

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Elliot Graham

Conducted by Deb Barrett

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This interview is being conducted on Monday, December 12, 2016 with Mr. Elliot Graham at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Graham was born on May 19, 1980 in the Bronx, New York. He is a community outreach minister, and learned of the Veterans History Project through the library director, Jamie Bukovac, and the Willowbrook Corner Coalition. Mr. Graham has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Live Before Entering Military Service

So, Elliot, where were you living just before you entered the service? What was your life like at that time?

I was living in Raeford, North Carolina, which is right outside of Fayetteville – the Fort Bragg area. My life – I was just out of high school. I was working a part-time job here and a part-time job there. I really was not sure. I tried community college – the neighborhood college said it was a community college. I just wasn't ready mentally to take advantage of that good opportunity. I was just sort of trying to find myself.

Were you living at home or on your own?

I was living with my parents at the time.

You said you were trying to find yourself. Is that what prompted you going to the military?

Yes. I was trying to find myself. I wasn't sure if I wanted to go to the military. I was raised by my father and mother, and my father was a Vietnam veteran. He was always urging me that I should go into the military. I was kind of in a rebellious stage, you might say, and I was trying to figure out what I would do.

What prompted me to go to the military was I got in trouble with law enforcement. I was fighting an officer, being intoxicated late at night going to see a young girl. Bad decisions – bad choices I was making. I was being irresponsible. I had to pay the consequences. I was given probation. I'd really seen the inside of a jail cell and was able to look myself in the mirror and see which way I was going because I wasn't listening.

What prompted me to go in was real life – seeing the inside of a courtroom. And the guys I knew and looked up to that made other bad decisions a little more serious than mine and were taken away from my neighborhood for two to five years, were coming out at that time. In my immaturity at the time I was thinking it was cool seeing them coming out and looking up to them. They would look at me and ask me what I was doing in there. I thought they would be happy with me telling them how bad I was and what I did. They looked at me and told me, "You don't want this. You're better than this. This is not a joke." There were no laughs or smiles, or at-a-boys like I was expecting. I always thought I was tough, and for them to really not applaud me on that it brought reality to things.

How long were you in jail?

I didn't do long. I did a night in there. My dad allowed me to have to sleep off that alcohol, and really have to sit in there and wait. And in the afternoon when he finally placed bail, it was just the whole process of waiting for sentences and things. Going to trial and stuff like that really started to set in and scare me pretty good.

It worked.

It worked! It worked. Here I am, a war vet now.

So you were overnight and you said you got probation.

I got unsecure probation. I wasn't being monitored. But I did have to report in, and I did have to do community service. I was able to do some nice things that I would have loved to do anyway, rather than be forced to do it – building Habitat homes and things like that.

So you did probation, and finished your probation. Then what happened? You said you had to go before a judge.

Yes. I finished probation and the community service, and then I had to go see the judge who sentenced me to all of that. I guess at that point I was pretty sure I needed to do something positive and take my father's advice. He was the one always encouraging me to go into to armed services. I just didn't want to listen to him, but he was right.

So I talked to the judge after showing him everything I had done, and I asked him a question before I was going to be dismissed. I asked him if my choices ruin my chances of serving in the military, not yet knowing what branch. I think I did know – I wanted to go into the Army, because that was what was normal to do in the area where I lived; because of the base – Fort Bragg.

He was surprised, like he had to make sure he heard me right. I just remember him sitting back, taking off his glasses and saying, "You want to go to the military. You will be doing much a favor!" So at that time he instructed me to go and find a recruiter and go after it. He said if I was so serious about it, he was serious about it, and report back to him as soon as I did. I think, to my memory, there was no big window. I had to have it done pretty fast – less than a week, if that, that I had to meet him back.

So he put pressure on me that I had to go right to the recruiting station in Fayetteville, which is roughly 35 to 40 minutes away from where I lived with my mother and father.

And you walked in thinking you were going to go to the Army, and what happened?

I walked in and was going to go to the Army. Like I said, it was the urgency that I felt the judge had placed on me that I had to make this happen. I believed there was a deadline. I was sitting in the Army recruiting office and it was like another day to get through it because they had quit a bit of people in there already.

There was a Marine recruiter who came by the Army's office. I don't know if he came to use a printer or copier – I don't know what his business was. But I was looking as he was acknowledging people coming in and out – he was the only one who really spoke. I liked his

confidence about himself. He spoke to me, “How are you doing, young man?” And I happened to be older than a lot of the high schoolers who were there.

How old were you?

I had to be 20 years old at that point, because this had been some time after being monitored on probation. So it had been some time.

So there were a lot of 17 and 18 year-olds, and you were 20.

Yes, mam. I was older. And I remember seeing him and he said, “Hey, how are you doing? You look like you’re ready to go.” I said, “Yeah, I’m ready to go. You don’t know how ready I am.” He asked, “Are you ready to go today?” I said, “Yes, I’m ready to go today.” He said, “Why don’t you come over here by me. You sure you want to go to the Army? You sure you don’t want to go to the Marines?” And it was typical Marine – there was no one better than a Marine, and that’s what he represented that first day, that first time. I was sold. We were on the same page. I was ready to go. I just needed for someone to take me down to the courthouse and wait to see Judge Pape to say I was going in.

And that’s all history. I was given a chance. One more chance. And if I had any fallout in my military career with marijuana, or even alcohol, that I would be not only kicked out, but everything that I had trouble with in the past would have been brought back to me, too.

So this was making sure you stayed on the straight and narrow.

This was enough motivation that helped me in my career.

How long from the day you met that recruiter was it before you were sworn into the Marine Corps?

That was a test. Because I thought I was leaving right away. But it didn’t happen like that. I think the answer to that question was maybe six to seven months I had to wait.

Why did you have to wait?

I think it was because of the training sessions down on Paris Island. I had to pass the tests that get you into the Marine Corps – the common knowledge and things like that.

Tell us about what those tests were like?

Those tests are pretty boring, in my opinion – I’m not a tester. There were maybe about 100 or some odd questions. You’re in this classroom that’s quiet – the quietest room you’re ever going to be in that’s full of people. You’re taking this test. You have maybe three or four sharpened pencils, and you’re going to answer these questions in a certain amount of time. The pressure is on that the higher the score you get, the better the more options you have in what occupation you would serve in the Marine Corps or whatever branch.

Were the questions about math and language, history?

All of the above – a combination. There was some science, too. I remember some science questions that were on there, math, like you just mentioned – all with the purpose of seeing where you were mentally. And your judgment as well – I remember some judgment questions.

So they could find the right position for you in the Marine Corps.

Yes, mam.

So, after you talked to this recruiter, he talked to the judge and you went home and you told your parents you were going into the Marine Corps.

He was Sergeant Capers. He was good. He was a good recruiter. I say that because he came to my house. He sat down there. My mother happened to be related to some Capers'. I never knew that. They got to talking and he was really smooth. And my mom was more open now to me being in the Marine Corps. She was not even for it until Sergeant Capers came over. And Sergeant Capers had a way of having me believe that I could have about four or five cars!

He painted a pretty rosy picture!

He was good! I liked that. He was really good. And I told my brother. He said, "You're going into the Marine Corps? Are you crazy?" I said, "Man, sit down and listen. I can do this! I'm going to get us some cars. It's good!" I was so convinced.

How did your dad react?

He was beginning to be a lot more proud of me then. I felt like he was a lot more proud of the choices I was making.

He felt like you were making a good turn.

Yes. I really believe he was more proud. He was starting to brag on me as a son, now. That was good. That was a good feeling. I have to be honest – it's always good to be bragged on or something.

So you said it was about six or seven months. When did you actually enter the Marine Corps?

It was November 12th or 19th. It was my ETS day, so I think it was the 19th. Our birthday is on the 12th, and it was the week after.

Induction and Basic Training

So you went into the Marine Corps. I know they take you on a bus to Paris Island. But where were you picked up? Were you picked up at the recruiting office?

No, mam. I was picked up in Raleigh, North Carolina. That's about an hour and fifteen-minute ride, give or take, from Fayetteville – two hours from my home.

So this bus picked you up. What was that bus ride like?

It was pretty cool. We had people from all over North Carolina on the bus. I met a good guy. We had a lot in common. His last name was Vick. We kicked it off pretty good on the bus on our way down to Paris Island, South Carolina.

How long was the bus ride?

I think it was every bit of four or five hours.

At night?

Was it at night? Yes, it had to be at night. We arrived at Paris Island, and it was dark. So some of the ride, I'm trying to gauge, was a dark ride. But I'm trying to think if we left in the day and night fell. We got there and all I remember seeing was the yellow footprints.

And somebody gently escorting you off the bus!

I don't know about gently!

What did they do?

Well, you get there, and you get warned before they even do it. You got warned about ten minutes before you get to the gate. They tell you the tone is going to change. Everybody on the bus was pretty cool until we got to about ten minutes away from Paris Island. And the tone changed. You could see it changing! I could. I don't know about anybody else, but I could see it. It was pretty cool while you were in North Carolina. But it got a little more on the serious side when we got to South Carolina. Then you weren't smiling anymore about the Charleston area.

What did they warn you about?

They said, "Your life isn't your own anymore. You're not at home. And I'm not your momma or your daddy! Your momma and daddy can't save you now. The Marine Corps is your momma and daddy! Get off this bus!" It was like, wow, man.

And what did they tell you about the footprints?

I'm trying to remember what they said about the footprints. I just remember you had to stand on the footprints and not move. This is where your life pretty much ends and starts. And it was an honor and privilege to be standing on those yellow footprints.

Which they are. You don't realize it at the time.

All the previous Marines who've stood on them.

Yes – all the ones who stood on them before you. It's very significant. I don't remember everything because those were some of the best – they've got some words for you, man! You were called everything. You were not even a recruit! You were maggot food or you were slime. You were everything. It was live and living color, I would say.

So you're torn down to build you up.

Tearing you down to build you up. Exactly!

What do you remember after those footprints? Did you get your clothing?

It was haircut time! We all went to this room and waited. And everybody was looking at each other. People were angry. There were attitudes – they'd never been talked to like that before. It was new to all of us.

I don't know. To me I felt like it was crazy! I don't know how I was feeling. I felt kind of scared, but I knew I had to go through it. I had a different perspective! They could go back. But I'm a grown man and I had to finish this – I had to talk to Judge Pape! So I had to see this through.

We got haircuts. Everybody got a haircut. It's quick and it's fast – from the back to the front. It's the quickest haircut you're ever going to have. And it's the ugliest haircut you're ever going to have! You finally see men crying, because they get up they look at themselves. It's so crazy how quick they give haircuts.

You get that and keep going.

And did you get your uniforms?

You got your uniforms after that. It's like an assembly line. You're in line and breathing on each other's necks – you're standing so close, in a single line against a wall, breathing on each other's necks. You're moving toe to heel, toe to heel. And you better keep it tight! The drill sergeant is walking and looking for you not to be there so he can just give it to you.

And it's still dark! It's still nighttime. But he doesn't care. It doesn't matter. You're on their time.

You go get your clothes and join the assembly line. It's around this big, long table where they have everything you need that you're going to get. You're not getting stuff – they throw it at you! You're catching everything: toothbrush, soap, socks; "go-fasters" is what they call them, they were sneakers. You got your boots and your skivvy shorts, shirts – everything you need they're throwing at you. You catch it and put it in your sea bag.

From there, I believe, after that we went and picked up everything. So now you're on your way to something to eat. I might be missing something in there, but we went everywhere in

formation, and finished up going back to our barracks – the barracks we were going to be in for 13 weeks.

And what did they tell you when you got to the barracks? What did it look like, first of all? Was it bunk beds?

Yes. It was like a big apartment building, but it was three floors. I stayed on the first floor with 90 other guys. There were enough bunk beds for all of us, and there were some left over so we could have room for more. It was shell shock!

We had three guys – two sergeants, DI's, and the head DI – Drill Instructor. Anyway, Staff Sergeant Mercer. He was a sniper. He was quiet, but he was deadly. You could see it all on him. I really admired him. Drill Instructor, Sergeant Clark, was the motor. He's in some of the pictures. I took a picture with him. I found favor with him, but he was hard on me. He really took a liking to me, and I to him. But he didn't play.

But the one who was really crazy – they got him out of there – I forget his name, but he was a staff sergeant, a black guy. He was wild! They ended up replacing him with somebody else for whatever reason – they gave him new orders. But he didn't care about anything. He was over the top with stuff. He would just throw your stuff on the ground after you just took your time. All that stuff was new! You were just coming from home. So you get transferred from your home, your Mama. But at least you had a bed. But he still would say, "I don't care if you think it's yours. It's mine!" He'd snatch it and throw it on the ground. You'd stand there and think that thing you used to do on the streets did not work here!

It's a whole other world!

Did you get a chance to call your family and let them know you arrived?

I think it was real brief. I think it was not even a minute. You just called and said, "I made it. Love you. Bye." Boom. That's it! And then you don't talk to your family for another four to six weeks. And even that conversation is maybe two to five minutes, so you've got to really talk to who you want and let them know how you are. How they would know was by us writing letters. So I could prepare them as I was getting informed by my drill instructors that, hey, I have a phone call to make to the house so please have everybody be there on whatever date and time it was. It was that fine-tuned. And my parents and whoever else was very supportive would be there.

I remember talking to my Dad and my brother, Cameron – that's the one I was telling you about the cars and stuff – he was there.

You wanted to know if you got your car back!

Yes! So he was there. He was smarter than I was. He saw it coming! Anyway, they were very supportive.

I was still proud of myself. I might be drawing it up as real as I remember it, but even at that point I was feeling accomplished. I was getting in the best shape I was ever in, even after being a high school and middle school athlete, I was eating three times a day – big meals.

Was the food good?

The food was good! Here's the catch: once you get it! You have to walk a certain way in the line just to get there! We had to get up really early in the morning.

And how did they wake you up?

Oh, man! So everybody has a watch. Watches, out of all 90 guys that I told you we first started off with, we all were assigned an hour watch or a 30-minute watch. So starting from taps, going to sleep with lights off at a certain time – I'll throw a random number out; maybe 9:00. So 9:00 p.m. we all hit the rack.

Now, you're in bed. You don't sleep under your covers yet, because you're not deserving of it yet. So that's already like – I'm used to covers! So you're on top of the covers – perfectly really fine covers you can't get under – and someone has to be up from that 9:00 to 9:30. What they're doing is walking around with all their equipment on – flashlight, boots; they're fully dressed. And they're walking around. And remember I said it was like an apartment building so there's no walls but the four outside walls. There were no individual rooms – this was a whole big room – full metal jacket style.

So he's walking around on watch. He's keeping patrol. And there might be somebody else with him, too. And then we know who to wake up eventually. And you might be in the middle of your sleep, from 9:00 to 12:00. But you better be up, fully dressed, like you weren't asleep. Because the drill instructor is going to test – they're going to be testing to see if you're sleeping. So before I even started I was think about it!

So you had to take your turn at watch.

Yes.

And when it was time to wake up, how did they wake you up?

There is revile – that thing's loud and clear! You hear it and you're up! And the lights – the watch is supposed to turn the lights on. Some people would be snoozing, and they caught it bad. If the lights didn't come on and the drill instructor hears this, you'd know there was trouble coming!

That's what we went through to get up. And we all had to be on line – there's a line, two lines on each side of the beds. Anyway, all 90 of us had to be on line and at attention mode – standing straight and ready. And if the drill instructor decides to come down and check to see whatever he was looking for – it could be who was not going to be there. So if everybody is all accounted for, then we would go, one side at a time, to wash up. You had to have all your stuff. When he says to go wash up, you're supposed to have all of that with you on the line.

You're supposed to be holding it.

Yes. You had to have your towel, your toothbrush, your shaving kit – whatever you need for your hygiene – because he's going to inspect that. He's going to inspect that when you come out. And you have five minutes. I mean, five minutes with 40-some guys in one bathroom!

And then you talk about having to use the bathroom – hygiene. It was a mess, man! The first two to three weeks were crazy.

But we got through it. You had to go back and do it again – you’d get yelled at, chewed out. They make you nervous and you’d about piss yourself! And this was all before breakfast!

Now you’re finally getting it together and you get there on time, which is maybe 4:40 or 4:30, to get breakfast.

And you had to march together.

Oh, yes! You had to march together. We were working on cadences – left, right, left. You sang that early in the morning, and you better have it together! You were together; you were one. And you went in single file.

There were four squads. Usually the first or fourth squad would go first. And we were working on being together in one step. So getting the breakfast: It was great food, but could you eat it all? Because you were in a timeframe to eat all this food. It looked so good; it was the best food! The eggs were different because I think they put some type of stuff in there, but I don’t want to go into that. Anyway, the eggs were different, not like home scrambled eggs. But everything else was great. You ate good. But, could you eat it all? You’d finally sit down and you’d have, at most, maybe ten minutes. And sometimes it wasn’t even that. Sometimes the drill instructor tells you you’re done and to go dump your tray. And you just sat down! So you started getting an urgency about getting yourself together. It was rough! But it was great food. And you finally started getting down to business, stopped looking around and talking to someone. It was crazy! And they would say “You’re done!” And you’d want to respond, “Really? Done?” But they’d yell at you, “Get out of the kitchen!”

So it was 5:00 in the morning and you’re being yelled at again. It didn’t stop.

So what happened after breakfast? Did you march back as a unit?

Yes, mam. You’d march as a unit. We’d go and prepare ourselves – and this is when the fun began – we’d prepare ourselves to go and get into PT uniforms – physical training. At that point it’s about 5:30 and the sun is starting to come up. And you’re getting ready for physical training, which is fun because you’re going to start seeing what you’re made of. In the beginning you’d see how you were growing; how your strength is. You’re doing pull-ups, sit-ups, push-ups.

And at that point you start seeing that the drill instructors who seem so mean and everything are into the physical part. They want to see who were the studs, so to speak. And we’re made to be human weapons to defend our country’s honor. So they wanted to see what we could do. You kind of see a side of them – they’re not smiling – but you can see them saying, “Okay.”

How long was PT?

It went on for about an hour-and-a-half at least. If not, at the most two hours and you were back in for showers and through the whole routine again. Everything is back on line. Everything is a countdown: 5, 4, 3, 2 ... And you answer, “Done, sir, done.” As a recruit that’s what you answer – as a maggot or whatever they call you. And you sound off. And if you sound

weak you go back and do it again! And you'd play games – you'd have to do it all over! We hated games! Playing games is going back. You'd go back and start again and someone would yell to stop, and you'd stop. Then they'd ask who told you to stop; to get going again. And everything you had to respond, "Yes, sir!" And you'd finally get back on line to sound off.

It's wild and fun. Just thinking about it gets me excited!

But we'd go and wash up. We were in the sand on Paris Island. There's nothing cute about it. There'd be sand fleas biting on you. You don't get to hit them. You let them eat. That's what they tell you all the time. You're like, "Oh, my goodness!" You're getting disciplined whether you like it or not. You don't touch those sand fleas. They are biting you and that's what it's supposed to be – you are the food, and let them eat. And if you touch them, you will pay. You will do push-ups until you dig yourself into a hole!

It's the only way you're going to learn discipline. The Marine Corps teaches they are the top of the list for a reason. You really get broken down to get built up the Marine Corps way.

How long was this basic training?

It was thirteen weeks.

Did you have classes in their as well, besides physical training?

Yes.

What type of classes did you have?

We called them, Marine Corps knowledge. You learned in basic training everything there is to know about the history of the Marine Corps, who the commandant of the Marine Corps is. You learn about "Chesty" Puller.

You learn about TunTavern?

Yes, Tun Tavern. You learn about the different wars and our best times as Marines. Some of the things that you learn in there stick with you. I know "Chesty" Puller was feared. I know he was one you'd better get it together with.

I was sharper then with that knowledge. That was drilled in you.

As you cleaned your rifle you had to multi-task. You had to clean your rifle and break it down to each bolt. You had to know how to put your rifle together, pull the lever back and everything. It had to be so clean – it couldn't be too oily; it couldn't be too dry. You had to remove the firing pin. You had to do all that stuff and have it together. And while you were doing this you had to learn the knowledge that was being taught to you at the same time. And you all had to answer as one accord. If someone wasn't with everyone, then you'd play the game. So you had to learn to learn how to work together as a unit.

And it wasn't "I" or "me."

No. There was no "I" or "me". We were a family of one. That sticks with me even now.

So, during your time in basic training were you able to receive packages from home? You said you were able to write home – were you able to get mail and packages?

Yes, mam. We were able to get packages. “Care packages” is what we called them. In the letters the drill instructors told us they would allow us to receive candy bars and things like that – energy bars, because we were going to need energy.

Was there anything you could not get?

Nobody was receiving any [liquor]. A lot of them weren’t old enough to drink, anyway. But, also, no smoking – cigarettes and stuff like that. Some of them had the habit they had to kick. Even myself, I think I was smoking cigarettes at the time or some kind of cigar, tobacco. But in training that’s out. You’re not doing that.

Could you do it in your free time?

No. We had no free time. It was Marine time! Thirteen weeks of Marine time.

Did you have any down time during that?

Your down time is writing letters home and telling them how much you miss them! You could see pictures. Your family might send pictures, or your girlfriend. A lot of them had high school loves who were keeping in touch. At that point I wasn’t having that concern. My friends would send pictures. Christmas time was coming – November and December. Thanksgiving you don’t go home – you don’t go home for holidays and come back, because you’re not coming back if you go home!

So, Thanksgiving. Did you get turkey?

Yes, we did. The food was there. We ate good – but you had to eat fast!

So you were there for Christmas, that first Christmas. What was Christmas like there?

I don’t know if I remember. It was very different. You missed home. But at that point I was so locked into what I was doing I felt even more committed as the time went on. I don’t remember any time that I felt like I just wanted to go home. That was when I knew that this was real for me.

You were fully committed.

Yes. That was what I was hearing, and I didn’t understand why they would feel like that. I was committed. There was no option I allowed myself to think. No, I was going to see this through. So Christmas and everything – I missed it, but Christmas at home was doing nothing.

So your thirteen weeks passed, and you had a graduation of some sort?

Yes.

Was your family able to come?

Yes. That was cool.

And what was your graduation like?

My graduation was very memorable. It was a proud moment. I don't remember my Dad being at my high school graduation, but I remember him coming down to Paris Island. He came down to Paris Island, and I even met my uncle for the first time – this is my mother's oldest sister's husband. And the surprise is, he was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Marine Corps at that time. So he came down. And I used to hear about him, but I'd never met him. I loved my Aunt Laura – she was so sweet on me. And they came to support me. So it was my mother and father, Aunt Laura and Uncle Bob. So my graduation was real cool.

The day before graduation we had a family night. The Marine Corps on Paris Island gave us a family night, which was real cool. Because what they would do, everywhere we marched around day-by-day-by-day, we were able to show our family what we did, for those who came by. So we were pretty proud of ourselves. By that time we had our uniform together where we actually looked like Marines – from week 1, 2, 3 on up, there were stages. We were finally in the third stage – first stage, second stage and third stage.

First stage you're a maggot or whatever they want to call you. Second stage you are a recruit. And the third stage you come into finally being a Marine. You're about to graduate. You made it!

So I'm walking around with my mom and dad, seeing some of the sights they wanted to see – because they'd never been down there for one, and two I wanted to show them what I was doing. That was great. We had maybe a few hours to do that, and it felt different to be without your drill instructor and the rest of the 90 to 80 to 70 – because the numbers started to decrease, because some of them started to drop out; getting injured, which mean they had to be held and recycled as they called it. So you really feel accomplished because all those who started with you, some of them didn't make it. So here you are walking around in the best shape of your life. You still look kind of crazy because that haircut is still happening, and your face is still shaved. But you are proud.

And the graduation ceremony is showing everything you did, from the drilling – left, right, left, moving together on the parade deck. It was really cool. You did your dress right, dress. Everybody knows when you hear that command you do it as a snap, and everybody would face right. That's like however many and it was solid, and straightening back up at the same time.

And when it was done you just wished the guys luck that you were with for 13 weeks. I don't think I served with any of them during wartime in the same unit, but I'm sure some of them did in the war.

So, after your graduation did you have any time off – any furlough?

Yes. We had ten days back home with my mother and father. I stayed with them for the ten days before I got stationed in Camp Lejeune.

What was your role at Camp Lejeune.

After training one more time – we had to do Marine Corps training again – I was stationed there to be a warehouse clerk. I was over contract. I trained with many infantry guys, but they didn't know what they wanted to do with me. I told them I didn't want to do infantry, which at the time I got so used to the guys I almost thought I might as well. But I headed other ways.

So you in the warehouse. What were you managing?

All types of tents. Field supplies. I remember the tents – we'd make sure they were serviceable. Sand bags. There was so much at my first post. It was mainly tents and those things you'd take in the field with you. Water jugs. Gas jugs. Diesel. Those things that you need out in the field. MRE's – ready to eat meals.

How long did you do that job?

Mostly the whole time I was in, which was four years. I was in and out, however you'd be augmented whenever you were needed. That was my MOS.

So were you at Camp Lejeune the whole time?

No. I started at Camp Lejeune. I went to war. I was augmented to a field military police command that would go and be the free deployment team. So we went to go set up for the Iraqi Enduring Freedom.

Deployment to Iraq and Enduring Freedom**So when did you go overseas?**

Right at the end of December. It was after Christmas. I believe I got the chance to go home for Christmas before that, came back. And I believe it was either the 30th or 31st when we flew over to Kuwait. From that point we weren't even really sure what we were going to do. They told us once we got there we went to a Naval base, because they had some who were already there. They had some people, Americans – Navy and Marines from different places. And we got our mission.

We started setting up tents all over the place. Not too long after that we would move further down – drive and take supplies that had been sent over early. And that was our whole thing – we were going to set up camps, moving forward from Kuwait to Iraq.

We had our positions. At times you had your “goofies” that would ride up on you. And you'd be shot at, at the time, doing com-work protection. That would be com-work protection.

By the locals.

By the locals. Like I say, I was young. There was a lot of stuff I wasn't really clear on. And it was really confusing to me. I don't know if it was Kuwaitis or Iraqi's, but we had the natives preparing our food. It was blowing my mind.

Anyway, we would be setting up camps and that was a new experience for me.

Let me ask you this. You flew across.

Yes. Big jumbo – it was a commercial flight, but it was the biggest commercial flight I'd ever been on.

Were you in uniform?

Yes, definitely.

It was a commercial flight, so you were there with civilian passengers?

No. This was strictly military.

When you knew you were going to be going overseas, what did your family say? How did they react?

I don't remember that. I know my friends – because that's what mattered to me, my friends – I know they were very scared for me. Of course I thought about it. Fear wanted to set in, but I didn't allow it to. Even at that point, not being saved – as a Christian – I still had a relationship. I knew how to pray. I just trusted the Lord. So I didn't really fear. But my friends, they didn't have that. So they tried to talk me out of it. A lot of them called me crazy. "You're crazy!" I heard that a couple of times from my close friends. Some girl with whom we grew up together was very scared for me. They knew I wanted to go. They didn't say too much negative. It was normal. You had brothers who were going to speak out. They were supportive but scared for me.

Your dad, you said had been in war in Vietnam. Did he say anything to you before you left?

He didn't, but he was very helpful. He gave me a Bible back in boot camp. He gave me a certain scripture that he had taken with him that my grandmother had given him.

Do you remember which one?

Psalms 91. "He that dwells in the secret place of the most high shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty." And it would go on. And as I would read it at times being in bunkers with the threat of the scud missiles coming in, some landing within a half-mile of the camp that I was at, it's funny how, right before that would happen – you never know; it's not like at 12:00 it's going to happen. You don't know that; you don't prepare for that. But it was like I felt the Lord was preparing me at times. I would be pulled to read it. I didn't just sit around and meditate on it because there was too much to do. You don't just sit around during war. You're

always moving, mostly. But there were times He would prepare me to read that. And lo and behold, we were all running in the middle of the night. “Grab your gas masks!” And you were asleep – passed out.

When you got there, what was your first impression?

That’s a good question! I actually like that question, because when we first got there and I stepped on the ground it was different. Even the transportation. You see the movies about it and you could almost miss it. They try to describe everything on these movies they have – how the cars are shaped different and they are driving on a different side of the street.

We drive on the right and they drive on the left.

Yes, and you see certain things like that. But in this sense, it didn’t seem it was like that. But the vehicles were the first things I caught. They have vehicles like ours, but then they had some vehicles not like ours that they must buy somewhere else. We rode on this bus that was the Iraqi style. There was a lot of cloth – some homemade cloth. And the radio station; they would play a lot of different music – a lot of their music, but then they would mix it in with Michael Jackson or something. And it was not the new Michael, it was like the old Michael. That was cool. But I remember hearing another song they played. And it was different in that sense. You knew you were in another country.

You see a lot of sand. I mean, nothing but sand!

What was the mood of the guys you flew over with? What was the mood on the plane and when you landed?

Quiet. Nervous. There was a lot to take in.

How long a flight was it?

Eighteen hours – 16, 17; I think it was 18. But we did stop at certain places to refuel. I think we stopped in Germany at one time. I don’t know where at in Germany. We never got out.

Did you know any of the guys on the plane?

Yes. At that point I had the 13 weeks from November 19 for boot camp brought me to around February. The ten days [leave], then going back for more training before I was actually officially a Marine. I was officially a Marine when I started that training, but I wasn’t in the fleet, as they call it, until I was at Camp Lejeune. That was around May – the end of May. And at that time when I first got there I met my master gunnery sergeant, who was in charge. It was me and a few other guys who were in my Marine Corps training who were told we were going to war. He said, “One of you is going to stay back, but the rest of you are going.” He looked at me and said, “You don’t have that option. You’re going. You’re going and you’re going.” So it was me and two other guys.

So this was the end of May. So you had just turned 21?

I was already 21, because this was 2002. I was 22 at that point. I got in trouble for the underage drinking, but then some time had passed. So I was already 21 when I actually went to Paris Island.

You were an old man! So you were 22 when you landed in Kuwait. What did you do when you got to Kuwait? What was your role?

At that point the unit that I had started to get to know when I got to Camp Lejeune wasn't the unit I went with. I was augmented. I was pulled off the unit I got used to.

The unit I got used to, we did some of the same things we did in boot camp. We just didn't do it to the extreme. We ran together, we hung together, we were in formation, we worked together every day.

You had to stay in shape.

Yes. That was my new family. But at that point, along around the December time frame, I was pulled from them to go to make friends with others who had been pulled as well. And we were all pulled to the MP unit, which was no one's favorite unit. Unless you are an MP, you don't understand the police.

So you didn't volunteer for the MP unit.

No, I didn't volunteer. At time I didn't have an appreciation for police the way I do now! That's all I 'm trying to say. I do appreciate the police now! They have a tough job. So let me clear that up now! But at that time that wasn't anything I was going to do.

But we went in and had to learn how they did things. And it was their way or the highway. We had to learn what to do.

How long did you have training for that?

That was fast! It was their way or the highway. If you couldn't follow after their plans – this was how the rules of engagement were – you were told what to do and you did it. Or you went brig time. So that's the reality of everything. So now you're in a place where you had an option – not the best option: you either listen and do what you are told or asked. Or don't do it and go to the brig: we'll see you when we see you.

So were you an MP in Kuwait?

Yes, mam. I was an MP. I didn't make any arrests. My job was to protect the merchandise – to protect the convoy. We had a convoy that was miles long. We were moving. When we moved out, we moved out. And I was protecting as a gun man.

I was trained to shoot the 240G, or I was trained to shoot the 50 caliber. Both of those are heck of guns. If one of those were ever to hit you, even the 240G, if they hit you it's

immediately going to tear flesh. But the 50 cal is meant to disfigure you. If you're hit with a 50 cal round in the chest, depending on what part it may pull off an arm. These were not toys.

They were serious weapons.

They were serious weapons. And I manned that one. I was responsible for manning that one and keeping vigilant, and the "goofies" who would come up and think it was a game and would run up on you. I had to follow the command of my commanding officer, or the one who was the actual MP.

Did you ever actually have to shoot those?

I was placed in the position, but fortunately I didn't have to.

You were told to.

I was told not to, but I was at a point where they didn't understand the rules of engagement. The rules of engagement at that time put me in a bad place. I knew what I'd seen. I was told to be vigilant and aware of my surroundings so I could protect the guys I was with as well. And this is one particular vehicle that was taunted at night.

And I don't know how they knew when we headed out at night, because sometimes we headed out at night. We headed out at different times; we didn't even know when we'd be headed out.

But this particular night was dark. And this vehicle – I could see him laying back and reclining in the passenger seat reaching for something. All I could think of it had to be a gun. He was riding too close and had to know what he was doing. He'd seen what I had, which was a 50 caliber. What could be cute or funny hiding in the dark hiding. And this puts you in the place where the rules of engagement were not to shoot unless we are fired upon.

We have honorable Marines who are leaders and want to uphold the law. I was telling them we had somebody on our flank, on our left or on our right, and he's reaching in. And they were aware, too. But they said, "Hold him in check." And I'm trying to flag him away, but they're not regarding it at all. I just remember the fact that one of our convoys had just been fired upon, and someone else had just been shot. So all I could think of were these stories I was hearing. And they're making me think I might be next. That's all I could remember. And I'm so far from home. You hear all these different stories.

So I was placed in a position where I really was about to disobey the instructions. I clocked back and made ready, and put one in the chamber. All I had to do was to put pressure on the trigger. The trigger is thumb-controlled. You want to make sure when you're holding the 50 cal that you have a grip. You don't need to be pulling. You need to be pressing down because you need to be holding the gun. It's going to fire.

Thank you, Lord! I found myself praying through the day. I found myself praying right then, because that fear was upon me to disobey. What I had seen I don't think they had seen. What I felt they definitely didn't feel what I was feeling. I felt like I was going to react and ask later.

And they told you to hold your fire. Don't.

This is what happened. Actually, once I started praying. They were not regarding what I was telling them. A miracle happened when I was praying. I was going to shoot, but they fell back. They left. I don't know what happened. They stopped. And there never was a problem again. That was the last fire-fighting problem that I ever had to worry about. We escaped a few situations like that.

There was a friendly-fire that happened over there that I was supposed to be a part of. I got pulled back to my unit.

So you were safe there. Or you would have been in it.

I was just thinking. Talking to you is very helpful. Thinking about things and how my life has been spared. I'm very grateful. Because that friendly fire was not to be told of to be friendly. That's embarrassing. It was a big miscommunication that happened in that.

So in the case of friendly fire, were the people who fired upon the group – were they caught?

I don't know all the details. I just know with the friendly fire, we fired upon each other. I don't know who initiated it. It was bad communication.

It was a miscommunication.

It was just one of those things. The rules of engagement had changed. There's a certain time when war kicked in – before war there were two separate sets of rules, which was my understanding as a private at that time – private first class; I was either E1 or E2. You know only so much at that level. We were alerted and found that's what happened.

And I remember because that's when I was pulled back. And it was within two days of being pulled back to my unit – being supply, not being a convoy specialist. I had an order to go and pull out so many body bags. So I was pulling out these body bags and you hear these stories – “You didn't hear? That was the unit you were with.”

How did you feel?

At that point it's happening fast. I'm grateful, but I don't know what to think. I'm alive! But I didn't know what to think at that point to where I am now. I really didn't dwell on it much because I still was over there. And it didn't happen to me. And I'm looking at these body bags, and to me it didn't hit the guys I was with – they didn't have to experience any of that convoy protection that I had to do around the clock. It was a real deal – I'd be so exhausted I left my rifle in the Humvee just to hit the rack! That's how tired I was. And at that point that's crazy! You don't do that as a Marine. Your rifle is with you.

This was all new to me. Thank God my sergeant at the time – he kicked my butt. He didn't write me up for it. I don't want to put his name out there. I just thank God for him, because all of that is new to you. Had it been someone in our camp who shouldn't have been in our camp. I put a lot of people in danger, even being a person who was saving them from danger day-in and day-out.

I never worked like that in my life. I worked hard, growing up with my father. We worked for everything we had. They live out on a ten-acre farm now. We didn't have the machinery to do it. We did it.

I thought I worked hard until war time. You worked around the clock! That convoy protection, I think a lot of the mistakes we had happen to us was definitely from being exhausted.

You said the work was very tiring because you were working around the clock.

Yes. We were setting up camp.

So when you were setting up camp, were you still in Kuwait or were you in Iraq by that time?

We set up all over Kuwait, from south of Kuwait. There were five different camps leading up to the Iraq border. On my tour we didn't go but so far into Iraq. I had a certain tour time before they pulled us back. And that's when the Army took over, and they went, and they were the ones who pulled down Saddam Hussein's head off the statue. I wasn't there then.

When you doing all this, where were you living? What were your living conditions like? Were you in former hotels? Were you in tents?

We were in tents. When I finally got back with my unit, we were in these Kuwait tents. We weren't even in our own tents. For sleeping purposes we would be in Kuwait tents. For working purposes we'd be in our tents.

What was the difference?

The difference was the Kuwait tents were white. And ours were green, and we had them covered with camouflage – the desert type of camo netting.

How many of you slept in a tent?

Eighteen or twenty.

Cots?

Cots, yes. I remember the kangaroo rats.

Kangaroo rats?

We'd get care packages from home. People sent us good candy, cookies and all types of snacks in big packs. So you'd have a Bobby Hudson or Ian whose family would send him something and would send enough for everybody. It was share time. And one time the kangaroo rats would come out. We worked so long and you kicked back in your cot after you showered, and you were going to eat and go to sleep. Now the rats came.

The local critters decided to share with you!

I'll tell you this story. I remember one night I was as tired as the next man. And I was lying with my arm off the cot, and something was brushing by me. It was dark, and I thought – we're grown men. Cut it out! I was thinking it was one of the guys playing games. I put my light on and saw he was knocked out. And I'm thinking, who was brushing my arm? And I looked down there. I'd never seen this type of rat before. We called it a kangaroo rat – it's short in the arms, like a kangaroo, with big legs and a tail that was brushing against me. Well, he was eating Bobby Hudson's cookies!

I got up out of there and I ran. I slept in the Humvee that I used to drive all the time, the rest of the night until I could see in there. I was so mad with Bobby! I said, "Dude! It's because of you." He wasn't even bothered by it.

Besides sharing with the local critters, what were your meals like?

The meals were good. We ate veal. We ate a lot of lamb. That's where I got an acquired taste for Gyros now.

Who cooked?

Locals took care of us. There were always a lot of rumors going around: Don't eat because they put glass in your food; garbage stuff like that.

But the Marines hired these folks to cook for you.

I'm sure they did. They couldn't just show up in our camp cooking. Not the way we were. You had to announce yourself.

Were you able to communicate with your family while you were there?

Yes. We had call centers. There were better camps than others.

I set up an Air Force camp. It was like they had never left home. They had a swimming pool. The chow hall was like a restaurant. They could eat and leave their plates. I ate there one day because I had worked. They said, "Just leave your plate there." I said, "Really?" The food was better. And they had a basketball court. It looked NCAA like, in the desert!

But to answer your question about the food: We had good food the civilians cooked for us.

I called home when I could. It wasn't every day. You had a call center and it would be up when you could call. I didn't make it a habit to call home a lot at that time, because you'd develop a sense that just because it was easy for me to call home, somebody else wanted to call home, too. So you waited in line. It was a different time zone.

So you had some down time while you were there?

The down time after you worked, you would find yourself relaxing with the guys you worked with and talked about what you would do when you got home. Some of us were rolling dice.

We had some money. At the time, after a while, they built a PX there. Eventually they got a PX. There were certain camps that already had a PX, but they were miles and miles away and you weren't just leaving to get a luxury from the PX. You looked for someone who was going and asked them to get you something. Cigarettes at the time was a major thing. If you had some you were holding them. Or if you had someone who could mail you some you had them do that. But then you had some thieving mailroom clerks who might be in your bag, but you didn't have time to go and file complaints about something like that in wartime. It was a bunch of craziness.

So you had someone go to the PX. They made money off us. But when the PX was there you found yourself more comfortable. You'd smoke cigarettes and talk to your buddies about what you would do when you went home.

And the time finally came. It seemed like it was forever. You had installments of some of the guys going back before you. They'd go back and you'd have to wait another 30 days before you could go. Then there was a clean-up party that had to stay back and close up just like I had to open up.

They looked out for me. I was able to go. I didn't stay back. I would have stayed back but I was ready to get back home.

How long were you there?

I was there for almost eight months. I was very fortunate because right after that they kept in with a year-and-a-half tours, right after me. Then they said that was too much and brought it down to a year tour.

So you were there eight months.

I was eight months. Then when they switched out to the year-and-a-half. I think they did one tour of that for all forces, then they fixed it up back to a year's tour.

Redeployment to the States

So after your eight months you came back here?

Yes. I didn't come back to Illinois. I went back to North Carolina. I didn't move to Illinois until after the Marine Corps.

So you moved back to North Carolina. Were you discharged, or did you have more time to serve?

I still had more time to serve.

What was your new responsibility when you came back?

I was not with the military police again. I went back to being a warehouse specialist. And from that point there I did that for about six or seven more months before they split our whole unit up. For whatever reasons we got sent different ways.

This was back at Paris Island?

No. This was at Camp Lejeune. Paris Island was just for the basic training.

So you were at Camp Lejeune and you were managing the warehouse there.

Yes. Learning how to do that, and that's when I got sent to the transportation battalion. I was going to do supply there for a transportation battalion. In my supply unit, the benefits of it was that it was much more relaxed. Coming from Paris Island all the way to the supply, they were more relaxed. But when I got to the transportation, they were really strict. Really strict. So I had to pick back up what I'd gotten away from.

It seemed like it was up and down. You were always adapting and overcoming. Whatever situation was given to you, you were going to figure it out and fix it. Then, at the transportation battalion I was being trained to serve a year tour, and I was going to go on float.

It was a whole other group of people. This was not the group I had gone to war with. This was a whole different group of people. I was making pretty good way doing that. I got a Navy Achievement Medal for doing what I did. I stepped up to fill a billet that was a staff NCO – Non-Commissioned Officer billet – but I was only a lance corporal.

I had made some big mistakes in the Marine Corps that without them I would have been higher in rank. But I stuck with it. And I finally got acknowledged for what I did know and what I did do right.

I didn't ever make it to war a second time.

So you stayed State side in North Carolina at Camp Lejeune.

Yes. And I was able to go to Twenty-Nine Palms, California to train, from about the beginning of September all the way up to March of 2004. They went around March, 2005, without me.

But you didn't have to go back.

No. I didn't go. Actually, at that time I was self-medicating with alcohol from being at war and things like that. I only knew what I knew how to do. I realize now that's what I was doing. A lot of us were. You don't go complain what you don't understand. You just deal with it. And that's what I did. I made bad decisions again, even after Judge Pape had given me a chance.

I was doing good stuff. I was just making bad decisions – bad choices – to get behind the wheel and drive. And I got pulled over while I was on Christmas leave of 2004.

They had just awarded me. I was maintaining millions and millions of dollars of equipment and having a leadership role in having Marines under me and training them how to do

it. And I didn't lose one piece. I made the decision: I moved up one and then took three steps back.

Mine is a little different. A lot of people have different experiences, but that was my experience. Just talking to you right now just makes me think about how it goes. But I am still really grateful. I was really fortunate with the opportunities.

So how long were you with the transportation?

I finished that out. Around the time Katrina hit New Orleans I was still with that unit. And, of course, being transportation we moved down there. I didn't get a chance. I would have loved to go at that time. They took some younger Marines who had just come in and took them down there.

You were 24 at that time.

Yes. And they were taking the younger ones. I was more seasoned. I had been to war, and then the trouble I had caused myself, it didn't look good. They needed someone minus that trouble down there. They had the experience and would do what they were told. But it's questionable what you do in your off-time.

Discharge and Return to Civilian Life

Where were you discharged?

At Camp Lejeune. I got an honorable discharge. I stayed the course. Even with all the decisions I made, I made it out of there Honorable, and at the same time I had come in, which was November 15, 2005.

Your family knew you were being discharged.

Yes.

They were still in North Carolina.

Correct.

So when you got home you had some decisions to make.

Yes. I didn't buy a home. I was living in the barracks. I didn't save the money I should have saved. I had a problem with alcohol. I even got help and counsel in the Marine Corps for alcohol abuse. So it was recorded that I definitely had a problem that was built up in there even more.

So I had decisions to make. What was I going to do? I had to have a plan. The plan I had was I wanted to travel. I didn't want to burn the bridges I had built with the Marine Corps. But I didn't have a plan of what I wanted to do from in the Marine Corps. I knew I had wanted

to see what life would be like now with this experience, now that I wasn't a little boy just wandering. I felt like I had learned and experience enough to have my own mind and establish new friends.

So I took a shot at it. I talked with my Mom and Dad and asked them to put up with me a little while again while I figured this out. And they trusted and supported me. They were very proud. I stayed at Mom and Dad's at Raeford, North Carolina.

I was unemployed for all of December and January. And in February a neighbor said they were hiring at a hotel.

I cut trees. As I said, my Mom and Dad lived out in the country. And there was work to be done that I was proud to do. I took it and did it every day as if I was working. I had that work ethic. So I was up cutting trees with the tools he had – with an axe. I think at the time he had a chainsaw, but I wasn't comfortable using it. So he gave me the axe and I cut the trees down. It was a workout, and I took to it just like it was the Corps. We cleared the fields. I cleared acres of fields of scrub oak trees. I'm proud of that. It was good.

So you did that for a while.

I got the job at the hotel.

What was your job at the hotel?

They wanted me to be a receptionist. That was cool. I didn't scare easy. It was okay. I got there and learned how to do that. I dressed the part. It was new. I learned how to be a receptionist. And for about a month, and lo and behold, look how the Lord works.

There was a guest there who first gave me a book. She was a really nice white lady. She said she was a believer. She said, "The Lord is telling me to give you this book. You've got great things that are going to be going on and happening in your life." I wasn't saved then. I'd heard all this before. My Mom and Dad actually mentioned this, too.

I believed in something. I prayed the whole while I was cutting trees down. But I still had an alcohol drinking problem and other habits I had picked up in the Corps, too, as well. This wasn't doing me any good. But just to hear someone who didn't know me to tell me the Lord talked to them and told them that he loved me still, that was cool.

So I read the book. It was *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. I was reading some of it and was praying to the Lord. I wanted to have a contract job – like some of the contractors who were over there. They were paying big money. I wanted some of that. I didn't really want to travel that far.

But anyway, He did! He opened up a door through a customer who came and checked in. And she was rude! No one wanted to deal with her, but she was the one – not the same lady who gave me the book; this was another one – she'd seen something in me. I hated to see her coming. But to this day if I see her, we actually have been – I haven't talk to her in a long time, but we are really good friends. And she said, "You look miserable back there!" I asked her, "Lady, look. What do you need?" She said, "I don't know. I'm just trying to see what you want." I said, "I don't know." I didn't know if this is a trick question or what. She said, "You're wanting something. Just tell me the truth. Just be honest. You don't want to work here, do you." She wasn't going to have me disown the job. I needed a job!

But she was getting to a point. She knew. She worked with the agency that allowed me to travel up here for the first time ever in my life. And I'd always wanted to travel to Chicago. They are a government contract agency. They work hand-in-hand with the Army Reserve. And they were in communications. So I was going to acquire a skill. So I had five years experience with that company. I traveled all over the United States – all over the military installations; Reserves or National Guard – through meeting her. And I was able to meet my wife and have a friendship with her before we got married in 2009.

So all of that happened within the timeframe November 19 to March 6, 2006. I got out in 2005 and within that time I had the unemployment and cutting down trees. Then the job at the hotel, working that for a month. Then applying for and getting the government contract job, starting in March, 2006.

My first gig was to go to West Virginia – Charleston, West Virginia. So I did that and came back and was successful. So they said to see what I could do with Chicago, Illinois – right here in North Riverside. So I took that and knocked it out of the park. And I was traveling ever since, until 2011. That's when my wife and I had our first child together. I married her in 2009. I married a ready family, as she had two children beforehand. Since then we've had two beautiful children and she had the two, so we have four beautiful children together.

And here I am.

Are you still doing the government contract, or did that end?

That ended. That was a beautiful five years. I learned more about myself. The Lord allowed me to do what I had a desire to do. And I honored my mother and father. It was what He told me in my heart, that I was going to work for your Dad and your Mom like you worked for the Marine Corps. And they need you to do this. Don't make it hard for them. You do this and do it well, and I'll take care of the rest. And He did!

My season ended with them. Their contract was up in 2013, but I had to leave because of health complications with my wife and my third child – our first child together, but our third child in the family. I almost lost both of them because there was protein in the bladder. It was serious enough that we almost lost both of them.

I had to leave because the job itself required me to be on the road all the time. And that's why a lot of people love that job. People who are retired, or already sent their children through college, and they can go across the world. You can bring your wife, and if you're at that point where you have no children involved to worry about, it's a dream job.

But with kids in school ...

It doesn't cut it. Right. At the time, being newlywed, I eventually needed to be pulling away from that and settle down and staying home.

The family is healthy. Everybody is alive!

Did you make any close friends in the Marine Corps?

Oh, yeah.

Do you still keep in touch with any of those folks?

Not as much as we used to when we first got out. We were hoping to get a reunion going. I have a close contact through the ministry I have. I minister in various ways, and I'm able to touch lives through conference calls on Tuesdays and Thursdays. One of my friends from the Marine Corps – war time vet and everything; we went to war together; we were roommates in the barracks – he's a part of it now. He's way out in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. We keep in touch. We definitely were drinking buddies – hard – and chasing women. We did all we thought we could handle! He has children and went through a divorce, so right now life is difficult for him. I'm able to be encouraging and supportive to him, and listen to him as a friend – we know where each other's been.

You've been through a lot of struggles together.

Yes, definitely. My life is very different.

Do you belong to any veterans' organizations?

I've been looking into that, but I have a lot going on. I really want to get the ministry the Lord's placed in my heart for the community. I'm sure that's going to line up. I'm sure the Lord's going to bring that in. He's been doing everything else. He's going to bring the right connection through Veterans Affairs that I would need. I have a desire to get with the wheelchair basketball league and have them be regulars in my community, to motivate those who've lost hope in their lives. They could look and see that these Marines could do it, and they have great attitudes about doing it. And wheelchairs or disfigured or however, how much can you do? Just to start that piece there, and then to share their lives with them. That's my desire. I'm riding it out and making my plans, and I'm very hopeful in that.

Lasting Impressions

How did your military experiences affect your thinking about war and about the military in general? Everything you're seeing happening in the world today.

I just really know now our society has lost a grip on what honor really means. And I really want to see that restored. From someone who served in a war – who fought and served in war; uncles. To be not honored the way they should have been honored ...

I see my Dad put on his war veteran's hat and clothes to go to the post office in town. It was like he had to be proud of what he did when no one else was.

And that was the Vietnam era.

The Vietnam era.

And now, to know what I know after going through it ... Man, the stuff you know. I didn't always agree with everything he did, but I'll tell you what – it took a lot of much the man that he is to really be behind promoting and speaking up for me when I was at war. He'd send me articles and say, "Son, this is what I did." He went downtown and through city hall to do

whatever he had to do to get a monument made for all of the guys my age within our town. He petitioned. And he had his guys at the American Legion and the VFW who felt the same. And they all rallied to say, “Yes! We are all for this. Celebrate our sons and our daughters.” And we have this still to this day downtown. I’m not there, Miss Deb. I was away, maybe half a day away from there, but just to go and be where I’m at now after serving time, to see what it took to get something done like that.

We’ve got to get back to that honor.

We come back home, and our desire to have our own home. We have some benefits, but we don’t have as many benefits as we should. That’s my opinion. I feel like that’s something I fought for. It was always established, but it could have gone any way. We could have lost. But we didn’t. We could have faced any country that could come and change the state of our democracy as we call it. I just think there should be more to be put out for our veterans, to know that because of what we do – “Aye, sir!” – continuously, to get the mission done. A lot of people have been able to be business men and women successfully, to have their homes and get a head start. It’s my opinion that it would be really nice to see.

This is America. Some of these foreclosed homes, and these homes that are abused or run down – we could have a Habitat for Humanity that could build up homes and give them to these families that served in war. If you served in war, you should have a home to come home to that you don’t have to pay for. That’s just me. I don’t say it has to be a mansion, but if it’s a home it’s a home. Whether it be two bedrooms or three, let’s just offer something. Because at the end of the day if we don’t have someplace to call home, we can’t serve. That’s why you see a lot of us – and it breaks my heart to see a war veteran with a cup and a sign saying, “I served.” And they are out of their minds.

I had the experience to see in the Hinds ward. I didn’t even know I was dealing with PTSD. I wasn’t looking for a handout, Miss Deb. I just wanted to take care of my family. I was able to come up the road and make my plans with the Lord. I had to do something. I had benefits to go to school through the GI Bill – post 9/11 benefits.

Did you take advantage of those?

Thank God for that, I did!

What did you study?

I studied computer science. But it’s been very difficult getting a job there because it’s flooded – the market’s flooded. But you keep going. That wasn’t enough, the VA, to take care of a family of six – at the time it was a family of five. But it was something.

I am grateful; I’m not complaining. But just to have a home was threatened so much in that time. I had to work as well. My wife was just recovering from the life-threatening situation for herself and my daughter. She was in no shape to be working. I had to work and go to school full-time to receive the benefits.

It was a rough spot. And that triggered the meltdown that I never knew. I wasn’t relying on self-medication. I was clean and sober since 2009 at that point – this is 2011 with all of this when I’m actually doing right. I was making the right decisions, but I was facing the hardest time of my life. And I was wondering what was going on.

We do have some great things in line with Veterans Affairs. They see me. I just hate it for those who don't believe.

I wish I could be more perky about the answer. I just know that America the Great can do – could and should – do more. It's not back pay. We've got so much to give, and I don't understand as time goes by why we haven't done that.

How did your service and your experiences affect your own life – your personal life? When you look back, was it a good decision for you to go into the Marine Corps, and everything you experienced as a result?

Yes. It was one of the best decisions I've made, besides receiving Christ Jesus as my Savior.

I can imagine going that day now, in the Army recruiting station. They had their hands full, so they weren't able to get to me. It was an urgency I'm still moving on now, even for my community. So there's the urgency that's always pushing me to greatness, to bold moves. There was no moving when I was that age. I didn't move that way. There's no one moving in my community the way you have to move as a young black man with a family of six. I have to move that way. There wasn't anyone moving into marriage in my peer group. No one moving to start over, to get their life saved and give it to Christ, and start believing in a Jesus they'd never seen.

Do you see what I'm saying? The Marine Corps triggered me out of that, out of practicing that. That's my normal now. It probably looks different than anybody else, but that's my normal with the Marine Corps has birthed through that thirteen weeks of training – understanding and appreciating yellow footprints; appreciating that deeper than what the surface is. I'm very grateful. In my expression that's the Marine Corps, and I have to give them credit for that. I started out one way like it was horrible. But that horrible was the greatness.

It molded you.

Yes. It's the greatness. Everything that I've done wrong doesn't add up to this great thing that I've done.

Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to add before we end this interview?

Well, I just thank God for the opportunity that I had the chance to serve for the United States, and to serve with so many great people who are still alive. I've lost some friends. One of my friends drowned while we were at Camp Lejeune's beach – after we got back from the war. I'm grateful. I'm very grateful, and I'm very fortunate. In the meantime my life was spared for people who did not have this experience. The Marine Corps has been tremendous. And the VA system I'm grateful for as well. I'm grateful for a lot of things, and the Marine Corps has made me humble to appreciate more than what the surface shows.

And those who went before me – I'm grateful. And I just hope the honor in our country would be restored for what it should be appreciated for – those who went before us, those who did the fighting in the Korean War, World War II; those wars that didn't get the notoriety they should have; what we take from there. Even the Gulf War – these Persian wars – these different

movements; you're not going over to win battles and wars just doing your own thing. You have to put that away. And to do that, and everybody being able to be in their own comfort zones and not miss a beat about what they want to do, and then you come back to life as usual. And you see that people that just don't give a ... There are some that I bump into, and I want to thank them for acknowledging who went before them. That would mean so much on Veterans' Day – getting those meals and a pat on the back from an old vet, or even someone who says, "My granddaddy served. And thank you." It's just those little things.

You might see those people on the highway at the exit where you got off – they've got their cup, and they're so weathered and beat down and look rough. Don't look at them like they're beneath you. Just try to begin to understand their greatest moments that you don't know. They're not going to tell you. You might have an appointment you're trying to get to. But don't look down at them. They're a veteran. We take it as a privilege to have done it, and we made it through with no options.

If there's nothing else, then, thank you for sharing with us. Thank you for your service.