, walk right over to the VA, and the VA has to accept it. Done. So now they've got their rating. They're good. DOD wasn't very good at that in Vietnam, either, right. You could be in Japan for a month recovering from a gunshot wound, get sent home, and next thing you're standing at an airport in San Francisco. You've got to find your way back to Wisconsin. So yeah. So it's a little bit more awareness, but also the DOD being better, too.

Gibb: What are the main sort of reasons they are coming to you, though, the Vietnam ones? Is it—

Johns: It's mostly they're getting—there are things that they never thought about before, right, that are related to their service. It might be—there's a lot of heart arrhythmias. There's a lot of strokes going on. And there are things that, "Hey, you know what? Yeah, I was around Agent Orange. I didn't think about it then. I was fine. Whatever." Or it's, "I fell off the truck and busted up my back, but I was able to work for forty years after that, right." Now, it's killing him, right. It's the things that weren't as traumatic at the time. But if they'd gotten the claim in, they'd be still getting it. They'd be fine. It would probably increase as it deteriorates. But now, they're trying to come in, and they're starting to say, "I fell off a truck. We had mortars coming in. We were on the road—out in the jungle. I fell off the truck, so I didn't get a Purple Heart. I didn't get medical documentation that I'd been wounded. I fell off the truck." And now, how the hell are you going to go back and prove that? Right. Whereas now, you fall off a truck, you're going to the medic. The medic's writing up paperwork. They're sending paperwork into your file. Your file's going to headquarters. It's going there. It's waiting when you're done. [inaudible]. Right. And a lot of times, it's even, "All right, we're going to treat you. You can no longer be in the service. We're going to medically retire you." A lot of it's done for you now. And so it's—you're getting a lot of those. The little things that clearly would be documented today but weren't then. And now you're trying to document it, because it's starting to be a problem now. So.

And there's believe it or not too, there's a lot of guys coming in for PTSD ratings that never—there wasn't awareness. I mean, there was, but not like there is now.

And there wasn't—they weren't believed. And so they're starting to get those ratings now. But again, we do appeals, right. Business-wise, we do appeals. I'll point these guys in the right direction. I'll point them to the service officer. I'll point them to the right paperwork. But again, going back to that is, they might be coming in for it, but is there an initial [??] claim?

[01:45:01]

Even if you go—I mean, even if you're sitting across from that VA comp and a guy who's determining your percentage. And he knows. You say, "Yeah, I was in Khe Sanh for two months, the siege of Khe Sanh." And he's like, "Damn. That must clearly—you had issues with that. PTSD, right. Yeah. Absolutely." And he's going, "There's not a damn thing I can do about it because you didn't file a claim when you got home, right. You're filing a claim today. I'm going to give you fifty percent, but it's from today." So yeah. And for a lot of those guys, it's a nice little retirement addition, you know. It's nice. It's finally getting something. But for some of them, who have more severe medical problems, hopefully we can get that rating so they can get treated. That's the most important part. I don't care whether it's zero percent or a hundred percent. You're not paying your medical bills for cancer treatment with a ten-percent rating. You can have a ten-percent rating and get 250 bucks a month, which is nice, but you better be able to still get treatment at the VA. In order—if your income is not right, or you're not fifty percent or more, if you're not there for that service-connected injury, you don't get treated for free. So it's—I've been doing the VA law side of things for two years, and I'm still learning stuff every day. Every day. OK.

Gibb: Yeah, is there anything else that you wanted to talk about? I mean, we need to just [??] sort of wrap up, just asking you about your service and reflecting back on it. And if this is family listening in the future or just people kind of trying [??] to project forward, what would you want them to know about your role in the service and afterwards?

Johns: Yeah. I think that the most important thing is, which I've already said, is, I felt the duty to go. And it's still the toughest, proudest thing I've ever done. But I would do it again. I really would. And I would also say, too, that when you get back, and you're out of uniform, and you're back in the civilian world, and the camaraderie's gone, and OK, what's your purpose now? Because you had a purpose then. It's to find it, right. Mine is helping other veterans. I've put my passion into that. And I stay in the lobbying side and other legal work just so I can pay the bills and pay to do the other stuff that I don't get paid for. So just find a purpose. I mean, that's what, whether it's that, or whether it's your purpose is feeding dogs at the humane shelter. You've got to find a purpose, because we were trained to have a purpose and to have a mission. When you don't have one.

So and I would tell my wife—well, we're pretty open at my house. My wife and kids, they're going to grow up appreciating it. So, it's not like, I know you've

probably had some grandchildren go, “What? Grandpa was in World War II?” And then they listen to this [??] and they hear his story. My kids will know, and they will know as they get older. So I don’t really have a message for them, other than Daddy loves you. [Laughter] But yeah. I get that question a lot. I don’t know if maybe other guys you talk to do, or gals. But when your kids are old enough, would you let them join the military? And I said, “Well, first off, it ain’t ’let.”” Right? Well, would you talk them out of joining? Probably not, because I mean, I wouldn’t wish some of the things that I went through on them, but at the same time, it’s made me who I am. It helped with my education. It made me lifelong friends. It’s given me a purpose. So no, I think I’d be the last person to tell them no or forbid it if they’re set on it, right. Am I going to push them into it? Hell, no. No way. Not especially since—I mean, hopefully they go to school in Wisconsin, because they’ll get to go to school for free because they’re my children. And thirty percent or more if you’re thirty percent or more. But with my luck, they’ll get into Stanford or something. But whatever. A good problem to have, I guess. So no, I don’t think I would. I’d be honest with them. I’m going to always be honest with them. I’ve decided that. I’m going to be honest with them, no matter what, as they grow up and everything else. And just talk with them.

[01:50:09]

That’s what I’ve got. Oh, and Wisconsin Veterans Museum rocks out.

Gibb: [Laughter] We appreciate that.

[End of OH02066.Johns_access.mp3]

[End of interview]