

PREFACE

March 1, 2012

3:30 p.m. (PST)

Eugene, Oregon

Interviewee: Brandon Michael Butchko

Interviewer: Tyler Wilhelm

TRANSCRIPT

Tyler Wilhelm:

Alright so my name is Tyler Wilhelm, I am a history major at the U of O. The date is March 1, [2012], the time is 3:30 p.m.. This interview can also be viewed in transcript form later on. Okay, so could you state your name for me?

Brandon Butchko:

Brandon Michael Butchko.

Tyler Wilhelm:

What branch of the military did you serve in?

Brandon Butchko:

United States Air Force

Tyler Wilhelm:

When did you join the Air Force and how old were you?

Brandon Butchko:

I joined the Air Force in November 2003 at eighteen years of age.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Tell me about your decision to join the Air Force, why did you pick this branch over the other branches of the military?

Brandon Butchko:

The biggest reason was the Air Force recruiter was the only one who came around most often. I would see him in the library and we got to talking. He had me enter to win a hat and I won the hat so he called me. At the time, usually when telemarketers call, I'd listen to them for a few minutes so I decided to listen to the recruiter. I asked him what he could offer me in terms of language because I was really big into Spanish at the time. He told me about the Defense

Language Institute [DLI] in Monterey. What he told me sounded really good so I decided to go for that and explore that option.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Tell me about your childhood and your family, what are they like?

Brandon Butchko:

Let's see... So I grew up in the Coburg Hills, my parents were from New Jersey. They moved out here in 1980 and I came along five years later. We grew up in a pretty isolated community, but I got along with everyone going through school. Pretty standard childhood ... pretty good one. I like the woods, I go outside a lot. Really active ... active all the time. My father was a letter carrier and my mother, she worked various clerical jobs ... I had a little sister but we didn't play a lot. I realized pretty quickly into high school that I didn't know what I was gonna do. College seemed pretty scary at the time, didn't think I had the discipline ... was always a good student but I knew I needed work on my study skills before hand. I knew I didn't have the means and there was always ... When I really started to think about the military and talk to the recruiter the more and more it appealed to me and the more and more it seemed really attractive to be able to do this immediately after high school. With no responsibilities back home, no kids, no wife it just sounded like a good thing to do and an attractive thing. The sense of duty really came later and we can get to that later if you want.

Tyler Wilhelm:

What did your parents think when you told them you were going to join the Air Force?

Brandon Butchko:

My dad was all for it. He wished I stayed in he really did. I had reasons why I got out but my mom was sad ... moms will do that. I remember the drive up to ... but they supported it, they always supported me no matter what I've done. My dad always wanted me to play baseball but I can't play baseball. I like track and football. Mom was sad, Dad was really excited. I'm sure he was sad to ... I think. The drive up there was probably the most heart-wrenching thing I've ever

gone through. I didn't cry until they closed the door. As soon as they closed the door in the hotel room I sat down on the bed and I bawled me eyes out.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Did you have a specific career line or goal when you joined? Something you really wanted to do?

Brandon Butchko:

I did ... The most attractive thing was language to me and when he [the recruiter] showed me a picture of DLI [Defense Language Institute], it's in Monterey, the bay is beautiful, and I said, "Alright let's do this." It wasn't easy I had to pass a Defense Language Aptitude Battery where they made up a language. They said OK here are three words, one's a noun, one's a verb and one's an adjective. You have to remember what order they were saying it in and if I hadn't have passed that I would have been in the general field, I think is what it was called. They could have had me doing anything, cleaning canteens for eight hours a day who knows. Lucky I passed that by four points and that really set me up for success later on.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Can you talk about what your perception was of the armed forces in general before you decided to join?

Brandon Butchko:

I didn't have any relatives that were alive who had served; I didn't have any neighbors that had served so I didn't have a good frame of reference beyond movies and television, what little I had read of conflicts that were occurring. I knew 9/11 had happened two years before I graduated and I remember that day. The biggest reference I had were movies and I always looked at it as a positive thing. I know there are a lot of movies like *Full Metal Jacket* [movie about U.S. soldiers in Vietnam] that portrayed things in a negative lights sometimes ... parts of it or all of it, I don't know whatever you believe in. I always respected it, I never had anything bad to say about the military and it seemed like a really good fit for me.

Tyler Wilhelm:

You mentioned that you went to the DLI, did you go to boot camp before that or after that?

Brandon Butchko:

I went to boot camp first. I left in November 9, November 9 I got there. We took the bus in from who knows what airport near San Antonio, Texas. We got to Lackland Air Force Base. Me and about forty other guys on the bus, dude comes in with an M-16 tells us what we're going to do, where we're going to stand. We started getting instructed ... I can't remember the sorting process and who got called to where and whatnot. We got into our bunks and got some good rest and then the next day processing started. We got our clothes, started drill, all day long, drill, PT, quick meals. I was such a slow eater, I'm still a slow eater. We sit down and as soon as somebody sits up at your table, everybody just starts getting up. There were people at the table in front of me and if they start to get up, you have to start getting up. It's just the way that they push you through. I'd be lucky if I had half a piece of French toast and a piece of bacon for breakfast and I lost some weight. Then I got sick and they say if you're sick, come get a little cold pack or something, we won't recycle you. That was a big fear in boot camp was to be recycled back a few weeks ... you didn't want to do that, you didn't want to be that guy. So I dealt with that sickness, just pouring all sorts of fluids out of my mouth at night and dealing with the PT. I got over it in a few days but it still stunk. In FTX [Field Training Exercise] I learned how to shoot the M-16, deal with the gas masks and all that MOP gear [Mission Oriented Protective Gear] and then graduated.

Tyler Wilhelm:

What was your favorite or least favorite experience in boot camp?

Brandon Butchko:

There was a lot of fun stuff in boot camp. I really enjoyed the tear gas. They lined you up in a room, cracked the little pellets and gas started swirling everywhere. You and a partner go up there, take off your mask and you give your reporting statement which is, "Sir, trainee Butchko reports as ordered," without coughing. It took a few times. Then you walk out and keep your

hands off your face because you still have gloves and that stuff is all over the place. Your just crying, nose is running, throat hurts and that was pretty cool. I remember one guy ... we got in trouble ... everybody loved their blues, the blues uniform that was like the cool thing. Yeah, it was nice but I thought it was uncomfortable as heck because I got the garters and the straps and the tighten [?], you have to tuck in your shirt. We got in trouble our last week when we are supposed to wear those everyday. Some guy had his wall locker set up with the wrong clothes, he got sloppy, he got lazy and threw them in there before we had to leave and we got caught. They punished us by making us wear our BDU's for our graduation week.

Tyler Wilhelm:

What is a BDU?

Brandon Butchko:

Oh that's the camouflouge, which is way more comfortable. Those dress shoes ... oh man those hurt my feet.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Do you have any specific examples of some camaraderie with some of the friends you made in boot camp? A funny story or something like that?

Brandon Butchko:

One guy... ah man I can't remember his name, I feel so bad. I remember one guy's name but we never really did much for each other. What was the other guy's name? Clemente, Rich Clemente, no that's a UFC [Ultimate Fighting Championship] fighter. His last name was Clemente. I don't know what his first name was but we hung out together a lot. We were on a different mental level than a lot of guys, may sound harsh to say but it was true. When my mom came for basic graduation, it was the wintertime, it was December around Christmas time, New Years. I told him hey, his folks weren't coming so he could come out on town with us. They told us that if we ran our mile and a half in under nine minutes or something we would be a War Eagle and we could get an extra day off base. I was like, "Oh sweet," so I ran my guts out, hardest I've ever ran but they ended up giving everyone three days off because it was Christmas

time. So I went out with him every day, we went to the malls, we went to the *Lord of the Rings* movie that was out at the time. I kept in contact with him for a while but I got tired of being the one always doing the output. Yeah, that was about it for guys in boot camp.

Tyler Wilhelm:

In boot camp, did you know that you were going to the DLI right afterward?

Brandon Butchko:

Yes.

Tyler Wilhelm:

So did that affect your behavior as far as making friends just because you knew that people in boot camp were going to be going someplace else anyway? I guess my question would be did you know anyone from boot camp that was going to be going into a specialized field like you were?

Brandon Butchko:

I ended up meeting everybody. When I graduated, I ended up meeting everybody that was going to DLI. There wasn't anybody in my flight, the guys I trained with for the six weeks, but afterward we were holdovers. They weren't going to send us to California quite yet. I would meet them ... That reminds me we would have meetings and that's where we picked our languages and I would see everybody that was going to DLI and we were all holdovers for a week. We would just do tasks during the day and stay in a different, another flight that was in their fourth week or fifth week of training but we were never bothered by anybody. Then I got to meet a lot of those people because we were working together and waiting to get our plane tickets to go over. That was neat and I would see them throughout our training.

Tyler Wilhelm:

So you met people that you were going to be going to school with before you went to the DLI?

Brandon – Correct.

Tyler Wilhelm:

OK nice. So what happened after boot camp? You went to DLI right?

Brandon Butchko:

We got to DLI and we met. We got picked up in van from the Monterey Airport and we got our room assignment. There was a big building and one floor was ... it looked like a square horseshoe and in the middle was the chow hall. The northern side, the lower part was, I forget what we called it, but that had all the administrative offices and all of our MTLs [Military Training Leaders]. Above that were two female floors, barracks and on the other side was all three male. I got to go over to detach, which was across even further north across the street. The lower level was for us Air Force guys but it was an Army barracks so we'd hear screaming all the time, all the time.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Just for the record DLI stands for ...

Brandon Butchko:

Defense Language Institute.

Tyler Wilhelm:

OK so you had to learn a specific language while you were there, which was?

Brandon Butchko:

They give you a wish list, a dream sheet of what you would like in basic. We all got together as a group and I was looking at all the different languages. Arabic was written from right to left and Russian, Chinese, oh heavens no, and then we got to Korean. It was really clean, it was really neat, it had an alphabet and I said, "Alright this is the one for me." So I put a check for number one and then I forget what I put for number two, probably Russian, maybe Persian Farsi I don't know.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Did you think about choosing Spanish?

Brandon Butchko:

I may have at the time. I don't know what influenced me to ...

Tyler Wilhelm:

Maybe because you already had enough experience with Spanish?

Brandon – Yeah ... something new, something that I was going to get a really intense lesson out of, that's a really good question. I don't know what I put, but I know I put Korean first. They gave that to me and then I found out when I got to DLI it had the highest failure rate. I said, "Alright, let's do it."

Tyler Wilhelm:

Quickly, kind of off topic, you took classes at the DLI so did anything transfer over when you came to the U of O?

Brandon Butchko:

Yes, all forty some odd credits. I didn't have to take any language. That really helped out it made me a senior faster so I could get priority on my classes. I still had to take math, writing ...

Tyler Wilhelm:

Can you talk about a typical day for you at the DLI?

Brandon Butchko:

There were different phases and there were times in my Air Force career where I felt like I joined the party late and some times where I got out just in time. When I showed up at the DLI I felt like I was joining late because there were different phases. Phase 1, 2, 3, 4 and however

long you were there ... The first phase lasted a month and you had to be in uniform and you could not leave base. So you had a uniform all the time whether you go to the chow hall, the BX [Base Exchange], no civilian clothes at all, even in your room. No, probably in your room, you'd be okay to have pajamas on or whatever. Every day we'd get up, grab chow, formation, morning announcements, go to class. Get to class, we got issued books, here are lessons one through twenty something and each one would take us a week or two to get through. For about three hours we would have language instruction. There would be an hour, one teacher would come in, native Korean, all native Koreans, and they tried to implement speaking only in Korean but they got kind of lax about it. It's kind of tough sometimes, I didn't know what was going on they'd have to use English but we got around that. After fifty-five minutes we would get a five-minute break. Then another teacher, five-minute break, another teacher, five-minute break and then it was lunch. If you started doing poorly on your tests, like I did frequently, then you would have to come back after a half hour and get a half hour of extra work and then another three hours. At 3:30 or 4:00, two or three days a week, we would have PT [Physical Training]. We would go back to our rooms, get in our PT gear and meet at the hilltop or over by the AstroTurf football field by the gym. We would do our PT and then the rest of the night was ours. If you weren't doing so good, you would have more study hall, two more hours at night. Yeah, it was a lot.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Did you ever do that? The two extra hours?

Brandon Butchko:

Oh yeah, a lot, sometimes voluntarily. When I'd pass a test really well I wouldn't have to, but I would go anyway. For the most part it was mandatory for me.

Tyler Wilhelm:

About what time every day would your classes/studies be done?

Brandon Butchko:

I think we would start about eight. It was eight to eleven, eleven to twelve, twelve to

three. Then we had PT and all that stuff. Sometimes it was seven to nine for the study hall then we would get done at nine and start all over again, Monday through Friday.

Tyler Wilhelm:

You had the weekends off?

Brandon Butchko:

We did have the weekends off.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Can you talk about your experience with the officers or instructors at the DLI?

Brandon Butchko:

We did have a liaison who was a non-commissioned officer. You had non-commissioned officers (NCO) and commissioned officers (CO). Non-commissioned officer is what I would have been if I had continued to be Sergeant, Master Sergeant. Officers are your Lieutenants, Captains, Majors, Colonels, Generals. The only difference is they chose that program and they have a college degree. The ones that led us, the Lieutenants, Lieutenant Colonels, the Captains, I liked them all, I had no problem with them at all. Sergeants we ... some of them ... a lot of people thought they were power tripping over us. We always made fun of them thinking they failed their tech school and that's why they were there. It's like their punishment but they would always tell us that's not the case. I don't know who to believe, I really don't. Maybe they didn't want to be there, maybe it was cool ... I would have taken that job; I think it would have been great. I was minding my p's and q's and, my god, maybe I got in trouble. We used to carry around these little slips of paper, 341s? Maybe if you did something good they would take one and write it down in a report. You did something bad ... Yeah I remember I only had one in my pocket and your supposed to carry two. We had a, I forget what they call it, standing inspection and I only had one and I got in trouble for that. I forgot what I had to do...clean something. I knew it was my job to do what they told me to so I had a good time.

Tyler Wilhelm:

You brought a medal that I took a picture of earlier. I know from talking with you previously there is a story behind that. Could you go ahead and elaborate on that? Explain first what the medal says on it if you could remember.

Brandon Butchko:

Oh yeah it says 692nd Intelligence Group Command Chief Master Sergeant. Those were in possession of the man in that position at the time. When I was in Korea I went to the chow hall before a swing shift ... which is 2 pm until 10. At about 1, which is around lunchtime, it was only two other guys. We sat down and I hear one guy drop his spoon and I look over. That's one of the quick relays in your brain, it's a reaction other than the enemy. I look over at him and he's kind of hunched over his tray. I'm nervous about it. He gets up and comes over to me, he pointing at his trachea, his windpipe and I start freaking out because I just learned CPR and the Heimlich maneuver a couple weeks prior. His body language and he's pointing at me to do that to him so I freak out. I put my fist in his solar plexus and I feel like I'm about to break this poor kid's ribs. He ends up ... we end up pushing that air and dislodging that huge chunk of rice that had gotten caught in his throat. He throws up all over my arm. I don't think I was dressed in my uniform at the time and this other guy just gets up and moves away. "Alright, thanks for helping out man ... checking on this guy who almost choked to death." I was shaken pretty bad because if I hadn't done something right who knows what would have happened. I didn't like to think about that at all but I couldn't help it. So I'm shaken and I get up to the skiff where I worked the ... compartmentalized something I can't remember the name. I see my supervisor smoking with three other NCOs and I tell him the story. He gets all excited ... "That's my troop, that's my troop." It looks good on him that he's got a troop that does something like that. OK, OK, I kind of understand but not at the time I didn't because I was so scared. Word got around and they told the high-ranking NCO from the 692nd. He took me aside and thanked me for what I did and handed me that coin. That was pretty neat. I didn't expect it to get that high up, but that was a pretty good feeling that day.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Can you think of any other stories like that, anecdotes or anything...

Brandon Butchko:

Do you remember any other ones that we discussed before?

Tyler Wilhelm:

That one specifically stuck out in my mind but I can't remember anything else from when we talked before.

Brandon Butchko:

Something about basic, something funny about basic...

Tyler Wilhelm:

It can be about boot camp too, I didn't ask you about boot camp.

Brandon Butchko:

DLI, yeah that was a pretty big blur. I remember every class, every class we had talking about ranks, this and that and all the academic stuff. At the end of every class they played that Toby Keith song ["Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)"], "We'll put a boot in your butt, it's the American way. Every one, man, American boys, American girls will never roll over and cry."¹ I don't remember the lyrics even though we watched it fifty times. They would always show the videos, the planes flying over, the bombs exploding, everybody would start cheering.

Tyler Wilhelm:

This is in boot camp right?

Brandon Butchko:

This is in boot camp yeah. That was pretty wild.

¹ The first line is from the chorus. The second line might refer to the opening verse, "American girls and American guys, we'll always stand up and salute, we'll always recognize, when we see Old Glory flyin'." (Ed. note)

Tyler Wilhelm:

What did you think about that, was it supposed to get you hyped up or something?

Brandon Butchko:

I don't know I was already, I guess, happy to be there. I guess people felt like they had to show ... That was a weird way to show your patriotism, I just did it by doing what I was supposed to. Oh and I remember the day they handed out sheets saying that, "Hey, you can sign up for two extra years all you four years, and you can put all your A1C rank," which is E3. I just passed it along. I picked the Air Force because, especially for the language job, because Navy, Marines, Army, as far as I remember, they were all five years and Air Force was four years. I wanted to have that option if I wanted to reenlist or separate as soon as possible. It just made sense to me, you know, what if I can't stand it I don't want to spend another year. I did get the addition to the MGI Bill [Montgomery GI Bill], it was another six-hundred bucks ... the MGI bill ... while your in basic you sign up for \$200 a month and if you spend another \$600 you get another couple thousand in benefits. It just made sense. Everybody that goes through there should do that ... the MGI Bill ... It would be ridiculous not to because now you can transfer it to your family members if you want and it sticks around for a long time. This isn't really appropriate but I remember this guy peeing his pants in front of me when they were handing out coins. It was Clemente that's why I remember.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Oh, that was your friend in boot camp.

Brandon Butchko:

Yeah he was standing in front of me and we were all waiting to get our coins that signify that we are now airmen basics, or Airmen First Class or whatever. I remember hearing the sound and when I looked down and one side of his leg was just soaked and this huge puddle ...

Tyler Wilhelm:

He got nervous or something?

Brandon Butchko:

He just couldn't hold it anymore, we were standing there for a long time. People would pass out during Basic graduation on the fields because they wouldn't bend their knees. That was scary. Oh, there was the dude I watched on suicide watch. They had me go down there when I was a holdover [after basic training before DLI]. They had me go down there. They stuck me in a chair facing an office, inside the office was a cot and a chair and this one guy was on suicide watch. There were a lot of ... It was always weird to me the guys that would finagle their way out once they were in Basic. I don't know what they expected, but I think he was one of those trying to come across as mentally unstable. They handed me a book about Chesty Puller, a really famous Marine, and I just sat there and read the whole thing while the guy just sat over there. Every time he stood up I would stare at him until he sat back down.

Tyler Wilhelm:

That was basically it for suicide watch?

Brandon Butchko:

That was it for a couple hours. I patrolled one sixteen feet by probably ten feet concrete area ... I patrolled that for six hours one time because people forgot to relieve me. Nobody came by so I could say hey, could you find somebody to take my place. Did that, hmm ... Then DLI one guy was dealing drugs out of his room. I can't remember if it was heroine or cocaine but he got caught, he got arrested and sent to Fort Leavenworth. Then they brought him back to be a linguist. I remember that, I wasn't happy about that. I would have gotten rid of him but you have to do a lot ... you have to do something crazy to get a dishonorable discharge. I've come to that decision. People would get Article 15s, which is a terrible blemish on your record. People would lose rank and stuff for stupid crap ... DUI's in Korea ...

Tyler Wilhelm:

What is an Article 15?

Brandon Butchko:

Article 15, it's a citation on your record for something pretty gnarly. One guy didn't show up to work at Korea and he was drunk. You're supposed to stop drinking eight hours before duty and he didn't. He did not show up and when he did show up, people could tell he was drunk. So drunk on duty, Article 15 they hammered him...took his rank. Another guy was driving drunk in Korea. I don't think we were supposed to drive, the lower enlisted we can't drive unless we live off base, which won't happen unless your married. I think he did get married, this one tattooed-up Korean girl and then they divorced and it just started a downward spiral of him drinking and going out of control. It was really sad because he was an all-right guy.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Lets see, at the DLI, how much communication did you have with our family back in Oregon?

Brandon Butchko:

Lots, I had a cell phone with Cingular, are they even around now? I went out and bought one and that was really what I used it for. It was just to call them. I would call them every two, three days.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Was letter correspondence less popular? Did you ever write letters?

Brandon Butchko:

Yeah, mainly to my pals back home. They would write back. That was more fun to get letters from them. I didn't want to use the minutes or whatever on them.

Tyler Wilhelm:

When you did write letters, was there any censorship?

Brandon Butchko:

No, in fact one guy wrote a comic of me. He wrote a comic of me sitting in a chair, the

next panel I'm drinking some hard alcohol, it says hard A on the bottle, then the next one of me is going in the headquarters, and then there is a big explosion. I never gave him any reason to think that I hated it there but he just wrote that for some reason. I'm sure that would have been opened and what not.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Upon completing your education at DLI, what was graduation like?

Brandon Butchko:

That was a huge victory for me because I started failing tests toward the end. This one really tough teacher Kang Son Seng Nim, he was a Korean War Veteran, this guy was an Army Ranger, he did not play. Nice guy, funny guy, really wanted to you to succeed but he did it in a weird way by kind of brow beating and making you feel bad. He made me feel bad a lot. I'd screw up a grammar pattern and he would say, "Why would you say it like that!" asking people in the class. I am just like ... I got embarrassed the first time and then after that I was like, "Alright man." I started failing and he wanted to roll me back. I did not want to get rolled back because if I get rolled back then ... it would just make that four years a little more uncomfortable. Who knows if I am going to have to tack on a few ... I wanted to do four years and then wanted to reevaluate my situation. I went to my command and he asked, "How close are you to graduation if we keep you there." I told him three or four weeks and he says no stay there. I ended up graduating with a two, two, two. It goes in levels of zero, zero plus, one, one plus, two, two plus, three. Three was the max score you could get. The bare minimum was a two in reading, a two in listening and a one plus in speaking. I ended up getting a two in speaking because my instructors or evaluators asked me about, in Korean ... They find out what you know, level one with directions, describing things and then they probe you with level two questions. They asked me about stealing music over the Internet. I thought about maybe it would increase ticket prices because artists aren't making enough and it was great. That really made me glad that I proved to him.

Tyler Wilhelm:

So they gave you a question you were familiar with already?

Brandon Butchko:

Yeah, it was a perfect question for me. So when graduation came along I just looked at that score and just kept looking at it. Then I saw Kang and I wasn't, I didn't hold it over him or nothing I just was grateful that he did what he did for me. We went down to soldier field...Ah man, I don't remember a lot of the circumstances of that day.

Tyler Wilhelm:

What was the date?

Brandon Butchko:

I wish I had my diploma here. Let's see I started in January, February and it took...I'll have to work backwards I got to Korea in November, I got to San Angelo, Texas in five to six months prior to that...so that would make it June, early June.

Tyler Wilhelm:

After DLI you had all of your training done, so what happened after that?

Brandon Butchko:

Almost, I had technical training in Saint Angelo, Texas. That was the more job-oriented side of training.

Tyler Wilhelm:

So how to take your skills from DLI and apply it basically?

Brandon Butchko:

Take what I learned, take all those words and be able to do any ... Texas prepares you for whatever job you were going to get when you arrived in Korea. There were many different ones. You could be Air, Ground, Navy and some other I can't remember. So we learned all those facets to be prepared for that. Texas was a lot of fun, I started putting on size, I put on like five pounds in Texas. I remember the first thunder storm scared me so bad, I woke up to the noise of

it, rolled out of bed and looked outside it was scary. It was really cut and dry in Texas, we were only there for six months. We got our tickets after that and then got to Korea. Got my job in Korea, I was going to be a Ground Forces Operator.

Tyler Wilhelm:

That was your official title?

Brandon Butchko:

That's what I was going to do. I worked hard to learn all about that. Sat missions, sat enough missions and then we would get training letters. Once you have a sufficient amount of training letters and your superiors think your ready, then you go for the final tests. I passed all those and became an operator. The unique thing about ground is there were three. There were two operators and there was one controller. The controller was responsible for writing reports. As soon as I became an operator they decided to try to get me to be a controller. I said, "Yeah sure." I ended up doing that for about a year and that was some pretty heavy dope.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Writing reports for superiors...

Brandon Butchko:

Yeah, for the whole peninsula to see. Whether they are right or wrong...I don't know, people check them later. It's a lot, a lot of responsibility for a twenty-one, twenty-two year old in my opinion but you could be pretty ambiguous.

Tyler Wilhelm:

What base were you located on in Korea?

Brandon Butchko:

We flew into ... gosh I can't remember the Airport. [Incheon Airport revealed later] Man I don't remember the name of the airport. Then we got driven to Osan Airbase in Songtan, South Korea.

Tyler Wilhelm:

I remember you explained before, where in Korean is that located?

Brandon Butchko:

About forty miles south of the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone). It's pretty close to North Korea.

Tyler Wilhelm:

You were the Ground Forces Controller, can you talk about what exactly you did on base in Korea?

Brandon Butchko:

I moved into the older dorms, they had newer, nicer dorms. I moved into the older ones. Before your assigned to a flight, there were three flights, Able, Baker and Charlie. We would go to DOT, Department of Training, and that was nine-to-five kind of gig. You would show up, you would go over manuals or stuff, just manuals of stuff, practice your Korean skills in the context of what you had to do for the job. This is because I knew I was going to be ground, that's what I worked on. After you did that for a few weeks and you passed some tests, you got assigned to your flight. I got Baker Flight. I showed up on the ops floor one day and met everybody. Some people I liked, some people I instantly didn't like. Then I got assigned my trainer, Fleming, he was a neat guy but you get passed around a lot. They maybe would be busy some day doing something so you're working with everybody. That is neat because you could learn a lot of different tools of the trade. Once you're a certified op, you get a trainee. The schedule always changed though. When I first got to the ops floor, it was three days on, three swing days and three days off and we loved it. Then some officer would change it because it would save time or hours. It was basically to make them look good, put something on their officer performance report, "Oh, saved x amount of hours by switching this," and it always screwed with us, always messed with us. Flights were unmanned or missions were unmanned so they had to get me or other guys to come fill in. It was a Frankenstein, a bunch of different people pulled together. So you put in about eight to ten hours everyday except for days off. Days off were nice, you could

do whatever you wanted. There was a nice gym on base, a couple chow halls, there was a rec center where I would go play drums, horribly. I would run the perimeter, that was a lot of fun where all the planes would land. I would just run around and watch the planes go up and come down. The one we flew was so loud, you could hear it from the barracks for like fifteen minutes.

Tyler Wilhelm:

What kind of plane was it?

Brandon Butchko:

Was that the U-2? I remember we talked about this but I never looked it up. I think we will just call it the U-2. Yeah I don't know all the specs behind it or what I can mention. It was big.

Tyler Wilhelm:

That was your primary plane for operations?

Brandon Butchko:

That was what gave us our stuff.

Tyler Wilhelm:

When you did get your days off, you said you ran around the perimeter, went to the gym, any other activities?

Brandon Butchko:

I had a really cool roommate. Oh that's another thing, I got so lucky with roommates my entire four years. I never had a bad roommate. I don't know how it happened, but I got along with all of them. I had this guy I met in Monterey his name was Taylor. He was about twenty-eight at the time so he was quite a bit older than most of us but we just hit it off. I'm a big fan of Insane Clown Possey [a hip-hop duo] and I might be their smartest fan. He liked to take something that you liked and just hammer it until you were sick of it but he admitted to somebody he made a mistake when he tried to get me sick and tired of Insane Clown Possey by

playing them all the time. He said, “Yeah, that backfired.” Then he started to like it so we would have fun playing Halo [video game] online. The connection for that wasn’t so bad stateside, so we would be playing against like six-year olds and stuff. We would spend a lot of nights with Bud Light and Halo. I fell in with the wrong crowd early on. When I turned twenty-one we started a beer pong league. I just got sick of it. Once ... one day out of those three days off we would play beer pong all day and I would feel nasty the next day and I would have to go to work.

Tyler Wilhelm:

What stage of your career did you turn twenty-one? Where were you at the time?

Brandon Butchko:

That was in Korea. Oh man so I got there in 2006, and that was in April. That day was pretty cool, the birthday day was pretty cool. I got a nickname of Rally, Rally Butchko because I puked and rallied like two or three times.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Did your friends take you out on the town?

Brandon Butchko:

Yup, we had a pasta dinner with wine. Then my supervisor bought me a four jaeger bombs that I had to throw up before seven and I said ok. We just kept going and then this other sergeant got me a tequila shot and we didn’t know how to do it. Salt, and lemon or lime whatever. As soon as I had that it was flippy floppy and that was that. Oh that’s another interesting memory about Korea is that the rules on fraternization are very lax over there Most of the time they would frown upon so many enlisted and NCO’s and officers in one place but over there its like where else are we going to go? The strip was very small and very short. It was only x amount of bars.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Your talking about comingling between enlisted guys and officers?

Brandon Butchko:

Right, and higher enlisted and lower like we were with our supervisors.

Tyler Wilhelm:

There was no social barrier between the two of you guys?

Brandon Butchko:

Should have been, we all got along pretty well, most of us were pretty good friends.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Did you like that because I'm sure that does not happen everywhere?

Brandon Butchko:

Yeah, I did. It was really neat. I think it ... camaraderie like you mentioned I think it really helped out a lot. Even when I realized that wasn't for me, that lifestyle wasn't for me ... to go out every night. I was still friends with them but I was like, "You know what, I can't do this anymore. I'm sorry."

Tyler Wilhelm:

And then you quit the beer pong league?

Brandon Butchko:

I did, I quit the beer pong league, the Beer Slingers are no more. Dress up like cowboys ...

Tyler Wilhelm:

On your free time, like you said you got to outside the base, what was the name of the town?

Brandon Butchko:

Ohsan was the name of the airbase and Tsongton was the name of the town. That was a pretty grungy place.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Can you describe what it was like when you outside the base?

Brandon Butchko:

Sure. Taylor and I really enjoyed going to a Suwon. You can go down the strip and there is all sorts of shops you can go into. You can get suits. I never got suits somebody said to do that and that would have been a really good idea but I didn't do that. Lots of small joints to eat, tons of bars, all over the place everywhere you look. Then there was a Subway. You could take the Subway to Seoul, the capital. You could take it to...maybe Seoul is forty miles south. I might be wrong on the location of Ohsan Airbase. I loved going to a small place for kimbab and mandu ramen which is like pot-stickers and soup. Kimbab is the seaweed with the rice and the vegetables and the meat inside. That was great. Taylor and I would go to Outback Steakhouse. They got all their meat from Australia, which was cool.

Tyler Wilhelm:

So it was like a really Outback?

Brandon Butchko:

Yeah, I was twenty and they served me this alcoholic carbonated grape wine or something like that. I was like "Yeah, I will take juice and that was their juice." That was the only place he would ever go, he never went any place else. Oh, we would go to hockey games. Went to baseball games. Their teams are allowed one foreigner because they are so much thicker. The hockey games were nuts. This one guy, Nedved, probably six foot six, just smashing Korean people. That was in hockey. For a couple bucks more, we were flush with cash, most of us were. Some guys lived paycheck to paycheck but I saved a lot. I still went out and had fun. For eight bucks we could get behind the goal and we would get a free hot dog and a Miller Genuine Draft and it was ... that was a lot of fun. Oh, I've got a great hockey jersey. Its all blue

and yellow and it says Anyung Halla. Anyung was the name of the town, Halla was the name of the team. It's got a big polar bear on it. The Hyundai Unicorns was the name of the baseball team. I've got a baseball jersey with a unicorn on it and it says Unicorns. That was neat. Oh, my parents came out to Korea. I can't believe I forgot about that, that was neat. We took them to a baseball game, we took them to Seoul. That was neat, that was neat for them to come out.

Tyler Wilhelm:

How long did they stay?

Brandon Butchko:

About a week.

Tyler Wilhelm:

That's pretty cool. That's kind of an unusual story for an enlisted guy.

Brandon Butchko:

That's a big trip. That's a long time on a plane. So going on leave is almost daunting. I'm like, "Ahh I don't want to go to Hawaii," which is closer to the States. I don't know know why ... That's one thing I would recommend to people if they are listening to this is take your leave and go somewhere new. Don't go back home.

Tyler Wilhelm:

I remember when we talked before you said on your free time you got to travel to other areas of Korea. Not just around the base but in the country ...

Brandon Butchko:

I never went to Sorac San. San means mountain. That's a good place for skiing and snowboarding but I never was into that when I was a kid. I have only done it twice and it's been horrible. I went down to Pusan though and that was cool. It was like a way less busy way more laid back version of Seoul. Pusan was great it was the southern most tip. That was a great place to go. I went up to Moido, which is the upper northwestern area, that's an island. We bussed out

there. Incheon Airport is the name of the airport. Yeah it was a great place, that was a good place, met a lot of Canadians. They go there and teach English, a lot of people come over there and teach English. I could probably go after I graduate, might not be a bad gig. Well only if one of my friends is over there. I wouldn't want to go and not have them over there. South Korea is so small, and every town starts to look the same. After about a year, I pretty much stayed on base. I would only go out for the meals or to the bars, if it was somebody's birthday.

Tyler Wilhelm:

How long were you there in Korea?

Brandon Butchko:

Two years.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Can you talk about what happened after Korea, when your service was up?

Brandon Butchko:

Sure. Ah, this is a good one. When I started out process, I was kind of surprised they did not try to ... We all got Top Secret security clearances and that's a big ordeal, that's a big process. I don't think that they were happy when I decided to leave. I decided that I did not want to spend every other year coming back to Korea so I decided to get out. My supervisor at the time asked me when I decided to get out and I said before I even joined. He said that was hard to argue with, he didn't tell me what the financial implications or the options and whatnot. It probably would not have swayed me, but who knows. I started out process and that was a pain in the neck. I was able to take my terminal leave, which was all the leave I had saved up. You get two and half days every month or something like that I can't remember. I got my plane ticket and I got all set up and one of the guys I had to get to sign off on my thing looks at my ticket and he tells me I don't have that much leave. However, I was done with my duties ...

Tyler Wilhelm:

You're talking about you trying to actually leave, you're done with service right?

Brandon Butchko:

I'm done with my flight, I still had a few more days before my terminal leave started but

...

Tyler Wilhelm:

Is that when you go onto active reserve or something of the sort?

Brandon Butchko:

Yeah, for four years after that.

Tyler Wilhelm:

And he would not let you leave?

Brandon Butchko:

He told me that I couldn't. I didn't have enough but he still signed off on my thing. I told him I would change it ... this is like the only time I have ever lied in my life ... in the military. I looked at him and asked what am I going to do, sit in the barracks for two days? Just waiting to go and change my plane ticket that I have already gotten? So I looked at him and said OK and then he signed off and nobody ever bothered me about it and I got out of there and no big deal. I hate to sound like I was cheating the system but when you're that stringent on something that ... I understand that he was looking at it from his point of view. That was his job and he didn't know that I was done with duty and stuff like that. I was going to be out of my room before then, they were going to put somebody else in there, I was all set up to leave. It would have been a horrible debacle. Yeah, so I got the States and took the rest of the terminal leave. After that I worked a couple odd jobs for a while and decided that school was what I was going to do. I started LCC and then after a couple terms there I decided that I might as well use ... the MGI Bill changed to take care of all the tuition plus a monthly stipend. I thought that was pretty sweet so I went to a major university. I knew I needed a goal. I picked human physiology because I could not go undeclared. I knew I had to have something to work toward. It's hard but I know ...

I've know some people that have taken biology and some physics and stuff like that and then quit because it's too hard but I can't. I don't know, something weird about me.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Do you think that your military experiences has anything to do with that?

Brandon Butchko:

I think so, I think persevering through the language and overcoming that, and passing that was a huge boost. I'm no stranger to hard work now, no stranger to putting in hours, putting in time. I understand that I have to put in time to get the grades that I want.

Tyler Wilhelm:

If you were to compare the courses you took at DLI to something here, which would you think is harder?

Brandon Butchko:

I'm going to say here because when I am at DLI I don't have to worry about commuting. I don't have to worry about ... I am getting paid to study, unlike here. I think that was a better, maybe more intense, but better environment because everyone is focused on you there. Here, they have office hours, time with the teachers, lectures, the course material is a lot less, sometimes it's not as fun and I have a hard time focusing, here in college. You know, anatomy I have to learn ammoniac acid oh that's boring. Human physiology, oh that's fun.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Do you think the fact that when you were learning your language there was something in the back of your mind motivating you? Maybe it was important to learn Korean because its part of your job in the military?

Brandon Butchko:

Oh definitely, I spent a lot of time, a lot of my free time on that. Weekends, I always made sure to relax and unwind on Saturdays and then Sundays I would get back into it. I mean

we had, toward the end, there was a hundred words a night easy and then we would get quizzed over it. It was just to see where you were at but I would get anywhere between seventy five to eighty five percent of them. You had to figure out what worked for you. It was fun it was awesome to learn a new language. Everybody keeps on me, you know, keep up with it. Dude, its here [points to his head] it's not going anywhere. Some grammar patterns I may be shaky on but not vocab, it's there.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Do you ever speak it anymore?

Brandon Butchko:

Very rarely, I will hear a couple Korean students on base and they don't seem too enthusiastic. I wonder if they get it a lot. They are used to some people that know a few words so I always try to come up with something neat to say. I should say something about counterfeit money or something to really get their attention. Also it was a very professional environment at DLI compared to here. The students talk, and cell phones are going off, that stuff did not happen.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Looking back on it, do you think your training with a language helped you with your job over in Korea?

Brandon Butchko:

Yes, some of those guys are even better than me. Some of those guys can just absorb it.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Would it have been more difficult had you not known Korean?

Brandon Butchko:

Oh yes, that was vital. You couldn't go without it, you had to. It would be so different when you got over there because there would be even more specific vocab and sometimes it was really hard to make sense of what was going on. I still had to work hard.

Tyler Wilhelm:

What do you think about the military after serving?

Brandon Butchko:

I think it's vital. I think it always will be. I think every branch has a really good mission. I think they overreact a lot on a very small scale. When I was going through MEPS which is Military Entrance Processing. I got pretty sick and I would go up there and they would do the physicals and stuff like that. I was in delayed entry and they would check on us every couple weeks, we would go back up there. In between times I got sick one time real bad and they gave me a throat spray. I went up there, and I should have told my recruiter but I didn't because I didn't think it was any big deal and he would have told me not to say anything. They said, "Hey, have you been to the hospital recently?" And I told them I had. They asked why and I told them my throat hurt so I got the spray. They freaked out, thought I had asthma, and they disqualified me from aircrew. There are two types of linguists; there is aircrew and ground crew. I never found out why all the ground crew guys got ground, because they had to be disqualified for some reason and they almost didn't let me in the military because of a throat spray. I was active, my throat was fine. I didn't have asthma or anything. Then my buddy didn't show up and he was drunk. I mean I understand but Article 15 and demote him and things like that? That's pretty rough I think. Overall I think you really get out of it what you put into it. There are a lot of people that I worked with that were lazy, they were slackers. That's going to translate when they get out as well. I think when you're in you should do everything you can to stand out. I didn't really stand out but everybody knew my name. My reputation preceded me even from Texas to Korea. I just did what I was supposed to do but everybody else didn't. It made me look really good to people but that was a lot of expectations and I didn't like it. They knew they could trust me.

Tyler Wilhelm:

What do you mean by expectations?

Brandon Butchko:

Show up on time, be groomed.

Tyler Wilhelm:

That's because you were one of the better students?

Brandon Butchko:

My GPA might have been lower than a lot of people but I wouldn't complain.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Would you say that it was an unfair bias toward you? People maybe picking on you or you were judged at a higher standard?

Brandon Butchko:

Not in a negative way but yeah, it was lots to live up to. I knew I was being watched but I have never done anything bad and I have never been interested in doing anything bad. I just kind of accepted it. There was one guy that was a complete jerk, total dirt bag and I wish I had his skills. If I had his skills, it would have been nuts. I would have been highly sought after. I was to a lesser degree just because or maybe even more because nobody liked that guy but everybody liked me. It was fine, sometimes I felt like I wasn't living up to what they expected but nobody ever said anything so that was cool. Sometimes I wonder if were just sort of a presence there, instead of supposed to be doing something. People got in my head like that.

Tyler Wilhelm:

You're talking about the base in Korea?

Brandon Butchko:

Whether our mission was useful or not.

Tyler Wilhelm:

What did you think?

Brandon Butchko:

I thought so. I could see how parts of it could be moot but when I was there I felt like stuff I got, the stuff I was able to do I felt could prepare our forces for future conflict. That's when I started to get way more pride in what I did. I always sort of looked at it as a job and then I was like no, I am doing this, people are believing in me, people are trusting me. It was a great environment for that, people were really supportive. That's when I started to get a real, a higher sense of pride in taking those four years of my life and doing it. It made things feel a lot better. I got excited, got ready for work everyday I was excited to go. I was excited to do things when people were kind of lamenting the fact and it was still a grind. Missions were still a grind, eight to ten hours sitting in there.

Tyler Wilhelm:

You were in Korea, do you feel regretful that you weren't in Iraq instead?

Brandon Butchko:

Good one, yeah. I signed up for an extra year in Korea. Had I not I would have gone one year there and one year probably to Maryland. Now people that stayed in longer than me, six years, a lot of them ended up going over to the Middle East but they weren't being used in the capacity of a linguist though over there. A Korean linguist in the Middle East? So one guy was a truck driver, one guy was taking pictures of evidence, bomb making things and stuff like that. We all played pretty supportive roles. When I got home I noticed there was a lot of focus on combat veterans. I mean all the help and all the respect to them in the world. Did I feel maybe for a time, I felt like I should have like that should have been part of my military experience.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Your referring to combat experience?

Brandon Butchko:

Combat, or even just being deployed. I was really thinking about that but I started really thinking about it and I thought no, I did an exemplary job at what I did. I made a difference and I

did some good. I am out and I am mentally and physically sound. There is not a day goes by I don't appreciate that. There is guys coming back without limbs, guys coming back with post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]. Now I feel, it's a strange sort of motivation for me to be the best at whatever I do maybe after school. My grades aren't so good I could probably get better grades if I spent more time on it. Doing other things like the CERT, Community Emergency Response Team, I like to give blood. That appreciation of everyday that I have been out and that I have the opportunities that I have had and what the military has afforded me keeps me even more on the path of a good, productive citizen.

Tyler Wilhelm:

That's why you would recommend the service to someone?

Brandon Butchko:

Not for everybody. There have been some guys here on campus that I go, what are you going to do after you graduate? They say I don't know and I say ever think about the military? There are some guys I wouldn't, some guys in class I just wouldn't trust in there to do the right thing. I always liked the answer, "I don't think it's for me." I go, "How do you know? Have you talked to recruiters or have you seen stuff in the movies or TV like I did? Maybe things have been swaying you, are you worried about what people will think?" I haven't got into that kind of detail with them but for them sometimes I hope I do plant a seed because I would love to see them be a linguist. In fact, one of my friends who I have known since I started going to school here, Kenny, he joined the Navy. I miss him pretty bad when I sit in physiology and he is not there anymore. I miss him but I know he is going to do great.

Tyler Wilhelm:

You recruited him in a sense?

Brandon Butchko:

I don't know if I ever mentioned it to him ...

Tyler Wilhelm:

He just decided on his own?

Brandon Butchko:

His father was a Marine as well so maybe that helped out.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Do you have any family military history?

Brandon Butchko:

I think maybe my grandfather on my mother's side was in the army during WWII for two years. No I never got a chance to talk to him about it. I was six and then he passed away. No aunts, no uncles. Oh, I got some cousin who is a captain in the Air Force people talk about. Its tough because when my parents moved out here, there is very limited contact with family members back there [New Jersey]. They will be nice but they never call me, they never say, "Hey how you doing?" There could be some more output by me but some of them I just don't like.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Do you regret not being in combat situation in any place, even in Korea?

Brandon Butchko:

Maybe in the beginning. Since I have been out and talking to Air Force Special Forces ... I have met army infantry guys like Brian [other interviewer for the project]. You saw how bored he seemed to have been of his job and how any dude could do it. I think if I had gone in a more tactical path I would have been bored out of my mind. Its tough to know if I had gone over there instead of somebody else, would they have come back, would I have come back, would they still be around, would I still be around? I try not to burden myself with that, but I am really glad I went into the intelligence field and was able to do that specific job as well as I did. I may not have been able to have done a combat job as well as I was able to do the intelligence one. So no, no I don't regret it. Part of me still does wish that if I had gone and if I could have done

something. There is a lot of what ifs. If the outcome had been positive and good then sure, but there is no telling. No, for a while there I wasn't even sure I wanted to do interviews and talk to people about this. I have only recently started to come out of my shell because there was so much media attention to combat veterans that I felt like we were being marginalized like everybody else. It's a good thing that we have all that attention. Do I think it scares some potential people from joining. Yes, I don't think that is good. I was interested in doing these interviews because there are other jobs out there and if you take your armed services vocational aptitude battery and the higher score you get, the harder you work in high school, the more jobs will be open to you. It's not you're going to go into the military and you're going to become a front line guy. There are tons of other jobs out there that will help you in things. Hopefully somebody will get word of that. I did a portrait series for the Daily Emerald [Oregon Newspaper] and it will neat to see, "Hey that guy was a linguist." I don't think I have met another linguist since I have been out.

Tyler Wilhelm:

After all of this, would you think about going back into the military and doing something different?

Brandon Butchko:

That's interesting. Kind of because then I could be an officer. I was thinking about it you know. Human physiology, the medical route there EMT and there is paramedic, man there is so much more schooling after that which is not bad. I think there are so many options I never wanted to be like, oh, I am going to be a doctor, I am going to do that. What if for whatever reason I change my mind then everybody has these expectations that I am going to be a doctor. I don't do that anymore. There is a lot of different things police officer, fireman, I would be happy with any of those but officer...it would be interesting. I could join any of the services and be one. That administrative role, I don't think I would like making decisions that would not necessarily benefit the people below me. That is what I felt a lot of officers did and it was minor stuff but it was not in our best interest.

Tyler Wilhelm:

You would not want to put yourself in that position?

Brandon Butchko:

I have been enlisted and I feel I could not do this to my own guys. Then again I could help them out, I wouldn't give that kid an Article 15. I would go up the chain of command and say handle it like this but then it could come back to me. Gosh, that would be pretty cool.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Have you thought about it before I asked you?

Brandon- Fleetingly, a little bit here and there. I guess we will see what happens after I graduate. I graduate next winter term. Yeah, we will see but it is a good option to keep open you know.

Tyler Wilhelm:

So you are open to it then?

Brandon Butchko:

I don't see why not. It seems a little more scary to do that than when I went in the first time. It's like, "Wow I am going back." I enjoy all these things about being a civilian and I would have to give all that up again. Probably another twenty years I would make a career out of it for sure. That's daunting right there.

Tyler Wilhelm:

OK, well do you have anything else you want to add, last words or thoughts?

Brandon Butchko:

Yeah, if you're listening to this, thanks for doing so. If you have any questions about being a linguist contact your recruiter, contact all of them the Navy, Marines, Army Air Force,

talk to all of them. Hopefully they will be straight with you and it could be a really good start to your career. Thank you for the opportunity.

Tyler Wilhelm:

Thank you Brandon.