

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH02166.Pino_OHMSaudio]

- Halaska: Okay, today is June 7, 2019. This is an interview with Yvette Pino, who served with the HHC [Headquarters and Headquarters Company] of the 101st Airborne Division in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 and the 501st STB [Special Troops Battalion] in Iraq from 2005 to 2006 and with the 1175th MP [Military Police] Battalion, Missouri National Guard. This interview is being conducted at the Madison Central Library. The interviewer is Rachelle Halaska and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program. Thank you for meeting with me today.
- Pino: Thank you for having me.
- Halaska: All right, so in your last interview in 2011, we left off in Kuwait at the beginning of the war in Iraq.
- Pino: Mmhmm.
- Halaska: Now I would like to get back to that, but first I would like to address [00:01:00] you signing up for the Army during Don't Ask, Don't Tell.
- Pino: Mmhmm.
- Halaska: And you went into, in your previous interview, a little bit about kind of the negotiation that you made with yourself about signing up at 9/11. And so, I would like to know how the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy also played into that.
- Pino: Well, I mean, this is one of those things where, you know, I think you're the first person that's gotten me to actually talk about this as part of my military experience. Not that I haven't talked about it, but I wasn't out before I joined the military. I was actually in a long-term relationship with a man while I was working in Connecticut at Goodspeed, and that relationship had kind of come to a screeching halt, and my job was kind of at a dead end, and that was something I explained, I think, in the last interview, of kind of reasons to go in as active duty [00:02:00] rather than reserves or guard.
- Halaska: Mmhmm.
- Pino: But I was also working in the theater industry as a professional stagehand, and, you know, in an off-off Broadway house. We were—the gay and lesbian community is very, you know, prevalent—is that the right word? In that industry. And so, for me, I think there were moments of—can you hear me okay?
- Halaska: Think so. Sorry, one second. I'm just going to pause.

Pino: That's okay. You want to double check it?

Halaska: Yeah. Okay, continue.

Pino: Yeah, so in the theater world, I mean, I think that I was surrounded by a community that was very loving and very much a family before my military family came to be. And I also think that I was exploring many thoughts about who I was as a person while I was working in the theater. So, [00:03:00] you know, you're—I was already joining the military during a confusing time in my life, and so I think in a way it was—might have been a method of escapism. But when I joined, I was really dear friends with a woman that I worked with, and we had become really good friends, and she was bisexual, and... You know, I had expressed my feelings for her right before I left, and they weren't reciprocated, which is okay. We're still dear friends to this day, but because of that, my mind was very much about who I was leaving behind and who I was choosing to walk away from, what was going on in my mind.

And so, when you sign up, you go through all the process of background checks, and there's tons of information. I don't think people realize how much information is actually [00:04:00] given before you even raise your right hand to go into the military. And so, the day you actually do go to MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Stations] to get processed in and get your final physicals, there were so many different factors going into play for me that day. I almost broke my ankle, like, two days before. I was hoping I would still get processed in. But then you have to go through all this paperwork and sign all this paperwork, and it was just very bunch of, like, 'sign here, sign here.' And I knew, I don't know from past with my father or just things in my mind, that you need to read everything you're signing. Especially before you're signing up for the military. You need to be aware of what you're signing. And there was one form, and I've saved all of my paperwork from the military. And, I have copies of everything, and my original report from MEPS, it's the one page I cannot find anywhere. [00:05:00]

And I know that I signed a paper that said that I was would not—that I was not nor did I know anybody that was involved in homosexual activity. Like, I know I signed it, because I sat there with my pen, and I went back and forth in my head thinking about this person that I was just telling you about. And that, was I actually kind of doing--not a disservice, but was I just discrediting her existence by—or even my existence. I didn't, I don't think I was aware of that at the time, but... by signing that paper. But I knew—I mean, I was at a state of desperation when I joined the Army. I was sleeping on somebody's floor. I—the theater was dark for the few months that it closes for—it's a seasonal theater.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: I was working at an art store making a hundred bucks a week. I mean, I was like—I had no money, a car payment, [00:06:00] no place to live, and I had already had to wait months before I got in the military. So here I was, one signature away from actually being able to go in, and it took me a minute to decide whether or not I wanted to do it. And I felt really guilty, almost like I was selling my soul signing that.

And I signed it, and it's really funny because once I got all my records, that was really, like, one of the first papers I went to go find. Because I wanted to verify that that—that Don't Ask, Don't Tell was a joke, that they were asking, and you were being forced to tell, and I don't know what the consequences would have been if I would have signed—you know, if I wouldn't have checked off that box. Like, signed the paper but didn't check off the box. I don't know. I wasn't brave enough to [laughs] challenge it.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: I was hungry, and I needed to work. So, [00:07:00] I don't know. I know somebody has, somewhere, has verified that that form does exist. I don't remember who, if it was you or if it was somebody else, but somebody has verified. It doesn't exist in my file, but it does exist. So...

Halaska: Okay. Thank you. All right, so in the last interview, we left off where you were talking about basically right when the war began.

Pino: Mmhmm.

Halaska: And so, listening back on that interview, I want to know, can you tell me when—so, you were there, and everyone was just kind of setting up in the desert in Kuwait, correct?

Pino: Yeah.

Halaska: And then, when did things start? Can you tell me of, like, your first memory of when you were like, “Oh, the war has begun”?

Pino: Yeah, I mean, I think that—I do think I mentioned that. The—everybody was in the camps in [00:08:00] Kuwait that were spread out, and they were all named by different states. I don't recall... So, we're—this was in March.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: Early—well, late February, early March, which would have been literally one year after I went to MEPS. I went to MEPS on February 26th, so a year later I was in Kuwait getting ready to cross the border. We had been doing constant training

exercises, and there was two instances where I knew that it was real. One was, I think I mentioned in the last story, when we were packing up the Quadcons and our sergeant came in and said, “If you hear the siren, it’s real. The war has begun. This—it’s official. These are no more—these are no longer drills. This is legitimate concerns. You need to mask within your nine seconds. I mean, this is no longer a test.” That was the one [00:09:00] definitive that I knew the war had started. Well, I guess three things. The second was one of the things I did want to talk about was we were at Camp New Jersey. Adjacent to us was Camp Pennsylvania and then Camp Virginia, I think and Camp New York. And we had guard duty around the night. And if you remember, if I told this story, just let me know, but I guess it doesn’t hurt to tell it again.

But the—we had guard duty. We were just constantly exhausted, and we had been taking bets on when the siren would go off and when we would have to seek shelter. And one night, this happened a couple times in distinct memory. One of our sergeants came through the tent and said, “Lightning, lightning, lightning!” which was, like, the highest alert. And the one other time was when we actually went into [00:10:00] a foxhole that we dug. Like, we dug this big trench in front of the Command Post, which was, like, five tents away from ours. But that’s a whole other story. [Laughs] It was not made for us [Halaska chuckles]. But this particular night, he—it was, like, lights on, everybody up, everybody full battle rattle. Grab your magazines, everything. You know, people, like, groggy getting up, getting yelled at, like, “I said get up now!” This is—we have work to do. And the—I don’t remember how it was told to us, but there was—something was told to what—to somebody that the perimeter had been breached, but they didn’t know whether or not it was a true threat, or whether or not—they were uncertain of what the circumstances were. It would be like the [00:11:00] reaction to, like, a mass-cas event [mass casualty event] right now. Like, you’re not sure, but you need to act as though the worst has happened, so you need to go into full mode.

Now, we’re headquarters platoon. We’ve been setting up tents and digging sandbags. We have no idea how to react to this. It’s the middle of the night in the desert. It’s pitch black. We’re in light-out conditions. And so, we are all in full battle rattle but no masks. So, we were like, okay, there’s not Scuds coming in. Like, the idea that, like, actual people had breached the perimeter, to me, was a little bit more unnerving than an air attack, I guess, because I knew we had the Scud, what do you call it, the Patriot to take down the Scuds. The alert system. But I—that was really eerie, like, because I knew our perimeter—I didn’t know where [00:12:00] our perimeter was, but I knew the perimeter literally maybe had one row of concertina wire. It wasn’t, like, anything substantial. And we were in Kuwait. So, like, they invaded Kuwait before, have they beat us to the punch is what I was thinking. And, but no information. It was really weird. It was really weird seeing my chain of command go into, like, combat mode. I mean, my first sergeant was a ranger. My company commander was a ranger. I mean, these guys—that’s why we were trained so well, was they were, like, hardcore. And

they didn't care who we were, what platoon we were, they trained us as if they, like how they were trained, which I'm still to this day grateful for.

But I just remember, like, they were, like, splitting us up into different groups. And there was—we're out near where the DMAIN [division main command post] was set up, which was really funny because it was set up, we were all in light-out condition, and it was, like, almost, like a [00:13:00] sport stadium. With—and it has a roof that goes on it, but we hadn't gotten to the point where we attach the roof, and it was, like, really strict lights-out control. But the DMAIN, like, light up at night. Like, it just glowed like this, like, sports arena. And I'm like, "Well, that's discreet." You know, trying—like, the most important valuable thing is, like, this glowing light in the middle of the desert [Halaska chuckles]. And when I say DMAIN I mean division main.

Halaska: Oh, okay, yeah.

Pino: So, like, the headquarters, the war room for the 101st. And you see this kind of, like, subtle glow of where the structure of the DMAIN starts, and then there's Humvees pulling up. And they're just—and the wrecker is just pulling off spools of concertina wire. And there's, like, this weird, like, track circle around the DMAIN. And it was like a rodeo because there was just sand and the Humvees were the only, was only lit [00:14:00] by the lights of the Humvees. And in the headlights you would see the sand just kind of, like, fogged out. And so, the—it just reminded me of the rodeo because you just saw boots, light, and sand. And they were just dumping spools of concertina wire. And we're all just kind of, like, standing there waiting on instruction. And as each spool would be tossed out, like, three people were grabbed or four people were grabbed and pulled, and they were just throwing gloves at you and said, "Put these gloves on. Start, you know, unrolling the wire." And I mean, these—if anybody that's dealt with concertina wire, especially when it's wired together, it's a pain in the butt, and gloves really don't help you. And the gloves, I have little, tiny hands, and these were, like, big man working gloves, and I was just like, "Oh my god. Oh my god, oh my god."

And [00:15:00] we're unwiring it, and then we're trying—I just remember it was, like, this little weird hop that you had to do as you're going through and you're hopping. And we're in the sand, and it's dark, and we don't know what we're doing. And we still think somebody's breached the perimeter. And I remember the conversations that were happening, the few of them, this is the rare time that we weren't actually bitching and moaning. We were—we didn't have a choice. We were scared, and we knew, whatever they tell us to do, we're gonna, but we were pulling this wire out, and people were like, "If they've, like, breached the perimeter, we're out here, like, unspooling concertina wire. Like, what is this? How is this going to protect us? Like, our weapons are all, like, stacked up over there. What are we doing?" And like, halfway around the ring, we had laid out one row, and we were, like, halfway around the circle, and this is circling the big

DMAIN structure, and it was really big. [00:16:00] They tell us, “You guys go back to the end of the line. Now it’s time to do the second row.”

So, then we had to start a second row and wire the second lawyer of concertina wire on the top one and start--and so, you’re trying to string that out and then stack it and then unstring so more, so it was like this decision of, do we unstring the whole thing and then put it on top? Or do we, like—and if you make the wrong decision you’re not intertwined on the other one. You have to figure it out, and of course we chose wrong [Halaska chuckles]. And we’re going through, and I think we got, like, three—I mean, it was just hours, and we were just kept doing it. And ‘cause I think it was, like, three in the morning. And we got, like, three, like the circle was, like, three-quarters of the day done. I mean, that’s how big this space was, when the sun rose. [00:17:00] And the whole night we were just like, “What is happening there? Are we under attack? What is happening?” And we just didn’t know, and the sun rose, and they were like, “Okay, stop,” kind of gave us semi-all-clear. Sent us back to the tent and said, “You’re done. It’s done. Go back to your tent. Get some shut eye, and we will—you know, we’ll formation at whatever.”

Well, we all got back to the tent, and literally it was like people fell into the cots, and it was that thing again where they were like, “Everybody up. Formation. Let’s go. Everybody’s going to chow. We’re going to form up.” And we were like, “We literally just got finished,” and it was one of those moments where the chain of command was like, “You guys think you have privileges to sleep and rest?” You know, and you were like, “I’m skipping [00:18:00] chow. Like, I don’t care. I don’t need to eat. I’m skipping chow.” And they wouldn’t let us skip breakfast. They—just to sleep. They would not let us. So, they formed up, and actually I think they did let me skip, and somebody brought me back something because I think that’s actually how I got picked for this. I was in my cot, just sitting, drinking coffee or something, and they came in and said, “You and you, like, we need two volunteers. Go report to the chaplain.” And so I went, and the chaplain’s assistant was there. It was a young sergeant, short little guy, really nice, but, like, I always thought that the chaplain and the chap—like, there was a rumor when you were in basic that if you were the chaplain’s assistant you would never have to—that’s where all the [00:19:00]—when you abstain from violence. Conscientious objectors became chaplain’s assistants, is what we were told. And then that day I realized, no, no, chaplain’s assistants are, like, really great infantrymen, usually. They’re really—they have to—because the chaplain doesn’t carry the weapon, so they have to be their bodyguard, essentially.

So no, the conscientious objector is not the chaplain’s assistant. And, but he was a really cool guy. And there was the little white trucks that you see in Iraq, like the little Nissan trucks, pickup trucks. And at this point we had—when we went to Camp New Jersey, you were in those vans with the blinds. You had never been past your like, it—direct, immediate perimeter. Like, it was a mile to the dining facility to walk, but you always got caught and lost in sandstorms walking to the

dining facility. It was like, through wide-open desert. And we [00:20:00] had a flag on top of our CP [command post], and that's how it—with the black 101st flag, which is how I always found our tent coming back through the sandstorms was that flag. But—I don't remember who went with me. It was me and somebody else in a Humvee followed the chaplain's assistant and the chaplain in the pickup truck. And we drove, and we left the perimeter, which is when we saw that the band was our gate guard, because the all—we lived with 101st band [Halaska laughs], and they have a sec—most people don't know the band has a secondary MOS [Military Occupational Specialty], that during wartime they still have to perform, but they also have to provide security details. So, the band was our perimeter guard.

I was like, "That's the band!" And so, we left the perimeter and then went through the desert, and this drive out in these [00:21:00] camps in Kuwait is through the sand. And I just remember—and this carried over through all my deployments, yeah, the back—you're doing it, the back and forth, like, the tires just going through these, like, sands, like, hump, and it's just like you're swaying back and forth and then up and down. And, so they take us to what—Icaban[??] was another one of the camps. And it turned out to be Camp Pennsylvania. And we got there, and again, this was the morning after the whole concertina wire. We're like, "I—where are we going now? Like, what's happening? Did somebody breach the perimeter," and it was like, "Don't ask any questions". So, we get to this camp, and the chaplain dismounts, and his aide goes with him. And they told us, you guys just stand fast. Just hang tight. We're like, what are we doing here? They're like, "You're escorting the [00:22:00] chaplain. Okay? Like, just wait here."

And we're like, "Okay...?" Like, so—and then I remember, like having that moment, like, "Did I tell my leadership where I was going? Like, does anybody know where I'm at right now? Well, I'm with the chaplain, so we're okay." But did I tell any—do they know where I'm at? And so we're waiting, and we're waiting, and we're waiting. And chaplain's assistant comes back. And he's just waiting with us. And finally, we were like, "What the hell? Like, what is going on? Did—number one, do you know anything about what happened last night? Number two, what are we doing here?" And he—we're, like, smoking a cigarette, and he's just like, "So the perimeter was not breached last night." Like, okay. He said, "But there was an attack." And we said, "Okay." And we were like, three or four tents up. He said [00:23:00] then the tents down there, "Somebody," I don't think at the time they knew exactly, but "Somebody went through all of the tents, took a grenade, threw it in a tent, went to the next tent, threw a grenade, went to the next tent, threw a grenade. And as they were scurrying out of the tents, shot them in the back." He said, "We brought the chaplain here to investigate the scene and to talk and counsel those that survived, and those that didn't, he's here to give last rites."

And, it was like, three or four tents down. And we were just kind of—I mean, that seemed to be my, like, war experience was, I was there but it was, like, just far enough away that I could see where things happened? But I was at a distance. And so, [00:24:00] I remember, like, “What the hell? Then why the hell did we put two layers of concertina wire around the DMAIN?” And they said they didn’t know. That’s when—and they must have known at that point, that it was, in fact, one of our soldiers.

Halaska: So, it was one of your sold—one of—

Pino: It w—no, no, no, no. It was 101st soldier.

Halaska: Who had—

Pino: Who had—right, it was the soldier within the confines of Camp Pennsylvania. It was their co—people that served together. He went in their tents and threw, and then he shot. I just looked at the papers a couple weeks ago, our memorial stuff, and I know we’re not going to talk about names, but he shot the captain in the back. And his wife was the chaplain—another chaplain’s assistant. Which is why I think the chaplain went, if I remember, to also give counsel to his other [00:25:00] assistant, whose husband had just been murdered. And so... I think that was the first casualty of the war? Was our own. It was—and... So we were just kind of like, in a weird state of shock. I remember just sitting on the vehicles, which, then again, was, like, a prediction for the rest of our deployment. A lot of driving to places you don’t know where you’re going, and then sitting on the vehicles and waiting and smoking cigarettes and not having enough water and being really hot.

And we waited for a few hours, I think. And then the chaplain came out. And the chaplain was the same chaplain that I talked about heading into Camp New Jersey where we were on the tiny bus, and he was like, six-foot-four, and his knees were to his cheek. And I think that’s why I also remember [00:26:00] him so fondly, I don’t know if the word is correct? But, like, he’s a very Lurch type guy. And he had served, like, several tours in Vietnam. And when he finally came out, he stood in front of, like, the four of us, I mean, didn’t know us, hadn’t talked to us the whole time, and I don’t remember if we say, “Are you okay,” or—And he kind of, like, just looked off, and then he looked at all of us, and he said, “I’ve served many tours in Vietnam. I’ve seen my share of combat.” He said, “When we start turning on each other, we’re in a very bad place.” He said, “This war hasn’t even begun.” And he said, “But I fear this war is not going to be [00:27:00] like Vietnam with mass casualties, and it’s not gonna be like any of the others.” He’s like, “I think it’s going to be ones and twos, just like this. And it’s going to be long, and it’s going to be hard.”

And I’m, like, there with my cigarette laughing. “What the hell is happening here? Like, why are you giving me this prediction? And why—what is—like, this is

terrible.” My stomach is actually getting a weird knot thinking about this, this day. But, I just, that was one where you said, “You know, can you tell me when the war was really real.” That was one of the moments. There’s another one down the road about the convoy, which I’ll tell you in a minute. But... that was one where I was like, this is definitely going to hit the news. And it if does, [00:28:00] like, I had been writing letters home in code about where I was at, and so I said, when I went to Doha to paint, that it was Camp Laughing Deer. And then I think I was trying to find a code for New Jersey. I think it was, like, something like Camp Not New York, or something. [Halaska laughs] I don’t remember what it was, but I just remember going, they’re not going to know the difference between Camp Pennsylvania or—and also, even if they did, like... That was, like, way too close. Like, those were people we were on the plane with. I mean, those are—and my best friend Marianne was out.

Was Marianne at Pennsylvania? I think she was at—I think she was either at Virginia or New York. And she was finance. And then Charlie, her fiancé, was [00:29:00] artillery, and he was at New Jersey with me, but he went back and forth from New Jersey to someplace else. And I—we would only see each other—that deployment, I would only see Marianne, like, once a month when we were on long-pack. And Charlie would come to the palace on convoys, and so he’d come hang out with me. But it was—every time we saw each other it was, like, this hug of, “You’re alive. Boy, this shit’s real. And okay, let’s talk about something else.” And that was one of those where I’m like, “I’m going to—hopefully it wasn’t Charlie. Hopefully it wasn’t Marianne. Hopefully it wasn’t—” We didn’t know who it was, but I knew the people. Like, the names were all familiar, but I didn’t know them, know them. It was really weird.

And then there was a newspaper article written in Albuquerque that was talking about hometown people deployed, and there was my high school picture, and there’s this story. They had interviewed my sister, and, like, they said I was at the camp where the grenades—[00:30:00] like, the newspaper article became, like, it was my tent that the gre—[laughs] I was like, “No.” I still have that article too because I’m like, it’s so cool, but at the time, like, it wasn’t my camp, but I did drive the chaplain. I didn’t personally drive the chaplain, but I was part of that. So, I don’t know. That was—that was eerie. And, oh, they didn’t know if there was a perimeter because there was just somebody going through the tents throwing grenades. They didn’t know it was our own soldier. So, they had to protect the DMAIN as much as they could, which I always still laugh about. Like, we weren’t gonna be able to stop them really, and it—whatever. But also, I wonder, there’s ways in which—which to make people busy and vigilant and aware. And at that point, if the perimeter had been breached, [00:31:00] we were already up. We were active. We were aware of the threat, that, well, number one, we could have been bait. But also, we were up and aware and ready. They wouldn’t have taken us from our slumber with loaded weapons going, “What’s happening?” We were already in motion to do what we needed to do.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: Yeah, so that was that. And then I had—that had to have been before the war actually started, because I think it was like, the war hadn't even begun, and here we are, like, with heavy memorial services. And then we just continued training in Kuwait. And then when the war started—

Halaska: What kind of training were you doing? Just—

Pino: Everything, well, like I said, my commanders were rangers. So, we were training. We were doing preparations. I don't know. I'm not infantry, so I don't know how the infantry [00:32:00] trains or the things they do on a daily basis. In my opinion, that's some of the things we were doing. We were doing a lot of combat lifesaver. I mean, memorizing combat lifesaver and 9 Line, and, but combat lifesaver modified to convoy operations. So like, fives and twenty-fives, and we had to do, if you're on a convoy and vehicle two out of five gets hit, how you communicate within vehicles, number one, and number—how you call it in, but then if vehicle number five gets hit and you see a casualty, but if it gets hit by—we were learning a lot about IEDs [improvised explosive device] at that time, which, they hadn't really become nearly what they were now. But that you were—if you were unaware of whether or not your vehicles were in a land—they considered the training through landmines at that time. They weren't using the terms [00:33:00] IEDs. It was more of the unexploded ordinances, and I've—maybe it was my mind that turned it into, like, a *M*A*S*H** episode of landmines. But, like, that if you're in the rear vehicle and you need to get to that casualty but you're not sure what you're sitting on, you can't touch the ground.

So, we had to learn how to climb over onto other vehicles to get to the casualty without stepping foot on the ground. And about how to do your perimeter, your checks, so you can go five feet out. Then you go ten feet out. Then you go fifteen out until you get to twenty-five, so fives and twenty-fives. To make sure that all of that's clear before you even—but you have to get to that person. So how do you actually—a lot of, like, survival training when you go out into the woods. You're like, “Okay, how—there's three of you, but you got to get to the other side of the water, and you only have the—” It was stuff like that, but it was very, you know, manual based. A lot of [00:34:00] weapons training, equipment training, checking and rechecking of supplies, packing and repacking of Quadcons and mail[??] vans, assessing what equipment actually made it. Like, I don't know if I mentioned, but our supply—one of our supply containers fell off the ship in the ocean. So, it happened to be the shipping container that had all the toilet paper and the sheet music for the band.

Halaska: Oh, no! [Laughs]

Pino: And some of the band instruments. So, we—I wrote a letter home and said, you know, “Hey, the shipping container that had all the toilet paper fell off in the

ocean. Can you send toilet paper?” And, you know, mail took, like, thirty days. So like, this was a pipe dream, that they were going get it. But my nephew was only two and a half, three at the time. No, he might have been five. [00:35:00] I got this envelope. This was all the way down in Mosul, so this was months later, but I got this—no, no, I was at the weapons factory in Baghdad. So, it was like, in April. I get this envelop, and it’s addressed to me, and it has his name in the front. I’m like, “Mmm.” And I open up the envelope, and my nieces and nephews have been sending cartoons, like, drawings and stuff. I open up the envelope, and the only thing in it is folded up paper towels. And I still have that. To this day, I think that he sent me, like, toilet paper that would hold up , or that would be, like, I could—I don’t know what [both laugh]. But that’s my—because he doesn’t remember now. But like, I swear, I think that was, he heard somebody talking and said, “Mommy, can you mail this?” And, but yeah, so the shipping container with the toilet paper, sheet music for the band, and some of their instruments. Poor band.

So, then we were also learning [00:36:00] guard duty. I want to say it was mostly combat lifesaver stuff. A lot of carries, which is where I hurt my back, carrying Alaman[??]. Lot of sandbags, filling sandbags, which was so stupid, because—well, it’s not stupid. They were protective, but we always ran out by the time it was to protect us. We would fill, so like, one of the other stories I’ve told, I didn’t tell it in the last recording, but was the air raid that came out. And Sgt. Cato[??] and I, I was on this end of the tent, and Sgt. Cato was on the opposite end. And when the siren would sound, we’d get all masked up, and then I would run to the opposite end of the tent, and we would practice our time. And she would link my arm. She’d grab my arm, and she had a green clip light on the end of her collar. They started issuing out, they look like little—they’re like spider lights, now. They look like a little diamond, and then they have little legs, but then you push it. And they’ve gotten all advanced now with LEDs, but at the time it was early LEDs. And it would [00:37:00] give this green glow, but it was like a little flashlight too.

And she had it clipped to her—’cause we still had buttons, so she had it clipped to her collar. And she’d click on her green light, and I’d—’cause we were masked. And she’d link my elbow. We’d head out the tent door. She’d shine the light while I got—like, it was her light, and I would—she would follow my guidance, and we would make it to the shipping container, which was our bunker, which, we filled all kinds of sandbags. And the NCO [non-commissioned officer] and officer one were lined up, the whole side was lined up with sandbags, but then we ran out of sandbags three rows into ours. So, we had this giant metal shipping container with three rows of sandbags, which was the bunker for all of the E4 and below, headquarters platoon, G-shops[??], and the band. So, when the air raid went off that thing, it was a, like, thirty-two-foot [00:38:00] shipping container. It was packed from front to back of people. You’re in all your gear, helmets and masks, and it’s pitch black.

And so, the air raid would go off, and then Sgt. Cato and I would try to get there first because then we could claim our spot at the front, because we both got really claustrophobic, and that's when I learned that the drinking—the ritual to calm my nerves and calm my breathing was to get my canteen and to hook up my mask to the canteen and drink water. So, we would book it all the way there, take a deep breath. I'd get the canteen, try to find the straw inside of my mask, like, try to calm my breathing down, get it hooked up, and I did it all with my eyes closed because you couldn't see anything. And then I'd flip the canteen upside down, and then I'd just stand there, and I'd open my eyes, and it was like, almost like an IV drip. I was holding it up, staring at everybody else coming in. And they often tried to push me to the back, and this [00:39:00] one time they did get me, and they pushed me all the way to the back.

So, I was in the back with the band and some obnoxious punks. And we were back there, and we were all, like, packed in there like sardines. And, like, I couldn't move my arms. It was just packed. And you just hear the door close to the container. And then you heard the lock go [makes sound]. So, the E6 would always close the door and then go to their bunker. And then at the all-clear they had to open the door and let us out. Well, he—my Sergeant was an idiot. My E6. He was a sweet guy, but he was an idiot. He closes the door and seals it shut. And we were all like, did he just lock that door? Did, like—did he lock the container? And people started panicking. People started yelling about we need to conserve oxygen. Because we ne—well, no, we never knew how long we were in there. Sometimes we were in there for two or three hours. [00:40:00] So like, he literally sealed the door, and we were packed in there in our masks and couldn't—you couldn't even lift your arms to take your mask off. Not that you were supposed to until the all-clear.

And [redacted0] threw up in her mask. I shouldn't say her name. She threw up in her mask at the front, and that you heard people go, "Did she just throw up in her mask? Oh my god, that's disgusting!" And then, like, another wave of panic made its way in the back. And they were like, "Oh my god, that's sick. She can't take off her mask. She has to leave it on". So she had to leave it on because we hadn't been given the all-clear yet. And the war had already started. So, and then I don't remember how long it was. I think it was, like, forty-five minutes. Sgt. Meeks[??] opened the door back up, and—

Halaska: How did you—do you remember how you were feeling during—like, what was going through your head as all that was happening?

Pino: That one was touch because I was trying not to have a panic attack myself because I literally don't—[00:41:00] my mom's a quadriplegic, so I don't like not being able to move my arms and legs. It's a really psychological test when that happens to me. So, I literally was bound back there. I couldn't do my canteen water ritual. And all of our flak vests, all of our equipment was snagging on each other's, and I had my weapon slung, and everybody else had their weapon slung.

So, my weapon was, like, catching on other people's weapons, and people were moving around and were restless. So you—I was just kind of, like, bobbing around, and then I—it was dark. All you could see was, like, a few green glows from people's clip lights. And then people were just, like, their usual. And [makes muffled breathing sound]. It's in a mask. So, all you're hearing is, like, this echo chamber of your own mask, your own sweat. Your own panicked breath is, like, resonating inside this kind of plastic tomb on your face. And you're—and the people—[00:42:00] there were people, a lot of people talking and joking, and people that were panicked, were upset by the people that were laughing and joking.

And there were—there was a lot of 'shut-the-fuck-up's and a lot of, like, just 'people, like, calm down.' Like, condescending 'calm-down's and 'shut-up's, and "We don't need to be talking." And we can't hear if the all-clear comes. And this is so stupid. And why would the guy lock it? And does it even matter? It's locked. And how the hell are we supposed to get out of here? So that was me just, like, listening to all of that and just, like, I don't know if I said it out loud or if it was me that said it, but like, the what happens if the NCO and the officer bunker gets hit and nobody knows we're sealed in here. Or what happens if we get hit. We're just in, like, a box of shrapnel. So, there was a lot of weird [00:43:00] conversations of, like, what our fate might be. And so, I was not comfortable. And then when you heard somebody threw up in their mask, you know, it's like, when you see somebody throw up, then it's automatically you start to think about it. Then you think about throwing up in your mask. Then you're disgusted. Then you're worried for that person. Like me, I'm like, "Oh, that's got to suck. That's—oh, that's just—" and then you think about it, and you start getting sick. And you're like, "Hey, don't think about that."

And then you're starting sweating, and you're uncomfortable. And I was not amongst the people that I wanted to be amongst, which was Sgt. Cato at the front and Howitz[?]. She wasn't a sergeant yet. She must have been an E4. She got promoted o—while we were out there. Because I was like, how the hell would she be in that Quadcon with us? Yeah, and so when he opened the door, so many people gave him so many dirty looks. People were cussing him out. And he's—he's like [00:44:00]—he's like this hillbilly, like, just kind of really, like, not—he's just special. He's just special. And he was like, "What? I didn't do anything." And we're like, "You did, though! Like, you don't even understand what you did, which is even more horrifying than—" And then when we came out, came out and you stepped down, and then I went to the right.

And those of us that went to the right, we didn't know at the time it was Biffle, who was one other cook with us. She was the other E4 with me, or I was a PFC [private first class]. She was another PFC with me. And the medic had her, and she had just taken the mask off and collapsed in his arms, so that that's one of the drawings I have is like, he's just literally holding her up, and she's with her mask to the side just dangling, collapsed in his arms. And we were like, "Oh my god. It

was Biffle.” And we all started gathering. [00:45:00] The cooks, our five—our core group, which was I’m going to say their names because I [inaudible] have to hear it. Williams, Alaman[??], Aguilar[??], Biffle, myself, and then Sgt. Meeks and Sgt. Hutchinson. That was our core group that we spent every waking minute together. And that was the HHC battalion cooks. And, that we had all gathered around her, and Sgt. Hutchinson came around and said, “You need to give her air. You need to get her to the medic’s tent and the aide station. And you all need to, like, walk away. Step away right now. She doesn’t need you hovering around her.” And we helped her to the aide station, and then we were all, like, in this weird, like, it was—we were just, like, phased by the whole situation. And we were just not okay.

And after you go to the bunker, because that always happens in the middle of the night, there’s always, like, a big herd to the porta potties because you don’t have time to pee when you get woken up, so everybody’s—so you’re also in that [00:46:00] thing need to piss your pants. And so, there was, like, this massive rush to the porta potties, and if you get there first you’re lucky, and then people start making their way back in the tent and figuring out who’s on guard duty, who’s not. And I just remember we all kind of were, like, really somber heading back. And that was—that was a weird moment.

And then there—so that’s kind of, like, getting through Kuwait.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: And then we knew, once I was at Doha.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: Doha, what I would say, is that when I was painting the mural, was the week—I think I was there for two weeks. So, the first week I was painting. And the—we knew it was getting close. And then I know we were there March 23 because that was my friend Katherine’s birthday, and I sent her a birthday present from Camp Doha. We actually [00:47:00] had access to a PX [post exchange], so I sent her, like, this tea set from Doha. So, I know that’s—and I think the war started the 23rd, right? Or is her birthday the 21st? Either way. March 20, something like that. That’s—it’s the week we moved forward. So, they started, like, the—I was painting outside the war room, so it started getting real hot. Like, people were starting to scurry in and out of that room at more—at a higher frequency, with a little bit more alert, and there were little rumors that I needed to start getting my gear ready. And then I kind of freaked out because I was only supposed to be there for a couple days and then go back to my unit. I was really freaking out because we were about to do the crossing back—crossing the border, like, entering the war, and I wasn’t with my unit. And I was afraid that I was gonna get separated and that I don’t know how I—I’m like, I don’t know how I’m going to get back to my unit. Like, nobody’s come and talked to [00:48:00] me at all about

the return. And I'm like, "I don't know any of these people. I've been training with other people for a whole month. I don't—I'm freaking out here. This painting isn't worth it!"

But I don't remember how I got back. I know that they started—there's pictures of people in front of the painting when it was done, because they were like, "You need to get it done. Get it done." And so, everybody started packing their gear and getting ready, and so there's pictures of a lot—I have pictures of a lot of different units taking pictures in front of the thing, the getting ready to move. And I'm just, like, kind of in limbo. And they must have taken me back on one of the convoys. I don't—I honest to god don't remember how I got back. But I got back, and we must have—maybe that's why, 'cause it happened so quickly. They—I remember they had packed all my stuff because that happened [00:49:00] twice, one when the sandstorm took out my tent, which, I listened to that story and I had completely forgotten that story. I was like, "I totally forgot that happened." That was the first time they packed all my gear. And the second time was when they came back, and they had packed up all my stuff because they didn't know if I was coming back. And I remember thinking, "I'm gonna lose half of my gear. Like, this isn't cool."

And then that's when we loaded up the, like—so if you're at the camp, there's, like, all these different berms. And, well, there's the Apache story. I didn't tell the Apache story of the—when I blew my back out and I was digging tent pegs[??] in the berm with the bathroom that overlooked down below. I don't know if that's—Well, so there's all these different berms.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: And then there's the dining facility. It was a really huge camp. When I got back, all the vehicles, when we were [00:50:00] starting to stage the vehicles for the convoy, and it was mindboggling. I mean, we're talking, like, I don't even know how long, like, feet wise. Like, the rows were. I mean, they were just, so they were—I, just for the sake of, I don't know, like, we'll say a football field. That was—it was bigger than. It was like four or five football fields, lined up, LMTVs [light medium tactical vehicle], Humvees, so all of our vehicles lined up in one row. And then next to it, all the way up to, like, within an inch of each vehicle side-by-side was another row, and then going back the other way. And it was like, I don't know, like, fifteen, twenty rows like that?

Halaska: Wow.

Pino: And so, you had to walk into—between all those vehicles to figure out what vehicle you were [00:51:00] placed in. So, our supply team was, like, bar none, top notch. Like, our—my—our chain of command for that deployment was ridiculous. I mean, they were just on it. Organized, smart. All of them were, like, career Army and just, like, cared about their soldiers. They could be dicks, but

they, like, they honestly cared about what they were doing. They were invested in their roles. And they had to know what weaponry had to go be assigned to who, what vehicles had to be assigned. All the logistics of everything was unbelievable, and it wasn't just our unit at this point. Obviously it was like, the 101st was prepping to move forward. And right before, so they staged all the vehicles, and then there was [00:52:00] another—we were getting ready for our convoy briefing, and Cpt. Villanueva, who was our company commander, was leading the charge. He was leading the pack. And he gathered—he was gathering us all by the CP [command post], which was also by the—like, there were porta potties set throughout the whole camp, but, like, there was one that had, like, kind of, like, center here, and then there were vehicles and tents over here.

And we were in a convoy briefing but with people—finally we were with people that we had never been training with. It was like, you know, the element had grown now. And we were about to get our briefing, and the siren went off. And at the same time, a sandstorm's coming in. So there's, like, wind and sand, and then all of a sudden the siren goes off, and all of us are just, like, [makes whooshing sound] and we mask, and I just, I masked, and I turned, and my battle buddy Williams. She goes to get her mask. [00:53:00] She looks down where her mask should be on her hip. It's not there. And she looks up at everybody like, "What the—where is my mask?" And looks back down, and then looks at everybody [Halaska laughs]. And then shrugs her shoulders, and goes, hmm, sticks her hand in an imaginary pouch, mimes putting on a mask, even, like, blowing out, she's like [makes exhale sound] and stood there like she had an invisible mask on. [Laughs] And I was like, "Hmm?" I was looking at her, and I'm like, "Did that girl just pretend to put on an imaginary mask? And hope that nobody would notice that she doesn't have a mask on? In front of, like, the company commander and all of these infantry people? Like, what?"

And I just remember going, like, "What?!" And I see, like, another, like, somebody higher ranking than her come up and is like, it's like this whole [00:54:00] pantomime in slow motion, like sandstorm's going off, the air raid, and I just see these, like, hands in the air, like, screaming, "Where's your mask? Where's your mask?" And she's, like, holding her hands up, like—because they're far enough away, I can't hear anything, and the sandstorm is so loud. And I just see her, like, "I don't know. Like, I went down to look for it, and it's not there." And I could, like, play the whole thing out in my mind. And then the— whoever it was that was yelling at her was, like, pointing, like, you need to go find it. Go find it now. And she's just like, "But I don't know where it's at." And she was another one that was a little slow. But she—she eventually, like, stomps away. She had left it in the porta potty [laughs]. And so—because she—see, I learned how to—I said that in my last one. I learned how to go to the porta potty without taking any of my gear off. But she would—some of the girls would take their little mask thing off the little belt, set it on the side. It was so nasty 'cause there's that urinal right there. And, but, [00:55:00] [makes disgusted sound]. I mean, I can't be much more nasty than leaving all your gear on, but I just—they

would take it off, and she left it in there. And I was like, “Oh my god. We are gonna all die. [Laughs] We’re gonna all die.”

So that was that, and then we—when we got through the all-clear on that, we thought we were, like, that moment getting ready to go. That was a pre-briefing. And then we started getting assignments for our vehicles. And then they announced that there was going to be an ADVON [advanced echelon] party that had to go out, and the ADVON party included—It was really odd, but it was, I don’t know why the ADVON party had to go. These are things I still want to ask Sgt. Young and Sgt. DeGrace [??], but it was Sgt. Young, our supply sergeant, Sgt. DeGrace, our motor pool sergeant. These were all E7s. Sgt. Rose, a medic, who was a E5, Sgt. Rotondo [??], [00:56:00] he was a E4, MBC [??] specialist, but Sgt. Rotondo was, like, thirty-five, almost forty. He joined the Army really late. I think that was it, that went. And the ADVON party left. And I remember being really lost once they left. ‘Cause those were, like, really, like, pillars of our unit. And that was the day, two days before? A couple days before. And then we all kind of got staged in the—they had to have left a couple days, and when we were doing—

So, I have to do this before the ADVON party story. But the vehicles were all lined up. And you went, you reported to Sgt. Young and her supply folks. And they had clipboards, and they told you what vehicle. And this was after—there’s so many Kuwait stories. I’m sorry I’m telling you all the—I had to paint all [00:57:00] the vehicles. So, when I had came back from Camp Doha, I came back, my reward was I got to keep the paint, and when I went back to my CP and reported back in, my first sergeant pulled me in and said, “Do you have paint?” And I said yes. And he’s like, “Do you have tan, sand color?” I’m like, I have primary colors. I can make sand. I can make brown, whatever you need. And he goes, “Do you know how to make a stencil?” Like, “Not very good at it, but I’m sure I could figure it out.” And he’s like, “Okay.” He gave me this handout with very specific measurements, and it said you need to make—find a piece of cardboard, an MRE [meal, ready-to-eat] box, something, and you need to make a stencil, and you need to mix tan paint. And then you need to find all of the vehicles with our bumper number across this camp. You need to scour the camp for the zero-zero, I think, IX [00:58:00] was our bumper number? And every bumper number that has that, you need to stop that vehicle, and you need to get your stencil and paint this number on the side, zero-zero-slash on the side of each door. And you need to find every vehicle. There’s over a hundred vehicles in our—here’s the list. And you need to go around the post and paint every single one of them.

And I’m like, would it—couldn’t we do this with spray paint? He’s like, “The spray paint fell off in the container in the ocean.” [Laughs] Like, that was another thing we lost was all of the spray paint and the stencils. And so, I’m like, “Okay?” So this is where you can see that my timeline’s kind of all skewed, but, like, I came back. I had this gallon of paint. I also had to paint another mural, so they

found a piece of plywood, and they made me paint a mural from the leftover drawing, so that the general didn't pick for our unit. [00:59:00] And I picked the one I liked, because he should have picked that one because it was a kickass mural, not like the piece of crap I made at Doha. But it was—it said rendezvous with destiny, which is the slogan in 101st. And then you—it had a guy air assaulting from an eagle's eye. It was badass. And I painted that and with piece of plywood against the meal van, the notorious container, bunker container. And then I have pictures of my little pet lizard Allah, who would come and visit me while I was painting. And then he got run over by a Humvee. Poor Allah.

And then so I had to go around the whole camp with this can of paint, in the desert. And I had to stop vehicles, would, like, wave them down, be like, "Let me see your bumper number." They're like, "What is wrong with you?" I'm like, "I have to do this." And I would read the bumper number. And I'm like, you need to wait until I paint these doors. They're like, What are you talking? I was like, "I have orders from the commander." [01:00:00] And they were like, okay. So I paint zero-zero-slash. And I literally would walk for miles and miles until I found every vehicle and had to paint. And the zero-zero-slash is the indicator, so when you see the convoys heading up, every brigade, every unit has an identifier. So the 101st headquarters was zero-zero-slash. And, like, the infantries were, like, one with the, like, caret symbol. There was just different ones. I only had to paint ours. Everybody else's were beautifully spray painted. Ours were hand painted by yours personally. [Both laugh] I kind of, like, want some of those doors from—the removable doors from the Humvees. We have pictures of me painting those, too.

And then I had to go paint porta potties. I had to paint porta potties because we only had—we didn't have the actual mechanized way of dumping porta potties. We had to burn all our shit, and that was something we had to do, our details, too. But I had to paint number one only, number two only on the outside of the doors. [01:01:00] And then [inaudible] lots of weird painting details I got. I had to paint street signs? That had the same street names as Fort Campbell because, yeah, we're at home. Let's just do that. But then, so I had to do all that painting so that—before our vehicles got staged. So, then our vehicles get staged in that big, long line. And then you go report to Sgt. Young, and she says what vehicle you're going to ride in. And we've done all this training, right, that I talked to you about. And we get there, and all my friends get placed in HHC division vehicles, and, oh! They ran out of room for me! So they said, "Pino, you're going with this truck-driving unit, these truck drivers out of wherever," I don't know. I don't make good friends quickly that way, then, especially when I'm scared and we—I'm like, "Again? [01:02:00] You guys are separating me?"

So they put me with this truck driver who also doesn't want some stranger riding with him as we cross the border. I'm sure he was like, "Really? What the hell?" Because then he doesn't know me, and I don't know him, and they put me in this big—I think it was—it had to have been a guard unit or something because it was

a five-ton. It was an LMTV. And so, they put you with your vehicle, and you have to figure out and remember how to get to the same vehicle in this long line of hundreds of vehicles. And you stand outside your vehicle at a specific time, and they came through, Sgt. Young and her two supply people, with boxes and crates. And they walk by each vehicle, and, like, they would, like, every other vehicle got a certain, like, rationing of weaponry. So she got to my vehicle. I think every vehicle got three regular grenades, [01:03:00] two incendiary, and two smoke. And then every other vehicle got an AT4. So, you know what an AT4 is?

Halaska: Mm-mm [no].

Pino: That's, like, the rocket launcher. So my vehicle got all the grenades and the AT4. And I was a truck commander. So, I'm like, loading my rocket into the front seat. [Both laugh] And the grenades were all still in the boxes, and I'm like, "Where am I supposed to do with these?" They're like, "Not our problem." And then they moved to the next vehicle. So the grenades sat at my feet, and the AT4 sat in between us. And then I remember saying, "Okay, what about radios?" And, like, they didn't have enough radios for everybody. And the o—and we were still using the Vietnam era radios, like the big giant ones with the giant antenna. So like, if you had a radio, you would see these antennas, like, sticking out the window of, like, an LMTV, and you're like, [01:04:00] "Hello?" And so, like, third vehicle had a radio. Our vehicle did not have a radio. People bought their own walkie talkies, which aren't supposed to do, but they were using their own walkie talkies. So, when you entered on these convoys, you honestly had no idea where you were going. You had to follow the person in front of you. You had to just pay attention to what was be—like, hand gestures, if we were about to stop. It was weird.

And, so we were all staged. Weapons are all in your vehicle. You go for your one final check-in with your officers the night before. You knew—we knew we were leaving the next day. And first sergeant called a company meeting. And we thought it was just a, like, pep talk. And he sat there, and he said, "Are you guys," you know, "Are you guys ready for tomorrow?" And everybody was like, "Yeah." And our ADVON [01:05:00] party had just left, right.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: He said, "So, I'm not trying to scare you all, but I am trying to put the voice of God in your heads. Today a platoon got ambushed, and there were prisoners of war taken, and there were people that were killed." It was the Jessica Lynch convoy. He said, "We are about to go on that same route tomorrow. Our ADVON party has already moved forward. We have not made contact with them. We do not know if they're okay right now. Keep them in your thoughts as we move forward tomorrow. But, we have no contact with them. They are with God now. We don't know where they're at. If we find out, we will let you guys know."

Because they took—it's hilarious to me, they took everybody but a cook. [01:06:00] All of our leader—senior leadership except the cooks, nobody wanted. So, by that time people were trying to shoot Sgt. Hutchinson. But I don't think literally, but there were threats made. But so, he said, "The reason why I'm telling you this is because, yes, they were ambushed, but they were ambushed because they took a wrong turn." He said, "We have done nothing but training with you guys for a month now. We've told you all of the importance of convoy operations that we possibly could give you." We're at the point now that the—we had one soldier that continued to raise his hand, and he was the 'what-if' guy. "What if this happens? What if this happens?" to where they had to tell him, "No. At some point this is just going to have to become instinctual. We can't give you every possible scenario of what's going to happen. And so, you need to just—while we say no question is [01:07:00] stupid, at some point you have to just accept your training and 'what if' isn't acceptable question anymore."

And he said, "You know, we've given you the tools that you need to do this correctly, but in war things happen. You don't know what's going to happen. The unpredictable will happen. There are unpredictable conditions. Not all of you are—even the best drivers could lose sight of another in sand driving. But I am telling you this because what happened to this convoy was, yes, they made a wrong decision, and they took a wrong turn, and they lost—they broke off from the rest of the convoy." He said, "We're going to be in a really large convoy tomorrow. You need to make sure you keep your distances and that you keep all sights on TCs," truck commanders, "You need to make sure you're aware. You are the [01:08:00] driver's eyes. You are—you need to be as just as alert as the driver. You are the driver's security." And he said, "These people that got ambushed and took a wrong turn were not infantry. They were supply. They were the cooks. They were the mechanics. They were you. Should you be put in that same position, you need to know that this is a possibility. And you need to prepare yourself, and you need to prepare, and you need to be alert. And so that means you need to get your rest tonight. And you need to make sure that you're ready for this."

And we're all like, "We're not going to get any rest now!" Like, "Crap!" And yeah, we—when I found out who it was late on I was like, "Damn, that's crazy." But so, he puts the fear of god into us. Our ADVON party's, like, MIA [missing in action]. We don't know if they're [01:09:00] alive or dead, and we don't know where we're going. And the way it was explained was we're, like, one day behind each major battle. So, like, the infantry, like, Rakkasans would go in, and 4th ID [Infantry Division] would go in, 3rd ID would go in. They'd clear out the area, and then we'd go the go-ahead and we'd move forward.

So, this convoy, we report the next morning early in the morning, and we start. I introduce myself to my driver. I don't know his name. That's important our relationship was going to be for the rest of our lives. All I remember is his wife sent him a gigantic duffle bag of beef jerky. And we had an AT4 leaning on a

giant duffle bag of beef jerky, and the guy didn't want to have anything to do with me except to say, "My wife sent me beef jerky. You're welcome to it." And I was like, "Am I, though?" I'm not real sure [both laugh]. And so we loaded up, and I'm just with this guy, I mean, and I don't—normally I talk when I'm nervous. This go around [01:10:00] I was like, I don't want to talk to you. I don't want to be in this vehicle. And I was so mad because, I mean, I had convoyed everywhere with all my buddies. We knew—I mean, we—convoys were really fun with them. This was shit. It was really shit. Oh my god. Most momentous moment in my history in this service, it's going to be with the guy with beef jerky. He's probably thinking the same thing.

And, so, we head out. And I thought we were going to break up. We were in, like, a two-hundred-vehicle convoy. So that shot, there's a *Time* magazine shot of all the vehicles lined up. That was our vehicles. I roll my eyes at that. But like, you see every vehicle had the code on the side door, and then you had these—we had to load all the vehicles. I remember having [01:11:00] to do that, too. We had to load sandbags. We had to pack it all up, sandbags, and then you had this like, weird square tarp that one side was, like, really, like, reflective orange. And then the other side was this camo, was green. And it was reflective material. It felt like tarp material. And then it had the, like, jute around the edges, and then grommets. And then you put, on top of the—either on the hood of the Humvee or on top of the LMTV, if you didn't have a turret you put two rolls of concertina wire, to rolls of concertina wire, and then you slung all your bags around the grill and tied them off, or on the LMTV along the side. All your bags went in the back there. And then on top of the concertina wire was another stack of, like, sandbags. So, you had, like, just stacks of weight on all of these vehicles. And then you tied all that down, and then on top, [01:12:00] I'm pretty sure we put it the orange-side up of that tarp. And those were identifiers for aerial to know that those were our convoys, and also, I think, they were our alert system. Like, if somebody needed to find you.

So that—we had to load all of those up. And then we left on the convoy, and it was, like, we knew we were crossing the border, and that convoy took forever. And it was funny, like, the convoys took, like, three days, but it was literally to go on a three-hour drive. Like, you weren't going far distances. And I remember we were with this guy. We had that talk the night before, right. Like, "Make sure you keep your distances." And then they—and then I'm like, "They didn't get the talk! They didn't get [01:13:00] the talk about keeping distances and about, like, this guy's going to think I'm just paranoid!" But they don't—they didn't—and they're truck drivers. So, they had this attitude already like, "We know what we're doing. This is what we're trained to do." So I'm like, "Don't lose sight of the convoy. We're going to get ambushed. And I'm going to die with people I don't know!" Like, this—it freaked me out. I have a too creative of a mind, I think, but—like, too imaginative.

And they went. And it was, like, two-hundred-vehicles long. It was bumper to bumper. And—sorry. We—it was the general’s platoon, so the general’s convoy. I think—I don’t remember if I told that story. But so, there was, like, we’re going, and we’re going and going. It’s, like, two-hundred vehicles, and you’re going at a snail’s pace. [01:14:00] And I’m thinking, this isn’t very, like, discreet, again, here again, right. Like, this was the whole DMAIN with no roof again. Like, we’re two-hundred vehicles. We’re driving along MSR [Main Supply Route] Tampa. We’re just going in throughout the desert, and there’s, like—there were these two Humvees that, I think they were security forces that would circle around us. So, they’d speed up next to you and go all the way down to the end of the convoy and then, like, stop and come back. And then this one would speed up. And they were just, like, circling us, these security forces. They were Special Forces guys that were just our convoy patrol [laughs]. So, the vehicles were moving forward. You have these buzzing Humvees just circling you, constantly. And then every, I don’t know, twenty minutes, thirty minutes, I don’t know how long it was. [01:15:00] Two Black Hawks [laughs] would come, and, like, the helicopters would start, like, just, like, spiraling around you.

And just, we had all of this weird, like, entourage of security. And I was like, “This is not secure! This is, like, horrifying. We are, like, shoot here, please. Why don’t we just pull over and salute? Why don’t we just, like, can we just—just line us up. ‘Cause this is ridiculous.” They were—it was ridiculous! And so, you would go for, like, however many couple hours, and then you had to pull over. And they would pull over, and you—we just—the words “staging the vehicles.” Like, “Stage the vehicles.” And you had to pull over in a certain way, and then you all had to dismount, and then one person had to take a knee, and the other had to stand. Like, you had to go out, like, twenty yards or whatever and take a knee and pull security. And then you would take turns peeing. So like, all the guys would just, like, [01:16:00] go out and pee, and all the girls would go behind the wheels of the LMTVs and then just pee. And so, like, from the LMTVs we’d just see this puddle growing and growing and growing and growing. And then some people would actually go take a crap. But I don’t—you’d see people walking with their shovel. And you’re like, “Wow, okay. All right.” And then people dumping their Gatorade bottles out. They just throw it. You would see on the convoys just, like, Gatorade bottles getting thrown out, just full of pee.

And I did try to pee in a Gatorade bottle in an LMTV because it was tall enough that I could stand up in it, and I did not succeed [Halaska chuckles], but I did try because I realized on a different convoy that you were not allowed to pull over at gas stations in war [both laugh]. I did not know that. That probably really says a lot about me. But I mooned Kuwait City one time. Because Harley pulled over, and he’s like, [01:17:00] “Go there.” I said, “I—but—” and it was on this bluff that overlooked the whole city. And I was like, “Okay.” I tried. That’s when we got lost in Kuwait City. I forget about that. Yeah. Woops.

Yeah, so we go on this convoy, and we're staging. And then we move forward. And so, you can only eat so much beef jerky.

Halaska: So, you did eat some of the beef jerky?

Pino: I only ate, like, one piece, but it was good beef jerky.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: Yeah, we didn't have much conversation. And every time we would dismount, he would go with his unit. And you knew they were talking about you, and it was just like, "You don't even know me! I don't know you. I don't want to be with you either." I wasn't very friendly either, I don't think. Yeah, and then so, we'd go for another couple hours, and then finally it was probably like four, [01:18:00] five o'clock in the afternoon, and we were pulled over, staged one more time. And I'm staring out into the desert. And oh, before that, we had just kind of pulled over, and we weren't dismounting yet. And I heard this, like, rumble. It was like [makes rumble sound]. And I remember thinking, "That seems really weird, that noise." I haven't recognized that noise. And then all of sudden you say a tank. I saw a tank went by. And I was like, "What the hell!" And then another tank goes by. And there was, like, four of them. And I remember looking at my driver, and I'm like, "I don't remember there being tanks. I mean, I remember that the Humvees were circling us and the Black Hawks, but did they add tanks to this now? Like, I don't remember there being tanks." And he's like, just kind of looking at me, like, acknowledging finally like, "No, I don't [01:19:00] remember there being tanks either."

So the tanks move forward, and I see them go down toward the end of the line of the convoy, and then they made an exact ninety-degree angle to the right, and they start moving right. I'm like, "Okay. I mean, it's all shared space, whatever. Like, good luck, tanks." [Both laughs] Like, I mean, I watch—I also watched *Courage Under Fire* while I was at Camp Doha. And it was not a good movie to watch right before you cross the border. Have you seen *Courage Under Fire*?

Halaska: I have not.

Pino: With Meg Ryan? She gets shot down. Oh my god. And then I saw *Black Hawk Down* right before, oh my god.

Halaska: Oh no.

Pino: I was—why would you show those movies at the place where people are about to cross the border? I don't know. But I watched those, and—while I was at Camp Doha. So, the tank thing, I was like, [gasps] "Oh no, why are there tanks?" And didn't think much more of it. So, then we're waiting and waiting, and [01:20:00] so we finally dismounted because this time was a longer wait than normal. And

I'm hanging out by myself, 'cause, like you do. Because of course my vehicle was nowhere near any of our vehicles. So, I couldn't even talk to them when we were dismounted, and I was just bored, so I put on my NVGs [night-vision goggles] during the day, just to see what I could see. And nothing.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: I mean, we were wide open desert, nothing. I had been on guard duty, like, a couple nights before where I thought I saw tumbleweeds, and it was bubble wrap going through the desert from the supply thing. And I remember that, looking through my NVGs in a sandstorm, and it was just really weird.

And so, we're there, and it was not—it was still daylight, and it had just been a big rainstorm with lightning during that whole guard duty thing with the sandstorm, so I know what lightning looks like in NVGs at night.

Halaska: Cool.

Pino: Yeah, no, it was really cool. And then [01:21:00]—but not cool to be on a metal tower in the middle of it.

Halaska: No.

Pino: [Both chuckle] But we were standing there, and I'm just looking through my NVGs, giving them something to talk about. I guess, they're, like, "Look at this girl, put her NVGs on during the day." And all of a sudden I saw a flash in my NVGs that looked like the lightning. And I went, "What is that?" And I took them off. I'm like, "Are we about to get a storm? That would really suck."

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: And it was blue skies. And in New Mexico, which is a desert as well, you get summer lightning, like heat lightning. And so it wouldn't be uncommon to get, like, a weird lightning storm, light storm without having rain. It wasn't kind of that off, like, far-fetched. So, I put them back on, and I'm like, "There's no storm. Like this is—and you're not hearing anything." I'm looking, and I don't see it. And all of a sudden I see another light, [01:22:00] and then I see, ptew, ptew, ptew, like, white little flashes, ptew, ptew, ptew. And I took the NVGs off, and I was like, "No." And I look out, and I see nothing for miles, nothing. I'm like, I'm losing my freaking mind, is what's happening. Put my NVGs back on. I'm waiting. I'm waiting. It happens again. And at that point I'm like, "Oh hell, no," right. Like, we'd just seen the tanks go by. I'm like, "What is happening?"

So I walk over to the E6 who was in charge of all the truck drivers. And I was like, "Excuse me, Sergeant." And he was just, like, "What?" Like, "What do you want?" I'm like, "Look in these." And I hand him my NVGs. And I'm an idiot,

right? I, like, never give any context what I'm trying to say. It's just like, "Hi, look at these." And he's like, "You're an idiot. I'm not looking in those." And I said, "No, I'm being serious. Like, please, can you look through my—just trust me. Look through my NVGs in that direction right now." And he's just like, "Ugh." [01:23:00] I'm thinking, "Please let some—let him see something because otherwise I'm just this crazy person." So, he puts them on. And I'm like, "Just wait for a second. Just wait." And you could see him. It was like when people are wearing, like, the Google glasses. Like, the—they're doing the thing. His whole demeanor, he just, like [gasps]. Like he was reacting to something. I was like, "He saw it." And he puts them down and does the same thing I did. Puts them back up and is like [gasps]. [Halaska laughs] And then at this point, I'm not even freaking kidding, the walkie talkie—he has one of the walkie talkies, there's someone talking in Arabic. And we were like—and they're all looking at me, like, "What the hell?" And I'm like—and the Arabic was not uncommon because the channels would get mixed up sometimes, and which is what—he was like, "That's nothing." Like, that's—he's like, "This is something. That, [01:24:00] we'll figure it out."

But it was really eerie. And so, he's like, "I'll be right back." And he, like—he didn't give me my NVGs back. And he's like, "I'll be right back." And he walks away. And they're looking at me like, "What the hell?" And I was like, "I looked over there in my NVGs, and you could see what looked like fire power, like rounds going." And they were—I was like, "It looked like tracer rounds in my night-vision goggles." And they were like, "No." And I'm like, "Legit! There's no storm out here, right. It's not lightning. What are we seeing?" And he went back, and then he came back, and he was like, "Yeah, it's real, but—" And we're like, "So, what's happening? He's like, "Nothin'. We're just—we're standing by for right now." He's like, "Get comfortable. I don't think we're going anywhere anytime soon." I'm like, "What the hell? [01:25:00] We're not going anywhere?" And he's like, "Hey, it's far enough we can't see it unless we're wearing NVGs, like, to see the firepower. It's nowhere near us, like, right now." [Halaska chuckles] He's like, "It's fine, just, but, you know, we'll probably be moving soon."

Another hour went by. Another, like, hour goes by. And we're looking, and it's starting to get dusk. We're like, "We're not moving. And it's going to be dark soon, and we're in the middle of freaking desert. Like, what is happening?" Finally get word that we need to get back in our vehicles. We're not advancing. Instead, we're gonna do a U-turn. We're doing a U-turn, and all of the vehicles are going to stage up along the other outside of the road on the opposite side, and we're gonna stage up [01:26:00] like you're loading a ship. So back again to the one inch, one inch right next to each other. And so, we staged all of the vehicles up. And so, we staged all of the vehicles up, two-hundred vehicles along this path of road, off side of the road. And then they went through. And the reason I know about the security forces is because of the—they parked right next to my LMTV. So, I met, who became a really good friend, I met Sgt.—I think it was Hannon.

He was one of the Special Forces guys, and his Humvee was parked right next to mine. And so, we stage up, and they tell us, “Okay, in whatever time you all need to report here, and we’re going to give our guard duty roster.” And we were like, “Guard duty roster? What is happening?”

So we each had to take turns patrolling the perimeter of the vehicles all night long, walking around up and down [01:27:00] the vehicles, up and down, up and down. I think they gave us, like, you didn’t have to do the whole vehicle. I think they gave you, like, twenty-vehicle span. And you had to do two-hour shifts. And so, I was just like, this is crazy. And Sgt. Hannon was sitting on top. I had the LMTV door open. It was a fifty-ton, five, whatever.

Halaska: Five-ton.

Pino: Five-ton. Had that open, and he would sit—he was sitting on the hood of his LMTV, and we’re just talking. He’s like, a good old boy from Texas. And I mean, he was doing a how-you-doin’ moment with me, and I was just talking, but he was the first person that was, like, talking to me in this whole however long it was. Because my—the driver went with his friends or whatever. I was just there. I didn’t even know where my guys were.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: So, he’s talking to me. And we’re just talking about different things. I don’t remember what it was. And it was just, it was making the time go by. [01:28:00] The conversation was really good. And over the course of our conversation, he’s talking, and he’s—so I’m up above, and he’s a little bit down below, but—and it’s dark again, like pitch black. And over his shoulder, I could see in the far distance a red light. And that’s the—you’re tilting your head, and that was the look I gave him. Like, I was like, “What?” So in the middle of our conversation I’m try—I’m fixated on this light, and he’s finally like, “What? What are you looking at?” Like, “What is going on?” And I said, “There’s a light, red light over your shoulder.” So, he turns around, and he looks at it, and he stays there for a minute.

And I was like—he just kind of pauses. And he gave me this weird look. And he’s like, “Let’s just—we’ll just keep talking. It’s nothing.” Like, okay. [01:29:00] So we’re talking, and we’re just having a conversation. And I’m looking at him. And all of a sudden, the light’s moving. And of course I’m like—And he looks at it, and he looks at me, and he’s like, “I’ll be right back.” I’m like, “Okay.” [Both laugh] So he goes up and down with the first sergeant, and he comes back down to me. And he says, “I think you need to go ahead and get some rest. It might be a long night, and you need to be refreshed for tomorrow. We need to—when we get the hell out of here. But you need to try to get some sleep.” I’m like, “Umm. What’s happening?” And he goes, “You don’t need to worry about it. But you need to get some sleep.” I’m like, “Alright.”

So I'm like, "That seems weird." So, he goes back down. And then he comes back up. And all of a sudden, [01:30:00] I see, [whooshing sound], the tanks are over here, and the other tanks that had gone by us had created a flank, and there was another flank on the other side of our convoy. And they were firing over us into that area where I had seen the bullets or whatever they were earlier that day. So, it fires over us, and I'm like, "What the hell!" And I'm like, "Sgt. Hannon, what's going on?" He's like, "I just said to you, you need to get some rest. We are not in harm's way. We're fine. You just need to get some rest." I'm like, "Okay, whatever, man." So, I actually grabbed my AT4, and I slept with my AT4 like a teddy bear that night [Halaska chuckles]. And I'm just like, "I may as well sleep. If I'm going to die, I'm going to die here with this AT4. And I had all these grenades and an AT4 and nothing to do with them." [01:31:00] And we did sleep, and I did do guard duty, but we slept. And when I got up the morning the tank had made its way, had moved over, and it kind of moved over, but yeah, it was like the tanks were over here. And then we just kind of got up, and we started moving forward.

So we—I think we went to Al Noz—either Al-Najaf or Al-Nasiriyah was our first stop.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: Yeah. And that's—we're in Iraq now.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: Yeah.

Halaska: Let's pause for a minute. [Break in recording] Alright, we are starting again the interview with Yvette Pino. And you just arrived at Al-Najaf after the very long convoy out of Kuwait.

Pino: Yeah [both laugh]. I think it's Al-Najaf. It's either Al-Najaf or Al-Nasiriyah. I don't know exactly where we were at. We—I know of those names because I was asked to design a coin [01:32:00] later on down the road, and they noted those as being our locations, but as far as that particular location, I'm pretty sure... I mean, it's really—I'm not positive. But when we got there, we got there sort of almost at sunset. And it was just in the sand in the middle of the desert, and the engineers, I think, had gotten there ahead of time and had been—it's when I learned what the word berm meant. And they basically took the tractors and, like, plowed up these big mounds of sand. And they don't tell you those things in training, and so when they tell you, "Go over to that berm and do this," you're like, "I don't know what you're saying. I don't understand what a berm is." And it's even got a weird spelling. And, we got there, and we had to get—since we had to build [01:33:00] all of our posts, our camps where we went, we then had to, like, take all of the gear off of the vehicles, at which point I was reunited with my unit.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: Yeah. Don't—again, don't exactly remember the exchange, but I was like, "I'm outta here." Found my unit, which is a good and a bad thing. I don't think the truck drivers were subjected to the amount of labor that ensued from our platoon because we were the headquarters platoon, which meant that we had to set up all of our tents, GP [general purpose] mediums, and then we had—I don't—oh, we didn't set up our tents first. We were in charge of setting up the DMAIN and all of their tents and equipment. So maybe we didn't get there closer to sunset 'cause I remember setting up the DMAIN in afternoon light. And we—that—the DMAIN was big this white, like, [01:34:00] almost, like, party-sized tent. And then there's these floors that were like plastic. They look like the bottom of, like, plastic shelving units. And they had, like, holes in 'em, but they were really heavy and they all were gridded, like tile pattern. And they were about, I don't know, five-foot by six-foot, each tile. And they loaded on the back of the trucks. The wrecker had to load 'em, and we had to unload 'em by hand.

But the—we had to set up the DMAIN first and get all of their—not only the DMAIN, you know, the big tent with—so that the G [general] staffs could set up all the computer equipment. We didn't set up the equipment. We literally just were the tent people and the floor people and the light people and the sandbag people. Everything but the nice computers and tables. And so, we set that up, and then we thought we were going to set up our living quarters, and they said, "No, now you need to set up all the G staff tents [01:35:00] so they can set up all their equipment." So, then we had to put up all of their tents and unload all of their cots and put everything up for them. And then [chuckles], I'm a little bitter about it. And then now it was sort of sunset, and we had to set up our tents. And it was kind of—this wasn't cool then. Now—I always thought it was kind of interesting that that's sort of how I learned. Like, there's a manual for everything. And so, this particular setup was, like, to the book of the manual for setting up camp and layout and looking. Like, when you're taught and you're supposed to, okay, the living tents all have to be aligned in this row with this much distance in between, and they have to be, like, [01:36:00] the latrines have to be at least fifty yards away on a hill opposite, you know, all of those types of rules of where—clean water versus dirty water versus wastewater, all of that goes. All of that was being discussed right in front of us. We were all in platoons waiting. Like, it was, "Set up this tent where we tell you to. Okay, now have a five-minute cigarette break. Take a knee, drink water while we discuss where the next set is."

And the high-ranking NCOs were all like, "Well, we can't have this tent here. The porta potties need to go here. If the porta potties are here, the MKTs [mobile kitchen trailer] have to be set up over here." MKTs are the mobile kitchen trailers, which is what we cooked off of. And at this point keep in mind, we had still not had running water. There was no running water, no showers, no, you know, bathrooms were wooden. The porta potties were wooden. The engineers made

'em. They were wooden [01:37:00] boxes. And there was, you know, no fresh food. We were still eating MREs. We were not cooking at this point. In Kuwait, the Kuwaitis had set up a DFA[??], a dining facility that we ate. That was interesting. And then so when we moved forward up north, that meant the cooks now were going to have to cook T [tray] rations. So we were going to actually have to set up the mobile kitchen trailer and prepare operations for cooking. We weren't sure if that—we were going to be capable of that yet because, I mean, also fuel. Like, the only access to fuel was at the forward operating bases and the, like, FARPs [forward arming and refueling point], I think is what they called them, fuel access refilling points.

So, we did stop at a couple FARPs along the way, but in order for us to cook, we need JPA [job package authorization] to run our [01:38:00] stoves, and we also need water. And we had water blivets, not water blivets. We had, sorry, the—what do you call your water. The trailer, the water trailer? It'll come to me in a minute. So, we had our water trailer, but we had the big water truck that would come up and fill our—dang it! It's going to bother me now. But the—they would fill up the water trailer, and then you had to put—we had—the cooks were responsible for making sure that the iodine tablets were correctly placed inside of the water buffalo.

Halaska: Ah, there you go.

Pino: So, and then we had to—at one point I had to crawl inside a water buffalo and clean it out. But water buffalo held not only our only source of potable water, and then we had—eventually we had palettes of bottled water, which I'll get to later, [01:39:00] and heat cat index and the guarding of the water [chuckles]. So, we had to set up the tents. In other words, we were all there, and I was really lucky to hear the strategies behind the grid system of the tents and that there was a method to the madness. So, where tents were placed in relationship to the command posts and the CPs and the aide station and the distance between each tent, and tent stakes and proper setting up of the tents, and, you know, that tour we got really good. We became really big experts in GP mediums, GP larges, and then the motor pool tent, which is a pretty phenomenal monstrosity. It's gigantic. And we got good at it because headquarters platoon, so I mentioned the five cooks and our two sergeants. We had five mechanics and two sergeants, [01:40:00] five supply and two sergeants, and five medics and two sergeants, and then our CO [commanding officer], our first sergeant, and our XO [executive officer].

And so that was headquarters platoon, that group of people were the ones that were tasked to put up all of the tents, living quarters, DMAIN, motor pool, MKT. And so, the motor pool would break off and set up their moto pool, not their tent, but, like, their station. We'd break off and do the MKT. And then supply would do their stuff, but we were, because we were the support platoon for all of the G staff, they rarely had to, like—some of the junior enlisted helped us on occasion, but for the most part, we were the slave labor. We were, we called it the bitch

platoon [Halaska laughs]. But we literally were doing anything from setting up tents to burning the shit to setting up—to cleaning out porta potties to cooking. So we set up everybody's tent. [01:41:00] And our tent was the last one to go up, and it went up at midnight. And we set it up in the dark, and it was gravely, and there was a gravely, like, little area. And we got it up, and the arrangement was wrong.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: Something happened in the grid system, a breakdown in the grid system. And we had, I think, things had become askew, like a ninety-degree angle off. So we had to take our tent down, I think, and a couple others, and then reconfigure 'em, so rotate them, and then put 'em so that the grid system was correct.

So we finally got our tent up, and I don't—did we run out of cots? I don't remember, but all I remember is we never slept that night.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: We finally got it set up, and [01:42:00] then the next few days were all just sandbag detail. And again, the damn berms. Like, they were constantly, like, creating berms. And we set up the MKT, and by this point we're just, like, all now exhausted. We have guard duty rotation, we are dirty. Dirty, dirty. Wet wipes are running out. There is no PX. There is no mail. There is nothing. You know, guys are pissing in the piss tube. We talked a little bit about piss tubes, but so, the piss tube is this pipe that comes out of the ground that the guys can then just walk up to and pee, like, at urinal. And that's just out in the wide open. And then next—so our tent was—there was the CP, and then next to the CP... I want to say, I don't remember if our tent was the first row or the second row, but I know that [01:43:00] across from our CP was a big berm, and then the berm was set up so that if, you could kind of overlook into a valley down below. And on top of the berm to the left was the—there was, like, two piss tubes. And then they built up—we didn't have any—we didn't have—I think the engineers were building the wooden porta potties at Al-Najaf is where they started building them.

Because we didn't have those there. We had them in Kuwait 'cause Doha was built up, or [Camp New] Jersey was built up, but we didn't take that stuff with us. So what we had was the piss tubes. That was the first time we saw piss tubes. And then up on top of the berm was this, like, three-walled sort of plywood, sort of like theater flat, like, it wasn't a full [01:44:00] room. It was literally, like, you're on top of the berm overlooking a valley. There was no wall on the back. And then there was two walls on either side and then one wall in the front that was sort of offset so that you kind of walked behind it, and there was some privacy. And then there was, like— [laughs]. It was like this little platform with, like, two pieces of two two-by-fours that stretched across, and they hammered. And then down below was this big pit, like this big hole. And there was a toilet seat hammered to the two-by-fours. So, like, you walked on top of the berm, and the pit was, like,

you were, like, pretty much, like, crapping off the side of the hill is what it was. So, there was no back to it. Just, like, you—it was like riding this weird ride. You'd sit on the toilet seat, and you were dangling over this, like, pit with, like—on two—that's just, like, dangled with two-by-fours [Halaska laughs].

It was like—I felt like sometimes it was a trap. It was just like, “This can't be real.” And any—and there were [01:45:00] people doing operations down below in that valley. So, I know somebody at some would just watch us go up there, like, and use the bathroom. So, that's where we would use the bathroom. And yeah, so that's—I remember visually where it was at because our CP was so close, and I had hurt my back, so I wasn't able to do a lot of—I was on light duty, quote-unquote light duty. So, they didn't have anything for me to do. So they sat me in front of the CP like a kid in a sandbox, and they made me fill sandbags. So, I had my little shovel, like, in the sand with sandbags, and I could barely, like, move. So, I would fill the sandbags, and then, like, just sort of roll them over, like, tie them off and then, like, roll them over until I was, like, surrounded in a sandbag fort. And then I would sort of, like, roll my body over to another area. And I would just fill more sandbags. [01:46:00]

And it's, like, beating down, sun on you, and my back was throbbing, and filling sandbags is not ideal for when you have back spasms at all. And this is like—I literally was like a little kid in a sand—like a sandbox. I was just mis—but I was miserable. And I'm just, like, with this little shovel by myself, talking to myself, like, singing to myself, doing whatever. And I had full view of that corner porta potty top of the berm. And it, at one point, the—I'm sitting there, and up from below the valley, like, raises up, this is the first time I saw an Apache. So, an Apache comes up, and I, like, was like, “What!” And it came up, like, in *Trues Lies*, the Arnold Schwarzenegger movie with Jamie Lee Curtis when the helicopter comes up in the building and they're in there. And then it, like, crashes through the building. So it comes up, like, from [01:47:00] behind the porta potty, and I'm just sitting there. I'm like, “What?! That's so freaking cool.” And then it ducks back down. I'm like, “Oh.” And then this other little, like, wasp looking helicopter comes up. And it's just like, [buzzing noise]. And I'm like, “Ah, it's like a little baby helicopter!” And then it went down. And then this dance continued. Like, the Apache came back up, and then the little wasp thing came back up. And they would do this dance, and I was mesmerized at this point. I'm like, “Oh.” Because it's all happening behind this berm. And in my mind, it's all up close, but this was far away. It was just a play on perspective. Like, they were literally, like, in the far distance doing this dance, coming up, coming down, coming up and coming down. And as they're doing it, the Apache's getting closer and closer and closer.

And so, the final time the little—the Apache goes down, [01:48:00] the little wasp one comes up, and the little wasp one comes up, and then goes [makes sharp sound], and it zips in a different direction. And I was like, “Oh.” And then the Apache comes back up. I'm like, “Oh, there you are.” And all of a sudden it just,

fompf, like, two rockets come from its side and shoot down into the valley down below. And at that point I dropped my shovel, and I was like, “What the fuck!?” [Laughs] And I’m trying to get up. And I’m like, “What the hell is going on!?” I, like, ran into the CP, and I’m like, “Ha, duh, ah!” And they just thought I was crazy. And I couldn’t get anything out. And then—and it was done. [Laughs] And then it’s just like, What the hell was that? And then—the crappy thing keep happening. And I’m just—there were several times where I was, like, by myself in those moments, and I’m like, “Son of a bitch! This is, like, ridiculous,” but, yeah, it was because it was—if you were in the porta potty at that time, [01:49:00] like, all this was happening to whoever was in the porta potty. It was happening right behind them. It was ridiculous, ridiculous!

Halaska: Ridiculous.

Pino: I think I gave up on the sandbags after that. But after that, then we had to set up the MKT. And this is over the course of, like, a week because we only ended up being there for, like, two weeks. But we set up like this was going to be home. And this was early on in the deployment, so I didn’t know any better. Everywhere—it took, like, eight months for me to realize, no, we’re not staying here. Like, don’t get comfortable. Because we literally move for—where we go—okay, I’m like, “Okay, they’re making us set up all this stuff. We’re doing this.” So we get the MKT setup, and we had to clean it all because it’s been through the desert and back, so we’re trying to sanitize it. I’m starting to really lose my shit at this point. I don’t know what’s happening. [01:50:00] I’m tired. I think it was just exhaustion and crankiness, and I was not getting along with a specific person in my platoon, and he was an E4. And he was kind of a dick, and he just—he had come from an infantry unit before.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: And he just kind of was like...He and I—we ended up becoming friends, but he was just a jerk.

And we had just been back and forth at MKT, and Sgt. Hutchinson, who was our platoon sergeant, was a dick too. And he was the one that always would watch me eat.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: And because I was always on the fat platoon. And so, he was always a really big kind of jerk to me and played mind games, but whatever. And he [01:51:00] would go with the senior leadership, and then we would—working on the MKT. And it was like, busy work, but in a way that was so obvious it was busy work. And we thought, “Are we actually gonna cook on this?” Because we have not got rations. We didn’t have T rations in which to cook. So, we were really confused by the whole, “Let’s put the MKT up and get it set.” And we would clean it, and

the sand, like, immediately—we would get to the end of the MKT, and the whole front had an inch of dirt on it again. And it was, “Do it again. Do it again. Do it again.” And we were like, we don’t have the water--c

Halaska: Mm, mmhmm.

Pino: --to keep doing this. And Sgt. Meeks, the E6 I was talking about earlier, was just like, “Oh, we got to do it again.” And he told us to do it again. And we’re like, “Have a backbone, man. Like, this is ridiculous.”

And they kept threatening us if we—you know, that they would make us [01:52:00] do more guard duty. We just needed to do what we were told. Just do what we were told. And it got really frustrating, so much that, like, Tavarus[??], who was working with us, because she waws MBC, so she didn’t have a shop to go, like, stuff. She got stuck with us. And she would be like—I have these pictures of us, and they’re out there with, like, brooms doing sentry duty. We’re just, like, “This is so stupid. We’re so stupid.” And yeah, I don’t remember what happened that led to this blow up, but Harley and I got into a argument, and he was just, like—he was a E4, and I was PFC, and he got his little, “Listen, Private. I told you to do it, and you need to listen to me because I’m, you know, an E4, and back in the day that would be a court—you know, when I was in infantry, I was a corporal, and out here you need to act like I’m an NCO. And listen up, Private, you got an attitude.” [01:53:00]

And I’m like, “Oh, freaking get over yourself. Like, this is—you’re an idiot.” Like, and he was like, “You better not be disrespecting me.” And I don’t remember what I said. I just like, was like, “Screw you.” And then I’ve never in my life been this person, but I literally turned into this, like, macho guy, and I, like, shoved my shoulder into his shoulder to try to pick a fight [laughs]. And he was like, “Did you just touch me? Did you—?” And he starts, like, “You just touched me!” rah-rah. And I was like, “I’ll do more than touch you!” I don’t even remember, but I, like, got in his face, like, almost fistfight, and Sgt. Meeks had to pull us apart. And he was like, “Whoa, you two need to settle down.” And he was like, “I want her punished. She put her hands on me.” And I was just like, “I’m gonna do more than put my fucking hands on you!” [Laughs] I just went off on him. And they had to separate [01:54:00] us. And I just remember, like, I was crazy. Like, I was like, “I am going to do something to you! I don’t know what. I don’t know how. I don’t know when, but be prepared, because I am not okay right now. Like, this is not okay.”

And Sgt. Meeks was like, “Pino, take a walk with me.” And he’s just like, “You got to check that temper, Pino. You got to check it.” And I’m like, “This is ridiculous, Sgt. Meeks. We’ve wiped down that kitchen fifty times, and the sand is still growing. This guy’s being a jerk. Sgt. Hutchinson’s being a jerk.” And he’s like, “But, Pino, just gotta go with it.” I’m like, “Oh, dude.” Sgt. Hutchinson comes back with, like, fresh food. Like, he had gone to town or something. And

he—I remember there were, like, tomatoes and some sort of food product, and this... guy made us cook! Like, there was no reason for it. There was no [01:55:00] directive for us to cook. He just was like, “You’re gonna cook.” And I just remember having to cook that night and just being really angry that we had to cook ‘cause then that meant we had to clean it all after we cooked. And, ugh! I hated that place.

And then, like, another day goes by, and they say, “Pino, you have the paint?” And I said, “Yes, I have the paint.” They said, “You need to go take apart—so-and-so’s taking apart palettes, and each plank you need to paint. Can you do letters?” And I’m like, “Of course.” Everything they ask me I’m like, “Yeah, yeah, I can do letters. Whatever. I can—” So then I had to go paint street signs, which is what I mentioned earlier. I had to paint every street name from Fort Campbell. And then I—

Halaska: This is at Al-Najaf or—?

Pino: Yeah, we’re still in Al-Nasiriyah, Al-Najaf.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: Wherever that was. And then so I had to paint every street sign, [01:56:00] like, McAuliffe Way or Screaming Eagle Boulevard. And so, there’s this picture of me with—and then we had to go around the gridded system and then hammer the plans into the ground, and they all had, like, arrows pointing which direction. And there’s this picture of me, like, pointing, like, down Screaming Eagle Boulevard with my really piece of crap sign that I painted in my, like, full battle rattle. And I wrote a letter home. And I’m like, “You know, it’s really great I’m getting assigned to paint these street signs and they’re letting me just keep getting these painting assignments. It’s getting me out of sandbag detail, that’s fine, but I just find it really ironic that here we are, like, the most homesick people ever, and yet we’re creating these signs that reflect nothing but back home.” I’m like, you can’t just put a street sign up in the middle of the desert in Iraq and say you’re home.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: Like, that’s not how it works. You don’t just get to go [01:57:00] into a country—because, like, we would rename all the bridges once we got up to Mosul. We’d rename all the bridges, like, after 101st names. I was like, you don’t just get to go and recreate a place with a new sign. Like, put a sign in it. And Eddie Izzard was one of my favorite comedians before I left. And he’s like, “Here’s your flag.” Like, that was my picture. I was like, “Here’s your flag.” It was like, so stupid. I was like, no amount—I said doesn’t matter how good of an artist I am. It doesn’t mean that you’re going to be able to recreate home.

So that's what—we did that, and then—and we were still at Al-Nasiriyah, and we had—DeSousa was our pack clerk. And he's the guy that everybody's couldn't stand, but he's—he would always—he was just, like, this little skinny—he's the guy that wouldn't pick up Alaman and the firemen carry. And he'd be like, “Uh, quick question, [01:58:00] Sergeant. Uh, quick question.” He was so annoying. And he had no personal hygiene. Like, we had to throw him into the shower. And he's still a good guy, but he was just annoying. And he's helping us on the MKT one day with our broomstick guard duty. And we literally were pacing around the MKY with broomsticks, like, it was just ridiculous. Because they just kept making us clean it. [Laughs] We just kept cleaning it, so finally we were like, I don't know what the hell we're doing. And he was with us, and he carried a 249. And the XO comes up in a Humvee, pulls up, and says, “DeSousa, you need to come with me right now.” And he's like, “But my weapon.” He's like, “Leave it there. You need to come with me right now.” And so DeSousa says, “No, no, no, no.” That didn't happen.

DeSousa goes to the bathroom, and before he goes to the bathroom [01:59:00] he says, “Pino, can you watch my weapon for a second?” We were all working, and so all of our weapons were all kind of lined up, staged outside of the MKT, and the 249s would all sit on their tripods, and then people would stack their M16s or M4s on top, so they kept them out of the sand. And so, he had a 249, so he put it down with the tripod. He went to the bathroom, comes back. After he comes back, he had literally just come out of the bathroom, and the XO drives up and says, “DeSousa, you're coming with me.” And he's like, “Okay.” And so, he gets in the Jeep and goes, drives away. And I'm in the distance looking, and I'm like, “Okay. Maybe he took his weapon, XO, we're good. I don't need to watch his weapon anymore.” Keep working all day long. We're doing our thing. At the end of the day, we're heading back to the tent to just go hang out. And everybody grabs their weapon, [02:00:00] and there's one unaccounted for 249. And everybody's like, “Whose weapon is this? Whose weapon is this?” And weapon accountability is huge. And then before we even left Fort Campbell somebody lost their weapon, and they locked the post down. In the field, somebody lost their weapon in the field, and they locked the post down.

So, we're out here, and we're like, “There is an unaccounted for 249 out here. Who is walking around without their weapon?” And I don't know what I said, but I was like, “DeSousa had me watch his weapon while he went to the bathroom. Do you think that's DeSousa's weapon?” And they're like, “I don't know. You were watching his weapon.” And I'm like, “It was with everybody else's weapons.” And they're like, “Well, you need to take that weapon and take it to supply and check the serial number, and if it's DeSousa's, let me know because he's going to be in trouble.” So, I go to supply. They verify serial number is his. And so now I've got to guard this weapon. And I was pissed. Everything pissed me off [02:01:00]—

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: So badly. And so, we would go back to the tent, and we all lived in the same tent. And our cots were all side by side. And usually when you went back to the tent you cleaned your weapon. So, everybody was cleaning their weapon, and Grace had a 249 too, and I carried a 249 my second tour, but my first tour I did—I wasn't familiar with it.

And I walked up to Grace, and I said, "Hey, can you show me how to disassemble a 249?" And she goes, "Yeah." I said, "Like, now. Can you show me how to?" And she said, "Okay." So, I disassembled the whole weapon, and I gave each person in the tent that was in there a piece of it. And I said, "When DeSousa finally realizes he doesn't have his weapon and he needs it back, I'm going to send him to each person to get his weapon back." They were like, "This is a big gamble, you know. People could actually lose it." And I was like, "Well, it's not my problem." [02:02:00] [Halaska chuckles] So sure enough, like, 10:45 at night DeSousa, like, comes in the tent and is like, [gasps] And he locates me, and he runs over to me. He's like, "I need my weapon." I'm like, "Oh, now you want your weapon?" Like, I was just, like, the jerk of all jerks. I'm sitting there. I was like, "Oh, now there's urgency and you want your weapon. I could say, 'What weapon? What weapon, DeSousa?' I was only watching it when you went to the bathroom. That was an awful long time you spent in the bathroom, DeSousa."

He's like, "The XO is waiting outside. He just realized I don't have a weapon. He wants me to show my weapon right now. I need my weapon." Like, "Hmm. That sounds like quite a pickle". I'm like, "Well, here you go." And I gave him, like, the one little handle. And he was like, "What the hell is this?" I was like, "Well, there's some of your weapon. And there's some of your weapon. And there's some of your weapon." [Laughs] He's like, "I'm gonna be in [02:03:00] so much trouble. Like, you need to, like, not--you need to give me my weapon!" I'm like, "I'm telling you where your weapon is." And so, he ended up having to go tell the XO that he didn't have his weapon. And I said, "Let this be a lesson to you that you don't ask somebody to guard your weapon and then never come back for it. Because I didn't even know it was your weapon. We could have all just walked away. Your 249 would be sitting there." He's like, "You were supposed to be watching it." I'm like, "Well, while you went to the bathroom. I mean, technically, yeah, but... was I?" [Halaska laughs]

So, it was kind of a kind of crappy thing to do, but that was the things I remember from Al-Nasiriyah, Al-Najaf.

Halaska: It sounds like tensions were—

Pino: Oh, it was getting bad.

Halaska: —pretty high. And were you—so you said homesickness. How were people dealing with that other than everyone [02:04:00] just getting really cranky?

Pino: Well—

Halaska: Well, I mean cranky was—yeah.

Pino: We weren't really getting mail. Mail took about thirty days. So, like, when we were in Kuwait, we were waiting on mail. I do remember right before we crossed the border that night, I did write about twelve just-in-case letters.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: And I mailed them to everybody and told them that I was leaving for the—to cross the border tomorrow.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: And that, you know, once they heard that we were okay, then they could take a sigh of relief, but not—if not, just in case, and I pretty much, like, gave them my whole, what I felt about them in a letter. So, I wrote probably, yeah, like about twelve of those. And then when we got to Al-Nasiriyah is when I told that story about [inaudible], about the sand. Like, he was freaking out, and Tavarus washing her legs in a oil pan. And we—by the end, it was only—we were only there, like, a couple weeks, and by the end they realized that tensions were high. [02:05:00] People were homesick.

You know, the homesickness we knew, but it was different. It was spread out differently, in different spurts. Like, I don't know how to—I don't know if this is homesickness, but, like... The first—when we were in Kuwait, the first, like, six days in-country, it didn't matter who you are, the guys would be, like, “Hey, how you doin'?” Like, it was like you were hit on, like, twenty times a day. And then by the time we got to, like, Al-Nasiriyah, the girls were like, “Hey, how you doin'?” [Laughs] And then finally, like, by, like, Baghdad and Mosul everybody was just like, sleeping around with everybody else. And, but yeah, it was really funny because, you know, there was moments where you were kind of like you—we had—by the time [02:06:00] we got to that point with, like, the convoy and the tanks and the air, the actual, like, explosions, I think everybody was at that point where every day was another unknown. And every day was a blessing. But I think the—there is no joke about, like, need-to-know basis. And you do—when you do the need-to-know basis, I'm of the company that I do understand the need-to-know basis, but I think over-information is sometimes worse than under-information, but, like, finding that balance of keeping your soldiers informed was really crucial, and giving them any sort of information. And at first, chain of command was pretty good about that, but I think they were still a little bit too restrictive of information for us, but, like—and when I say information, even, like, if you're telling me to clean the MKT [02:07:00] over and over, at least give

me some indication of why. Or give me some logical explanation of what purpose this is serving.

Those were, I think, what led to my greatest frustrations. You know, people would talk about their families. I mean, I'm thinking back now, and they would, but it wasn't like that. We just would have—you'd have heart-to-hearts. Like, when we dug that trench outside of the commander's post that I was telling you about, we had been digging. Anybody that tries to dig a foxhole or a trench in the sand realizes what an unbelievably stupid task that is because the sand keeps coming down on top of you. So, once you finally get down to a level where you actually have a little bit, enough moisture to keep your walls intact, I mean, you've already re-dug and dug and dug and dug. So, when we had to dig that trench, it was probably, [02:08:00] oh, whatever the width of a GP medium is, is how long the trench was, and it was about three or four-feet wide.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: And there were probably six to nine of us digging, digging, digging. And then you—after we dug it, then we had to fill sandbags up and do three layers of sandbags around the whole thing and then put a tarp on top and then do another three layers of sandbags on top of that. Ideally you would have put wood planks and then put sandbags on top of the wood planks.

But we had spent, I mean, at this point, it was starting to get really hot. We're talking about March, early—like first week of April. Yeah, it was first week. Last week of March, first week of April, and so it's starting to get to be, like, hundred, hundred-ten, and we're digging in the dirt. And we're all—again, we hadn't bathed. We didn't have access to water. I mean, [02:09:00] we were really kind of grungy. Your shirts were—I just, like, big, white salt stains. And you didn't even itch anymore. You were just annoyed. And I remember we finished digging, and we were so—we got mad because we had spent all day doing that, and then we had—we needed—we had a question for Sgt. Hutchinson, I think, and he was in the CP with the first sergeant. And we hadn't been allowed in their tent. And we walked in the tent, and it was air conditioned. And they were sitting around with their feet up on a refrigerator with refrigerated water.

Halaska: Wow.

Pino: And I really admired my first sergeant, but I really—there were moments of sheer hatred for a couple things he did. That was the first time I [02:10:00] started calling him Jabba the Hutt. Because he had that sort of, like, physique, and he and our commander did the little, like, vagina patch on top of their head. Like, they shaved their whole head except for that little triangle, like the Kevlar bouncer. And then he would chew—they both chewed tobacco. And he would look up at you and be like, "Whatcha need, Private?" And there would just be, like shards of tobacco in his front teeth. And he did, he had that, like, weird, like, diamond,

blehhh, puddle of blehhh shape. And he was sitting there in the air conditioning. And I remember just, like, pausing and staring at him. And I was just, like, “Oh man. They won’t—” Will it pick it up?

Halaska: I don’t know. It might. [02:11:00]

Pino: I don’t think it’s still—

Halaska: No, I think we’re fine. Okay, anyway.

Pino: Yeah, and so I just, I was just standing there, and I was like, “Hey, First Sergeant.” And I was just—and he was like, “What do you need?” And I’m like, “You know what? Never mind.” And I went back out there. And we were all like, “Fuck ‘em.” And we went into the bunker, because it was now covered, and it was shade. And we threw each other a bottle of water, and we all just sat in there. And we were so mad! And we were so tired. But—and we had been so tired and so mad because it was just, like, the last straw for us. And at that moment we all started, like, confessing our sins. Like, it was this weird, like, we’re so tired, and one of the guys was like, he had broken his back, and so he was—something had happened that [02:12:00] he couldn’t do his job. So, he was one of this, like, he— they just stuck him with the headquarters platoon because he couldn’t. And he was this big, tall—I think he was formerly infantry. And so, he was injured in some way, but he was probably not supposed to be doing what he was doing with us. But he was doing that with us, digging the trench with us. And he said something about missing home.

And I don’t remember what he confessed, but then Williams—I have this picture of him and her sitting in the trench, and they’re so defeated. And she confessed something. And it was—these were confessions about either home or I don’t—and I confessed some insecurity of mine. We were, like—we were literally, like, revealing all of our insecurities because we had got to that point where [02:13:00] there was nothing else to talk about. It was like, “I go in the port potty and shave so nobody knows”. Like, it was, like, weird things. Like, “I pissed behind the blah-da-da-da-da.” And it’s like, “I can’t do this anymore. I mean, this is who I’ve become.” And it’s like, it was just these weird, like—it was the most bizarre confessional, like, bonding experience. Like, it was sort of amazing but so depressing. And somebody finally came and said, “Hey, you guys got to get out of here and keep working,” or whatever.

So, we did that, and then at this point they finally had the water blivets were delivered. And the water blivets were, like, these giant tan above-ground swimming pools that are not filled with air. You fill the interior like a swimming pool, with water, and as you fill [02:14:00] it up, the water blivet kind of fills with air and water so it makes this full structure. So it’s like these little water balloons sitting in the middle of the desert. And so, then the water truck, they finally had it set up so a water truck could come, and the water truck filled the water blivet, and

all of us were like, “We’re going to take a shower!” Like, this is so exciting because then they stick these plastic hoses out of the water blivets, and then they go, and they run along the, like, areas around the tents. And they’re, like, tarp PVC sort of material? But they’re, like, jiggly. They’re just water tubes. And, like, when I got to my second tour, like, I would—my bike. I would run my bike over. They could be run over. They were pretty indestructible, and that’s where the water went through, like a piping system. And then if you had a water pump, then you could pump it into different things.

And so, we were like, “Oh my god! We’re going to have a shower. Like, we have water. Maybe we’ll start cooking.” They said, “Go get all those two-by-fours,” [02:15:00] because they noticed people were starting to come with their buckets and grab water out of them. And they said, “You all need to go get the two-by-fours, and you need to put them across the top to make the water inaccessible. And then you need to put non-potable water signs, and then you need to put no access. Do not touch this water. Non-potable. Do not touch this water. Non-potable.” And then we had to pull guard duty around the blivets. And we were like, “Wh—why?” And they were like, “That water is not for us to use.” [Both laugh] And so we have all—I have these pictures of Alaman and Tavarus with their, like, their shovels and everything we’ve been working with standing in front of the water blivet pointing at the water like this [Halaska laughs]. Like, sad face! “We can’t drink this.” We couldn’t touch it. We couldn’t drink it. It was the worst desert [02:16:00] scenario ever.

We were—we have pictures of us next to it in a sandstorm, that the water blivet’s there with the wood on top of it. We’ve got goggles on, and our neck gaiter and, like, I was about to say nothing else. We just had our t-shirt, not our jacket on. And we’re pretending like we’re skiing in the sandstorm, like, next to the water blivet.” It’s just, like, slowly turning to mud. We’re like, “Why can’t we have this water?” And I, to this day, do not know. But we were not allowed to ever touch that water. And water buffalos all were parked right next to ‘em.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: It was just—and our last—it might have been our last night in Al-Najaf, they finally said to Tavarus and Rotondo, who are our MBC team, You guys need to set up the DCON [decontamination] tents. And you set up the decontamination tents, and they made a male tent and a female tent for showers. And they told us all we were going to have a two-minute [02:17:00] shower. And we were like, “What? What now? What? What’s happening?”

And in between each tent was a generator and a valve system. And the DCON tents were basically GP mediums with a pipe system that was piped up through the ceiling like a sprinkler system. And then there was, like—do you need—do I need to stop?

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: There was, like, a tarp on the floor. So, they set it up, and the way it worked was you—it was like an amusement park ride. On the outside and the—there was an entry tent, one you entered the tent one way and one you exited the tent on the other side. And then the males all had to be prepped, and they would say, “Okay, twenty at a time.” You all went and stood in the tent, and then you got naked. You did whatever you needed to do. And then they said, “In five, four, three, two, one,” and they’d start the water. And it was like a sprinkler [02:18:00] system, but it was like a shvitz. It was just like, psss. So it was almost like garden sprinkler system. Like, it was like this little, like, misty haze, but you didn’t matter. It was water. And, like, you literally had two minutes. They timed it. She was sitting on the generator with her stopwatch, and she would go, “Thirty seconds.” And you’d get everything you could possibly scrubbed off, and then she would give you the countdown. And it would stop. And while you got your towels and all your other stuff, they—she switched the valve, and twenty females went into the female tent, same system.

And this was at night, so the tents had no light. And I’m—because they were piped up with water. So, it was a pitch-black tent, and you all went in. And at this point you’re like, screw it. I have no inhibitions. You just, like, stripped all your clothes off. And I’m thinking, I have all my clothes. Are my clothes going to get wet? Like—and then you realize really quickly that the exterior of the tent didn’t have the pipes. You couldn’t see, but if you knew, you tossed your stuff to the side, then you [02:19:00] came to the center of the tent. You could get your shower. And so as soon as the water starts, and you’re in the pitch-black tent, like, I couldn’t—I was, like, my first thought I went to was concentration camps. Like, my first thought was, like, we’re in the gas chamber. Like, this is what it must have felt like. Probably a lot different, I will admit. I know that. But, like, you’re standing there, and you’re like, you don’t know where it’s coming or what’s coming or where it’s from because we didn’t—I saw the next day how the mechanism was set up. I didn’t know. And then you just scrub really quickly in the dark, and then you hear that “thirty seconds,” and you’re like, “Nooo!” And you try to rinse off as best you can.

And then it turns off, and you gather all your stuff, and you towel down, and there was a little area on either side of the tent where people were finishing up. And we were all just kind of, like, finishing toweling down, and we turned to the right, and there was Alaman naked, and we were like, “No! No! Please, god, why? Why did we have to see that?” And it was just [02:20:00] really funny because it was, like, all of us women bonded. We’re like, “I don’t ever want to see that again [Halaska chuckles]. Never. Ever. Ever, ever.”

But yeah, so we got a shower, and then kind of had, like, a little moment of joy. And then we packed up to jump. We had to pack everything up.

Halaska: What do you mean pack everything up? Like all the tents and everything, or?

Pino: Everything. That's when I said at the time you didn't realize that that was temporary. So then they're like, "We're jumping tomorrow." And you're like, "We're to what now?" And that's when I learned what the phrase jumping was. And it was like, "Bitch platoon, let's go!" And they—basically we take everything down, load it all back up, clean everything, no evidence left behind. We packed everything up. We get ready. We get on the convoy. [02:21:00] And we started moving forward. We moved forward. It was, like, a three-day convoy this time. It was not still a two-hundred-vehicle convoy at this point. All those different people had dispersed, and we were—whatever the G shops and us were and the band. And it was a three-day convoy this time through, like, the desert, and—well, it was all through the desert, obviously, but this—when I say through the desert I mean, like, wide open. Like, we literally had to stop for an hour for camels to go by. And we just drove and drove and drove and drove and drove. And when we got—we went to Baghdad. And when we got to Baghdad we pulled into—it was a weapons factory. I called it Hotel California.

When you pulled it—as it turns out, it was basically like a technical college. They were, in fact, making weapons there. And I say 'were, [02:22:00] in fact,' because I know. I saw them. I saw the stashes. I saw the caches. I saw the—I did a lot of walking around at that post. It was really eerie. But the—when you pull in, there was two giant concrete things with Saddam Hussein paintings and then palm trees. And then you'd pull in, and it was almost like—looked like barracks. And it looked like a community college campus, more rundown. So, we pull in. And we get there, and we're like, "Okay, shit, we're in Baghdad." And this would be the first week of April. And we start to dismount, and before we can even, like, go to the porta potty, Sgt. Hutchinson comes up, and he says, "You, you, you, you, you, you, you, pack—get back up in the trucks." And—or, "I need you to download these trucks and I—the equipment off of these trucks, and then I need you to get back up. The XOs going to come and meet you. You guys are going back." [02:23:00]

And we were like, "We're now what? We're doing what?" He's like, "You're going back." We left the porta potties and the DMAIN floor and three personnel back. You need to go back, get all of that and pick them up." [Halaska chuckles] We didn't know that DeSousa and Rotondo were left behind in the middle of Al-Nasiriyah with twenty wooden porta potties and a stack of floors in the middle of the desert, overnight for three nights. Were guarding the porta potties in the middle of the fucking desert. Yeah!

Halaska: Oh, my god!

Pino: So, they said—he says, "Load your—you know, take all the equipment off. Get back in the vehicles. The XOs going to take you, you guys." So, the cooks. It was the cooks and the wrecker. So the two—so it was the two mechanics. It was Sgt.

A and, oh... can't remember his name. So, it was the wrecker—actually, I think it was the wrecker, [02:24:00] 'cause the lead vehicle was Harley and the XO in an LMTV. Then it was—I think it was Manny and Harley in the second LMTV. And then Manny is Alaman, Manuela, manual labor. And then it was me and Biffle in the third vehicle, and the vehicle behind us was the wrecker. And then the vehicle behind them was two mechanics. I think it was DeGreek[??] and one other guy. We might have had a medic. Did we have a medic? We might've. So that was the convoy. So, it was whatever, one, two, three, four LMTVs and one wrecker, so the big LMTV wrecker.

We're driving, and I said to Sgt. Hutchinson, I'm like, "Do we need to fill up the fuel cans?" And he's like, "You're fine. You got plenty of fuel. You're just going—" [02:25:00] He goes, "I know it was a three-day convoy. It was actually just three hours away. You're just going there and coming back today." Like, it's not far. I'm like, "Okay, but still, shouldn't we fill up the fuel cans?" He's like, "Get in the vehicle and go." I'm like, All right. Okay, whatever. So we go. We're going through Baghdad, lead vehicle, XO, Harley. They're going. All of a sudden, we're going through Baghdad, and we, like, hit the brakes. And we do this U-turn. I'm like, "Where the hell are we going?" So we do a U-turn. Then we go, like, two or three different turns. It's evident we're lost. Right? And I'm like, "What the hell is happening?" Like, "We're in Baghdad, and you're lost. You don't know where the hell you're going." We're, like, going through neighborhoods. I'm freaking out a little bit. And so, we finally are back on the same path where we did the first U-turn, and we're driving. And Biffle and I are, like, kind of bitching about this. And she's driving, and I'm a TC. [02:26:00]

And we're going. And all of a sudden it's obvious they made—they realize where they were at. They needed to do a turn. He slams on the brakes. Second vehicle slams on the brakes. Third vehicle slams on the brakes. We're like, "Oh, shit!" Biffle slams on the brakes, literally is standing up in the LMTV on the brakes. I'm looking at the vehicle, and I'm like, "Nooo!" And we go, and we literally stopped with an inch of the vehicle in front of us. And I took a deep breath, and she and I looked at each other. She's still standing on the brake, and we looked at each other like, "Oh god." The wrecker [claps] pops into us. The wrecker hits us, we hit the car in front of us. The other car hits them [Halaska chuckles] [02:27:00] The guy goes through the window of the wrecker, breaks the window of the wrecker. He was fine, miraculously! But the wrecker now, is, like, the most damaged vehicle in the whole convoy. The wrecker, who's supposed to be carrying us out of this kind of scenario. I slammed into the—my knees slammed into the—there's, like, a vent box in an LMTV. My knees slammed into that. The first aid kit came and hit me and knocked the Kevlar off of my head. I—and I—like, my whole body slammed into that, and I couldn't feel, like, below my kneecaps. Like, they were just, like, throbbing. And I was like, "I can't move my knee-caps."

“Like, I can’t—” and Biffle was like, “Are you okay?” I was like, “My legs. I’m, like f—” And she’s just, like, “Ugh.” She gets off. We all have to, like, pull security now. I’m like, “I—my legs are numb, you guys.” And so, they just were, like, “You stay there. We’ll pull security.” [02:28:00] We had—we were there for, like, two hours while they had to fix the wrecker. So, they fixed the wrecker. We’re there. I’m starting to get feeling back in my legs. We’re all still a little freaked out. So, we’re, like, only, like, a mile up from the weapons factory. Like, do we need to go to the weapon’s factory? The XOs like, “No. We have three people in the middle of the desert waiting for us. So, we go and putz along and make the drive all the way back to the middle of the desert. When we get there, the reason we had the wrecker was because of that DMAIN floor I told you about. We needed the wrecker to load all of the porta potties onto the back of the trucks and the floors onto the back of the trucks. So we get there, and DeSousa and Rotondo are like, “Where the hell have you guys been?” I’m like, “I cannot believe they left you out here. You guys literally slept here guarding porta potties [02:29:00] throughout the night.” And they were like, “Yeah. It wasn’t fun.” And we’re like, “No!”

So, we start loading all of this stuff up. And we’re on the back of the truck. My legs are fine. They’re hurting. My knees are, like, really bruised, but I’m fine. And so, we—I’m on the back of the LMTV with DeSousa. And they’ve got the DMAIN floors, like, wrapped with ratchet cord, ratchet straps. And the wrecker’s, like, toeing them up over the LMTVs, and we’re guiding them in and down. And then once it’s down we’re releasing the hook and giving back the wrecker the hook. So, we’re guiding it down, and I worked in theater professionally. Like, we did traveling shows. I loaded trucks in and out. So, like, this was, like, old school for me. I’m like, oh, this is great. So finally, we’re floating it down, and we’re guiding it, and we’re guiding it, [02:30:00] and we’re guiding it. And common sense tells you not to put your hand underneath it. And DeSousa’s guiding it like this, with his hand underneath. And then the wrecker lowers it, a whole thing, like, a ton of weight on DeSousa’s hand. And he’s like, “Ahhh!” He screams at the top of his lungs. [Laughs] And I’m like, gimping around on my legs. And I’m like, “What is wrong with you?” And he’s just like, “My hand! It’s crushing my hand! It’s crushing my hand!” I was like, “My god, you idiot!”

So, I was—[laughs] I had to tell them to, like, lift the thing back up. We get his hand out. His hand is, like, broken. And so, we’re like, “Sorry, dude, you’re gonna have to suck it up.” We wrap it up. So, he’s in the LMTV while we finish loading everything up. He’s like this with his hand. [Laughs] And my knees are, like, swollen. Everybody’s really shaken up. There’s no windshield in the wrecker. Like—[laughs]. [02:31:00] We load up all the porta potties, all of the—we actually left some of the DMAIN floor out there. And doesn’t matter because they never used it again. Fun note, I ended up using that floor for when I moved into that freezer where I cleaned up the human feces at the palace. I was like, I’ll take one of these DMAIN floors and just put it right there on top of it, never to be

seen again. So yeah, we never actually ever installed the DMAIN ever again after we left Nasiriyah. But, because we were in hard structures moving forward.

So yeah, DeSousa's hand is broken. My knees are shot. Wrecker's blown to pieces. We start—so now we're like, okay, now, we have to go back. So, it's probably at this point—I don't know. It's getting pretty late, and—but it's not dark yet. We drive. We make the driver. We're just getting to Baghdad, and it's dark. [02:32:00] And we're going the wrong way on the highway. We turned the wrong way on the highway, so we're going the wrong way, and we're like, "Oh shit." So, we got to turn around. It's dark in Baghdad, and we run out of gas. We run out of gas. [Laughs] And I was like, "I told him we needed to fill the damn fuel tanks." [Laughs] And the XO was like, "I didn't anticipate us getting in a car accident and then also wrecking the wrecker and having to fix the wrecker." And I'm like, "That's why you do it! It's preventative medicine."

So, we had to siphon fuel from another—It was the wrecker ran out of fuel because part of the wrecker has to keep running in order to run all those things. So yes, the LMTVs had enough fuel, but the wrecker, who was doing all of the labor, ran out of fuel. So, we were literally siphoning fuel out of our other vehicles to fill the other vehicle. And we got back to the weapons factory. And when we got there—[02:33:00] and mind you, I call it the weapons factory now. We still had not even—we don't know where anybody's at. We literally had pulled in that day, and they said, "Turn around. You're going back." So, we pulled back in, and we reported to our platoon sergeant. And we told him what happened. And DeSousa and I had to go to the medic. So, we went to the medic. We found the aid station and Major Manly was there, who was the guy that when we were at Fort Campbell, when they diagnosed me with polycystic, looked at me and thought I was lying about the, like, spider bites that I got that—which is how they diagnosed me with polycystic was these, like, giant, like, puss-y filled welts I was getting on my body, that looked like brown recluse bites.

He was like, "You seem to be walking fine." And I'm like, "Yeah, but, like, my legs went numb for a good, I don't know how long." He's like, "Nothing's wrong with you. You're fine." And I'm like, "Can we [02:34:00] document it? Can we--" "Nope." And they fixed up DeSousa's hand and pretty much said, dismissed me. I'm like, okay. So, I have no documentation of that happening to my legs, which really drives me nuts. But yeah, he's like, "You know, you're going to have some bruising, but there's nothing wrong with you." I'm like, "Well, okay. Can I get something in writing?" [Laughs] I don't care that nothing's wrong with me, but so anyway, he sent us away, and then we figured out where our unit was. And then we lived inside of what was their dining hall, and there was, like, these little rooms behind it, and it was attached to—so it was, like, a big dining hall, like, a regular cafeteria. And there was an actual hotel style kitchen in the back. And I remember we were all like, "Wow." But none of the stuff worked. [02:35:00] And it had obviously been some sort of community college at some point that was converted into a weapons factory.

And then so there's this big community hall, and then in the back was all the hotel style kitchen, and then to the left were, like, hallways with offices and files. And I found some really interesting blueprints in Arabic, and I mailed some home to my friend Paul, and I couldn't bring myself to keep any other ones. And then to the right was an entire shop. So, there was metal working tools and carpentry tools and power tools and then a locker room where the workers would go. And what was really eerie about that, for me, I walked in, I was like, "Oh my god." Because I was a carpenter before I joined, and we were—didn't have any tools in the last two places we were at, so we were reusing palettes and nails from [02:36:00] palettes. And I'm like, "Oh my god, these are brand new drill bits." And I had a set of brand new, sharpened drill bits. They still had oil on them, they were beautiful. I took those. And then I was going to all the work stations. There was just these amazing drill presses, and I was going through the work stations, and then I just happened to, like, look down, and there were ashtrays with, like, it was obvious that, like cigarettes had just been put out, and, like, there was still leftover lunches on them.

And then the more I started walking through I was like, "What is happening?" And if you looked up on the windows, you'd see the windows, and there was, like, two or three holes where it looked like probably, like, launched grenades went through or smoke grenades went through. Because everything in there was, like, people had either left in a hurry or were taken in a hurry. And it was really—it was at that point I was like, "This is really weird." And we weren't supposed to be walking around alone, but I was [Halaska chuckles]. And [02:37:00] I was, and I started, like, looking. Because I was looking at the tools. And I was looking in the cabinets. And then I started looking in the lockers. And I went, you know, there's potential that somebody could be in one of these that, like, maybe I shouldn't be walking around alone because you never know. The place has been cleared out, but has somebody been hiding in one of these cabinets, one of these lockers? So, I got very creeped out, and I went back to my cot area, and I had the drill bits and those blueprints. And before we left the hotel I decided I didn't want the souvenirs. They felt somewhat haunted to me, so I left them there. I had already mailed Paul the blueprints though.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: He was a draftsman. That's why I sent him the architectural blueprints.

Halaska: Oh cool.

Pino: Because they were all in Arabic. So, it was really cool. But yeah, we cooked. We actually started [02:38:00] cooking there. And that's when I learned that butterscotch pudding comes in a ten-can size, and—which is the big can, the industrial can. And if you're hungry enough, you might take one of those and keep it under your cot. I'm just saying. It might be—if you're hungry enough, that

might be something that becomes a really weird moment in your life. And that—peaches. Butterscotch pudding and peaches become a, you know, something that you really cherish. And yeah, we stayed there for a couple weeks. I don't even think it was a couple weeks. We did have to burn shit there. I did go around the post there. That's where we had to burn shit, and as cooks you weren't supposed to. And it would splash up on your uniform.

Halaska: Ugh.

Pino: And then the officers that gave us the most grief, I would, like, put my sleeve down and serve the food [02:39:00] with my sleeve just, like, dangling over their food. Yeah. And then... Yeah, I would walk around the post, and there was, like, warehouses with, like, old tank parts. So, I have pictures on, like, these weird tank treads and on old, *pew, pew*, the artillery guns... Howitzer!

Halaska: Oh, okay.

Pino: It was like their version of a howitzer but, like, a little bit smaller, so I had pictures of me on that. And just would go into different warehouses, and there was always some sort of different weapon in each warehouse. And I'm so mad. I had all these amazing pictures, but I had a—I still had a manual camera. We had a lot of disposable cameras. That's why I said I have pictures of all this. But I had a manual black and white camera that I took film with me. And [02:40:00] I had all the pictures of the weapon factory on that, and I was trying to take the roll of film out in my sleeping bag so it was dark, and was trying to get it out, and it got exposed. And I'm so sad because there was a lot of things that could answer a lot of questions that I had that—because so—when we were there are Baghdad sulfur fires happened, that people talk about, where the air was, like, really yellow from the sulfur pits burning.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: And then, like, we—there was—so next to the, like, dining facility was these other, like, rows of warehouses. And this one warehouse, it was right next to us, had, like, police tape up around it, like they—and there was, like, drums of chemicals in there.

And I remember, like, looking at that going—I mean, I always joked though. Because I'm, like, so sarcastic. [02:41:00] But, like, Alaman and I would be walking around, and I was like, “We found the weapons of mass destruction. There's the chemical weapons in there. Look, nobody can go in.” And then there's like, legitimate stuff about what was in there. And I'm starting to find reports that that—I probably shouldn't have joked about it because there's—bad chemicals were in there.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: So, we were there up until Easter Sunday. I'm trying to think. Other things happened while we were there.

Halaska: Can you tell me, like, just when you were kind of going from, like, the open desert into Baghdad? Like, how did that—tell me about that and how that kind of felt. And how it felt to go from being in wide open desert to, like, populated area, I guess?

Pino: So wide open desert was really weird because—it was weird for me, we talked about [02:42:00] being homesick, it was like home to me. So, like, there were certain areas that reminded me—every Saturday we went to Santa Fe growing up. My mom would drive us to Santa Fe and drive me through a certain area of Santa Fe. The mountains turn kind of sandy and orange, like, this really, like, iconic desert sort of feel. And there was a couple areas outside the desert that were, like, I literally had a moment, like, out of body experience where I thought I was in Santa Fe for a minute and remembering this, like, how much that felt like home and how confusing that was. And then as you get up a little bit northern, you start seeing more palm trees. And then, like, seeing camels was really cool. I think everybody thinks that when they first see them. And then you get up, and I was surprised by—this is how naïve I am and how dumb I am, but, like, I was surprised how much their cities look like our cities. Like, I feel so stupid saying that. Like—

Halaska: It's legitimate. [02:43:00] That's—yeah.

Pino: It is, but I realized, like, if it hadn't have been for that military experience I wouldn't have, I don't think, ever ventured out and seen a part of a world and experienced—I think that's the shared humanity that I'm very grateful for. But, like, that their cities—Kuwait City is, like, a very Americanized-type city. And then Baghdad, their street signs all have Arabic and English. So, you know, you'll see Baghdad, and then in Arabic it'll say Baghdad. And I think once we saw the signs as we were entering into certain cities there was, like, moments of... intrigue? But also nervousness. Anytime we got into an urban area it made me nervous because in some of the convoys we had gone through what we call chokepoints, choke zones. Like, we went through this one town in the initial convoy where basically this wide-open highway then went narrow down to a one-way street through a marketplace town with [02:44:00] buildings up, tall buildings, and then, like, their electric wires were just, like, very low hanging across everywhere. And then the crowds of people. And as we came through, the crowds of people would swarm us.

So, in the desert we would get swarmed. I always talk to people about how it was like the sand people. You'd be driving through the desert. It'd be wide-open desert, nothing, and you might see, like, some weird shack out in the distance.

And then as you're driving, all of a sudden from, like, below the, like, hill, like, you just starting seeing little heads pop up. And then, like, in the hot air where you see, like, the waves, you know, you would start to see, like, people coming up. And then they would start running towards you. And it was all, like, in slow motion, you know. We're going, like, forty miles an hour, but then, like, you'd start seeing people running. And it's just, like, this very gestural image I have is these little, like, in full run, like, a hand [02:45:00] stretched out. Like, waving at us but then, like, begging for water. So, it was like, [speaks different language]. And then out of nowhere all of a sudden you had a swarm of people. Like, it was uncanny. You would just be, like, wide-open desert. All of a sudden you see a couple figures, and then all of a sudden a swarm of people. And they were like, [foreign language]. And they'd be begging for water. And remember we would throw water bottles out to the little kids. And then we would throw MREs, and then we realized that we had to stop doing that. And then we were told they were selling that stuff on the black market, so we weren't supposed to do it. I don't know if that's true or not. Whatever.

But, like, it just was so weird, sad a little bit. These little kids were like, "Water, water, water, water." And then we would go through the town, and it was that same gesture, that same running, but now you're in a chokepoint, [02:46:00] and the people were swarming and coming up against the vehicles. And when we had got to that point... Gosh, I guess after—at some point, I was no longer with the truck driver. I was—because I was put on a different vehicle because I remember they didn't have vehicles enough for the people that they had. So, when LM—couple of LMTVs, all of the bags were stacked, like, in a mound in the back of an LMTV. And then the, like, little gates were up, but the bags were in there, so you couldn't put the seats down of the LMTV. They were all stacked in there. And so, they put about fifteen, twenty of us in the back of the LMTV, and we all sat back-to-back on that mountain of bags with our feet on the end of the LMTV and our weapons as the truck drove down. So, there was, like, twenty of us on the back of the truck, and then some of the bags were, like, wrapped around the LMTV.

Halaska: Was it covered?

Pino: No.

Halaska: Or was it in the open?

Pino: No, it was open.

Halaska: Oh, [chuckles] okay.

Pino: So it was like cattle trucks with all of us out in the open sitting on the back of the LMTVs. And we had our, like, neck gaiters up because there was a lot of sand [02:47:00] in our goggles. And so that's what I was riding on when we got through those towns. So when we got to the chokepoint and people were coming

up to the vehicles, we were in the back of that vehicle with our weapons, and we're, like, pointing our weapons at them. And it was just really, like... I drew a picture of this—because you would, as you're driving it was like the town. And then you could see down, like, little alleyways that would go into, like, the little market spaces. And there was, like, women with baskets in all of them in the--hijab. And then kids coming up, and they started, like, pulling at you.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: And we would just, like, honk the horns, and we got through, but sometimes the only way you could get through is by pointing your weapon down at them.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: And that was really nerve-racking, going through towns like that. And then [creaking noise] once you got into, like, Baghdad, [creaking noise] it was a big city, it was like being on the highway.

It just was [02:48:00] kind of like an out of body experience, an out of world experience, and so, you—it's weird because there are streets signs telling you where to go, but there's nothing for you to follow. You could say, "Oh, that'll take me to Sadr City." I don't—I—it's weird that you just have to follow the vehicle in front of you and hope that the vehicle in front of them and the vehicle in front of them is going in the right direction.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

You could have—it was like having a map with no control over how to use it.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: So, I don't know. It's—the city was just kind of weird because it was like, "Oh, we're in Baghdad now. Well, that's interesting." You know, and I think you try to play in your mind, like, history of the Gulf War. Like, I kept trying to remember what the Gulf War, what that might mean--

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: --if I was in Baghdad. And I can't—that's what I was trying to think about [02:49:00] with the weapons factory in Baghdad is that we were with PAO [public affairs officers] too, so the public affairs,

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: And the—because public affairs went with the general, went with all of the, you know, civic affairs. And they had a satellite that they always had the set up so that

they could, you know, send communications back and forth, and then they always had CNN up for the war room.

So like, they finally got their satellite setup so that we were in—and they set up, like, on—there was a stage area in the—'cause it was very much like a community college. The cafeteria had a stage, and then it was—and the stage area, they set up a big flatscreen TV, which probably wasn't a flatscreen. It was probably a projector on a screen. And they had the satellite, and it was always, like, just static. And every day was like, [makes frustrated sound]. And then one day in between meals, so we were sitting, we would sit in the dining room, and that's when I would write letters, they got [snaps]—they got the TV working. [02:50:00] And the snow just went [makes static sound]. And you could see it, and CNN came in. And we were like, "Oh shit. We got TV!?" And so, we start going over there, and it was breaking news, CNN, they're pulling the statue down of Saddam. And it says live from Baghdad on the bottom of the thing [laughs]. And all of us were, like, standing there with, like, our, like, dish rags and everything. And we're like, "Aren't we in Baghdad?" They're like, Yeah, we're in Baghdad. I'm like, "They're saying that's happening, like—" and right before that, when we had come back from that convoy where we got—the gas ran out and everything, there were lines of people in all green, and we learned about Mecca and going to Mecca.

And we were learning about the different religious ceremonies where they—it was like a pilgrimage, and they were making their pilgrimage. And it was all green, and we thought that they were coming after us, and it wasn't. They were just on their pilgrimage. So that, I was like, you know, just a few days before [02:51:00] we're there, and we're like, "What is happening out here? What is going on?" So, they're showing these 101st guys pull down the statue, and it was so funny 'cause we had this room, and then there were, like, windows up above, and the TV was right here. And the windows facing out. We were all like, "Yeah, we're in Baghdad." And so all of us, like, looked out the window, and we're like, "Must not be that close." [Laughs] Because we can't—we're like—we were hoping, we all were hoping we would be, like, "Hmm." And we're thinking, that's happening right up the road from us. Like, "I'm not sure what that means, but we'll just keep going with it."

And yeah, at this point we had found, like, some little weird trickle of water behind our living quarters, and we took some of those big hotel cooking pans, and we had found a way to wash our clothes. So, we were actually much more fixated on the [02:52:00] idea of getting clean than we were about any historic event that was happening. And then word got around that we were going to probably start moving again. And we were like, "Just—what? We just got settled. We just figured this system out!" And Sgt. Hutchinson got us, four of us, and we had to go make a, quote-unquote, sand table. So, we went out to the yard, and I wrote home a letter because I was like, "Only in my experience." I'm in the desert. On the sand he made us get the rake and make out a nice little area and rake, you know, a

gridded pattern so that they could put the map, and then we got water bottle boxes, and then we basically had to recreate the map just heading out of Baghdad on MSR Tampa with water bottles. So, we made this, like, three-dimensional map with [02:53:00] water bottles on a sand plot and then drew the road with, like, strings and an MRE box [Halaska chuckles]. And I have a picture of this too. Then we had to flag it off so nobody could pass. And then I had to, like, gently sweep the sand [Halaska chuckles]. And so, I was sweeping the desert, and I had to make sure that I kept the desert tidy [Halaska laughs]. And I didn't know what a damn sand table was. But it literally—we literally made, like, a mockup of Baghdad.

And you'd think I would be able to know where we were headed. No! I had—I was given the drawing to do the buildings but not any, like, idea. Not to mention, like I really knew any geography of Iraq. I didn't know where the hell we were going. I mean, I could have—it didn't matter. It just didn't matter. And so, rumor got around that General Petraeus wanted us—this was the rumor that went around. [02:54:00] But people were starting to say, "Petraeus wants his third star, so we're moving up north. We were supposed to stay in Baghdad, but the damn man wants his third star, so we're going up north." And we were like, "What's in Mosul? Like, isn't, like, the—isn't the war, like, over?" And I kept telling people. I'm like, "Gulf War was, like, over in ninety days."

Like, so we got—finally got, like, CNN and realized that pretty much, like, the whole Mission Accomplished thing was happening. And then, like, word from back home, everybody was like, okay, well, the war is officially over, so, but now you're going to be on a humanitarian mission, but there's rumors, like, that they might start sending troops home, like the Gulf War where it's, like, wrapped up. And I'm like, "I don't see that happening, but you never know. But I'm not going to count anything. I'm not going to count on that." And so, they said, sure enough, "We're moving up north. And pack it all up." And it was Easter Sunday, [02:55:00] because it was my brother's birthday that year, and I had time to get a quick email in. And Williams had guard duty, in which she conceived of her first child [Halaska chuckles] on guard duty that night. And it was quite the conception. So then—the rooftop of Hotel California [Halaska chuckles].

We packed everything up, and we got in a convoy again, and this time, once again, we left a few people back. This time it didn't go so good. That's the one where, I won't say who—

Halaska:

Okay.

Pino:

But he and several others were left behind, and they were to meet the new party that was taking over that spot, which was a guard unit.

Halaska:

It was an intentional leaving behind?

Pino:

Yeah, they were the liaisons for the group that was [02:56:00] supposed to—

Halaska: Okay, got it.

Pino: —to take over that spot. Unfortunately, the group was late, and because it was a weapons factory, the people overtook it. As soon as we rolled out they swarmed the campus, and the guard unit was late. And he was left there with some other people, and they were trying to defend it. And they ended up calling in for help. And then the Black Hawk was getting shot at. And I know this because he told me. He sat down. We finally—he came back not okay, and I didn't know what was going on. He was a really good friend. And he just, he finally had to tell me what had happened. And he said that they just, the people were jumping over the walls, and they were just coming in. [02:57:00] and they, they were trying to stop them, and they just wouldn't stop. And then he called for help. And they were able to find shelter, and then the guard unit showed up, and they were like, "Hell no," and they turned around and left. And I think he ended up getting rescued by the Black Hawk, but in the process, he ended up killing a thirteen-year-old boy and a couple other people, and... he was never the same again. He was just—I don't know.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: But yeah, he—nobody knew about it. I don't think many of the people in our unit knew about it.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: Because he just showed up in Mosul when we got to the palace.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: And never talked about it. He ended up talking to me about it because he got hurt again. And then [02:58:00] he was seeing—we were all kind of having affairs with everybody else. And he was seeing somebody else, and we were having a conversation about what our lives had come to. And, like, what we were doing. And he wasn't okay, and I wasn't okay. And he was just—I don't remember what led up to the conversation, but... he also was—yeah. There's a lot of things that happened with him. And he just retired a couple years ago. Yeah, but so we once again left people behind, and that time was a little bit more intentional, but they just—I don't see the purpose in that.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: I just—it was so—Especially because we weren't, that's not what we were trained for.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: Like, you know, that—I mean, I’m not saying that [02:59:00] it’s right to leave two infantry guys there, but, like... This seems like more strategy of—well then, no, and that’s the naïve me too. Like, two PFC E4 infantry guys aren’t going to know how to hold down a—they’re not, you know—they might, but...

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: Whatever. Whatever. I think we moved north early too. I think that’s part of what happened.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: I think we jumped early, and I think it just all was just, like, a series of stuff. But he’s okay. He’s fine. But yeah, he—we left him behind, and then we went up north, and that’s when we got to Mosul.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: And they had sent another ADVON unit again. And they secured the palace and the airfield. And I kind of wanted to stay in Baghdad. I mean, I’m grateful that we went to Mosul, but I kind of wanted—there’s something about Baghdad that, you know. [03:00:00] And I don’t know why, but there’s something about Baghdad. And we went up to Mosul. And we staged the vehicle alongside of the palace, and when you pull up, I remember coming up along the hill, and, like, just looking at the palace and going, “Where the hell are we?” And we were on the top of the Tigris River, like, it’s breathtaking. And you—we changed environment. Heading up there we stopped at FARPs, so we had to stop.

I always kept wondering, “Where were we sleeping?” We would sometimes go to the fuel and we’d stop, and we would sleep there for the night. So, we would be at that outpost. Because I kept thinking, “Where were we sleeping?” I remember sleeping on the vehicle at the outpost. It was so hot. Ugh. It was so gross and MREs just, ugh, in the heat, eating the MRE. And when we got to Mosul we were told to hold tight, and when you pull up the road there was, just, like [03:01:00] howitzers parked, like, parallel parked. Like, not parallel parked, like, at an angle park, all the way up the road. And I was, like, had never seen them in person before. And I’m like, “Oh, those are cool.” And then—but then I went, “Charlie must be here!” Because Charlie was artillery. And I was like, “[gasps] I’m going to get to see Charlie. I haven’t seen Charlie since Kuwait.” And then we found out that airfield—Marianne was in the airfield, so I could go visit Marianne. And we—that’s when we learned about log packs and—But the palace, we pull up, and we’re all waiting out there.

Because we didn’t know that’s where we were going to stay. And I could see Major Fitzpatrick and all of the highers up talking, and they were, like, blowing

out windows and stuff so you could see people, like, on the balconies. And then they finally said that's where we were going to stay. And they told us where we had to put the MKTs, on the palace front lawn. So, we were the white trash trailers on the front lawn of the palace [sound of hands sliding against table]. And we had put the MKT on the palace [03:02:00] front lawn. And then they took us to where we would be living, and we were living in what would have been the servant's quarters. Like, it was hard structure, and there was, like, bathrooms, not running water still, no running water. But, like, one room was, like, you could tell was a walk-in refrigerator at one point. And the palace had already been really looted at this point, but pink marble staircases [sound of hands sliding against table]. We rarely went into the palace. That's where Gen. Petraeus lived and worked. We were on the outskirts and on the lawn. And then our CP was—stayed over here.

But yeah. I don't know if you want to get into the palace, or where are we at for time?

Halaska: What time do you have?

Pino: It's one-oh-three.

Halaska: Mm. Let's stop here for the day then. We'll remember that we're—

Pino: Well, dol you want—I was going to say pause it—[break in recording]

Halaska: All right, so today is August 1, 2019. This is a continuation of the interview [03:03:00] with Yvette Pino. And last—in the last file we ended talking about your arrival at Mosul.

Pino: Mmhmm.

Halaska: And getting set up there. But before we continue on with that, I want to know a little bit more about the vehicles that you drove up in and how soldiers were improvising with those vehicles in the early days of the war.

Pino: Yeah, so our vehicles, I mean, I think I talked a little bit about painting the zero-zero-slash on all of the side of the vehicles, and the cooks had LMTVs, so the big trucks. And then behind them we carried our MKT, which is the mobile kitchen trailer. So almost every vehicle on the convoy, with the exception of one or two vehicles, was either carrying a trailer or some sort of, you know, element that was required for their job. So [03:04:00] the Humvees had trailers with equipment, like, regular trailers that were hauling stuff. Supply had specific types of trailers. We had the MKT. But the Humvees at the time were still fairly new. They were newer. And they had a variety. Some of them were up-armored, which means they were all metal all around. The majority of our headquarters platoon, our vehicles, except the mechanics, had the kind that still had clothe doors, so still almost a

play on the Jeep, the old Jeeps. So, they were four-door, two- to four-door, and they had removeable canvas doors. They were probably not canvas, more of a high-end PVC, you know, plastic type material with, like, [03:05:00] metal, round frame, and the hinges popped off, so you could take those off. And it was really extreme heat.

So, in our initial convoys up, this was the beginning stages of IEDs, they weren't as prevalent as they are now, we were literally getting more training on landmines and, you know, antitank mines and—but the thought of IEDs was really kind of a—it was secondhand knowledge. It was, we were aware of it, but it wasn't the first concern for defense. We were much more concerned on ambush and small arms fire, RPGs [rocket-propelled grenade]. So, when we moved—well, at least I would say that's from my role, as a PFC. Like, I'm sure the higher the chain—the higher up you were in the chain, and the infantry units were much more aware and were preparing themselves for... a different type of [03:06:00] attack. But for us, as we moved forward from Kuwait up north in all of the convoys, the first convoy, I think I told you, I didn't have a seat. So, I was a TC in somebody else's truck. And then each different convoy I found myself a passenger in random vehicles. It wasn't until we got to Mosul that I was ever a TC. So, the convoy from Baghdad to Mosul, I was actually in our company commander's vehicle, Cpt. Villanueva. And he was the lead con—he was the convoy leader in the big convoy where I talked about with the tanks firing over us.

But he was the TC, and then his driver, and then I was in the passenger seat behind, the back right passenger seat. And in our vehicles we did remove the doors, so we removed all of the doors to let some air come through, and then we had all of our gear, like, ratchet-strapped to the front of the, [03:07:00] like, the grill guard of the Humvee. And then there would be, you know, concertina wire stacked on top of the vehicle. So, we were packed to the gills, and then I would sit—I always said it was China Beach style, and that's a reference to, in China Beach they're in the helicopters with their feet dangling out of the helicopter as it descends onto the ground. So, our doors on the back were off, and I would sit sideways in the Humvee looking out, like, if you're sitting on a trolley car with my weapon in my hand just kind of watching the world go by as we drove through.

And at that time, we were in the wide-open desert. So, as we're driving up you would see just, like, sand, and then from, like, behind weird berms in sand that you didn't even know exist, little kids' heads would, like, pop out. And like, one little kid would run by the convoy with his arms up. And they would say, [foreign language], for water. And so, we would sometimes throw water bottles out. But we learned really quickly that if you threw a water bottle [03:08:00] out, that little kid would go for the water bottle, and from out of nowhere, like, a swarm of people would, like, come up and then just swarm on that bottle of water. And the—we used to throw MREs and water, and we had to stop doing that because all

of a sudden people were coming from out of nowhere. We didn't know. And we would be surrounded by people begging us for water and food.

So, most of the time it just kind of turned into driving by, holding our weapon up, you know, in a defensive stance and waving at the kids or the people as we passed by. And then once we got into, like, city areas or things, you know, the road got a little tricky. You would pull your feet in. 'Cause sometimes you a seatbelt. Most of the time you weren't really seat-belted into the vehicles. So that's one way I rode. Another way is in the LMTVs we—before we left, part of our inspection plan for our vehicles [03:09:00] was, in our Quadcon of equipment that would get inspected monthly in garrison, we also had our vehicle equipment. So, the LMTVs did have a hole in the roof for a turret, so during garrison life you—basically that hole was sealed with a cap, a removeable, you know, kind of like sky light, sky roof. And then we had to remove that, and we had the turret attachment, which was really, really heavy, and without a wrecker you really can't do that manually. And we tried to get it up there, and it was just kind of pointless, and the equipment was so dilapidated, it hadn't been used in years, and it was rusted out.

So we never put the turret attachment on the LMTVs. It was just a wide-open hole. So we didn't put the cap on, and we didn't have the turret on. And what we did do was you would have a driver and a TC, and then somebody sat in the middle on all the gear or, like, on the hump, whatever [03:10:00] was there. And if we went through certain areas we would stand up and without weapon that we had. So a turret would hold a fifty cal. We didn't have that either. So, we did have a fifty cal. But only one of our vehicles housed it. That was on—I think they might have put that—I don't think it was on the wrecker, but it was on one of the vehicles. And then so I stood up there one time with my M\$ as we rode through the city, and you really shouldn't do that because people that were in the turrets were in the most vulnerable position, but we were—I don't know what we were thinking, whether we thought we were being cool or if we thought that that was actually a safety precaution. At this I don't remember. [Laughs] I just remember that I stood up there, and I was, like, bobbing around with my M4 because you also didn't have anything to lean on, so it was, like, just straight up balance and Alaman hit the brakes one time, and I just, like, slammed forward and hit my hands on top of the [03:11:00] vehicle.

And that also, the top of the LMTV gets really hot. Like, that metal gets really hot, so any time you had to, like, catch yourself you were—I wasn't wearing—they gave us these, like, you know, like pilot gloves that, like, were flame-retardant or whatever. They were long. They looked like gown, like ballgown gloves, and then had the leather. And I'm like, "What are—" [both laugh] I remember when they issued them to us. I was like, "What are these for?"

Halaska: Yeah. [Laughs]

Pino: And if you're a pilot or what they were created for, it likely made sense. I saw some video of people wearing them in the place they were supposed to be worn, and it made sense. But for us it just—it was like issuing us driving gloves. But it was before they were really coming out with the gloves that were missing the trigger finger.

Halaska: Mm.

Pino: That had grip, you know. The mechanics had their mechanics gloves, which were—they're really interesting because they had—they were fingerless gloves with grip on them. So they protected your hands, but you were able to do everything you needed with your weapon. [03:12:00] But yeah, so we stood in that hole sometimes, and for an extra measure, and then in the LMTV and then in the Humvees, either inside the Humvee they also had a turret opening. Again, we didn't have the up-armor, so we didn't have the Humvees that were designed. If you had a—the original up-armored Humvee was so top heavy that one of the issues was, it was so top heavy that they really couldn't maneuver at high speeds. And it just wasn't functional at all.

The other part was that the—all, from probably the wheels up, was up-armored, but underneath the chassis was not armored. So, if you were hit by, I think it was antitank mine that comes from the side,

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: You had some protection. But the IEDs, as we all now know, were in the ground or from below. [03:13:00] So what was happening is that, the explosions were coming from below, and the chassis were not protected whatsoever. So, they were just destroying—I mean, you were then just trapped.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: It was like the original tanks. Like, you were trapped in this tin can. Or if a blast happened on, like, either side of you, not underneath you, they were so top heavy that it would flip you. So, then you—if you were in the turret, any time you were in the turret you were probably the most vulnerable person in that whole vehicle. Because the turrets also—what the Iraqi's started doing was they started putting up wire. Like, they would string wire across the highways, and you couldn't see it when you were driving. So they would drive through, and the—those in the turret were getting decapitated.

So—which is why I said we all now know it's stupid of us, if we were in the turret, to go just be standing up there with a weapon or, you know, an improvised posture. [03:14:00] Because you were already vulnerable plus that added more. Because at least in the turret if it was facing a certain way you had that kind of lip

that comes up in the turret. It almost works as a wind—like a metal windshield. Obviously, you can't see through it, but that circular kind of impediment. And then you're up with your weapon, and that causes some protection, maybe, but it was not good. So, then you—what you started seeing is a defense mechanism for the wires. We started seeing these Humvees driving around from the same grill, that metal grill on—and bumper would be, like, one by box tubes, steel box tube welded to the grill going up at, like, a forty-five-degree angle. And it extended out, I would say, ten to fifteen feet. So, like, the Humvees were driving around with these, like antenna. It looked like, [03:15:00] just, like, this, like, really thin rhinoceros sphere coming out of all of these Humvees. And it would just kind of, like, wobble in the wind. And that was in an effort to catch the wire before--

Halaska: Mm, mmhmm.

Pino: --it would be able to decapitate the person in the turret. And the person in the turret. If they didn't have—I never got to ride in one of the vehicles that actually had the turret set up, but I know in the vehicles we had, we modified them because, again, we didn't have the up-armored vehicles. So, if you were inside, like, a four-passenger vehicle, there would be the hole, and then there would be from either side, like, carabiners with the ratchet straps and their—what are they called? They're seven, 729—oh, I'll think of it because it's five, 550... Oh, it makes me so sad that I can't remember. But they're—[03:16:00]

Halaska: It's okay.

Pino: I know, but then we used to just, like, toss them to each other, and it was the one thing that was like theater that we had the same name for something in traveling theater. But they're the ratchet straps, but the big ones, the big jute ones that are probably two and a half inches wide. And you would hook those up to the carabiners and use it like a swing on the inside of the vehicle. And you'd sit on the ratchet, and that's where you sat. And then if you had to stand up, you had—I think you could have one hooked to yourself just to kind of give you some stability. And then in the vehicles that were the two-seat Humvees, so if you had a two-seater with, like, where, like, a truck, almost, so it had a little, like, storage truck area in the back. They took these giant pipes, and we worked with the local nationals to help us with these, these giant pipes, and then a square plate, and they welded the pipe to the square plate and then bolted that to the bed of the truck. And then [03:17:00] from that they bolted a mount for a fifty cal.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: And then they mounted the fifty cal. And then they created another welded kind of mockup setup for the ratchet strap again. So, you would ride on the back of the truck sitting on this ratchet strap with a fifty-cal [Halaska chuckles]. Welded to the truck.

And it was, like—it was absurd. I have so many pictures of my friends, like, on these, like, improvised armored vehicles. And I will say, that's, like, one of the reasons why I get so sad when we talk about funding and military spending. Like, being an advocate for cuts is not because—I think there's some mismanaged funds, but when I realized that, you know, we were provided with the equipment that we needed to do the job we needed to do. And there will always be—you know, it's 'adapt, improvise, overcome.' But when [03:18:00] you think about how vulnerable we were going into these situations, it's alarming. And it's hilarious when you're in the military because you're like, that's typical. But then it really saddens you when you see the amount of money that's getting poured into the system, to know that we were still not only using, you know, certain equipment from the Vietnam era, and the Vietnam era was using World War II era, and so on and so forth. It continues to go. We can't be—we're not advanced enough to get ourselves prepared.

But the equipment was really just interesting traveling conditions, to see what everybody's traveling in now where, like, in '05, '06 when I went back, some of the vehicles, I was like, "What is that!?" [Halaska chuckles] Because it was, I mean, night and day to what we experienced. If I look back at some of the old Humvees and it just cracks me up because--

Halaska: Mhmm.

Pino: They were pretty much just, like, a metal [03:19:00] skeleton frame on—it was liker—somebody said it was, like, a—I don't think this is true, but it was like a Honda chassis with all of this, like, steel sitting on top of it and no protection from underneath. And then they started putting protection underneath. And it made it so heavy. And, but that's the type. If I say I was riding China Beach style, that's what I mean. We took the doors off. I was sitting sideways in the passenger seat with my feet just kind of like, dangling out, with my weapon.

Halaska: Mhmm.

Pino: Like, giving the peace sign to people [Halaska chuckles]. So that's pretty much—yeah, I'm look—go in in my mind to thinking about all the different ways people, like, modified their vehicles. It's kind of funny.

Halaska: Mhmm.

Pino: There's a lot of different—

Halaska: People had to get creative.

Pino: They got creative but not in a creative way, like, when you would, like, paint.

Halaska: No.

Pino: Like, we weren't allowed to paint things. Like, I think my second tour they finally painted the black knight [03:20:00] on the side of their Humvees. But there was no, like—it was all practical—

Halaska: Oh yeah.

Pino: —creative invention. And even that was, like, we didn't have the supply. So, we couldn't even modify it until probably eight months in the country.

Halaska: Uh huh.

Pino: Because we didn't have access to a welder or to—I mean, a lot of stuff was made out of wood. I mean, we had a lot of stuff that was made out of wood, and it was, like, refurbished palettes, and even, like, nails from the palettes that we—so—

Halaska: Do you remember, like, trying to get stuff and, like, people kind of pleading with their chain of command almost, or—?

Pino: Well, it wasn't so much that the chain of command wasn't--

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: --trying to get it for us, at least in my case. Our supply sergeant was tops. And I think I mentioned that, you know, our shipping container fell off in the ocean, right. So [03:21:00] we were trying to get materials, but while we waited for the materials we also were, you know, waiting on materials from Turkey. And that's why, as we got up north, we had to go up to Turkey to get certain supplies. And supply routes were just tricky. And also, it depended on who you were. If you were the 801st and you were at the airfield, then you had direct connection to the supply, and it's all about supply and demand, right? Like, if you're in charge of the supplies, you're at the place where everybody else has to come to get the supplies, you get first choice. And sometimes you can ethically distribute, and other times you can... not. And I think there were occasions where they were not ethically distributing in a fair and consistent way. And it was a, like, eat or be eaten world. And I can understand that, but I can be a little frustrated with some of that as well. [03:22:00]

I think what we were doing was we weren't so much... trying to get new supplies. We were trying to be resourceful with what we had, and we did so by, like, like I said, with the palettes. Those of us that had been in a trade before or familiar with construction or carpentry, I mean, I was a carpenter before I got in. So, we were out constantly looking at materials of how they could be used. But we were so exhausted. We were so beyond exhausted that I think that there was a lot of effort and dreams and kind of—and we were, had to be mobile. We were jumping all the time. So, it didn't make sense to acquire or to build, right?

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: And we did—we were with the engineers, so, like, the porta potties were built in Iraq, those wooden porta potties that we had to go back for. They were [03:23:00] built there, and then we found all the palettes from equipment, like the bubble wrap that went through the desert. We acquired those, disassembled those, and then tried to keep the nails. And we had—because we had one hammer. And so that whole experience prepared me for my second deployment.

And I won't jump too far ahead for the second deployment, but in case we don't get to that, my second deployment I packed a tough box full of tools. And because many of the letters in the later part of my first deployment were, "Can you send us—?" Like, my wish list for supplies when people asked what to ship to the troops, I'm like, "Hammer, nails, screwdriver, staple gun, like, wire that you can wire up electricity, funnels for fuel." All of these really practical elements that I packed a tough box full, and everybody thought I was an idiot, and they thought I was crazy. And I was like, "You guys have no idea what it's like [03:24:00] to not have any of this stuff and what a simple hammer would do. If you had more than one hammer, how much more productive and how much easier our days could have gone." And then, of course, by the time we went back the second tour, the posts were all built up. It was almost, like, garrison wherever you went, so everybody then thought I was an idiot even more because I had all of these things, and they were like, "See? Why—we could just get a hammer at the PX." And it was really frustrating. But then, midway through that tour people wanted to, like, you know, personalize their little areas, so I created a tool library, and they could checkout a tool. And it became a much more received, well received experience. And people were like, "I'm so glad you brought these tools!" I'm like, "Aren't you, though, really."

So anyway, that was the equipment. Was there anything other—specific about the vehicles?

Halaska: No, I think [03:25:00] that's good. Thank you. Alright, so let's kind of—you just—you arrived at Mosul, and you guys are getting settled in there. You briefly went over your living conditions? Like, just, you guys were in the trailers in front of the palace, and the—

Pino: Yeah, and those were the MKTs, were the trailers in front of the palace. So that was the kitchens.

Halaska: Oh, okay. Yeah.

Pino: The mobile kitchens. And we had four of them. And the way they're designed is you can break them down. They can be one. They're like popup trailers. And then you pop them up, and they have two—each MKT has two rows. So, a center is

where you're cooking, and then the exterior, like, perimeter of the trailer pops out as footing, and that's where people come up on the trailer, and they can walk on, get their meal, just like at a dining facility or cafeteria, and then they walk off. And the way it's designed is there could be staircases on either end or on side to side. And so [03:26:00] there's in the regulations, in the manuals, there's ways in which you can do different configurations. The trailers can attach side to side, back-to-back. So, with four trailers we essentially created a small footprint of a dining facility. And then on the interior you have all of your cooking apparatuses. So, you have the—they're just welded squares, and then they put the—The way you fire your stoves, which is through a jet-propelled burner system. So, it's this big rectangular box that holds JP-8. And then it's got a burner and a clicking device to ignite the JP-8, and then it goes [makes gas ignition noise], and then you can maintain the flame a little bit. And those sit in the square probably about three and a half feet up, and then above that is another rack where you then put, you know, it could be—it depends on what you're cooking or how you're preparing.

It could be a big, like, pot that has water. Because what you do is, it's like [03:27:00] the trays when you have the little burner underneath it and you put a little bit of water in a tray and then another tray sits on top. That's essentially what we were doing, but with T rations. So, the T rations are square rations in a tin can. They're a square tin can, which makes opening them very fun. That is the one thing we had plenty of, manual can openers. So, you got Popeye arms by the end of your deployment because every day you're opening hundreds of cans, and they're about a foot long [Halaska chuckles] by about nine inches wide. And then the way you cook those is you—there's these other big squares in the tent. So, you have your MKT, and the MKT is designed to have, like, a quote-unquote oven. So, it's a taller rack, and with the burner it, and then you can get it up to a certain temperature and open it up like an oven and bake things in there. Nobody uses that. I mean, it's ridiculous. It sometimes works. I'm sure it works fine, but we didn't ever have fresh food in which to bake. So, [laughs] like, [03:28:00] you need eggs to bake, so we never used that. It was—became more of a storage shelf system.

And then all your trays, and then they also have a flat top grill. So, you could put the burners under, like, a cast iron flat top grill. Again, we didn't have anything to cook, so, other than the T rations. So, we didn't use those until the very—second half of the deployment.

And if you need to stop me for audio, let me know.

The other tent houses three—at least, we had three burner units that, basically it's a square welded, looks like almost a sink? So, the bottom you put the burner in, and the top is probably a two-foot square, shallow opening. You fill that with water, and then you get your burner on, and you get that water boiling, but before you fill it with water, you put all of your T rations in. So, they're, like, a foot high by nine inches [03:29:00] wide, and you stand them on end, and you stack 'em all

in there. So when you're looking in it looks like files of rations. Then you fill it with water. You turn your burner on, and you boil water. And they cook boiling in the water. And then you have these special hooks to pull out the T rations. Which is interesting, and it's interesting when you're five-feet tall because that's, like, they come up to, like, four-feet high, so trying, for me, to like, actually configure pulling things out got kind of sketchy and dangerous, but it is what it is. And then that's where they go, and then when they are cooked, you pull them out, and you take them out to the serving line.

You open them with the can opener, so there was always kind of, like, who got to be the can opener that day. And they were really crappy can openers, I'm not gonna lie. So, it was just really kind of, like, meticulous. And you had to do, like, each meal probably we went through, [inhales] I don't know, a hundred? So, and they were all different, so, like, the rice [03:30:00] came in one, the country captain chicken, which is all we ever got. Country captain chicken and veggie lasagna is what we ate for six months [Halaska laughs]. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Or an MRE. So, when you start preferring MRE to the cooked meal—that's why it bugs me that cooks get a bad name. It wasn't our fault. We all knew how to cook. We just didn't have food in which to cook. So, we actually, like, four months in got really creative and started, like, Biffle and Sgt. Gooch would, like, come up with these really great combos. They would take the rice that we got, and the rice that cooked in those things was almost like sticky sushi rice. And they'd pour it into one of the big line pans, all the rice. And then they got—we finally got our hands on some soy sauce. So, they put soy sauce and then the can—the big ten can. A ten can is the large industry size. Big ten can of peas and carrots, and so we put the peas and carrots in there, the soy sauce, [03:31:00] salt and pepper and garlic. And they would make a stir fry rice.

And then we would take the country captain chicken, drain out all the juices, wash off that nasty jerk sauce, and I'm not opposed to jerk sauce. This country captain chicken is [gags] tinny, tinny taste. It was horrible. I have nightmares about country captain chicken. I'm sorry [Halaska laughs]. I do! I don't ever want to see it on a menu. I probably will freak out. Like, if you ever see a video of me freaking out at a restaurant, it's probably because they said, "Would you like some country captain chicken?" That would probably be, like, how my story goes [Halaska laughs]. But they—we—they rinsed off the jerk seasoning and then threw that chicken into the stir fry. So, if we had country captain chicken, we at least knew we were going to have a variety. So now that I have much more culinary experience, I actually sometimes wish I could go back after going to culinary school and after living life a little bit. I wish [03:32:00] I could go back because I would have a much more inventive background. I didn't know how to cook before I joined the Army. I learned how to cook, and I just didn't have what Sgt. Gooch and Sgt. Biffle had. Which, they were both moms. They knew, like, we can make a meal stretch and do anything with it. I still admire those women today, because it was pretty incredible. I have this picture of Sgt. Gooch with the

pasta noodles, like, just with a smile. And I'm like, they just were pretty incredible to make the days a little bit easier.

But that chicken fried rice, I remember everybody was like, "Oh, my god!" And so, as the line—people were coming through the line, I mean, we [snaps] ran out of it like nobody's business. And so, it was like, "Well, we have country captain chicken." People were like, "Ugh, my god." So, you would have to boil those things, and then anything we made involved boiling water. In order to boil that amount of water with those types of burners took an [03:33:00] extraordinary amount of time. So, for breakfast we had to be up at, like, 3:45 and there by 4:00 just to get the water boiling. We did have an officer that got—we got in trouble because he came at 5:00 AM and the water—hot water was not ready yet. And we were trying. I mean, the burners—we also—the burners kept going out, but we were trying, and he was mad because he didn't have hot water to shave with. That was when I started getting really kind of—to me, he started becoming an asshole. [Laughs] Like, there was just, like, you're an asshole. Like, I don't know what else to tell you. Like, you're—and he went and reported us to our chain of command. And we got disciplined. And I was just like, "Are you serious? Like—"

Halaska: What kind of discipline?

Pino: You know, like, slap on the wrist, or, like, the threat. Like, "This is your job. Know your role. Stay in your lane. If you can't get it done by 5:00 AM then you need to get here sooner. Make it happen. [03:34:00] Do what you need." The usual pomp and circumstance. Whatever. The shitty part is, for the most part our chain of command backed us up, but there were some times that, like, it was our platoon sergeant that was just a spineless piece of crap. And so, he, you know—whatever. He was just, you know, there's times when you can, like, go to defense your team and then other times where you're like, "Yes, sir." And sometimes just saying, "We'll take care of it." Humoring somebody, like, is all you need to do. I don't know. It was tough because of the position we were in being the direct platoon for the G staff. So, everybody—I mean, it'd be like working at the Pentagon. Everybody that came through was higher, high up. They thought their shit didn't stink, you know.

And anybody that comes—[03:35:00] he was—that was like a Frank Burns moment, right. Like, if you come to the cooks at 5:00 AM and say, "The water's not ready so I could shave with it?" Like, if the water's not ready so that I could fix my morning cup of whatever that's medicinal for me for my constitution or whatever. If it was, like, nutritional based? Fine. Like, I might roll, my eyes at you, but I would be like—I give everybody the benefit of doubt. Everybody's got something, right? But the fact that, number one, he was using the water that was limited supply for shaving, and it took four and a half hours to boil that water, go boil your own freaking water! You know what I mean? It's a hundred-and-twenty degrees out. Leave a canteen cup full of water out at night, and by the morning

it'll probably be hot enough for you to shave with. Just saying. Anyway. I don't want to get on that tangent, but go ahead. You have a question?

Halaska: How was it? Because boiling the water and cooking spaces just got hot anyway with the heat. Like, [03:36:00] how did you guys deal with that?

Pino: It was really difficult because we were also on a water shortage in heat cat five [Heat Category Five] conditions. So, that's actually a really good question because I always forget to mention. We were also—not only did we cook, but we—the log packs, the convoys we went to the airfield to pick up all the supplies, we were also the source for water distribution to our camp. So, we would get all of our T rations and then MRE supply and then water supply. So, one truck would have palettes full of bottled water and one truck would have palettes full of food. And we had to load that. We'd go to the airfield. We'd load it on the truck, come back to the palace, down-load it. Then we had to restack it on all the palettes in the whole area where the MKTs are. And I realize now that I haven't even talked about our living conditions. But the MKT, I think, is a really—being a cook, I don't think [03:37:00] it's a story that's told very often—

Halaska: Oh, definitely.

Pino: —the details of the inner workings of an MKT. Also, because cooks rarely get an opportunity to cook in the field for long periods of time.

So, we would down-load all of the water, but because there was a water shortage, I think we blew up the water factory. Because we ended up repairing it. So that's [laughs]—so I know we ended up repairing it 'cause we ended up getting a bunch of water that was non-potable, but it—you could use it for doing, washing your clothes or, like, things you needed to use water for but shouldn't ingest it. So—

Halaska: Could you use that for the boiling water because you weren't ingesting it, right?

Pino: Yes, 'cause there weren't any permeable containers. I don't—yes! And I'll tell you why—how I know that. So, we had next to—so you had the MKTs set up, and then across from the MKTs you had your tent GP medium. So like, a GP small or a GP medium that had your cooking burners and then palettes with that days' worth of [03:38:00] rations. Then adjacent to that you had your row of palettes with all of your food. So, we have all these pictures of the stacked boxes, and then you'd make, like, little clubhouses out of 'em. And you'll see in the pictures it's all country captain chicken and veggie lasagna [Halaska laughs] and all of us pretending we're happy about it. And then you had next to that our Quadcons, so the shipping containers, the small shipping containers that we stored equipment in, and then we had another GP medium tent set up. And it was to keep the large supply of food. So, it had, like, two rows. God, I'm walking through this again in my mind, and I haven't even talked about this tent in a really long time. So, it had two rows, you know, the size of palette, right? It's roughly four feet

squared. Yeah, sure, and so it's' roughly—it was the GP medium tent here and then our Quadcons, and then so you would have four feet, so it had to have been a medium tent because it had the [03:39:00] poles in the inside, the wood poles in the inside.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: And then you had to have enough area to walk around, and then sometimes we would pull up the tent flaps so that air would go through there because sometimes it would just be like a sauna in there and you had all that food being stored in that. And all that food is created and tested to stand up to be shelf stable at high temperatures, but I still feel like, I mean, if we're cooking it in boiling water it's sitting outside in a tin can in a hundred-and-twenty degrees, we were likely, you know, there were moments where you had to get that food cycled through 'cause it was just—it was sitting, boiling in its own cans. But then so you had all these shelves in here, and that's where you kept your, like, ten cans of, like, your canned vegetables, your desserts, which was, like, your butterscotch pudding, fruit cocktail. And then all your condiments? So, you had boxes of jelly, boxes of little peanut butter [03:40:00] packets, you know, salt and pepper packets. We had to monitor that because if you didn't, you would end up with a rodent problem. And so, they—everything has to be six inches off the ground on the palettes. But that was where that was.

And then across the way from that, where I was talking about our boxes of T rations, next to that were the palettes of water. Again, it's heat cat five, which, for people that don't know, that's, like, the highest level of heat index where you could possibly get—and you're a medic, so correct me if I'm wrong, but you could get a heat injury on a very quick timeframe. And as we go through the summer months, I'm actually realizing I actually think—I know I had, you know, suffered heat injury while I was out there. It was never medically checked, but I do remember very vividly not being able to have a conversation with somebody and being—just staring at them and telling them I know I'm supposed to be telling them something, but I couldn't recall. And being dizzy [03:41:00] and being clammy, and we all knew that. It had gotten really—I mean, it was really hot with the burners. One of the things I remember about the burners—I'll get back to the water on the palettes, don't let me forget that.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: The water—the burners, like I said, sat right at, like, three feet.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: That's right at my ovary level. So, it's like, so in other words, my hips sit right there. I say that because I had—I ended up with such severe ovarian problems out there while—but that I would get, like, little burns on my—because it would be so

hot. So sometimes you had to watch out that you didn't—you weren't actually physically on fire, but you were—the heat was actually causing, like, what would, like, a steam burn be?

Halaska: Mm, mmhmm.

Pino: So, because it was—you had the water that was steaming, but then you had the direct flame that was, like, within four [03:42:00] inches of your body at a constant. So, at one point we actually had to turn the burners off because we were burning our pelvic area.

Halaska: Like, through your uniform, basically?

Pino: Yeah, I mean, basically we were—it was getting so hot that we were like, so sensitive to the touch, and our uniforms, I mean, because you had, I think we would do makeshift. We would use our jacket as an apron around the front. But I mean, the—it was literally maybe, like, a four to six-inch difference between you and—the flame didn't come out. I think it's hard for people to understand. It's, like, a jet engine flame. 'Cause it's JP-8. Yeah, so it's just this constant, pffff. And it's the heat. It's not the flame. But you had that, and it did—so there would be, like, in between you and the burner, those little waves, you know, the heat waves. It was tough! And so, you had the water, and you would have to stay hydrated, but because of the water shortage we had—we could only issue out one [03:43:00] bottle of water per person per day, at a certain point. And when I say bottle, it was, like, the thirty-two-inch-tall bottle—thirty-two-ounce-tall bottle, and now that I'm supposed to be drinking whatever, sixty-four, eight-four ounces a day, thirty-two ounces is not anything. And I think they let us up to two bottles, but then people—so basically each time per day a representative from each platoon or unit could come and get their water from us. And they would come, and we—they would give us their list. And we would know per whatever, 501st Alpha Company had twenty-five people, so we could issue no more than fifty bottles. And so, you could do it by the case.

And I would remember we would issue them to them, they would be like, "You're going to give us more than this." And we'd have to say, "No, that's what we're allowed to issue." And they all thought we were—I was talking about the ethical distribution of [03:44:00] supplies, they all thought we were hoarding the water for ourselves. And we weren't. We actually we under, you know, a direct order that this is what we had. And then you could look at the supply that we had. We didn't have enough to give more bottles to everybody. And so, we'd issue out the issue, and then we'd tell them to come back at a certain period of time at night, and if we had excess, they could get a couple bottles of water. Or if somebody had a heat injury and was on a special—you know, there's, like, extra rations profiles, extra water profile, then of course we would distribute it. But it got so bad that we actually had to put a row of concertina wire around the palettes of water, and we had to have a guard. So, we were guarding against each other for the water, and it

was a twenty-four-hour guard post for us. So, in addition to doing everything else, we had to now guard the water. So, I have all these drawings that I did of, like, palettes of water with concertina wire around [03:45:00] it. And, like, we were at war with water. And it's the same with the water blivets in the desert. We finally got the water blivets, and they're filled up, and they made us put big pieces of boards on top of it and then signs that said, "Do not use this water." And everybody was starting at this water in the middle of the desert going, "Why, god? Why?"

So, we had that, and then we had a palette of non-potable water, some of the water bottles that you couldn't drink. And we would use that, and then one day, you know, because we would get up and do breakfast, and then after breakfast was served we had to get all the dishes, and we had the local nationals that were in charge of—they were our KPs, our kitchen patrol.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: So, they would wash all the dishes. So that was another tent. So, a tent next to the cooking tent had another three things of the boiling water and to wash your dishes. It's a three compartment. So, you have to wash, rinse, and then sanitize. And then on the side row were the water buffalos. [03:46:00] So we got a lot of our water out of our water buffalos, which we had to purify with iodine tablets on a daily basis, and measure the potable nature of the water.

Now, the water bottles that were non-potable, we were using. And it was in between breakfast and lunch, and we had finally got to, like, a stopping point where we were just letting things boil and cook. Everything was clean, and we were taking a little bit of a break, and we ended up in a water fight. So, we were—had some fun. Somebody came and squirted somebody with water, and the other one was like, "Oh no, you didn't just do that!" and got another bottle of water. And before we knew it, we were out on the lawn, visible to everybody, throwing water at each other. And it was all non-potable water, but as our chain of command liked to yell at us, perception is reality. What people saw was all of us wasting water, throwing, and then standing armed guard over the water saying, "No, you only get one bottle," as we're, like, holding empty bottles of water, [03:47:00] laughing and joking, wiping the water away [Halaska chuckles]. So, we got in trouble for that, our first sergeant came down.

We were actually [inaudible] with article fifteen that day, but it was hard because we're like, you know, "You guys are all behind closed doors with, like, air condition units pumping—using generator fuel pumping air into the palace walls or into the CP, and we're out here literally getting burned, and we used up, like, five bottles of non-potable water to fight and cool off." And that cooling off period probably lasted, like, ten minutes. Like, that was the saddest part was we were just, like, "Fine. Whatever! We'll go smoke another cigarette. I don't care." I think that's where I got my attitude from was this deployment of whatever, I

don't care. It's just, "Whatever. This is stupid. [Laughs] This is the most stupid thing ever." [03:48:00] like, [laughs] "I'm not even having fun anymore. This is dumb."

So that was kind of how it was set up, and then yeah, so the water, potable water was—came out of water bottles, even the water that we purified in the water buffalo wasn't really recommended for potable use. And then eventually they got the water system running on the palace grounds, so there was a water hose that we could at least—we didn't have to use the water bottles. We would use the hose to fill up all of these things that we had to get boiled. But that was not potable, to us.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: Our local nationals were drinking out of it, and all of us were like, "I love drinking out of the garden hose. Please!" And they're like, "You'll get sick." I'm like, "Oh screw it. Have you seen what we eat?" Like, that's—so we had T rations until July Fourth. And I know that exact date not because it's a national holiday but because it's a national [03:49:00] holiday yes, because we—Burger King donated, like, a thousand hamburger patties and lettuce and tomato. And it was the first time we were delivered a reefer van, a refrigerated van. And so, they—it's like a big shipping container that they parked on the street right next to us, and it ran on gas, so that was another generator that we had to fill up with gas. And, oh! So, all of our stoves ran on JP-8, but they had to be started through a generator. So the LMTV is hooked up with a special plug that you can turn on your vehicle and actually plug all your units into your car,

Halaska: Hmm!

Pino: Your LMTV, and so we would charge a lot of our elements with that. So, you had these big chords that would—we had the LMTV parked on the lawn, and then that also functioned as our dumpster. So, we would throw all of our trash in the back of the LMTV and go down to the burn pit, down to the end of the driveway. [03:50:00]

So [laughs] I love burn pit days. It was fun because then it was close to fire, again! It was really great. It was kind of a fun—if you got to burn pit detail, but how fun will it be next year? I don't know. But so, you'd have the LMTV parked on the lawn. You'd have all these, like, tentacles of chords coming out of it, and they would go to the burners, and they would charge. And then you would click this little, tick, tick, tick, and then fffwww, ignite them, and then you can unplug everything. You could leave them running plugged in for a while if you needed to. And then you took the cables off. And, oh, so the reefer van, so we had that instead of a generator we had the LMTV functioned as one of our generators. And then the reefer fan was parked up, and we got fresh food for the first time. We got the hamburger patties, and we got steaks. Like, T-bone steaks. Yeah, and lettuce and tomato. And I cried. I actually—[03:51:00] my—I got a gift box from my

father in the mail the same day. And it was full of New Mexico salsa. Yeah. And my friend Aguilar and I were like—we opened the box, and we both looked at each other, and we just, we cried. And we had eggs for the first time, real eggs. Because we had powdered eggs before, or T ration eggs, which were very green.

They could be very green if you didn't—but they— [Halaska chuckles] so we have all these pictures of the Fourth of July because then Fourth of July every— was the big, come reenlist on the palace lawn, the *Time* magazine, hundreds of people reenlisting on the back of the palace in Mosul. So, yay for the cooks! We hate—are inviting everybody in north Iraq to come to the palace for Fourth of July. So, we had a line of soldiers that started at the MKTs [03:52:00] and went around the palace. We served over a thousand soldiers that day. So, it was a lot of cooking, a lot of grilling of fresh food. And it was like a blessing and a curse. We had fresh food, which meant everybody's like, "They have burgers at the palace." But because of that we had to grill all of those burgers. And we didn't care. We're like, "I'll have two steaks!" And Aguilar and I sat with steak and eggs and the salsa on the steps of the MKT, and I took a bite, and I was like, "Praise Jesus. My god, this is—thank you god." And then I took another bite. I was like, "I'm in heaven. This is—oh, Jesus." And then everybody's like, "Are you okay?" I was like, "Get out of my way. Like, shut up."

And everybody, I mean, we have pictures of all of us at the grill. We had bell peppers and onions and the steaks on the grill. And I mean, it was that day with, like, your clothes where, I told you we had so much sweat that you had [03:53:00] the white salt outline. So, we had this, like, body armor of sweat on all of our shirts. So, you have this picture of us at the grill, like, drenched in sweat with a big smile and a spatula, flipping the steaks and pointing and, like, holing our hands out. Like, in, like, praising this meat on the—on a grill. And then but all of us have this, like, white crusty outline on everything [Halaska chuckles]. And we just, like—our clothes were walking themselves. They were just—it was so disgusting! It was so—we were so—like, we weren't even sweating anymore. I think we were literally just putting out crystalized salt. It was just—[laughs] it was—you were just crunchy. You were. [Laughs] You were crunchy. And then we served you food. You're welcome. [Laughs] It was that seasoning we use where we're just like, [makes cracking sound], seasoning the steak.

So, we cooked all of that food and probably overindulged. [03:54:00] There's probably—yeah, we overindulged. I mean, I remember. It was just like, [moans]. Because you also didn't have any refrigeration for, like, soda. Like, you didn't have soda for a long time, but when you could—'cause we used to have Fred at the perimeter. We had concertina wire up. We didn't have big walls yet, so we would go to the concertina wire, and we had Fred, who was an Iraqi man who would come with, like, supplies. And we would buy—I bought an RC Cola for \$20. And I hope people don't judge me, but I was like, "I'll give you \$20 for that ice-cold RC Cola." And he was like, "You got it." [Both laugh] And I was like, "Oh." And you could buy VCDs, which are like, DVDs on the VCD player out

there. You could buy a VCD player from Fred. Fred was also selling alcohol. We—there were many things we bought from Fred we probably shouldn't have bought from—we shouldn't have bought [03:55:00] anything from Fred really. But we did [Halaska chuckles]. And then we had—because we had Kool-Aid. That's really much—all you get in your T rats [rations] is you get iced tea pack—like iced tea. Like, you can make iced tea, like, Lipton instant or Lipton tea bags as well, or you could make the different fruit beverages, or the powdered fruit drink. So... mostly the red Kool-Aid or purple Kool-Aid.

And I hated making the Kool-Aid days. That was when I got—because you're talking about the potable water. Then we had to pour in the water into the containers and then mix it with a big spoon. It was a pain in the neck. Ugh. I hated it when I was a kid. I hated it in the Army. And then—because you never make it right for people. I will say this, people are very particular about their powdered fruit drink mixture. [Halaska laughs] And I am not a fan of the response that people give you when you incorrectly mix the Kool-Aid [Halaska chuckles]. [03:56:00] I would rather be on dish detail than make the Kool-Aid [Halaska chuckles]. And I also have a thing against Kool-Aid, making the Kool-Aid because my first sergeant was trying to get my goat one time in formation in garrison before we deployed. And I was trying to be on the culinary arts team and was trying to, like, talk up that cooks aren't just stupid people that couldn't pass a test, and that's why they're cooks. That there are some really smart people that are cooks. Like, I was trying to defend the history and the reputation of cooks from World War One to present, that was me. I was like, "Cooks are people too!" And yeah, that went over really well. And so, my first sergeant, in formation in front of everybody, got into my face, and he said, "I guess we need to acknowledge our cooks." And then he walked forward. And then he walked back and looked me in the eye and said, "'Cause they make some really good Kool-Aid." And then he walked away. And I was just like, "I'm gonna [inaudible]." That was, like, the worst formation for me ever [03:57:00] because he was just trying to get me to, like—he was firing me up.

I think, now that I know that first sergeant, I'm like, he was just trying to get me to stand up for myself. 'Cause he thought it was funny and—I didn't think it was funny at the time. I got really defensive over the Kool-Aid comment--

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: Which, every—in which case everybody was like, rolling their eyes at me even more. Like, "Chose your battles." [Both laugh] Like, what are—like, what are you—I'm like, I don't have very many. I'm a cook. That's the whole point. Like, I don't get an opportunity to be taken seriously, and now I really am never going to get taken seriously. Until you're in Iraq and it's a hundred-and-twenty degrees and you want your freaking Kool-Aid. Then who do you come to? This girl. And then you complain to me. I don't think so. That's—Kool-Aid and people and their Kool-Aid are very real.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: And then you had orange juice. So, you can make—orange juice came in this weird can, and it was this weird concentrate. For having a restriction on water, we sure had a lot of things that required water. [03:58:00] [Laughs] So that was one of the things the cooks hoarded, was the cans of orange juice and the Kool-Aid packets, and that was so that they could mix with their Fred beverages [laughs]. So, if you went to the supply cook area at any time at night you probably would see them with their, like, water bottles of red Kool-Aid or orange juice. And, I didn't partake in that until later on [Halaska chuckles]. And then once that began, it's a whole new world.

Halaska: Oh, just—so you talked a little bit about having local nationals at—working as your KPs and also, I guess, Fred [Pino laughs]. What were kind of, like, the direction from command with interacting with local nationals, and how did you kind of decide who to hire? Like, who was in charge of that?

Pino: Did I talk about the local nationals in Baghdad [03:59:00] and not being able to take off my jacket and...I don't remember.

Halaska: I can't remember.

Pino: Well, in Baghdad, when we first hired local nationals, the men were not respon—the local national men were not responsive to the females in the group. The females in the group were told that we were hiring local nationals as KPs, but the females were not to have any involvement in them, in that. And that was, like, that's not productive. And I think I might have already told that story, so I'm gonna—

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: Probably segue off to Mosul. And if I didn't, that's regrettable, but I think I did. So when we were in Mosul, you know, in Baghdad we weren't allowed to take our jackets off in the hot weather. When they realized we could interact with the men, we weren't allowed to, like, discard our jackets and just be in our t-shirts like the guys, which was really unfair and unfortunate. [04:00:00] And where I started kind of getting a chip on my shoulder, like, I'm a guest in their country, but I'm an American soldier, so I should follow the same rules as American soldiers, not as the cultural difference of the—we can have a conversation about the cultural, respect for culture. But I think that was a cop out for what they were trying to do at that point.

When we got to Mosul, we were then in charge of KPs again. We were not involved with the hiring process. We were basically assigned a set group of men. And the—I'm trying to think approximately how many we had. We had

[redacted1] who was our translator, and [redacted1]—I got to know my Iraqi men really well. We worked hand-in-hand day in and day out. And I had conversations with them. By this point, the whole Mission Accomplished had already been said. We were in what we—what I believed, a peacekeeping mission. Just as Gen. [04:01:00] Petraeus told us to do, your job is not to know the whole mission. Your job is to do the job you were trained to do and stay in your lane. And so, we were pretty much cooking. That was our job, to cook. It was a much better speech than that, but that's essentially what I got out of it, is that the mission cannot be successful if you don't do the job that you were trained to do. So, if you do your job successfully, the larger mission will be—yes. It's—whatever.

Halaska: Yup.

Pino: So [redacted1] could speak English, so he functioned as their translator, and I don't—I may be getting the names wrong, and that's okay for me if I do, because nobody needs to know their real names. And he mentioned to me that he was a helicopter pilot in Saddam's army. So, he—we were right next to the landing—the helipads, so he would often [04:02:00] watch the helicopters, which is good and bad. And then [redacted2] was really probably my favorite guy out of all of 'em. However, I think [redacted2]'s mom was, like, sending food. He would—she would send food with him to share with me, and I think they were courting me [both laugh]. But he was an amazing, soulful, wonderfully kind person. And he's, like, crystal green eyes, but just so sweet. Just, a really beautiful person. And then you had a couple other guys. And I get so sad. I'm starting to—[redacted3]. [redacted3] was working with us, and he was like—it was really interesting because they had the same sort of dynamics as our own, like, unit had.

Like, all the cooks, we each had our own little distinct personalities. And we all had our own strengths and weaknesses, and we all had our own [04:03:00] set of very specific types of work ethic. From completely lazy, I shouldn't say worthless, but to, like, the person that you're really like, you could ask them to do it a thousand times, and they're going to be like, Whatever, and they didn't care that you were pissed off that they didn't do anything. So you had that level all the way up to the person that was working themselves to death because they were like, "We gotta get it done!" Like, manic almost, right. I was—probably fell more on the, like, manic, got work, work, work person but still had my bouts of laziness. And so, they fell into that same sort of pattern of personality and [redacted3] was, like, the workhorse but comedian jokester. And he got along really well with, like, Alaman and Aguilar, who were also that same sort of, like, brute force. Like, they're the, like, manpower that came, but were, like, the silly—Like, they were twenty-three, twenty-five-year-old males, you know. That sort of, like, immature sense of humor but is—you can't [04:04:00] function without it.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: And you don't want to get them mad either, and [redacted3], they all got along really well. So, they all became, like, best buds, like, and Harley too. He was part of that too.

But you needed something done, [redacted3] was your guy. But he also didn't take shit from you. So that was a good thing. Well, my chain of command would not believe that that was a good thing, but that's—and then we had couple that didn't speak English at all, so I learned Arabic during this time from my guys to kind of communicate with them. And one that really did not wanna be there. He was pissed off at the world, and the only way you could get him to do anything was, [redacted1] would talk to him. But he was just, like, "Whatever." He knew this was slave labor. Like, he knew. Because they were getting paid, like, two to three dollars a week [Halaska sighs heavily]. And, [04:05:00] you know, we were told, "Yeah, but two dollars a week is more than they were ever making when they're—" And I'm like, "I don't know how that can be." But the other part that was shitty about that was, that they were making, like, two to three dollars a week, and whatever their foreman was, whoever their foreman was, often--not necessarily in our section, but in all the—because supply had their own set of guys, the mechanics had their own set of guys, it was all across the base. Different groups had different foremans, and some of the foremans were corrupt, and so they would take the majority of the money, and not distribute it to the guys the way they were supposed to. And they had to come and check in every day. They did not live on post.

Halaska: Mm, mmhmm.

Pino: Until we had a restaurant, and then our chefs lived on post. But—

Halaska: Were the foremen, were they, like, contractors or the Iraqi guys as well?

Pino: They were not contractors at that point. I guess we could get to that in a minute because that [04:06:00] does happen. So, keep track of my time because I think the contractor part is probably really important. They were not. They were—their foremen were local nationals as well. And the—the reason they were foremen was, again, they were the ones that could likely speak the most English. And could show leadership to gather the guys and discipline them and follow the rules, and in which we could communicate the way this worked to them and they could communicate it down to their guys. So, every day they would come in. And we weren't ever privileged to see the process. I mean, I think I witnessed it once, but I didn't know exactly how it worked. They were all issued IDs with their name and an identification number, and they were given that ID when they went. So, they'd come to the gate guard. And at this point we still only had one gate guard point of entrance. Now there's multiple, like four, five. At this point, I mean, we had, like, one [04:07:00] row of concertina wire and then, like, one gate guard. I mean, it was the band, our 101st band were our gate guards. Which, the band gave concerts at Mosul every Saturday night at the palace! Live at the palace.

So, they would come in, and there was a shack specifically for the local nationals. They would line up, and at the beginning they were allowed to have, like, one bag with, like, their lunch or whatever in it. And that bag would get searched, and then they would get their ID. And they would issue their ID, so while they were on post they would have it, and then when they left they had to give the ID back. It was a lot. I would say there was probably a lot more accountability of them coming in and out than us. And so, they would come through. And, if there were ever complaints on the exterior or interior, of them, they would—it would be noted at the gate, and if they had been fired, many times if they got fired we wouldn't know about it until they just weren't at work one day. And we were like, [04:08:00] "Where's Allah?" And they were like, "He got fired yesterday." We're like, "Why'd he get fired?" And that came to become a problem with me. So—and I'll talk about that. I don't wanna just, like, bury the lead on that. But they would come through, and then they'd come and report to us at a certain time, and I honestly don't—I want to say they got to us probably every morning, probably like eight, eight or nine, and we had already been boiling water and everything. We would have to start our day and get the breakfast going.

And then they would get their assignments for the day, which were always the same thing. At the beginning of the day while we were in service, we would split—the cooks had a rotational shift. So, half of the cooks would always get selected to go on log pack, so they would—logistical packs. They would go to the airfield to get all of our supplies, and sometimes they would have to escort— [04:09:00] sometimes it was a longer journey than others. They'd spend the whole day there because supply had to do—have a meeting with, you know, the chain. They had to have their logistics meetings and with other components or division meetings, what have you. So, it depended on who we were attached to on convoy, and it was usually a six-to-eight-vehicle convoy that went from the palace to the airfield. So it was about a ten to fifteen-minute journey, depending, and you went through the city, and you crossed the bridge and the river, over the river, over the Tigris to get to the airfield. And the main IED—the IEDs started becoming a problem toward the end of the tour. But the main choke points were once you crossed the bridge and you entered into the, like, downtown area, and you had to make a left to get to one of—there was two or three entry points. One was right after the bridge on the river. Like, [04:10:00] a couple blocks down you took a left and went down that street. Or you would go further into town, take another left and go, and that was where they ended up changing all the entry points.

And you'd go along this, like, berm hill side. And they had built it up a little bit more on the perimeter, and then there was multiple entry points at that area. And that's where the little kids would stand and throw rocks at you. But so, when we would go on log pack, most of the time it was Harley, Aguilar, and Alaman. The guys went on log pack. Biffle went. I got pulled out of log pack a lot because I was painting murals. So, that's one of the things I talk about, like, it kept me from going on these dangerous log packs, but it also made me feel guilty because I was

really privileged not to have to go on these log packs. And it also probably weakened me because I wasn't as confident when I did have to go on them. These guys were doing it on a—such a high level of repetition that [snaps twice] [04:11:00] they had it down. And so, when I did go, number one, they didn't trust me because I wasn't with them all the time, so I was a scared piece of crap. And then—not that I presented myself as such, but you know, they had their crew.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: And I can't blame them for it. And so, you'd go on log pack, and then the other half of the cooks would stay back and prepare the meals. And it was a rotation. I don't remember exactly how many times a week we did log packs. I know it was multiple times. But I also know that sometimes the log packs took a substantial amount of staffing away, so it did make it harder for those that had to stay back and cook. So, that's where our local nationals really came to be helpful for us, in the loading and unloading of the trucks when they came back. We would be preparing the meals, and then they would get there about nine or whatever, and then they'd have—they usually had to finish all the dishes the night before. [04:12:00] And dishes was minimal because, again, we were using aluminum can, boiled aluminum can foods, which also became the serving container. So, all of those serving containers had to be emptied out into the trash, put on the back of the truck, and then the truck would go to the burn pit. And they would get on the back of the truck and shovel it into the burn pit. Sometimes you get on the back of the truck with them. But it's really funny because a lot of times it was just, like, individual. Like, one of us would take the truck with two local nationals in the truck with you. And I was just thinking, we didn't really follow the buddy system for trash rounds. Hm. Interesting. That was really not smart of us.

But, we would do that. And so, they had to deal a lot with our trash and our mess. And then they had to wash all the dishes. And again, you have to boil the water for the dishwashing. And it doesn't maintain the temperature, and to try to sanitize, you were [04:13:00] on limited water, so the sanitization sink was already all cloudy by, like, halfway through. And it was a lot of slop. So, it was shitty work for them. I'm not gonna lie. And then we would take chai breaks, like tea breaks. And they would share a meal with us, and they wanted to eat our MREs, and they would trade us their, like, fresh, like, fasoulia or bamia. Such good food, for their MRE—for our MREs, and we're like, [makes incredulous sound] “Okay.” And then T rations, this is getting back to the whole entry booth fire—not fire. T rations you would prepare, and if you didn't use them, so you got through your service line, and you still had twenty T rations left in the stove. You had to take them out, wipe them off, mark the date on it, and you were allowed to use them for one more meal. So, you could [04:14:00] reheat them and use it one more time. If after two meal services they were still not used, then you have to mark a big “X” on them and discard 'em. So essentially, we were throwing away cans of good food.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: And at the end of the day, some of our men would say, “Do you mind if I take some of these home with me?” And I was like, “Yeah, go feed your family,” right? So, they would put their bags, like, two or three of the T rations in their bags, and they’d ask if they could have some of the condiments that were just sitting on the shelves, like the Lipton tea or the jelly, and I’m like, “Take it.” Like the—they loved the, like, Nestle cocoa powder packets and the Lipton tea packets and the T rations. So, I would send them away with food, not too much but some. And come to find out, one—couple of our guys got fired because they searched their bags on the way out, [04:15:00] and they had T rations in there. And they accused them of stealing. And we were like, “They didn’t steal! Like, we gave it to them.” And they didn’t want to hear it. They had already set—they were trying to west a precedent. And so, we got in trouble for giving them food. And I was like, “They were taking it to, like—I’m—like, they’re talking to me about their families.” And I know I’m naïve. I know I want to be hopeful, and maybe they were just telling me stories, but, like, I don’t care. If you’re telling me your family’s starving, and I have this food that I’m just going to throw in a burn pit, take the freaking food. Like, I don’t care. And the—so they said, “No, if another one of your workers gets caught with food, they will be fired.” And I’m like, “This is ridiculous.” And they said, “And, if a food—there’s no longer this black X to discard it. You will take a knife, and you will puncture [04:16:00] the center of the T ration.” They said, “Now, if you’re worker wants to take a T ration that you’ve punctured so you know that it has to be consumed that evening, then they can have one, but it has to have—it has to be punctured.”

So, on top of everything when we got them, we’d have to puncture all the food, and look at these men and then throw it in the trash. Like, [makes puncture sound] “It’s open. Sorry, you can’t have it.” And throw it away. So, it was just—I was, like, at this point where I couldn’t. It was ridiculous. And I would tell my guys. They’d be like, “Please, Misses. Please, Pino. Let us take this.” And I’d be like, “You guys can’t. You will get fired. And honestly, I don’t even know if being fired is the only thing that’s gonna happen.”

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: Like, “I want your family to eat, but—” [04:17:00] They’re like, “I don’t care. Cut it open. I’ll take it that way.” And I’m like, “I don’t know what to tell you man, like—” And we had one guy that went ahead and took the chocolate packets, the hot chocolate packets. He got fired. And, they told us—and I keep saying “they.” I can’t remember who in my chain of command was telling us, informing us. But, that what was happening was that they were taking these items, and they were finding a lot of these items for sale on the black market. So, they were going and selling them, selling American T rations, or out there selling it, and they—were couldn’t have our equipment and our supplies being sold on the black market.

And I'm thinking, "Well, if you paid them a living wage, maybe they wouldn't be selling our supplies on the black market, but whatever."

It's not like my country captain chicken was going to break the secrets of national security! [Laughs] I just, [04:18:00] I'm just saying. And so, yeah. And you know, we ended up, we did have—we had a rotation of workers for the most part. They all were the same workers for the whole time I was there. The one—we—toward the second part of the tour, we got this guy who was another one that didn't want to have anything to do with us, and he didn't want to deal with women. One of the guys that was just really angry I think didn't like taking orders from a woman.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: Is what it boiled down to. But he was a biology professor at the University of Mosul. And so, I was really confused at the time why we had a helicopter pilot, a biology professor. You know, this person, that person. And there are—the history is starting to be presented to us. And I'm learning about De-Ba'athification, and I'm learning about different parts of Gen. Petraeus' strategy. So, I don't [04:19:00] have a lot to offer other than, as I'm learning this history, I'm saddened to think that some of the men that were put in our charge possibly could have been part of this process.

Halaska: What was this process? What is De-Ba'athification?

Pino: So, I don't—I want to do my research again--

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: -- before I talk about it. But I believe it was, like, the difference between the Ba'ath party and—I want to read up.

Halaska: Okay, okay.

Pino: Because I'm going to sound really ignorant on it because I haven't read up on it in a while. But essentially, it was like, if you were part of the Ba'ath party, they remove you from the element to help move along the democracy of what we were trying to do out there.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: And so, as such, they ended up placing those people within their ranks to continue to monitor them but also, like, as a form of punishment. And so—I, again, I want to do more research on it, but it started to make sense to me with why certain personnel were now working [04:20:00] for me under my charge. But, because of the position we were in. But it worries me that if that is the case, were we in much more—in greater danger than we were led to believe? Not that they would tell us,

“Hey, you’re in extreme danger,” but I got in trouble for—I got pulled aside, and I was told that I was being too nice to the local nationals. That I had become too good of friends with them, and that I was making myself vulnerable and making my colleagues vulnerable. And that I was being really naïve to the reality of the situation. That I needed to be careful, and I needed to distance myself from that level of personal connection with them. That, I was told that while they [04:21:00] seem like they’re on friends on the surface, they still are, you know, nationals of the enemy country.

And I’m thinking—I was like, “But aren’t we here to help them? Like, we’re not fighting against the people of Mosul, right? Like, I thought—I didn’t think that was—there’s no, like, Iraqi army and Iraqi uniforms that were out there. Like, we don’t know who the enemy is. I get that, but at the same time, aren’t we hiring them to help them? Isn’t that what you’re telling us? Like, we’re hiring them to help them and to rebuild their economy, yet you’re telling me that we’re hiring them and that I need to treat them like dogs, and I need to constantly point my weapon at them. That doesn’t make any sense to me. And it doesn’t make any sense that, you know, they just want their kids to be able to play outside and not have a curfew, and not be worried about getting blown up outside. And they just want a job, and they just want food to put on their [04:22:00] table.” And he said, “Yeah, but they’re being kind to you during the day, and at night they’re blowing up your convoys. So, like, you can’t—you want to trust them.” And I remember, I won’t say who told me this, I know who told me it.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: But, “You want to believe that it’s all genuine, but you can’t think that way. And in order—” And it was like, “I don’t want you to be compromised. In the event that something happens, we are worried that you are not going to be prepared to do what is needed to be done.” And I said, “If you are telling me, if we get attacked or we get—if the perimeter gets breached, that I’m going to protect the Iraqi man and let DeSousa get shot or whatever. You know, I’ve thought about that.” Like, “I’ve thought about that. Do I [04:23:00]—will I have to make that tough decision? Like, I don’t know what I would do, but I firmly believe that I know my role here as an American soldier and that I need to protect my fellow soldiers.”

But I—it’s funny I think now—back then I was like, “No, I’m ready to do what it takes to protect my soldiers.” Now I’m—I can see their point of view too because I honestly think if I think you’re actually trying to persecute this person for not doing anything, I don’t know what I would have done. But at the time I was like, “I would be fine. Like, if I had to point my weapon at [redacted3] to get Aguilar out of the tent, I would do that. If I had to shoot him to do it, I would probably do it.” And he’s like, “Yeah. [Laughs] See, I don’t think I believe you. And that’s okay. Like, we’re—that’s why we’re talking about this. But you need to—either you need to, like, fix this, or we need to, like, remove you from the situation.”

And like, [04:24:00] kind of lightbulb just went off in my head because, huh. Huh. I was taken off of that, and I was put in charge of the new restaurant down at the wife's palace.

Halaska: Down at—oh, the wife's palace?

Pino: Yeah, I'll tell you about that in a minute. But I just realized—

Halaska: Okay, but yeah. Okay.

Pino: Yeah, so I said, "Okay, fine, whatever." And I got really pissed, and I wrote a letter home, and we had just—or first convoy had got hit by an IED. It was in August, so it was—because I just wrote a story about this, so I had been reviewing all my letters. And it happened on August 3, 2003, I wrote a letter home about the fact that we were all susceptible to this war and that somebody in our unit got hurt. And there wasn't more I could tell my family about it, but the war is real. It's still going. It's not—we're—

Halaska: And it was one of your log packs?

Pino: Yeah. It was one of our supply log packs, and we [04:25:00]—A Train, Sgt.—what was his last name? His last name started with A, and he was hit. He got purple heart. He ended up getting shrapnel in his leg. And Wilford, who's still a really good friend of mine, she was on that convoy. Um--yeah.

Halaska: Would you be able to walk me through that day?

Pino: I can't really remember the day. I remember it happened. I remember that we had been—had scares before, but they were—I told you about the two entry points.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: It was the first entry-point. And they had started—so when you turn along the entry point you would go kind of through the town, and there were, like, these houses, and I have this picture, because they were starting to put IEDs in, like, trash piles, or there was a dead cow on the side of the road. So, they had put a IED in the carcass. And I—so I had this picture, as we're going through on a log pack. I was not on this log pack that got hit, but-- [04:26:00]

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: I'm describing one of my log packs in the week up to that.

Halaska: Yup.

Pino: And the—so I had taken a picture of the carcass, the cow in, like, the middle of the road. There was, like, these emaciated cows out there. It was bizarre. A cow under a palm tree in the desert. It was very bizarre to me. But there were piles of trash, and that's what we were starting to be told to look out for, was potholes, piles of trash, dead carcasses, that kind of thing. And so, you go through this little town, and then you—You're constantly scanning. 'Cause they—the—when you get into, like, downtown Mosul, there's little higher—it's like Madison. There's not high-rises, but enough, and then we were told to scan the rooftops. Because at the time, the IEDs were being set off by cellphones and, like, pagers. So, if you saw somebody on a rooftop with a cellphone, you were supposed to, like, alert everybody in your convoy. So, that's why I still scan, to this day. You're constantly looking up, looking at anybody [04:27:00] that's on the rooftops, anybody that's, like, huddled in groups on the side. People on cell phones was just a really big thing. And so, as you turned through this neighborhood you're just scanning rooftops and walkways and stuff. And then as you got closer to the airfield—I don't remember what unit was that was guard post there. But they had a big tank, so it was big tank, its barrel pointing down at you facing out as you pulled into that gate guard. And then you'd pull in, and you'd show your ID.

And as you're probably like, I wouldn't say it was a full mile. I would say it was, like, the block, like a street block leading into the gate, they started—the locals started setting up, like, little farmer's market posts. So, they had little areas that you could stop and pick up a blanket. Like, you know, you see those blanket sellers on the side of the road. They had vendors set up with, like, buy a blanket. Those blankets are [04:28:00] so soft. Why anybody would stop before they got to the gate guard, I don't know. But they started selling that. They would have, like, soda and candy vendors. And, it's just like you entered a little farmer's market before you got to the—And I don't know if—I think the vendors were set up for the local nationals to get stuff before they went on to work on the airfield. I don't know. I still don't know. I don't know. But—

Halaska: Maybe to pick stuff up for soldiers.

Pino: Yeah.

Halaska: If they were selling stuff to 'em.

Pino: I just don't know they were allowed to be there.

Halaska: Right? Yeah. [Chuckles] yeah.

Pino: That's—because there was a PX on post. There was a ton. There were b[redacted4]s. Like, it was already established.

Halaska: Oh, okay.

Pino: There were b[redacted4]s. There were what we—we called them haji marts. I know you're not supposed to say that, but that's—we had them.

Halaska: Called them hot shops. Anyway.

Pino: Yeah, and so, you know, we had internet cafes. You didn't need that. Wasn't like we were doing community engagement [chuckles], you know. [04:29:00] It was the—a really good example of creative place making but a really bad location for a military security operation. It—so, I say that because that was the path they took that day. And I remember us talking about these vendors out there. And you know, the log packs had got to the point where, people were so bored with things not happening, sadly. That they were—the guys were getting really—they were—I can only say this about, like, young men in the Army that join at, like, eighteen years old, right? So, like, the eighteen to twenty-five-year-old male in the Army is essentially, what I always tell people, that's their college years. This is their fraternity. So, if you think about all the antics and craziness in a fraternity [04:30:00] and then put a weapon in their hands, and a war... What do you have? So, I served with a lot of really good people, but it doesn't mean that good people don't do stupid things. And at one point, you know, somebody fired their weapon just to fire. And, fired it out into a crowd, you know? And it—the accountability of that—because what happens is after a course of time, you on these log packs, you don't need the higher chain of command. You empower your junior ranking. So, these convoys were filled with E4s, E3s, PV2s. You might have an E5 or an E6 as a convoy commander. Most of the time it was, like, a pretty experienced E4. I think, every once in a while you might have an E5. But the E6 or E7s, if they were on the convoys, it was 'cause they had business to do at the airfield. And everybody was like, [04:31:00] [groans] "Oh, man." Unless—I mean, we had cool—we had some pretty cool E6s, E7s, but yeah.

So, you know, it just, people were kind of getting antsy. And, I don't know what happened with the convoy. I know they went down that path, and I know they got hit. When you get hit, then you have to pull a perimeter, and when you pull a perimeter—and I know Wilford[??] was part of the pulling a perimeter, and... She's going to come up. She's actually supposed to come up here this month to visit. And I want to, actually, interview her. Because there's—she's my kind of go-to when I'm verifying stories that I remember and I'm not sure if I'm remembering them truthfully. She's kind of my go-to. But I know it was—it still affects her this day. Obviously. He did get a purple heart. He was fine, but not initially. He remained with us in Iraq for the rest of the tour. I don't believe he was required to go on convoys until we convoyed [04:32:00] back to Kuwait. But we—our convoy got hit, and then another one of the G—I think that was the same week that a sergeant major got ambushed and killed. His driver got killed, and he got killed. And they were—it was literally, like, a two-vehicle convoy, and they got ambushed at a streetlight and point blank, just killed.

So, it was one of those where we were—as they told us, “Don’t get complacent.” They constantly said that, it was the one time we actually, I think, that we felt we had gotten a little complacent. And that was in August, and, you know, if you look at the evolution of things, we had already been in country so long. We got there in, you know, in February, crossed the border in March. But, so much had happened up to that point that everything was just a day to day by that time. And you could really see the war starting to change in terms of the realities of, we weren’t just going in [04:33:00] and coming out. By, you know, by April we were like, “Wait, we’re not going home? The war is over, we’re not going home?” By May it was, “Okay, now we’re on this humanitarian peacekeeping mission.” By June it was, “Why are we up north again?” We’re up north, and now it seemed like up north was fine and peaceful. But now it’s starting to get a little bit more heated. And by July it was, “Let’s reenlist everybody, and let’s get this—let’s earn the love of the people and hire the locals and rebuild their economy and rebuild the factories and rebuild the water plants and rebuild their power plants and buy generators and ambulances and big farming meetings that—” And by August, IEDs had started creeping in and more ambushes were happening. More convoys were getting hit. More [04:34:00] EODs [explosive ordinance disposal], just different things were happening. It started to, like, kind of rumble up again. We were like, “Okay, I need to be a little bit more aware.”

So, August I—was a really tough month. August was just tough because so many different things. Letters from home were not coming back the way you wanted them to, you know. People had started—they had finally established midtour leave. So, this was a brand new war. Of course we were in Afghanistan, but they—we hadn’t been in a place long enough for them to establish midtour leave policies since, you know, Vietnam. So, they created midtour leave, but there were only certain slots. And those of us that knew that others had just, their wives had just had babies back home. Like, some of them, they, like, had literally just had a child. [04:35:00] Other people had little kids back home, were married and little kids. So, all the single soldiers pretty much, like, gave up their slots for the people that needed to see their families. And I still think that’s right. I mean, if there was a crisis, then absolutely, but, like, Biffle, her daughter, left her daughter in custody to her sister. And actually, I just said her name, so I’m not going to put all her business out there, but there was an emergency leave she needed to go home for. And that was totally legit, you know. And I’m glad she had the opportunity to go resolve that.

Because the people that didn’t have the opportunities sat out there with all of these familial issues that we—nobody really knew. We confided so much in one another, but sometimes you really didn’t know the reality of what was happening back home. And when that was brought to the surface, the amount of empathy both men and women showed out there was unbelievable. When you realize your [04:36:00] spouse has spent all of your deployment money on drugs. When you realize your family home has burned down, you know. When you realize that your spouse literally took all your money and left and you don’t even know where

she's at, or you lost custody of your child and didn't even know it. Or, your child was left with your mother-in-law that only speaks Spanish, and when you came home, the child speaks Spanish and doesn't know you as their mother. Like, those kinds of dynamics, I think, are the part that a lot of people don't realize. And they don't realize that that—those are conversations that people are having right now, as we speak. Not to mention, you know, the single soldiers that are out there and are trying to kinda deal with that and figuring it out. And, you know, just different things.

But yeah, August was just really tough, and I think [04:37:00] we were also a little bit more vigilant on our convoys. We had already been that way. I know it made me a little bit more paranoid, but we got—I'm all over the place, I'm sorry.

Halaska: Oh, you're good.

Pino: We got—I was on a convoy coming back from the airfield, and Sgt. Ross was the driver, and he was pretty cool. He's gung-ho, and he was one of those guys that was like, skateboarder, death metal rebel. Like, has, like, the punk tattoo, like the black flag. Was like, he was a go to war or go to jail. Like, he'd gotten involved in drugs, and he was just like a rocker. He got into the Army and was still, like, a misfit, constant article fifty—article fifteen. And something snapped right before we deployed, like, I don't know if they, like, gave him an ultimatum, but he—or somebody found way to channel his energy into a way that he could retain who he was, but be more productive. And he became this, like, amazing [04:38:00] sergeant, but almost sadly he kind of went on the other end of the spectrum. Became this, like, conservative almost, like, one of those weird warrior mentalities where, like, "I'm a soldier first." And it, like, consumed him. And it didn't really start to turn into that until the end of the deployment. But the beginning of the deployment he still had that kind of balance of rebel rocker meets sergeant. And so, you—he had—you trusted him 'cause you know he was, like, he had his moments of I don't give a shit, and when he believed in something, it was probably a good thing to believe in. I don't know what that means, but that's how I felt.

So anyway, he was just kind of cool shit, and he was my driver. And there was, like, four vehicles. And we were almost—when you get around to head up to the palace, there's, like, one of those old sculptures. Like, with the hand coming out of the ground. And I rarely saw that one. I don't know why. But you pull—you go through, and you're on the highway, and [04:39:00] from the highway you could see where they were building a brand-new mosque. I think the mosque finally got complete, and I think they blew it up. I'm not sure. But you could see they had the, like—they were building the mosque, and it was really amazing to see. And so, there were a series of overpasses that you had to go under. And there was, like, one that had, like, a soccer field to the left of it. And the overpasses were deadly 'cause they would hold a grenade, and you—when you went under an overpass you had to go in one direction and come out the opposite direction because they

would—that was also where the wires were at. And, so overpasses were always, like, scanning, scanning, scanning. And then the—so you—once you got through those series of overpasses, then you went through, like, another jungle sorta area, and it was really beautiful. But I would always scan inside the trees, and you could sometimes see little, like, structures within the trees.

Then you got through that, and then you could start to see the wall that was the perimeter of the palace grounds. ‘Cause it sits up on the hill. And so, [04:40:00] as you get through this it looks almost like—it almost looks like Colorado, actually. There’s just, like, this weird wet concrete wall with, like roads. And there’s a specific area in Colorado that I know looks like that, so that’s why I’m saying that. Not all of Colorado looks like that, but, like, this suburbia next to highway, kind of. And then so when you get through that area you’re almost there. Like, you have to go to the end, and then the [inaudible] Boulevard you do a U-turn. Then you come back around, and then there’s, like, an offramp curve, and then it gets you in to get to the entry level.

So, we had got through the underpasses, and this was probably a couple—it was fairly close to when they got hit. And I heard a pffff. And we kind of, like, stuttered a little bit. And I looked at Ross, and he looked at me, and I was like, “I’m gonna count vehicles!” And I—because we were the lead vehicle. And I just was—I looked at my mirror, and I was [04:41:00] like, “One, two,” and I was just counting out loud. And I was just counting vehicles. And I was like, “I can’t see the final one.” And then finally, somebody—had swerved over, and then I finally saw it. But there was this moment of we—it was like, “What the hell was that?” He was like, “I don’t know what that was.” I’m like, “Did you hear it? I’m not crazy, right?” And he’s like, “I heard it.” And I was like, “I’m counting vehicles. I think I see all the vehicles. I don’t know. Do you see anything? Do you see any--?” Any it was just—Because we didn’t have radios to communicate with each other.

Halaska: Mm, mmhmm.

Pino: In the other vehicles. So, it was literally like, you had to figure it out. And you don’t want to pull over if you didn’t get hit or—and we know something went off. We don’t know what it was or how close it was, but it did make vehicles swerve.

So, that was the closest I ever came. And that was frightening as hell, so I can’t imagine what—I mean, I think about the guys that are in, like Afghanistan and even the convoys in Iraq now. And the amount of IEDs that are so [04:42:00] frequent, like, to get over that stress, I don’t know. I don’t know if people really do.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: The anxiety for me has dissipated a little bit, but my first few years, even on midtour leave I—my brother was like, “Are you okay?” He was driving me

through to Santa Fe, and Santa Fe looks like Iraq. So, like, we were driving, and there was, like, a car pulled over. Because the other part was broken down cars

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: Is how you would either get ambushed or broken-down cars would explode. And so, I was just—I didn't realize how much I was on alert constantly. We were under an overpass and stuck in traffic with my dad, and I had a panic attack, and my dad, who was military, was like, "Are you okay?" I was like, "We have to get out from underneath this. We cannot—" And the rumbling of the cars. I freaked out.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: But anyway, that was IEDs and that kind of stuff. I don't remember what else we need to talk about. [04:43:00]

Halaska: Mmhmm, that's okay. That was August, and then we're kind of starting to heat up.

Pino: Yeah, August.

Halaska: So—yes?

Pino: Local nationals. Got the chuck, got in trouble for it. Was really pissed about it. And then one of the local nationals that we were in charge of, this was Thanksgiving, that sort of changed my demeanor. I had to kind of compromise and figure out a way that I was going to do this. I asked to be on more convoys after that. But I realized that was kind of a turning point because it made me start looking at my men differently.

Halaska: Yup.

Pino: And my men were starting to—I think everybody was just getting tired and frustrated. They were starting to act a little differently. And then we hired [redacted4]. And [redacted4] is a really weird story because by this point—at some point during all of that they—I had to paint Gen. Helmick's mural. So [04:44:00] Gen. Helmick's living quarters were right down the hill from us. And he brought me up to paint the concrete blast barriers in front of his living area. So, I was assigned to do that for a while, and after that assignment they said, "Okay, you're gonna—we're—we fixed up the area by the wife's palace," which was down the hill, and there was a swimming pool there. And they fixed the swimming pool and made the swimming pool functional, and then they had designed a restaurant, and they were bringing—and going to put a restaurant in that would be run by Iraqi chefs. And they hired a bunch of Iraqi, like, legitimate chefs studied in the Middle Eastern Cordon Bleu. And then put them in there with

a wait staff, and sous-chefs, and everything. And I was selected. I had just got promoted to E4, and I was selected to—I say I was selected. They assigned me to be in charge of, kind of—you know, [04:45:00] it's funny, Harley was put in charge of that first. Huh. Harley was put in charge of that, and then they took him off and put me on it. And I don't remember why. Maybe it was because of the local national thing, being too close.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: But I was in charge of sanitation to make sure that they maintained the same sanitation protocol for the American regulations, even though Middle Eastern regulations are very different. So, I had to make sure they washed their hands and that they were wearing shoes and that they refrigerated all of their—and wearing shoes, I'm not trying to be racist. They literally would wear open-toe sandals or barefoot in the prep kitchen, 'cause it's so hot. And there was water, and so that was just their style. I just wanted to clarify that.

Pino: Mmhmm.

Halaska: That they literally were working without shoes, and I had to purchase shoes and make them wear them, so. They would refrigerator—monitor their refrigeration. But they—other than that, they were top-notch, amazing [04:46:00] chefs.

So, my job was to be the Army bureaucratic piece of crap that was like, “Wash your hands. Put your gloves on.” [Halaska chuckles] And—which I did, and I learned how to say it in Arabic, and—but [redacted4] was hired. I wouldn't say hired. I would say captured. [Laughs] Because he literally was brought to our formation one day and said, “This is [redacted4].” He—and he was probably, like, nineteen. Evil eyes. Evil eyes. He was mean. Presented to us and said, “This is [redacted4]. [redacted4] is now going to work for us. And [redacted4] is going to live with us in our CP, our command post, in the same area where our first sergeant, company commander, and XO live. You will watch [redacted4], [04:47:00] and Yvette—well, Pino, you're in charge of [redacted4]. And his job is going to be to clean up around the camp. You will give him trash. You will give him direction. You will give him assignments. And he will pick up trash. He will clean up flower beds. He will do whatever, and you are in charge of making sure that he does this. And, everybody in the platoon, this is [redacted4]. You need to treat [redacted4] like you treat all the other local nationals, but rather than being escorted off the post every night, [redacted4] is going to live with us.” And all of us were, like, in formation, you know. In parade rest, like, side glancing everybody, like, “This kid's gonna live with us?” And it was like, “Any questions? No. Okay.” Like, “No questions.”

And I remember going—I was joking with people. I was joking, but I was like, [04:48:00] “What did this kid see that they picked him up, and they said they can't let him go? [Laughs] Like, was one of those, like—seriously, like, did he

witness something? Or, is he under—like, is he in witness protection program with us? Like, what’s the deal?” ‘Cause this kid was a little asshole. He was horrible! I mean, you—some of the men in Baghdad were mean, but they just didn’t engage with me. This kid engaged with me and was straight up, like... I mean, treated me like less than human because I was a woman and because I was American. I mean, he was, like—I just think I’m just so heated about it. Because he, unfortunately, to all of the men that I worked with that I got to know, was the stereotype of what you see in the movies. Of, like, the terrorist enemy. He was that, like—[04:49:00] He was just a piece of work. And I just remember thinking he was a kid. And, like, I’m like, “You’re just a punk kid!” and I don’t do well with—I don’t function well around, like, high schoolers. And so, like, that was, like, I don’t [Halaska chuckles]—I’m like, you just need a good, like, whooping. Like, that’s, like, you were just—he was rude. He was—you—he was—he could speak English, but he did the refuse to speak English, and when I spoke Arabic he would be just so disrespectful to me.

And there was this other guy [redacted5]. The only other person that was allowed to live on post was [redacted5]. And [redacted5] was really freaking crazy. Something obviously had happened to [redacted5]. And I always said, [redacted5] was either really—[sighs] I shouldn’t say—I’m trying—not trying to be mean. [redacted5] was mentally incapacitated but a really good worker, or he was a really good [04:50:00] actor and a really good spy. And [redacted5], the lore of [redacted5] was that he was in one of the highest-ranking positions in Saddam’s army. And this was told to us through the translator who was also a historian. It could be folklore. Probably is folklore. Whatever, doesn’t matter. Because it’s fun story and truthful in the ways in which I experienced it. But anyway, he was high-ranking in Saddam’s army, and they were doing training missions up in the woods in northern Iraq. And he got attacked by a black bear. And *aswad* is black in Arabic. And *dubb* is bear in Arabic. And so, from that experience he kind of had a psychotic break. So, he understood if you gave him orders to, like, pick up trash or rake the leaves. He understood work, but he had—no longer had the social capacity to interact with people in a [04:51:00]—it was only specific people he would talk to. He only spoke Arabic, and you would find him in the trash bin, scrounging through, eating the food in there. And so, we would give him food, and he was like, “I won’t take it.” He was like this skittish animal. And I don’t want to call him an animal,

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: But that’s the metaphor. I’m not calling him an animal. That’s [redacted5]. But [redacted5], once you kind of like a skittish animal, once you realized if you bring him food or you learn I don’t—“All I want from you is to clean up this flower bed, and then when you’re done—”and it was through a translator. “You come to me, and I will give you a sandwich at the restaurant. Don’t go in the trash bin. Just don’t go in the trash trailer. You’re not in trouble for being in the trash trailer, but come to us. We’ll give you food.” And he would be like, “Okay.” And he was

always just, like, dirty because they put him in, like, the most horrible spots. Like, he would [04:52:00] jump into sewer beds and clean out the sewer, and yeah. But [redacted5] was really—he was sweet. But [redacted5]—the Iraqis started this, and then the Americans come on, that knew him, it was—this is terrible what we do to people, but, like, when you have that cousin that's special, and everybody has that thing they do that, the only way they know how to interact with them. If you walked up to [redacted5], like, kind of behind him and snuck up to him and went, "*Dubb*" He would go "Whah!" and he'd jump in the air. It was like a cartoon. He was a short, little guy. And he would jump up in the air like Yosemite Sam, and then when he landed he would be like, [ululates]. And I'm not trying to be mean. That's just was the way he spoke Arabic so quickly, he would just start cursing in Arabic, like, "What would you scare me? [ululates]"

And it would just be—he would have his fingers [Halaska chuckles]. When my Iraqis were yelling at me [04:53:00] they would do, like, that thing. They pinch their fingers and put it right in your face [Halaska chuckles], and he was just like, [ululates] and yelling at us. And you'd be like, [redacted5], [redacted5], [redacted5], it's okay. It's okay. And so, he'd calm down. And then they'd be like, walk away, and then they'd turn around and go, *Aswad!* And he would be like, "*Aaah!*" And he'd jump up again, and it became this kind of call and response game that people did. And unfortunately, it caught on, and the American soldiers would do it. And then it got—word got out, so we were also a hub for log packs to come in because we were part of the G staff, so any, like—any high-ends had to come talk to Gen. Petraeus and the G staffs. They came to—so when those log packs came on, and then I ran the restaurant and the swimming pool, so people would come while they were waiting for their people to come back for the log packs would come to the pool and swim. Word got out. Anybody that came through the palace, if they got—found [redacted5], [04:54:00] they'd walk up to him and be like, *Dubb! Aswad!* So, you would—I witnessed this from the restaurant, as [redacted5] was working around. Because I was also in charge of [redacted5] and [redacted4]. But [redacted5] really had free reign of the place. He weirdly didn't have to have any escort. And he knew the whole tunnel system underneath the palace. That's why they kept [redacted5], because he knew the whole ins and outs of the building.

Again, either brilliant strategy, I always thought he was Keyser Söze, like, he was going to drive away in the, like, convertible at the end of the war and be like, "Got you good, you fuckers." [Both laugh] Like, he was just—that was—and so [laughs] I watched all of these soldiers come through that didn't even live at the palace, and they would find [redacted5], and it was, like, this daily torture of this poor man. "*Dubb!*" You just, from the kitchen in the restaurant I could hear, "*Dubb! Aswad! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!* [04:55:00] *Dubb! Aswad! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha.*" And they're just, like, torturing this poor man. And one day I walked out and crossed the pool. The door to the palace was here, and the pool was over here, and across there's these rose gardens. And [redacted5] was in the rose gardens, like, cleaning. And these guys just walked up to him. They were like, "*Dubb! Aswad!*

Dubb! Aswad!” And he was cowered in the shrubs, shivering, and had peed his pants and was just, like, shivering. And I was like, “Get the fuck out of here!” Like, I just, like—and they were like, “Oh, shut up. We’re just having fun.” I was like, “Can you not see what you’ve done to this man? Like—” They’re like, It’s [redacted5]. *Dubb aswad!* And I was like, “Get—what the fuck!? Like, get out of here.”

So we got—my cooks and I, like, got [redacted5] and lifted him up, and there was—since there was a pool there was, like, a shower house and everything. And they weren’t—the showers weren’t really used. [04:56:00] That’s where the cooks—the cooks that ran the restaurant were allowed to live on post. So, they ended up setting up, and they used the pool showers. And so, we got him back there, and they got him cleaned up, and... I don’t remember how, if ever, we ended up putting a stop to that.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: But that was, like, the disgusting things we’d do to each other.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: Yeah. So that was [redacted5]. And then you had [redacted4]. Who—

Halaska: I’m going to pause this for a second. Just—[break in recording] [coughing] All right, it is August first. This is a continuation of the interview with Yvette Pino, and it is the second file from today. All right, so we were talking about—you were going to tell me about [redacted4] and working with him at the restaurant.

Pino: Yeah, so [redacted4] didn’t really work with us at the restaurant. [04:57:00]

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: [redacted4] was assigned to random cleanup around the post. Basically, like, whatever I needed done they said, Use [redacted4]. And [redacted4] really didn’t like taking orders from me. [redacted4] was a little prick, excuse my language. But there is no other really big way to explain it, to—explain him. And there—I tried—you know, I was trying different ways in which to get him to function. But at the same time, I didn’t understand why he was—I think that’s my problem. If I don’t understand the reasons behind something or someone, I don’t function really well. A little bit of information goes a long way with making me become a more productive person. Because if I’m asking all kinds of random questions, my imagination takes hold of me, and I probably—it makes it worse. And so, it’s like, I didn’t understand why we were in Iraq, and so I was a pain in the ass the whole time we were in Iraq. I don’t understand why [redacted4] is now working for us, and I’m in charge of him, and he’s living with us, and he’s a little jerk. So, it doesn’t make any sense that my [04:58:00] guys, who just want to take hot

chocolate packets home, are getting fired or worse, and this little kid has the run of the post. And I have to kiss his ass, essentially.

Like, I was—I was not told to mistreat him, like I was told to mistreat the others. It was like I had to almost roll out the red carpet for him to work for me. It was really weird. And he also was very rude to [redacted5]. And that, for me, was not okay. And it wasn't the *aswad* or the *dubb* with [redacted5]. It was you—it was one time you would see [redacted5] actually almost have, like, a legitimate conversation, interaction. Because [redacted5] would say something to him, and he would go back to him. And this was—I'm just watching this engagement in Arabic. And [redacted5] would kind of be like, "Wah!" and then walk away, like, "You're an idiot." Like, you know, like, old men talk to the youth. Like, "You don't even know what you're doing." And so, I kind of had to keep [redacted5] and him separated. So, I'd [04:59:00] just get [redacted5] to go do his thing. And he would pretty much say [redacted5] was a piece of shit. And I'm like, "You don't even know what you're talking about." Like, there was this weird dynamic.

And I remember we had him in—there was the wives palace and next to the wives palace was another palace. So, there was, like, two weird, like, compounds right next to each other, and one became the restaurant and one became our gym and smoothie place where you could buy a smoothie. Yes [chuckles], we were so mistreated in Iraq. [Halaska laughs] And meeting rooms where we did all our combat lifesaver training. And so, we had a picture of him in front of the mosaic work that spelled out something in Arabic, and I didn't know what it was. Oh! [redacted4] meant flower. And I think the Arabic word that was on—mosaic on the wall was his name. Yeah, I can't remember, but I have this picture in front of this mosaic, and my camera—it was one of those, it was, like, [05:00:00] over exposed, so I know I have that picture, and I know it's [redacted4], and I know he's in front of this thing, but I never got a crystal picture. I have one picture of the word in Arabic, but it's not really clear either. So, I can't—there was a correlation between him and that wall and that mosaic. And it was the only time he was somewhat decent to me, and he wanted me to take his picture in front of that mosaic. I don't know what that means, if anything, but he was just a jerk. And I couldn't get him to do anything. And my chain of command didn't seem to care that he really didn't want to do anything. I just needed to make sure that he was monitored.

So, it was very confusing why [redacted4] was part of us. And I honestly remember several interactions with him, but I—the main one was on this, like, weird—the palace was up on a hill, and then it was terraced down. And there were different staircases that would take you to these beautiful, like, concrete slabs that you could tell were these beautiful [05:01:00] gardens at one point. And then you would go down another set of stairs, and it was another terrace garden. But at this time, it was already kind of dilapidated, and there was concrete. But the—so it's kind of where we would assign him to pick up trash because you could see him from the restaurant up on the hill working, but I didn't have to be

side-by-side with him with a pointed weapon. Which seemed odd because everybody else I had to be that close to. And then yeah, at night he lived at our CP, so they would be in charge of him.

And on Thanksgiving Day we had—so I know I fast-forwarded all the way from August all the way to November, but we had a lot of people. By the time November hit to—chronologically this—I was really fast-forwarding, so forgive me for that, but by—so August was when I was getting in trouble, and then [05:02:00] by August-September I was in the—running the restaurant. Oddly, feel like that now today is only is the first time I felt like maybe I got the restaurant gig because I got in trouble for being too close to my workers. So, they took me away from the workers and put me at the palace, the swimming pool. So, between August and September is when they made the move to start bringing in contractors. So, KBR, rumors of KBR coming had started, and then they, by end of August, we had built this giant tent on—we had got a new tent and built this giant tent. And then by the end of September we took that tent down, and the KBR moved in and built a giant dining facility structure. So, the whole palace lawn was now, like, the structure was probably the size of a [05:03:00] football field. Kind of like a—wasn't a hard-shell tent but sort of like that, looked like a big, white circus tent that had, like, more hard walls than fabric walls. And it became a full-sized dining facility. Much of what you see now, all around Iraq, wherever we're at. And real kitchen was installed. And then we had chefs from Turkey.

So, the cooks were now KBR monitored, with a American civilian in charge, and the cooks were from Turkey. And that's the first time I saw when they hired local national—not local nationals. They brought in other third world nationals to run the facility like a professional cafeteria. And our cooks were then put on other details. So that was the first time we saw our jobs eliminated. I'm sorry that that's a lot more information than [redacted4], but it is—

Halaska: That's okay. Yeah.

Pino: It all has important details. So, they built [05:04:00] this dining facility. Our cooks then became QRF force, or quick reactionary force, or strictly log packs or headcount at the dining facility. I'm trying to think now what they were assigned to do 'cause I was already at the restaurant at that point. Because our KPs stayed. Huh. Oh! I know what it was, our KPs then became, like, police call detail, permeant basis around the post. So, they would take them in, like, groups of five or seven and then pick up trash around the post rather than doing our dishes. Because the dining facility was self-sustaining. None of our cooks or local nationals no longer worked in the dining facility. Yeah, interesting. And so, we never—we no longer provided the supplies. So, the log packs that were needed were simply for supply, logistics back and forth, no longer food operations. [05:05:00] So I was at the pool. I was in charge of [redacted5] and [redacted4]. Our guys were in charge of the other workers [clears throat] doing police call.

So that was August, September, October. Yeah, because by October it was all set up because I remember Halloween at the dining facility was the first time we had access to nonalcoholic beer. This is where—how my brain works, right. I'm like, right, so we had a party at the dining facility, and [redacted4] was already with us at that point. Because there was, like, a 5K, people running in costumes. Probably very inappropriate costumes for today's Me Too movement really. It's like, [Halaska laughs] probably really inappropriate costumes. And then November, the dining facility was all prepped for our first Thanksgiving. So, I guess other than Fourth of July, that was our first major holiday out there. Because Easter was not—null and void. We were on a convoy up to Mosul. So, Thanksgiving the— [05:06:00] you know, they put the full spread out and decorated everything. And then the line again was outside the dining facility all the way around the palace. So, the palace sat up on a hill, and then there was landscaped, terraced, like, concrete, beautiful, like, concrete terrace walls with foliage and rose bushes, and it led to the sidewalk that led into the side entrance of the dining facility. That is an important part of the story. The—[redacted4] had been acting his usual asshole self.

Thanksgiving, we celebrate Thanksgiving. All the people ate. They got through the big lines. The day after Thanksgiving... we—I'm trying to remember the timeline. [05:07:00] It was either the morning of Thanksgiving or the day after Thanksgiving. Morning formation, [redacted4] was under arrest. Sgt. Rotondo had him in zip ties, and had volunteered to escort him to the airfield to the detention. The detainee center. And I remember that we were in formation. We knew [redacted4] was in zip ties, and I remember them putting him in the Humvee and him looking at us. And they told us—and I was like, "What the fuck?" 'Cause, right—because I'm in charge of [redacted4], so [laughs] I had been told I'm too nice to the Iraqis. Now [redacted4]'s being arrested. And he apparently, 'cause he lived on post, at night [05:08:00] snuck to the perimeter and sold grid coordinates on the perimeter. And so, they caught him selling grid coordinates. And it was Thanksgiving. They took him, detained him, put him in a "I Love 101st" t-shirt, and took him to the detention center and handed him over. And I remember that was the big joke, like, 'Well, he may be alive now, but we put a 101st, "I love 101st" t-shirt and threw him to the wolves, essentially.' And it was really a weird thing.

And there's a whole other dynamic with the sergeant that took him, and who he became. But they did that, and the day after Thanksgiving—this is why I don't know—remember the timeline exactly. Because [redacted4] sold grid coordinates, and then the day after Thanksgiving [05:09:00] we got hit. Really badly. The—our CP got hit. The dining facility got hit on the—so the—the door to the dining facility is adjacent to the palace, I told you that, and there's that sidewalk with the gardens. In the same place where hundreds of soldiers were lined up the day before--I think it was RPG. Something came in and landed right there. And there

were several soldiers that were en route to eat where there had been a hundred the day before. So, we did luck out in that regard, but Sgt. Rico was killed.

He got hit directly. The palace took five rounds to the roof. Our CP got hit and then another round hit down by the palace, and then another round hit up by our living quarters. And I don't remember if it's the [05:10:00] same day that—'cause we had a—a mortar went off forty yards from where I was asleep, and we had to get accountability. This was a different day.

Theirs was—this was, again, I was telling you, like, after August things just started happening. We were getting hit, like, legitimately hit. It was no longer—we didn't have the air raids anymore. It wasn't like we had the sirens anymore. If you got hit, you just got hit. And when you got hit, then you would start doing accountability. But you got hit, and sometimes you would get hit and it was close enough that everything shook but far enough away that you had to take a moment to pause and try to figure out if it was EOD blowing up a cache. Because every Thursday at one, EOD would detonate a cache of weapons. And so, it was on schedule, so if things happened Thursday at 1:00, we were like, "Oh, it's EOD." That was the running joke. You'd pause your movie, and you'd be like, "It was EOD." Because if you heard an explosion and then you heard a series of gunfire afterward, tat-tat-tat-tat-tat, you knew [05:11:00] whether or not it was EOD or if it was a firefight. So, there was like, we—the way you—through audible clues, you knew whether or not to be on higher alert than other times. When we started getting hit, that day that it happened, we each had—we didn't have walkie talkies, but we had channels that you could go to on—we started carrying the hand-held, like, radio walkie talkies you could get from Walmart. We had them, like, shipped in, or, like, the Garmins. Everybody was buying their own Garmin. That was thing, so you had GPS, and you had a walkie talkie in one.

And we each knew that channel seven was HHC division, our headquarters platoon, direct to our CP. So, everybody knew we were under attack, and so we had to split up, and then we were all getting accountability down by the—I think we were down by the palace. Because it was a different [05:12:00] place 'cause I remember the walls, but I was with a group of other people, and I found everybody that was in my platoon, and I borrowed somebody else's walkie talkie, and I changed it to channel seven, and I reported in that it was me and that I was doing an accountability check and that I had so-and-so and so-and-so and so-and-so, and so we were with me. And did they need any information from any other unit? And that this was not my walkie talkie, so I just wanted to provide accountability and to get their orders. And they said, "We got your accountability. You need to just take orders from the highest ranking in your area." So, I gave the walkie talkie back, and we held—we stayed there until we got the all-clear.

And when we got the all-clear we were told to report back to our CP. Our CP had got hit. So we didn't sustain any injuries in our CP, but our roof did get destroyed,

and the palace took several blows to the roof, tiles everywhere. And then Sgt. Rico, they were doing work on him. I don't know how I didn't see—[05:13:00] whoa, he must have gone the back way. Because the dining facility, that road where I was saying Gen. Petraeus and his entourage cut by the—the airfield was there, and then the—from the helipads there was a road that led up to the palace that passed by the MKT and, which would have been the dining facility, up. So, you would have seen where Sgt. Rico got hit to get to our CP. Because our CP was directly to the left of the palace. So, we must have taken the back way down the staircase trellis area that I described. From the swimming pool, you could either go up the road that led along the helipads up to the front of the palace, or you could take the stairways up those terraced courtyards, which is where the 501st lived, which was our commo team. And then up to our CP was, like, the back way you could go, up the hill. So, we must have come up that back way because [05:14:00] I didn't find out about Sgt. Rico until the next day.

So, Sgt. Rico, I'm going to keep saying his name just because it's a—he was with the artillery unit with the 320th that was housed with us. And he lived near, across the—our mechanics. Are mechanics called something else? Why am I thinking mechanics is the wrong word? Motor pool, where our motor pool guys lived, and they were also in servant's quarters but a different area that was more setup readily so they could do work on the vehicles, and then across from them is where the 320th that—I think the guys from the 320th that were housed with us were the gate—functioning as our gate guard. Because they—obviously we didn't have—we didn't—I don't believe we had the howitzer set up beyond the point when they were first parked when we arrived at the palace. My friend Charlie, who was my best friend Marianne's fiancé, was [05:15:00] 320th. He was artillery, out in the field, actually. He was in Tal Afar [??], actually, doing his job. But so, I remember Sgt. Rico because I remember he was part of Charlie's unit. And when Charlie would do log packs, he'd come up and see his guys and then come and—we were literally across the street from them in a different area of the servants' quarters. And Charlie would come and hang out with me for a little while. And then because we were, like, either he would report back how Marianne was doing, or I'd report how Marianne was doing. And we would all just keep in touch with each other and how we were doing. Because we all lived together back in—at Fort Campbell. We rented a trailer together.

And I just remember thinking, “Shit, that's 320th. That's sergeant—that's Charlie's unit.” And the name just stuck with me. I didn't know Sgt. Rico. The name just stuck with me. And side note on that, [05:16:00] years later in 2014, I was doing a panel discussion on veteran artists in San Francisco, and I worked with Drew Cameron from Combat Paper, Aaron Hughes, and they all asked me to invite Jessie Ulbricht, who was another one of the artists, and we all had this panel discussion, and we were talking about our art, and we went out for beers that night. And I was talking and getting to know Jessie, and Jessie was like, “Yeah, I was a medic with the 320th. I was with you in Iraq.” And I said, “You were with me in Iraq?” He's like, “Yeah, I used to go watch you paint. I used to

come and talk to you when you were painting. I know you didn't know me, but—" I was like, "You were with us in Iraq?" He's like, "Yeah, I was there with you at Mosul." And I was like, "And you were a medic?" And he goes, "Yeah." And I was like, "So you were with, like, Sgt. Rose," and I'm telling him all my medic's names, like all my friends. And he's like, "Yes. I was a reserve unit that was placed with you guys [05:17:00] under the 320th." And I was like, "Oh my god." I said, "So you were there when Sgt. Rico died?" And he pulled up his sleeve, and Sgt. Rico's name was tattooed on his arm. And we—it freaked me out. Because he treated—Sgt. Rico died in his arms, essentially.

Halaska: Yeah.

So yeah, like, however many years later I was side-by-side with this person and had conversations with him. And, you know, as a cook, every person crosses your threshold, so you talk to everybody. And then as a painter, people would come and just hang out with me. So, there's many people that I talked to and I met, but I didn't realize had an—either had an impact on or we knew one another. And he worked with all my guys. My medics were great, Sgt. Pay[??], everybody. So, we were a really tightknit group. But obviously I knew that group from our formations and PT [physical training], and they didn't do any of that with us. They were just [05:18:00] attached to us, so, yeah. Actually, I don't know if he was attached to the 320th or just attached to the medics. Either way, whatever, he has Sgt. Rico's name tattooed on his arm. He's a Wisconsin Veteran.

Halaska: Oh.

Pino: He's from Stevens Point.

Halaska: Awesome.

Pino: Yeah, and he lives in Montana now. So, it's like this really weird, small world.

Anyway, that happened the day after they arrested [redacted4] for selling grid coordinates. So that, in combination with the talk they had given me, sadly reinforced what they were telling me. Except that the difference was, [redacted4] was very obvious that he was not okay with us. And my workers—maybe they were great actors or spies or [05:19:00] whatever, but there was a different dynamic that was—and my workers were not allowed to live with us. And be there twenty-four-seven and know how we functioned at night. So, the irony behind all of that is that this person, for whatever reason, did not enter into the picture the same way that these other workers did. And yet, they were told to be mistreated, and he was given the red carpet. And in turn, was the one that... brought danger to our camp. So, I still don't know who [redacted4] is, why he was with us or—I have tried to find that history. I've tried to find that research. I—someday maybe I'll figure it out. And [redacted5] as well. But yeah, and what happened to him after he was detained, I don't know. But I can see him

[05:20:00] clear as day in my head. And there's—there was—I have photos of the area where Sgt. Rico was killed. There was a big chip taken out of that concrete flower bed that they never repaired with, like, this big, black thing. They cleaned it up otherwise pretty good, but yeah.

So, you know, it was also timing, like, literally day before there were a hundred soldiers.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: They—he would have probably got, like, god, I don't know how many would have been in just that little area in the line waiting. But it was—[redacted4], his name means flower. Just—we didn't have any more people after that, that I'm aware of, that were brought on and told to live with us. I mean, when I was running the restaurant, my cooks were really great people. We had—the head chef was Egyptian. [05:21:00] And he had studied at the Cordon Bleu, and he was a little standoffish at first, and then I won him over. But he was standoffish in a way that I thought, “Oh, here we go again.” And, but it was, “Oh, it's because I'm a woman.” He was standoffish because he was a chef. It was like, if you had Gordon Ramsey, like, in, like, a warzone, like, in charge of his chefs, he's like, “Fine. I'm still going to be chef.” Like, “Yes, chef.” Like, that's how he treated his sous-chefs and his wait staff. And it was really cool to me because he treated them like this was, like, a five-star restaurant in downtown Mosul, and we were the high-end clientele that was coming to his food. And by god, his food was gonna be good.

And my workers, they were so amazing. We had Redacted8[??] who was one of the waiters, and then Redacted6[??] and Redacted7[??] were twin brothers, and they were tall, and they were gorgeous, and they were handsome, and they were sweethearts. And Redacted6—I can't remember if it was Redacted6 or Redacted7, [05:22:00] one of the brothers had disfigured hands. Like, what you see from, like, the agent orange or, what do you call it, the birth defects from chemical—so Redacted7 had a birth defect on his hands were kind of like—they were very functional but kind of mauled and weird, misshapen. And Redacted7 had really good hands, and they were gorgeous. They were two twin—identical twins, and they were probably, like, nineteen, twenty? Really tall. And their dream was to move to America and become hand models [Halaska chuckles]. And the one that had the really good hands would earn the paycheck, and the other would manage his career as a hand model. I was like, “Ah!” like, “I would love for you guys to come to America and be hand models.” And Redacted8 was just another sweetheart waiter. And then all of my waitstaff there were, like, the sweetest. I mean, they were just so much fun, and they were just so [05:23:00] nice. And my cooks were a lot more standoffish, but they—because I think they were all, like, “Screw you. I don't need to, like, listen to your rules and regulations.” But they would—they were the type that would, like, chop food and look at you. And they would, like, [Halaska laughs] literally, like, just dicing. You're like, “Why—you

are going to lose fingers.” And they’re like, “No, I’m not [makes fast chopping sound].”

And they would lay out each individual plate had its garnish were edible, like, a row of cucumbers, a row of tomatoes, a row of onions, a row of olives, and that was just the garnish on the plate. And then they would put the rice, like, sculpted in bowls and, like, the meat, like the—oh god, it was so good. And their breakfast! I don’t know what they cooked their eggs in, but I cannot reproduce how they cooked eggs out there. And then the coffee was Nescafe, but they would steam milk, constantly have milk steamed, and they would put the Nescafe in the bottom of your cup and put a little bit of water in it and make this paste. And then they would [05:24:00] pour the steamed milk over it and made cappuccinos, as they would call it. And it was so good! And then they taught me how to cook. And then Redacted9[??], who was the restaurant manager, was the one that actually taught me about the Moors and the fact that they invaded Spain and that Spain invaded New Mexico, and that’s why when I’m sitting there saying, “I just don’t understand. Your food tastes just like the food we make back home. I’m so homesick because this tastes like things I grew up with.” And he’s like, “Well, of course.” And then he explained history to me, which was very embarrassing. And then he had me point out, on a map, where I was at, and I couldn’t do it. And it was really disheartening. But he was so sweet! He helped educate me.

And then he—we were at that time now training ICDC [Iraqi Civil Defense Corps], so the Iraqi police force. We had started hiring local Iraqis to become the new police force to remove the corrupt police force. [05:25:00] Whatever. I keep saying “whatever” because it’s like, yeah, this is all strategy and everything. And then he—thank you—he—so the ICDC were on post living with us. So now we had a bunch of people living with us. The cooks in our restaurant were living with us in their own little camp.

Halaska: Were they local nationals as well?

Pino: The cooks were local nationals but were also—but they were Egyptian native and some—so the wait staff was from Iraq. The chef was from Egypt. The rotisserie sous-chef was from Egypt, and then the dining facility workers were now living with us as well, but they were KBR, so they were from Turkey.

Halaska: So, for your wait staff in the restaurant, did you get the same kind of warning about them, and were you feeling a little bit more—

Pino: I didn’t get that discipline again after they moved me to the restaurant.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: I don’t—? Whatever. The restaurant—[05:26:00]

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: Well, the restaurant, like, earned me a little bit of weird respect? I don't know from—the restaurant also, I think, we were touting as this, like—we had a lot of VIP meetings there.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: At the end of Ramadan. So, we had not only big meetings to show off, but we also had administrative diplomatic meetings there with high-end—so Gen. Helmick had all of the local heads of government. So, we had to provide all the food for that. And that was, like, a full spread.

Halaska: Wow.

Pino: Like, the tables were put together. It was like a diplomatic spread, like. And I was privileged enough to be a fly on the wall at those meetings. So we would prep it all, and then all of the heads of government, like, city municipal heads of government came, and Gen. Helmick would run the [05:27:00] meeting. And he was our two-star—no, I'm sorry, he was our one-star. Gen. Petraeus was the two-star. He was out in the field.

Often Gen. Petraeus would be there, but this was Gen. Helmick's, like, he was really good general. Really good. And he was a soldier's general, meaning he slept on a cot. He—and maybe this was all show for me, but he, like—because I had to paint his mural. So, when I was out there painting, he was like, “When's the last time you called home?” I was like, “I don't call home, sir. It's too hard.” ‘Cause you only had fifteen minutes. You'd get cut off. There would be a delay. He's like, “I have a satellite phone. I want you to go into my living quarters right now, and I want you to call home.” And I was like, “Yes, sir.” Go into his living quarters, it literally was a cot, two pair of boots, a pair of running shoes, a shelf with an extra uniform, his headgear and his PTs hanging on hooks, and his little desk area and the table with the satellite phone and internet connection for [05:28:00] when he had his computer, his laptop. And that was it. And that was compared to Gen. Petraeus, who was living in the palace. In this, like, high-rise, almost, like, penthouse setup. Anyway, I have a lot of respect for Gen. Helmick. And he would—he was the general that would come through the dining facility. It was a very busy schedule, but he would come through the dining facility every morning, shake hands of every—like, people. Stop by and say, “How you doing today? How you feeling? What's your assignment today?” He'd have a cup of coffee. He never ate. He just would come through, do a one-on-one with people, a quick, like, breeze through. “What's your name? What are you doing?” It's very, you know, politician like, but at the same time, he was visible.

Halaska: Yup.

Pino:

“--and accessible. Anyway, he would hold these meetings, and I would make sure that everybody was following the sanitization regulations and making sure that staff was kept in the kitchen and not, you know. They stayed in their place, but they were [05:29:00] allowed to listen. And I would stand there at the door. And I would watch this meeting, and the, like, local governments would say, “We don’t have enough seed. You’re telling us you want us to continue this farmland, we don’t have enough seed. What are you going to do? We don’t have rice, and you want to do this?” And he’s like, “How much do you need to—” And it was like this agriculture discussion about, like, if you need to be sustainable, what are we doing? How much does the water table—okay. Well, we’ll work—make a note of that. We’ll work on getting you the rice,” and this guy would be like, “If he’s getting rice, I asked for ten ambulances, and you only gave me five ambulances, and I don’t understand.” And there was, like, this negotiation of things we were promising with allocating our resources of the FOO [field ordering officer] money that—FOO money was the—I know it stands for something. I thought it was found money. Like, all the caches of money that we found, we utilized to build their [05:30:00] economy. Which was part of the problem of when we transitioned out, to hand it over, is the FOO money was gone. So, a lot of what we spent in ’03, ’04 was with their own money. And then they wanted—then when it ran out, we were like, “Oh, it ran out.” And they were like—we built this economy that was not sustainable, which is a common thing.

So, I got to watch these meetings of them, like, just negotiating what these local governments needed. Yeah, it was pretty incredible to watch, and, like, heated discussion but, like, there was all—you know, all these Middle Eastern men, and our very male-dominated staff was there, and I’m just there watching it. And it was kind of nice. And during Ramadan, at the end, if you—Ramadan, [05:31:00] they don’t eat for thirty days, and—they fast for thirty days. I think they can eat once a day. I’m not sure what all the rules of Ramadan are, but it’s very, you know, you’re supposed to be—not supposed to think or act on sex. And so during Ramadan the women, the female soldiers were asked, not demanded but asked to be more respectful about walking around in PTs. If they weren’t doing PT, like, we were told to maybe not do that, because it was temptation. That was—I was only asked that once and it was by a—some of the Iraqis saying that I was being disrespectful to their fast. I’m like, “Oh, that’s flattering.” No. [Both laugh] No, but that—and then, you know, they were also just different. We had to watch out for our [05:32:00] local nationals because they were fasting. So, we’re in hot weather, and they’re fasting, and we had to be respectful of what we offered or what they were consuming. And at the end of Ramadan they put a full spread out, and it was these long tables with, like, beautiful fresh figs. I’ve never seen a real fig on a branch before. It was like this cornucopia of goodness. And the same local governments all came, and all the VIPs and, you know, the government we were building came to enjoy the end of Ramadan feast at our kitchen.

Halaska:

Mmhmm.

Pino:

So I don't know. Just because we had so many VIPs there, the fact that I also took my job very seriously and that—because I was getting gigged[??] just like if they got inspected at the dining facility and garrison, they were holding it to that standard, which I thought in some ways was unfair, because we didn't have the same type of electricity or refrigeration systems that we have in the States. Culturally [05:33:00] things were very different. But, you know, I was making sure that they were following sanitation regulations. And the food was really good. And the service was really good. And, oh, because of ICDC, we were training them there, we were teaching them English. So, we had Arabic books, workbooks for, like, elementary school kids of where they're learning how to write in Arabic. They were using that same sort of process to teach them English. So, I was able to get a couple of those workbooks, and then Redacted9 would teach me how to read and write Arabic during the day. And we would do—I would just learn a lot. I learned a lotta Arabic, and I learned how to write Arabic. And I was really falling in love with the language. And a lot of our customers were a lot of the troops that lived with us, but it was a lot of people on log pack coming to eat and use the pool. Because the swimming pool, we actually had Saddam Hussein's pool guy who actually ran it. And his son had polio. [05:34:00] And so he was always trying to get our medics to help his poor son, and they couldn't do anything. And a lot of my wait staff and sous-chefs had very terrible medical issues that wanted to go to the medic, and they would beg me, and I couldn't. And if they saw you coming in, they knew you were a medic, they'd be like, "Mister, Mister, I have these really bad kidney."

This one guy was in such severe kidney failure, and was living and working with us. And, I don't know how long he lasted. You could start to see him getting jaundiced by the end. We were—I mean, it was bad. And then one of our sous-chefs was deaf and mute. And they had learned how to sign with him, and he was—it was really interesting relationship with him. And then yeah, so Saddam's pool guy was our pool guy, and [redacted5] knew all the tunnels underneath. And then the grounds maintenance, like, operations guy was, like, [05:35:00] one of the head honchos that was the partnership with our highers up. And he was the one, his son I said, you could tell there was a class structure, and when he walked into the room, all of the men stood up. And he was like--he must have been, like, considered, like, what we would consider a mayor or a governor or something because, I mean, these people were like, "He's coming. He's coming!" And they would have to, like, show this big sign of respect. And he'd bring his fifteen-year-old son, who would—essentially, they had to roll out the red carpet for him too. It was like glorified babysitting. We would take care of this kid, and he just was, like—he was a sweet kid, but he was full of himself. And he was obviously of upper class because he had that, like, kind of chip on his shoulder.

But yeah, I don't—I don't know. It was interesting to watch that relationship unfold [05:36:00] with that particular person. And Redacted9 would not—Redacted9 was very open to me about a lot of the dynamics of who I was witnessing and who was coming through and who wasn't. He was kind of giving

me the local point of view of all these highers up and how people thought about them.

Halaska: Can you give me any examples of that?

Pino: Uh, well—

Halaska: Or any that were particular interesting?

Pino: I mean, I think the Kurds, and we had some high-end Kurds come through, and he would talk a little bit about the dynamics of the Kurdish people and the local people in Mosul, was not always a good relationship. I didn't learn about how contentious that relationship was until much—many years later. But this particular person. He—the—I can't—is Abu[??]? [Sighs] It was Redacted10, I think. Redacted10 was the guy that I was saying we felt like everybody was, like, the mayor. [05:37:00]

Halaska: Mm, mmhmm.

Pino: He was just talking about he would tell me that he was the one that, you know, ran this place, and he would talk to me about the pool guy and that the pool guy was this. And I honestly don't remember very specific examples. Because we also had our translator historian that would tell us stories. So, like, one of the—so we were in the wives' palace, and when I say the wives' palace, so Saddam Hussein, we lived in his palace in Mosul, and he of course had palaces across the country. And his palace was up on a hill, and that's where Gen. Petraeus lived and all the G shops. And then we lived in the servant's quarters up on the hill, even further up on the hill. Down below everything, we're all up on a hill elevated overlooking the Tigris and Euphrates, so the Tigris River went through. And I don't think we were—because I think the Tigris and Euphrates cross in Baghdad. I don't think they cross in Mosul. I thought they did for a long time, but I think because that's where Eden is supposedly, [05:38:00] Mesopotamia, where they cross.

So, we were down—yeah, I could be wrong, but we're in Nineveh and Mosul, and, very biblical area. Down below is—there were several palaces among the entire compound, the palace compound. So, we had a VIP palace that we had to renovate and refurnish and decorate, and I painted a helipad for that, for the VIPs that came in. Gen. Redacted11 was our first guest. They trashed it [Halaska chuckles]. And the next day their helicopter got shot down. It was weird day, and I was pissed. They trashed it, and I was pissed. I was like, “And they didn't even sign the guestbook! Assholes.” [Both chuckle] It was bad. So mad about that.

And then at the wives'—he built the palace for his wife, and then [05:39:00] there was a building right next door. So, I guess you could consider that whole area down by the pool one palace, but there were two separate building structures.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: And the building that the restaurant was in was, like, one level. So, it probably was more of the entertainment area sort of ballroom of the palace. Because next door where the palace was were these two wooden—you walk in, it's this grand entry way. And both of these are surrounded by giant, concrete relief—artistic reliefs, so like a horse coming out. Like, very much—Saddam Hussein, I learned this in art history, was, like, trying to—he was trying to be, in content, similar to, like Nebuchadnezzar and a lot of the ancient Assyrians. So, a lot of the way he created and decorated his palace was an homage to the ancient Assyrians during that time. So, these relief, giant, like, twenty-foot, [05:40:00] thirty-foot-tall relief structures. Columns that went up that were just complete relief pattern all the way up, and then the ceilings would be a mosaic tile using the seven-sided—it was all geometric. And so, then you had tile and wood carved ceilings. So, when you entered into this—and the palace-palace had pink marble staircases going all the way up and then this wood inlay, beautiful wood-carved, ceiling mosaic. Really for just—Beautiful, breathtaking. And the exterior of the palace had all of this stone mosaic relief all the way around it. The exterior roofs had the wood. You could look. If you look up, you just see this star pattern in wood and blue tile.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: So, this palace, the wife's palace, you walk in, and there's these giant walls, [05:41:00] and there's marble again, not pink marble. This one had, like, a brownish-gray marble. And then as you walk in there's just, like, this round—it was a much more round room space, and there were these two wooden spiral, like, grand staircases that went up on either left or right, that came up to this overlooking kind of balcony that looked down. And then on the second floor were, like, different meeting rooms. And I only went up there a couple times. But as you go up these wooden staircases on either side is, like, twenty, thirty-foot-tall mosaic—tile mosaic portraits of Saddam Hussein.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: And the one on the left, really creepy. I do have pictures of these [sighs], there's Saddam Hussein in uniform. And they're probably, on a curve, angle wall. I would say they were probably fifteen to twenty-feet wide by twenty to thirty feet high, individual tile mosaics. [05:42:00] The one on the left was—and I could get the left or right confused, doesn't matter—is him sitting in his military uniform with a little girl on his lap. And he's almost, like—he's got his arm around her, like grandpa would have with his, like, granddaughter? And he's kind of, like, squeezing her in, but the little girl is kind of, like, squirming away? And she's got her hand coming across, and his military coat kind of, like, is sitting, like, draped. But her hand goes underneath the coat. And it looks like it's going down into his, like, crotch. That's just—it's a weird pose. Like, he's holding her with this big smile.

And [chuckles] then the other mosaic is him standing in his military uniform, and there's a woman in a full hijab. And he's, like, with her. And they're looking [05:43:00] off in the distance, and he's got a grenade in his hand.

Halaska: Hm!

Pino: I mean, swear to Jesus, they—these—I would stare at them, 'cause I was like, “Look at these mosaics!” And then you stand there for a minute, and you're like, “What am I looking at!?” [Laughs] Like, and this is in his wife's palace.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: I'm not sure what that—do not know. And then you go further to the back, and there's this big round room, and then the mosaic with that word that I was telling you [redacted4] took a picture in front of.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: And what we ended up doing, when we moved in there, at first that just kind of sat vacant, and then they created a gym out of it. MWR [morale, welfare, and recreation] came in and put a indoor gym, like, with treadmills and what you have in a gym.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: It's a indoor gym where, if you were lucky enough, you could do your morning PT there, and they wouldn't make you run. That rarely happened. [05:44:00] Like, we're going to the gym today, “Yes!” Otherwise, it was, like, gravel frog leg lifts and running and—and then they opened a juice bar [chuckles]. And the guy that ran the juice bar was this really rich Iraqi man who was, like, being an entrepreneur and decided, I'm gonna open a juice bar on the American base. The man had a visa. He would tourist in America. He talked to me for hours about Santa Fe and how he loved Santa Fe, and, “Oh, and when you go home on midtour leave, can you bring me something back from Santa Fe?” And I was like, “Who are you?” He was, like, this rich entrepreneur running a juice bar and a pastry shop in—right outside of the gym. Like, he had these most decadent cakes and everything. [Halaska chuckles] Honest to god. And I'm like, “You lived in Europe for a while, why are—? Again, right, why are you working for us here, [05:45:00] right now. You rich man who travels the world is running a juice bar in our sweaty-ass gym in the wife's palace at Mosul.” Whatever. I don't know. I'll figure it out. I have his name, too. I'm going to look him up someday [Halaska chuckles]. And I don't actually. I can't remember his name. But I know I have—maybe I have it written somewhere.

In the wife's palace, to the right—I was talking about Redacted9, and you were asking me about examples. The translator, we went through before it was a place that everybody was using, and they were giving me the initial tour. [snaps] That's how I got the gig, at the restaurant! They asked me to paint a mural inside the restaurant. I'll tell you about that in a minute. Because I got fired from that.

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: It's the only mural I got fired from in Iraq. And it's not because I did something wrong. That I knew of. And they took me through, and they were giving me a tour because they were still getting the pool, ready and tell me about what [05:46:00] this was going to be. And I was trying to get ideas for the mural. And when you walk into the wife's palace, to the right, on these marble walls, is this piece of marble that's got what, like, looks like scratched in it a architectural floor plan of the palace. The palace is shaped kind of like a horseshoe, and on either—on each point is a rounded part. So, you have a round area that's a big, open ballroom space and then, like, a long hallway and then another round area that's like a ballroom space and then another hallway and a round area. And the spiral staircases take you up to kind of fill that weird, triangular spot.

So, there's this floorplan. And it's got scratched in it the bird's-eye view of the thing, and it's got in Arabic, like, architectural measurements.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: You know, like, when you look at a blueprint it's like, this wall's thirty-feet-four, this—and it's got those measurements, and then it's got this signature on the side. [05:47:00] And what we were told is that when this was built, Saddam hired the contractor, and they had had some sort of delay or problems in some of the other construction. And so, he had exactly what his wife envisioned, this structure, and they—he scratched it out. I don't know if it was Saddam or the contractor, scratched it out, and he made him sign it. And if it was not created exactly to those specs, he would be removed, eliminated, whatever. I don't wanna, you know. I could make it, like, all Hollywood. "He would be destroyed!" I don't know. But that was... the blueprint. And it remained in the space as a reminder of this will be to spec, of what we wanted. So, I have a picture of that blueprint. That's really cool too.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: But interesting, like, background of that. [05:48:00] So like, Redacted9 and the translator would, like, kind of give me those background stories of where we existed, the place where we were living and why certain things were the way they were. And there was these beautiful roses. I kept—I have some of the roses in my book from just the rose petals. There was these velvety red rose bushes and just, like, [exhales] succulent. You go from this dry, desert nothingness from Kuwait

and southern Iraq, and you come up to this lush river town with palm trees and rose bushes, and, ugh, it was just gorgeous and fragrant. And then, yeah! So that was kind of, like, how they described it. The palace—the restaurant, they had said, “We’re creating this restaurant in the wife’s palace. We want you to paint a big mural.” And I wrote home to everybody. I was like, “It’s amazing. My patience. I’ve painted porta potties. I’ve painted Humvees. I’ve painted helipads with numbers. They’re going to give—I can paint a mural. Like, ha—[05:49:00] this is going to be by far my best assignment yet. I just can’t wait. I’ve already started with sketches. I’m so excited, and thank you for sending me the art supplies. I have all this stuff. I’m so—like, this is going to be my masterpiece.” This was the letter that I wrote [Halaska laughs] home.

So, I start, and I start doing my sketches, and I had gotten, like, you know the, like plastic covers, like paper, like, document holders. And I put my drawing in there, and I was drawing on top of the—gridding out a grid on top of the document holder so I could scale it up. So, I have all these drawings inside these document holders with the scale. It was, [exhales] gosh, if you start from there, to there, if was, like, seventy-feet long? [Halaska whistles] By, like, ten or twelve-feet high. It was a full wall of the—

Halaska: Wow, yeah.

Pino: So, this is where my psychology was at. We were calling it the Eagle’s Inn. [05:50:00] Eagle’s Eye Inn was the name of it. So, I also had to paint a sign for the Eagle’s Eye Inn. [Laughs] I look at the drawings now, and it’s like, “I love this! I don’t know why I got fired from this.” But the sign for the entry was a sniper. And it was Eagle’s Eye 101st. We were the Eagle’s Eye. So, there was a guy in the prone position with a rifle, and his Kevlar came over, and the side of his Kevlar became the eye of the eagle as he’s looking down and he’s looking through the scope of his weapon. And it’s—and then I put in, like, this cool font “Eagle’s Eye Inn.” [Laughs] And I’m like, “That’s amazing.” And then when you come into the—I don’t—it took me years before I realized how terrible these—what I was—how my mind had been, like, had shifted. [Laughs] [05:51:00] I was drawing from my experiences, in our deployment. I was trying to capture what our experience was in this country and what Mosul meant. And, like, Redacted9 had been talking—well, no, I hadn’t really bet Redacted9 that much. So, I was learning about the history of where we were at. Because if I hadn’t met Redacted9, the drawings, I don’t think, would have been this way.

So, then the left-hand side of the drawing was old Mosul, like, these rolling hills. Because I had got—I was lucky. I got to ride on a helicopter, a Black Hawk. They took me on a ride, and we went through Mosul and then landed at the airfield. So, I got to—the pilots took me through the farmland,

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: And we did these swooping maneuvers through the—I got to see the sheep herders along the river and the farmland, and it was spectacular and frightening but spectacular. And so, I had this vision of, like, these rolling farm hills and sheep herders, which was the traditional, what we think of [05:52:00] and some stereotypical Iraq. And I know that I talked to Redacted9 because I talked about the rooftops and how they were all, like, these flat rooftops, but I was trying to go back to his—Since we were trying to—I think the thought process was, like, go away from the Saddam Hussein era of these palaces, and go back to what—this beautiful, rich history of Iraq. And so, it then turned into almost, like, now I understand the problematic with the—problems with this imagery, but it was, like, the stereotypical Middle Eastern rooftops. And I did do some research to, like, find what that would look like, on my limited time on the internet that I could have access to. But so that was the left side was this beautiful, like, skyline of, like, historic Mosul and these rolling hills. And then as you came to the side it was also country [05:53:00] meets urban? So, the cities that we had to drive through on our convoys were, like, major cities where the choke points were, where we were in the vehicles. I think I might have mentioned it, where I was riding on the back of truck and then the—like, that got narrower and narrower.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: And people were on it. So, we were in the right-hand side of the portrait now, today, is a visualization of our occupation [Halaska laughs]. So, I was documenting my experience. I felt terrible, but it was front end, like, if you were looking down the nose of an LMTV as we're going through this convoy in this city. So, there's, like, these high-rise structures to the left and right that had these, like, flowing electrical wires that—because their wires are all just, like, strung about. And then it's, like, the marketplace, and women are coming out in the hijab or the—is it hijab or burka? They're coming out in their full regalia with, like, baskets of food, and [05:54:00] it's, like, the bustling marketplace. And we really went through this in the LMTVs, and then the people were coming up asking us for water. So, like, their hands are outstretched, like, give us water, and they kept coming closer and closer and closer. And we were like, "We've got to get out of here." Because the swarms of people were coming around our vehicles. And so, it's like you're looking down the nose of an LMTV. Two of us cooks are sitting in the vehicle, and all of the people in this town are swarming around the vehicle with their hands outstretched to us. Like, give me, give me, give me. And then we're looking down at them. Like, the two people in the vehicles are looking down at them, like, scanning, right. Like you're getting too close to the vehicle, and up—[laughs] this is so terrible. Up on the horizon is an Apache. And he's the Apache with a full—the [05:55:00] Apache helicopter.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: --not an Apache.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: I'm like, that would even be more problematic. [They laugh] An Apache helicopter, and he's loaded. I mean, bwwhoo, missiles down, up and down the side, because that was, again, another experience when we were in Al-Najaf with it coming up in the little other—and so I'm like, oh, I'll put that in there. And wouldn't it be cool? Because they didn't like the helicopter that I did in my original mural, so maybe now I'll get it, like, yeah, like, meeting, huh. And it's up in the sky, and then in the background in the sunset is a black Hawk flying. And it's, like, this country peaceful country goes into this, like, urban dynamic of occupation. It is a cool drawing.

Halaska: It's a very cool drawing [chuckles].

Pino: But the—apparently our command was going to let me paint it, but I—the restaurant guys were completely opposed to [05:56:00] it. And I didn't ever hear from them. I was just pulled into my first sergeant's office and saying, "I'm really sorry. You don't get to paint the mural. They're going to go—they've decided to decorate the walls with art from—local art from the local artists." And I was like [exhales]—I was devastated. And I'm like, "Okay, I get it." I was devastated though. I wrote this letter, and I was like, "I got fired, and I don't even know why, and I was so excited, and it's just—" and it was all happening at the same time as our convoys are blowing up. And I was just, like, I was having a breakdown. Like, I was seriously, like, "I'm not okay with this. Why wouldn't I get to paint this? I had such a cool sign. Eagle's Eye Inn, I mean, come on!"

And then when they decorated it, the local art was these, like, foam carvings, and I shouldn't be disrespectful to the local artists, but these foam carvings. And, you want to talk about propaganda, it was these, like, baby blue painted [05:57:00] foam carvings of Iraq's silhouette and the United States silhouette, and then from the two countries were carved out two hands coming together shaking each other's hands. And other than it being, like, wah, wah, wah, it was also just really bad craftsmanship. And I was like, oh. And I had to stare at those for, like, five months or however long it were. And it was those types of banners, like, "Join together!" "Iraq and America!" all these different sort of, like, carvings throughout the room. And I'm saying, "Aww." I would stare at that wall every day and picture how my mural would be [Halaska laughs]. God, it would have taken me—and then so I think they had already swapped me and Harley, because I was going to be painting the mural, so it made more sense for me to do sanitation. So, I don't think I got pulled. So I figured it all out during this interview. [05:58:00]

Halaska: Okay.

Pino: I don't think I got pulled because I was too nice to the people. It was because I was supposed to paint a mural. See? See how quickly we can go negative?

Halaska: There we go.

Pino: Anyway, that was the mural that never happened. I still have those drawings, and I'm glad I've learned from it though, to look at the drawings and go, "Yeah, that's not okay at all. [Halaska laughs] Wow. I just visually depicted our occupation of Iraq and wanted them to take it and be happy with it. Shocking that they didn't want that in their restaurant. [Both laughs] Who knew?" It probably was the generals who were trying to win the hearts and minds that were like, "Oh hell no. [Laughs] We can't paint that. I mean, you could, but, you know, you can't paint that."

Halaska: Yeah, now I'm visualizing having that painting there while they're having all of the local government guys come. [They laugh]

Pino: Yeah, we'll get you an ambulance.

Halaska: Yeah, that's—

Pino: But we got to convoy it through that town.

Halaska: It's problematic.

Pino: Look at you guys, always with your hands out, [05:59:00] wanting more! [Laughs] What is wrong with me? I was psychologically not okay. For years, I thought that was okay [Halaska chuckles]. For years I just thought it was, like, a dig on my art that they wouldn't let me paint that. It was only until recently I was like, "Oh my." I was not okay. Like, I really wasn't okay. Like, I had really started—because I also started be—going on a little bit more convoys.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: And after we got blown up on Thanksgiving I—the switch flipped.

Halaska: Tell me about that.

Pino: Well, the—you know, we—I had compare—I say this, so it's not as bad as Abu Ghraib. But when everybody was criticizing the soldiers in Abu Ghraib, I said to people that I am not justifying the actions of what [06:00:00] happened there. And, the lack of humanity in all of that. What I could say is, when you reach a level of exhaustion, confusion, and great harm, you cannot know how far you'll go to survive in that type of existence. So, no. I didn't do things like what they did at Abu Ghraib. But the way in which my mentality shifted was I lost a lot of that kind person, of who I thought, I was a guest in their country, was prior to that. I honestly started looking at the same men that I got in trouble for being too nice to

in a different light. I started questioning [redacted3]'s motives, who I talked about earlier. [06:01:00] I started looking at him differently. I know I was looking at them through a different lens. My chefs, for some reason, I never did. I think it's because I was breaking bread with them and eating and living with them on a daily basis. I was no longer working with the other guys. But the—but I also knew that after what [redacted4] did, those guys that were cooking were under a greater microscope, and they knew it.

And so, when I went on convoys, I no longer was afraid. I actually was to the point where everything had just started happening. There were so many dynamics with confusion and regret and anger and everything that I also was starting, I think, to feel guilty that I had gotten out of so many convoys and my other—the other soldiers in my platoon were at harm's—in harm's [06:02:00] way and were actually getting injured themselves and that they were starting to—it was like I said, when I was on a convoy it was like, "Oh great. Pino's on the convoy." Like, I needed to toughen up really quickly. In order to—for my own wellbeing. And [sighs] so, like, when we went on convoys, I would wear my neck gaiter a lot more. I would wear my tinted goggles. And I would pull my neck gaiter up over my nose, and then they had the sunglass goggles, so essentially on my face you could not tell whether I was male or female. And I was always the TC, like I said. I think I was a driver only once. And I had—at the time, so I didn't talk about that with the up-armored vehicles. But, because we didn't have up-armored vehicles, the SOP, [06:03:00] the standard operating procedure, was TC, windows down or doors off, and your weapon outside the window or outside the thing at the ready.

And when we left, so you had your weapon status, which was green, amber, red. Green is no magazine, but magazine on your person, weapon on safe. Amber is magazine in the chamber? Like, magazine loaded, but no round in the chamber, weapon on safe. Red is one round in the chamber, weapon on. I think off safe, right?

Halaska: I thought that was black.

Pino: No, off safe is black.

Halaska: Black. Yeah.

Pino: So, weapon on safe. Never, ever, ever in my two tours were we ever directed to go to red. Did people follow that rule? No. However, if you had a negligent or an accidental discharge, you would receive an article fifteen, if not more severe punishment. If you were caught. [06:04:00] So, when you went on a convoy you were in amber status. And then you had your weapon at the ready, and you were—your job was to scan, and to look, and to inform your driver, and to maintain eyesight on the vehicles. Previously, I had been a little bit more passive where I had the weapon at ready, but I wasn't in an aggressive posture. I always felt that that was in fact posturing, when people were out there. That they were

creating hostile situations by being so aggressive in their demeanor. So, I got to the point where I was just in a really bad way. I was not sleeping at all, and when I was asleep, I was having these nightmares that weren't, like, your typical nightmares. They were very surreal. They were—always took place in some place that I grew up [06:05:00] in that I loved so dear, and I was always on some sort of guard duty or perimeter check or log pack, and I was always—there was always one person from my past there, and there was always one famous person that I admired in the dream. So, it was this—there was just these really weird scenarios that—so I just wasn't sleeping. And I was tired.

And I pretty much before every convoy was like, “If I die today, I don't give a shit.”

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: Like, I was like—I get in the vehicle, I put my magazine in the chamber, and I said, “It's either you or me. And we'll see who. We'll see who survives today.” And I would—there was no longer the joking. And I get in the vehicle, and I was just, like, ready. It was, like, when I came home and I watched that movie. I don't remember what it was, and I just, I was like, what's the [06:06:00] point? We have all this training. Like, you know. And so, we go out, and any vehicle hat was next to us, they got their—they got my weapon. And I do, like, the nod, like, “What?” And it was just this constant, like, threat. Like, I've never felt that sort of, like, machismo thing that the guys did that the, like, “Yeah, you know, I'm going to go out and, you know, catch me some towelheads today,” or whatever the derogatory—I never was that person, but, like, that sort of, like, bravado was—had like—was the only way I could handle feeling like I was okay in those convoys. And the other guys had been doing the convoys so long that they kind of had lost that edge? It was more of a very, like, too—like, business. They weren't aggressive. They were just business. And I was aggressive. Like, I got—I caught up late. [06:07:00]

And so, there was, like, a cab pulled next to us one time, and for the most part we never stopped at red lights. Convoy operations, you had—you went out, and, you know, everybody knew how to do that and how to stop traffic. And one vehicle would stop traffic while everybody else went through, and then go catch back up. And at this point I don't know why we were now adhering to traffic laws. So, we were stopped at a stoplight, and a cab pulled up next to me, and I pointed my weapon. And I looked in the window, and there was a woman in the backseat holding a little kid. And I stuck my weapon out, and I pointed it at both of them, and she grabbed the child's face and pulled it into her bosom and just stared me down. And I had the sunglasses things on. And I stared her down. She didn't know that we were looking right at each other, and I just—she was holding the child in her arms. And I stared her down, and I lifted my weapon, [06:08:00] and I pointed it even further, and then the light changed, and we kept going. And I was just like,

“Whatever”. Like, that was the—that was the, like, what’s the point at that point? There was just, like, nothing left.

And it was a couple of those things of where I was just, like, I would, like, get off—we finished the log pack. We get out. Sometimes after we got through the gate guard at the palace, we’d jump out a little early because the little haji mart was right there. So, we’d want to go get something before we head out. And if whoever was driving would just go check—they’d check their vehicles into the motor pool and check everybody in. But if you wanted to jump out early you could. And I—couple times I’d just jump out early, and I’d be like, “I didn’t die today.” And then I’d walk back to the thing. And I’d be like, “When are you gonna kill me?” That was just, like, what it was. And then [06:09:00] it’s just, like, kind of a progressive and then, like, more progressive bouts of anger. And I had already had fights that I was picking, and in, like, Al-Najaf. You know, my—I had—and I had already—I got in trouble at the MKT because we were supposed to pack and unpack our container, and Sgt. Meeks was like, “You guys just need to do it again.” And we did it, like, four times. And we had to keep doing it because he kept filling the paperwork out wrong.

And so, like, the fourth time I said to him, “I am not doing this anymore.” And he’s like, “Oh, Pino, you got to be careful. You got to watch your tone, Pino.” And I’m like, “No! This is, like, the fifth time in 120-degree weather, and we’re packing and unpacking.” I was like, “I memorize. I can tell you everything, where it’s at.” He’s like, “Oh, I didn’t fill out the paper right.” And I was like, “You’re the E6. That’s not my problem,” Like, because you didn’t do it right. He’s like, “Just do it again, Pino.” I was like, “No.” And he’s like, “Pino, I’m warning you.” I was like—and I ripped my—it was before I was promoted to a specialist. I ripped my [06:10:00] rank off my collar, and I handed it to him, and I said, “What are you gonna do, arrest me? Are you gonna send me to prison and put me behind wire and not let me go anywhere and give me three square meals a day and work me like a slave? Huh! You’re already doin’ it. [Halaska chuckles] What do I have to lose? Like, I’m not doing it again.” And he’s like, “Pino, I’m going to—you and me and first sergeant are going to have a talk.” I said, “Let’s go.” And I walked to the CP. And he’s like, “Pino! Get back here.” And I was like, “We’re going to talk to First Sergeant.” And I just kept walking. He was like, “Pino, I mean it!” And I was like, “Fuck you.”

And I went to the first sergeant, and they were in a meeting in the CP. I was like, boom, boom, boom, boom on the door. And he’s like, “What’s up, Pino? What’s goin’—y’know. Why are you interrupting my meeting?” I was like, “I just wanted to come and let you know that Sgt. Meeks will be on his way in probably ten minutes, [06:11:00] because his fat ass is going to take that long to get up here, but I want you to know that he is probably going to come up here and tell you that I was being disrespectful to a non-commissioned officer. And I wanted to tell you, from my mouth to your ears that in fact, I was being disrespectful to a non-commissioned officer because he, in fact, has not earned my respect. And we have

been ordered to do the same activity multiple times today due to his error and inability to understand the format in which we're supposed to follow. So, that is the reason why I do not have respect for the man, and I will no longer show him any sort of respect, because he has not earned my respect. I have, as you can see, already moved the rank from my collar, handed it over to him, and he is welcome to give it away to anybody of his choosing. But if it means having that rank on my collar that I have to respect that man, then I don't want [06:12:00] it. You can keep it, and you can punish me however you want to punish me. But I just wanted you to know that that is what he is going to come and tell you I did, and I said. And it is all true. But I will also tell you that the man has no common sense whatsoever, and he does not know what he's doing, and it could take a child to give us the direction in a correct way for us to accomplish what we've already accomplished multiple times today because of his inability to fill out a form."

And First Sergeant was like, "I see him coming, up the hill. [Halaska chuckles] What do you think I should do to punish you?" I was like, "I don't care. Give me an article fifteen. I already told him, 'What is he going to do, arrest me?'" And you could see First Sergeant was, like, trying not to laugh but was also, like, 'I want to take you really seriously,' and he also understood the dynamics of what kind of sergeant Sgt. Meeks was. And Sgt. Meeks is a good man but terrible sergeant. [06:13:00] And he said, "I want you to look at me right now like I am punishing you. And I want you to know that you can't disrespect a non-commissioned officer and that you are being punished. Is that—do you understand?" I was like, "Roger, First Sergeant." He was like, "Now, are you going to go back and complete the task?" I was like, "No, First Sergeant." [Halaska chuckles] He's like, "Okay. Go back, and know you've been punished." I was like, "Roger, First Sergeant." And I went, and I passed Sgt. Meeks on the walk, and I was—but he was like, "Pino, come with me." I was like, "I don't have to go anywhere." [Laughs] And I went back to the MKT, and I kept working. I don't know what First Sergeant told him. But, that was, like, I had already become kind of aggressive in that way, and then this. So, I just, I was starting, to, like, do that more and more, and I was having nightmares, and I was—there was all kinds of things happening.

And probably around [06:14:00]—well, then November happened.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: Yeah, so by the beginning of December I asked if there were any slots left for midtour leave. Because I was trying to tell Sgt. Meeks on a different occasion about my nightmares because I missed formation in the morning, and I got in a lot of trouble, and he came to talk to me. And I just broke down, and I was like, "I'm having these nightmares." And there was two times I tried to tell him about the nightmares, and Sgt. Meeks and I kind of shared—I had my living quarters, and then he had this little hallway that split the two—where the guys lived and where I lived. And he had a cot set up in this, and it was just separated by two woobies,

like, two blankets. So, we pretty much, like, lived in the same room. And at this time we had already gotten refrigerators. And I had a refrigerator, and on top there were, like, snacks. And first time I tried to tell him about what was happening he looked up at the top of my refrigerator. He was like, “Are those HoHos?” [06:15:00] And I was like, “Yes, Sgt. Meeks. Do you want one?” He’s like, “I just love HoHos.” He’s a sweetheart! He was just dumb. He was so dumb.

And then the second time I was just, like, exhausted. And I missed formation, and he came to talk to me. And I told him I was having nightmares, and he was like, “Well, what do you mean you’re having nightmares?” And I’m like, “Well [sighs], I don’t know how to explain it. In this one nightmare—” I call them nightmares, but they’re really surreal absurdities. Like, they—I was at my granny’s house, because I was raised in my granny’s house. So that’s a very common thing. And I was in a van parked outside the front yard, and nobody—only people use the front door were visitors or holidays. Like, we went in through the back door. She had a car port in the back. So, I’m in the front, and there was the front room, which was the formal living room that you only sat in on Christmas [06:16:00]

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: --or if you were a visitor. And then the kids never spent any time there. So, I’m in this unmarked van in the front of my granny’s house, and it’s like we were, like, doing, like, kind of like spy operations. We were listening in on what was happening. But inside—and we were doing, like, almost like guard duty too. And inside my granny’s house, when you walked in the house, it became my Auntie Georgia’s house. So, the exterior was granny’s house, but the inside was my Auntie Georgia’s house, but then you went into the guest—or the formal living room, which was also Auntie Georgia’s house, but it was also granny’s house. It was really weird.

But there was a cabaret happening there. And mind you, I came from musical theater. I joined the Army. I was missing my life. Like, it was a very, like—but it was, like, a drag cabaret. And we were, like, you had to get dressed up, and it was like the movie *Cabaret* with Liza Minnelli. And part of my mission was to be in the cabaret? [06:17:00] I don’t know. Surreal, I told you. And so, I had to go back to the van because that’s where everybody got—that was like the dressing room. But you were also on guard duty. I dunno. So, I’m in the van, and I’m looking, and there comes, like, a convoy of, like, the perimeter was getting ready to be breached. But it was like in *Back to the Future* where, like, they’re at the shopping mall and all of a sudden you see this van pull up. And they, like, have weapons, that’s what was happening. But I’m in the van. They can’t see me. And I’m like, “Oh crap, they’re about to go into the house. I have to protect the house.” So, I grab my weapon, and your, like, big fear when you’re out there is that you forgot your magazine. And I go to my cargo pocket, and I don’t have a magazine.

And I have my weapon, and I go to the—like, I have cargo pocket, and I don't have my magazine. And I'm like, "Where the hell is my magazine?" And I start searching through everything. [06:18:00] And I'm watching them unload, like, download from these vehicles and start to swarm the house. And I'm like, "I don't have a magazine. I don't have a magazine." And somehow I'm not out of the van, but I'm in the cabaret outfit. [Both chuckle] And I'm trying to protect the house. And I'm telling Sgt. Meeks this story, [laughs] because it's embarrassing, right. Like, I'm like, this is just really surreal, but I'm like, but I can't stop them because I don't have a magazine. And I'm in this weird cabaret outfit. And they're taking over. Like, they're entering into the house. And I can't do anything about it. And I'm—I don't know what to do, and I'm in this panic. And he says to me, "I bet you looked real good in that skirt." And I was just like, "Uhhh...I guess." And he's like, "I don't know, Pino." I'm like, "No, Sgt. Meeks, forget it. Like, it's [06:19:00] stupid. Like, it's dumb. I just need some rest." And he's like, "I don't—" I remember, he was like, "I don't know what you want me to say." And I'm like, "Just, if there comes a slot open on midtour leave, can you just—I don't think I'm okay. I thought I could hold out until we went home. I just don't—I'm not okay. Like, can you—I don't want people to hate me for taking a slot, but I also... I can't. I don't know what you want me to do anymore."

And he's like, "Mmm. I'll see what I can do." [Laughs] But he was—I mean, that was his—he was like, "Bet you looked real good in that skirt, Pino." [Halaska laughs] I was like, "Yeah, looked great." That was great. I want an outfit like that when I get home. [Both laugh] I want all—I'll do the performance for you, Sgt. Meeks. Yeah.

Halaska: Did you [06:20:00] end up getting a slot on midtour leave?

Pino: I did. And I didn't mean to get this slot, but I got the slot that—I went home for the last two weeks of December, so I got to go home for Christmas, and my birthday, and New Year's Eve.

Halaska: Oh, nice!

Pino: And it was hard because we redeployed in February. So—not redeployed. We came back home.

Halaska: Yeah! Came back home.

Pino: So, it was—my dad warned me about coming home. 'Cause I asked him. I was asking him for advice, if he thought I should go on midtour leave. And at that time I said, "Do you think if they gave me an opportunity for me just to go to Europe and spend two weeks in Europe, should I go to Europe, or should I—" which I did my second tour, "Or should I come home?" And he goes, "You know, I want to see you, but I know how hard it will be for you to want—to have to go

back.” He’s like, “If it was up to me, you go to Europe.” I was like, “No, I’ll go home.” And I’m glad I went home because I went home, I came out to my mom while I was home, and then it was the last time I saw my mom. [06:21:00]

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: She died two weeks after I came home from Iraq.

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: So, it was the last time I actually saw her. So, it was—it resolved a lot of exhaustion issues. It—yeah. And when I came back from leave, because mail was so delayed, when I got back, my cot was overflowing with gift packages that people had sent for Christmas for me because they overdid it. It was overkill for Christmas that year. It was the first Christmas in—during the war.

Halaska: Yeah!

Pino: And I mean, literally you couldn’t find my cot.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: It was just a mound of presents. So that was pretty cool. But yeah, I had—I was losing my shit. It was bad.

Halaska: Do you know how—or how were other people dealing with it in your unit? [06:22:00] Or how did they deal with it, I guess?

Pino: [Sighs] I don’t—you know, it’s funny. I never thought about that. There was a lot of sex. I’m not gonna to lie.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: There was a lot of sex and a lot of movies. It was really, it was just watching movies and having sex, and when you could get your hands alcohol, drinking.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: I don’t know. I mean, I think we talked a lot to each other, but I don’t think we really—it was weird. It was like, I just keep going back to, like, when we dug that trench in Al-Najaf or whatever it was, and we were so tired and so mad, and we were just telling each other our, like, deepest darkest secrets. That’s kind of—it was, like—maybe it was like that. It was, like, surreal. Like, we were telling [06:23:00] nasty things about ourselves. Like, one sergeant talked about going on this trip one time and ping pongs coming out of places ping pongs shouldn’t have been coming out of. And, like, when I started having problems with my ovaries.

Such severe pain. You know, I had people that came to me and were trying to confide in me and help me through that.

And I remember DeSousa was the one guy that I always talk about, DeSousa. But he's the one guy that was a really—he was our pack clerk, and he was really, really annoying. And he was the guy that was like, “Uh, quick question. Quick question.” And he was the guy, I think I told the story about combat lifesaver, doing the fireman carry.

Halaska: Oh.

Pino: I don't know if I told that story. And I lifted up Alaman and about broke my back because DeSousa wouldn't do it. And then we had to burn shit, and DeSousa was afraid of fire. [06:24:00] [Laughs] So we reset the pots on fire. He was like, “Ah!” He was just so scared of fire. I was like, “Dude!” JP is not really combustible, and so it's hard enough to get this started, and it's the wind in the middle of the desert. “I need you to stay focused.” And he's like, “I am so scared of fire!” I'm like, “Well, it's even worse man, because we're actually burning shit! Like, this is fire and gas and wheezes all sorts of bad. And I have got stuck with you. And you've got to figure this out.” [Laughs] He was so scared of fire. He's the guy that broke his hand when we got the porta potties and we got the—[laughs] oh, DeSousa.

He was also the guy that was—would not—refuse to take a shower or do any sort of bitch bath. And finally, by the time we got to Mosul and we had, like, a shower stall, the guys literally picked him up, threw him in the shower, turned the water on, and started scrubbing on him with his uniform on. And we all had to go into his [06:25:00] area and take his clothes out and wash them.

Halaska: [Makes noise of disgust]

Pino: And bless his heart. You know, I don't envy anybody that gets that from the, like, shaving legs comment. Like, I don't envy anybody that gets accused of things, but I mean, he was pretty rank.

And so DeSousa is the guy that I always say, when they came to me and said, “You're being too close to your local nationals,” I'm like, “At the end of the day, it doesn't matter how much anybody annoys me, I will always stand in front of a bullet for DeSousa, even if I hate him.” Like, even the guy you hate the most, that's just the way it is out there. You would defend them to the death. At least that's my point of view. Nobody's annoying enough for me to throw them to the wolves, you know? [inaudible]

But anyway, DeSousa, [06:26:00] they—everybody was handling my pain in different ways. Not the nightmares, but I was having such severe—I don't even think we've talked about the ovarian--

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: --cyst problem, but the pain and what I was going through. And I was pretty much, like, ODing [overdosing] on Midol and ibuprofen. And it was getting bad that way too, and they were trying to help any way they could. My first sergeant propositioned me because he said his wife had the same problem, and the only thing that resolved it was sex. And so, I was like, "Oh, I thought you just wanted to borrow a movie, but okay." So, you know, he meant well [Halaska chuckles]. I rolled my eyes, but he did. I think. I think. I don't know at this point. I'm just, like, "Please leave." [Laughs] I'm like, "I have—I've heard that's a good resolution, when you're married!" [Laughs] And I don't—

So DeSousa came and sat with me one day, and he said, "I know you're in a lot of pain." [06:27:00] I'm like, "Why is this everybody's business?" you know. He's like, "No, no, no, I—" He said, "I don't think you know this. A lot of people don't know this. I'm engaged to be married." I was like, "Okay. Good for you." And he goes, "No, no, no, there's more to the story." He said, "My fiancé is a medic, and she has the same problem. And it's so severe that she has to have medication and birth control." And I was like, "Yeah, I do too, but I lost my six-month supply of birth control. They can't get me anymore out here." And he goes, "Right." He said, "But she's had to actually have a procedure done, and they—" He's like, "The reason I'm telling you this is because even though the doctor here is telling you that you can't do anything about it or that you're trying to get to go home," he's like, "She was lucky enough to be in a unit where they sent her to [inaudible], had the procedure, and then she was able to come back. [06:28:00] But because she was a medic, she was able to communicate that." He was like, "But, you know, the amount of pain she's in, I can only imagine what you're going through. And I don't—" He goes, "I don't know how to solve it other than we need to keep getting people to help you, because it is a legitimate problem."

And he's just confiding me about his girlfriend and, like, all this stuff that had just happened to her. And then he's like, "And I don't know what I'd do if I lost her." And I'm like, "I know. It would be hard for any of us." And he's like, "No." He's like, "We've been through so much." So, he tells me that he's, like... a Kennedy heir. Like, his—the DeSousas are part—he comes from the New England bloodline of the Kennedys. And he comes from society, high society. And he joined the Army in a little bit of a ways to get that experience as his future role in the family. And also [06:29:00] just to kind of prove himself. But his fiancé is not what their family would qualify as an acceptable mate. So, his family told him that it was either her or his bloodline. And he chose his fiancé. And so, he was like, "So if I lose her," he goes, "When we return, I'm going back to nothing. And I've never lived with nothing before. And I don't, you know—" He's like, "I'm a little scared." And it was weird because at first, I was like, "Why are you talking to me?" Like, "Why, DeSousa? I don't want to talk to you!"

And then it got to be this really sincere sort of, like, we all were dealing with our own little things. And we didn't know—we didn't know how to have, like [06:30:00]—we didn't know how to—we weren't intentionally counseling one another. But really, what else were you gonna do? There was no bar. There was no—I mean, by second tour it was kind of sad because people had already gotten into pain killers. You know, before the opioid, I think we were—it was the preliminary. They were all starting to take Percocets. I mean, they were downing Percocets like no big deal the second tour. But the first tour, it really wasn't like that. And part of it was we didn't have access to all of that. But, the first tour was much more of an adventure, and because things were unknown for everybody to the highest echelon. So, it was survival at it's, you know, in its most beautiful way and in its darkest way, too. I mean, there was just—the—when I said there was a lot of sex, there was a lot of sex, [06:31:00] but it was also a lot of everybody knew everybody's business. So, a lot of blackmailing too. I mean, if you know what somebody's business is and they want to, like, tell you you're doing something wrong, it was a lot of, "I dare you to say something to somebody."

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: "You sure you want to do that?" I mean, I—it's kind of how it was. It was weird. It was like a soap opera.

But I think we got into dangerous territory too because, from a psychological point of view.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: Because counseling, one-on-one counseling of one another in a co-ed situation, oftentimes when you have a bad day and you find yourself with alcohol will also lead to allowing yourself to be vulnerable maybe with [06:32:00] the people you shouldn't be vulnerable with. And it also leads to confusing situations, whether or not you've been abused or not.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: You know, letting your guard down with people that you would never let your guard down with. That—I mean, that's definitely the case with me and a couple people. Just, I don't know. We—and then having to work with them on a day-to-day basis and then never talking about it again. You know.

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: And—or—I mean, or, like the beautiful things, like turning on Whitney Houston's greatest hits at the loudest volume and singing as a group. And how did we cope? We put—we stacked up mattresses, like the foam mattresses that we

got, like, ten feet high, and then we got on top of a building and jumped into ‘em. [06:33:00] [Both laugh] Thank god none of us got killed. And yeah, I mean, there’s just—I think there was a lot of fun, weird, like, you didn’t—you were so tired. I mean, we watched *8 Mile* a thousand times [Halaska chuckles]. Like, that was the only movie we had access to. So it was, like, eight—the soundtrack in my deployment is *8 Mile* and 50 Cent. And it was just like, it was just, you just—there wasn’t a lot.

Aswaga[??] was a weird cat. He was like, he worked with us in the dining facility but was a loner, and he loved Evanescence. And that was the only time he would talk was when he was—He was like Billy Bob Thornton in—“I like them French friend potatoes.” But he was like, “Evanescence has one amazing sound, and just with the acoustics and the—” And I’m like, “Why are you talking, Aswaga?” And it’s bizarre. And it’s crazy. Like, and he’d just sit there and be like, “Yeah, [06:34:00] no, Evanescence has a lead singer, and she’s quite beautiful. And I—” I’m like, “Ah, you’re strange. [Chuckles] I love you though, but you’re strange.” And I don’t know. God, by the ten—end of my tour, PT was kind of like a—running, running, and running, and running, and running, and running, and running, in a hundred-degree weather and knowing that you’re sick and you shouldn’t be running and, like, I’m not even sweating anymore. Doesn’t matter. I bought a cowboy hat at the haji mart. Look at me, woo-oo. Like, it was crazy. [Laughs] I was crazy.

That’s so funny. I never thought about that, how everybody was handling it. Because I think they were all not okay either. Like, my friend Aleman, who’s now got brain cancer, and he I know was not having an okay time, because we had an accident on a convoy where a woman got killed and [06:35:00] then was brought back to the medics, and it wasn’t our convoy. It was another convoy, and we had to pull security after it happened. And they took her to the medics, and then they paid her family off. And it all happened, and we went back to my room, and we were sitting on my cot, and I remember looking at him, and I was like, “Did that just happen?” And he was like, “I think that just happened.” Like, “I don’t—it doesn’t seem like it just happened.” And he’s like, “Yeah, I don’t know. Maybe they’ll tell us about what happened. Maybe they’ll clarify that in the formation.” And the only reason I know it happened is because I talked to the medics that dealt with it. And it was—those were those moments where we looked at each other like, “What just happened?”

And the other guys were like, these—I told you. They were, like, the tough guys. And Aleman was a little bit more sensitive. And Aleman was [06:36:00] very loyal to his wife. I’ll say that. He was the one that was loyal to his wife. Everybody else was a little questionable. Not a little [Halaska chuckles]. But, you know, I—that’s the other—I think that—I hate to keep saying that with the sex, but—

Halaska: It’s how people coped.

Pino: It was. But I was not—it's like why I think I love *M*A*S*H**. That there was sex, and in *M*A*S*H** there was sex and sexual harassment and, yes, inappropriate behavior. I always say this, again, I'm not justifying the behavior, but this is the reality of the behavior. There was sex that was very much, like... deeply felt. There was sex that was just sex for sex's sake. But there was also sex that was, like... I [06:37:00] know there were moments where it was like, "I don't know if I'm gonna live tomorrow." It was weird. Like, emotional. I'm sorry this is so much details because it's—

Halaska: It's okay.

Pino: I'm not just talking about me—

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: Because we all lived with each other. So, like, emotional, like, crying sex, you know. Like... [hammering sound] not shame, not—I don't know. I can't—

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: [Hammering sound] Just needing another person with you for that moment in time that understands on a visceral level what it means to be in that moment. And not—there—it wasn't all, like, beautiful, romantic like movies. But there was definitely inappropriate sex happening too, like dangerous sex. But, like, we all watched out for one another. [06:38:00] And it bothered me because I think that's one of the things that they use as a weapon to say why women shouldn't serve. And I don't agree with that. I think that it—women can also be a reminder of the nurturing, a way in which you can be empathetic and nurturing and still strong and still function, in your job? I don't know.

Halaska: Did you have women in your unit that were kind of, like, an example of that for you, that you're--?

Pino: That were strong and nurturing and empathetic?

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: Oh, hell yeah.

Halaska: Mmhmm, and maybe helped people deal with stuff or—

Pino: I honestly—yes. Yes. Yes. I didn't think of it that way, 'cause I think of them more as stronger forces than just counselors, [06:39:00]

Halaska: Yeah.

Pino: But yeah. Sgt. Young, E7, charge of—platoon sergeant for supply; Sgt. Pay, E7 in the medics, like gritty, tough as nails but super cool. They were—those two women were warriors. Like—and not—I never felt of them as mother figures. They were leaders. I mean, absolute leaders. Because they didn't take shit, but they also had strategy. Like, Sgt. Young was on the ADVON team that went and crossed the border before any—she was on a team of five males that were entrusted to cross the border and be in a very h[redacted4]dous way. And, man, she held her own. If I had to be stranded on an island with somebody, [06:40:00] I wouldn't want to be one-on-one with Sgt. Young, 'cause I think we would probably butt heads eventually, but, like, I'd want her on my team. Her and Sgt. Pay by far. And they—also because they worked really well with the other platoon sergeants. Like, they were best friends with the head of the motor pool, the two top sergeants there. They were best friends with 1st Sgt. Cody and with Cpt. Villanueva. Like, they were respected. I mean, and they earned that shit. I'm not gonna lie. They earned that shit.

They—you know, I remember after we came back and we had had our thirty-day midtour leave and I had to go on extended emergency leave because my mom died, you know, we talked about—they all knew about my mom because we all had conversations. That's all we could do is talk out there, so they knew about my mom, and... My mom was a quadriplegic. I don't know if I've talked about that before, but, so I used to write these really detailed letters [06:41:00] to her so she could live vicariously through my letters. And when I came back from emergency leave we all had a kinda reunion party before everyone went on their separate ways to different units, and whatnot. And she was the only one, she grabbed my arm and pulled me aside and was like, "I heard about your mom."

Halaska: Mmm.

Pino: And that's all she had to say. And she gave me a hug, and that was it. And it was like, [tears up] you asked about these women, it was—for me, having that happen and then to lose my mom right off the bat and then to be separated from that community that you had known every day for a year? To have that great of a loss and then to go back to a brand-new unit with people that had no idea. It was horrifying. And then it was, like, for her to be like, "I heard about your mom" was like, "You're gone though. I'm not going to be with you anymore. Like, I can't [06:42:00] just talk about this." And, like, that's what gets me now. Like, I've been out for I don't know how long, but when I'm having a shit day or a shit week. Nights are hard 'cause I quit smoking, and so, like, it's like that nighttime, like, 2:00 AM outside in the silence of the dark telling your deepest, darkest secrets or fears, over a cigarette with somebody that understands that. Like, that's gone. I mean, I have that to an extent, but it's not... it's not the same.

And it's not that I want to ever be back in that situation, but it's just, it really is a visceral experience. But yeah, those—I mean, those women were top-notch. Top

of their league, for lack of better word, [06:43:00] in the trenches with you. Like, and Sgt. Pay only deployed with us half the time because she actually had a baby, like, two weeks before we deployed, so six months in, she left her baby back home and joined us out—turned back in Sgt. Pay. But she was a lot more nurturing after she had her baby. It was really funny. She was, like, a lot more motherly [Halaska chuckles]. But yeah, yeah, and I think those women—it's really interesting you said that. Because they were women that all the soldiers would go and confide in. They were definitely the mama bears.

Halaska: Mmhmm.

Pino: But not in what way you would think. It was like, a lot of “Toughen up,” and “Suck it up,” and when you needed to be nurtured they would nurture, but it was a lot of, “Suck it up. You're stronger than that.” Like, “What's your—” Like, they'd light a cigarette, kr-cchh, like, “What's your problem?” [Halaska laughs] It was, “What?” And all of her, like, soldiers and [06:44:00] supply were like, “Get a load of this wuss.” Like, it was, [laughs] like, “Not my problem.” But no, they were good.

And Biffle, too. Biffle was my equal but a mom, and she and I were bitter enemies when we first met. And by the time we left that deployment we were dear, dear friends, really good friends. Yeah [hammering sound]. I have to think about that, how everybody dealt with it.

Halaska: Okay. Well, I think we're good for today.

Pino: Yeah.

Halaska: Alright, we will continue next time.

[End of OH02166.Pino_OHMSaudio]

[End of interview]