Date: February 27, 2018

Time: 10:15 am

Place of interview: Room 220, Knight Library at the University of Oregon

City, State: Eugene, Oregon

Interview duration: 01 hours, 16 minutes, 07 seconds

Interviewee: Nathan Diamond

Interviewers: Paul Lopez and Caitlin Pratt

Paul Lopez is a junior at the University of Oregon and is a history major.
Caitlin Pratt is a double major in International Studies and History with a minor in Arabic.

Transcription

Paul: Hello, this is Paul Lopez. I'm here with…

Caitlin: Caitlin Pratt

Paul: and

Nathan: Nathan Diamond

Paul: and Nathan Diamond is being interviewed here in room 220 of the Knight Library at the University of Oregon. It is 10:15 am and it is February 27th.

Caitlin: 2018.

Paul: Alright, so the first question we have is simple. Where are you from?

Nathan: So, originally, I'm from California. I'm from Riverside, California and then I moved around a bunch, but that's where I'm from. And now, I'm from Eugene, Oregon.

Caitlin: Why do you move around a bunch?

Nathan: So, great question. I started around when I joined the military. That was in 2006. 2005-2006. Prior to that, I moved to Arizona for a little bit because that's where my dad was. Then after that, until 2006 when I actually did join the military, it took me to Texas and several places in Texas. And then, to North Carolina and over to Hawaii and some other places that shall remain nameless. But yeah, it was kind of a nice little tour of the country. Hawaii was really nice. That's where we were for a very long time.

Paul: Are you still enlisted or are you a veteran?

Nathan: I am currently a veteran. I got out in 2014, April. Then we moved to Eugene. We wanted to stay close to family and it was a relatively low-cost area compared to other potential areas on the west coast. And Eugene is extremely kid friendly. We had a daughter at the time and now we have two kids, so that's fun. But Eugene has been really cool, really welcoming, really different than Hawaii, where we came from. The culture is way way different and it's nice, so.

Caitlin: What is your current profession?

Nathan: My current profession is security officer at the University of Oregon Police Department. Prior to that, I was working at a … when I got out of the military, prior to the security, for another security company and it's pretty interesting working for the police department. It's pretty fun. Pretty dynamic type of job, not really want to do it for the rest of my life, but it's been good for right now.

Paul: So, you said that you're also a student, what's your current major?
Nathan: So, my current major is Family and Human Services and I am minoring in Special Education. I wanted to do Family and Human Services, because, well… for a lot of reasons but

well, I wanted to stay in Eugene and didn't want to have to travel out of the city to go to a different university and that degree program was closely aligned to the social work degrees that they have at Portland State and other competitive universities, so as far as that it's pretty cool. Originally, I wanted to get into social work and then it kind of morphed a bit into special education and I think they kind of both interplay into each other. You learn how to work with diverse people, different backgrounds, different cultures, and that kind of thing, and I think in the current climate, it's kind of an important understanding. So, I wanted to get as far away from anything militant as I could. Unfortunately, private security is something I know and so it's easy to get into and so it's really good for the time being, but eventually it'll change.

Caitlin: Can you elaborate on what you mean when you say you wanted to get away from something militant? You wanted to prioritize special education or social work?

Nathan: That was a very good question. So, my job in the military was just spatial analyst and targets acquisition which, essentially, on top of deployments, you're deployed in place which is basically just means there are jobs in the military that when you are state side you might just be training or prepping or … I don't know there's a lot of things you could do, but a lot of combat roles you end up just prepping while you're state side, so it's not really … But you also deploy a lot more. In my career field, you deploy in place so essentially every day you go to work and you are working in some theatre somewhere else. So, you're working a mission schedule so you're working fourteen hours a day, so you're working a ton and it's very involved or very … very intense type of work. It's basically like being deployed for your entire military enlistment. I was in for eight years, so after eight years of working combat operations deployed state side, it was very just emotionally draining and very just strips the pain off. It definitely leaves you drained, I would say. It drains a lot of energy away. And so, I think that was my big push, you know, I saw it in the current climate and the current war on terror. I think, eventually I started off really for it, you know? I think a lot of people were for the war on terror. I think it was very face on the surface … It's a very appealing war, or it can be. Like you know you're fighting war, you're fighting terror, you're fighting bad people and especially early in 2006, I think that was a big, the pulse was pretty strong for that, but as time goes on I think things, they change and when you're operating it, the entire time, you can see the chains a little bit more changes, a little bit more, I

guess in a different life. I think I just got to the point in my career there in the military where I felt that I was detracting from the common well-being of the world versus, you know, giving something positive back to it. I think that was doing in my role, I think I was kind of doing … I don't know, I was trying to maintain a positive influence (laughs), but um overall, I don't know, I just became disenfranchised and distant. I just didn't really appreciate what was going on and so that being the case, I wanted to be in a profession that was helping. A more helping profession. I wanted to be able to either help veterans that have found themselves in a similar place in their life or just found themselves not just being able to really reconnect with civilian life and try to help them out or just deal with the population of the world in general that is not doing that well and needs to be helped, lifted up in some way. Basically, I just wanted to add to this takeaway. That was my big shift, and to move away from militant-like professions.

Paul: During your times when you were working in the theatre, were you able to maintain a personal life?

Nathan: I think I would say, military in general is very non … How do I want to say … I think one of my NCOs had said it at one point, but they said that, "It's the biggest gang on Earth," and so socially if you were trying to have or maintain a social life with other military members, it was really easy because you work with military people, you work with your co-workers and a lot of times they would go out and do stuff so you could hang out all the time. Even when you're at work, any job you have, you can BS and stumble into the social interchange. But if you were to have any type of family, I think military in general sucks for that. I was in the Air Force and the Air Force in general, I think, it the best out of the four branches for being sympathetic to people in families. That being said, I think any other civilian occupation is a hundred times better. At the end of the day, the military, it's like, "Oh, you know, my significant other is not feeling well," and you go home and take care of the kids. You know, it's not that type of job. It's like, "Okay well that sucks. They need to suck it up and you should probably have a plan that doesn't take you away from the mission at hand." I think as that just became less and less what I was, I didn't really want to be in a position like that, especially with the occupation I had. Like I said, there are other positions in the military that, I think, when you are state side and if something like that were to happen, they would be more understanding, well not understanding, but you would have

more flexibility like, “Okay cool, go, we got this, it’s not a big deal.” But the profession I was in, was like, you were deployed in places where you can’t just leave like, “What are you talking about? That’s not a thing.” So, socially as far as like my family, I think it was a real burden for my family which was one of the main reasons I got out. That and just the job and getting burnt out and suffering extreme burnout over time.

Caitlin: Can you describe the process of you joining? Why did you join and what prompted it? Did you feel like the recruiter was being completely honest and up front about the process? What can you tell us about the joining portion?

Nathan: So, in Riverside, where I was in California, I was working at a video store, which was awesome. I was also working private security at a hotel, which was interesting. Just kind of living, just living. I think at one point I tried the school thing. Right after high school I went to community college for a couple years. Didn’t really stick, I didn’t really know, I had some vague idea of what I wanted to do. I really wanted to do law enforcement for a long time, but then that was kind of changing and I think that was like … You know anytime I think you have a kind of “this is who I am” for a long period time, this is my kind of goal, this is my trajectory, this my this, blah blah blah. I think when that changes you get kind of like, “Holy shit, what? That was my plan that was what was going to happen.” I think for a couple years, two years at the end of high school and the two years when I was in college, that was my goal. Then when I started to realize, “Oh, criminal justice might not work out just because school in general is not working out.” Like, I’m not really feeling it and I think I had that freak out and I just kind of like realized that I needed to do something. I think joining the military was kind of, for me it was just kind of, sucks to say, it was kind of just something where I was like, “Holy shit, I need to get out of Riverside.” I needed to just get out of Dodge. The military is a good way to do it. And it will help me build a resume, it will help me build up my experience and get more experience and I think that was my original kind of driving force to get in. I got to do something outside, to shake it out and that’ll do it. And then I called the recruiter probably the next day.

I don’t remember when I really thought about that. From the time I decided to get in and the time I left, I think it was like a week. It was very quick. Maybe a little bit longer. I had to

take the ASVAB[1], but I took that like day two of talking to a recruiter and I hit that ground just both feet and pew! I took off. As far as the recruiter, I don't know. I think when I went in initially, I really wanted to go security forces, like my options were, like when I had chosen, was security forces, EOD[2], and aerial gunner. Can't remember which one of those but first was security forces, and then just aerial gunner maybe and then EOD. And so I really wanted to do those, like nope put me in those, that's what I want to be, but then I took the ASVAB and then I did well on the ASVAB and the recruiter went, "That's great and all that you put them on there, but if you're goal is to do law enforcement or something, you can do…" I just really think they had a position open for the intel job that I inevitably got, but he was pushing that one pretty hardcore and I don't know if it was just at that recruiter station that they don't have a lot of people with a good ASVAB score, you know not to toot my own horn, but that was a kind of dingy area. And so, maybe that was the case but I know he was definitely pushing that one and recruiters are interesting beings. They really just … I don't know, I think mine, I liked him to a degree, but dealing with him felt a lot like it was a numbers game. He was kind of … and he was odd. He kind of had like, I remember getting in and getting through basic and getting through my tech school and then after that I stopped talking to him because he was my recruiter, he wasn't like my buddy from home, but I feel like he got a couple of emails, he was very offended that I didn't keep up with him, but that's a side note and totally unrelated.

Anyways, that was interesting. I think that was, as far as the recruiter being up front, I think he was as much as he could be? I think, I was a fine candidate, I wasn't a drug addict, I wasn't an alcoholic, I didn't have a criminal record a mile long. I was relatively smart so I think for him, it was like, "Okay, cool, let's put you into something because I don't have to worry about signing waivers for this, it's just an easy thing." An easy connection. But yeah, so I don't know. I think he was relatively straight forward but yep. Then a couple days later, I was on a plane going to Lackland Air Force Base.

Caitlin: That's in Texas?

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[1] Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. A multi-aptitude test issued to all enlisted military and is developed and maintained by the Department of Defense.
[2] Explosive Ordinance Disposal. Trained to disarm explosives.

Nathan: Mmhm, yep, that's where basic is and off to some other place in Texas to do my tech school for eight months, so it was good times.

Paul: How did your family react to you wanting to join the military?

Nathan: I think, I'm trying to remember how they acted. I know my, at the time girlfriend, which is now my wife, was very shocked because it was just, for me, it was just like, this is what I'm going to do, I didn't talk to anybody and was like, "So what do you think about should I join the military, should I …?" And it came completely out of left field. As far as anybody was concerned or anybody knew as far as my life's trajectory was like school, working at a video store, and just working and going to school and that was it. That's what you do and okay. So, like, yeah, "What's my son do? Oh, he goes to school and he works at a video store," like that was it. And then like all of a sudden, "Oh no, yeah, I signed up and I'm getting ready, I'm leaving in a couple of days." That's all people knew. I think it was such a huge 180 that they think, my family was probably just kind of in a state of shock, but my girlfriend/wife, she, I think, she was definitely in shock. She didn't know what to say and she couldn't really, she … I can't remember if she tried to say anything against it but I was like at that point in a relationship you're kind of just like, "Okay, I guess, geez that's something." But we stayed in contact, obviously. Stayed together through it. I think that's a situation that either makes or breaks your relationship and we made it through to the other end. I think the general feeling was "WTF,"[3] this is kind of like, what the heck is going on? And that was then and it didn't really matter.

Caitlin: Did you feel nervous or scared or worried?

Nathan: No, and for better or for worse, that's usually the way it is. I usually just jump in. That has been good and that's been bad. So, but yeah, for me I felt kind of like, I didn't really think about it, like let's do it, one step in front of the other and I'll get to the end of it. Every day is a challenge, every day is different and you just, I was, you always think, "Well, where am I going to be a month from now? Two months from now? This is all going to be in the past, so what does

[3] Acronym for the phrase "What the Fuck"

it matter? Let's just go through it." So, no, I didn't really feel worried or anything like that I just kept going. Eyes closed, move forward, and hope you don't run into a wall.

Paul: How would you describe your basic training?

Nathan: Basic training was interesting, I think, I had a really, I don't want to say, I think everybody thinks [that] they had a unique experience, but I think that my experience was definitely interesting. So usually in basic, from what I've heard from other people who went through boot camp and all that kind of stuff, is, you know, the relationship between you and the drill instructor changes over time. And the people say, perhaps this is all the same, everyone will say it gets easier. It doesn't get easier. You just get more indoctrinated and you get more used to it, and in that sense, nothing changes, it doesn't get any less intense, you just become more familiar with what to expect, which makes it easier. I think the drill instructor ends up being kind of, at least when you get back to your barracks, kind of dials back the verbal abuse and the corrections and the what not, be that because you would require less or they, just people just fall into line, so you need less correction. However we, when was it? So it's eight weeks and I think week two, I want to say, our drill instructor blew out his knee and so he could no longer be our drill instructor. The way it is there they really only have, they're pretty much at 100%. Which means that if they lose somebody, it's not like they can backfill with the extras sitting around at 110 and throw that 10 into someone else's and bring it back up. So, when they went undermanned, because he got injured, that essentially left our group with no dedicated drill instructor. So, we became the kind of step-child group. I think our group was really kind of filled with a lot of people from southern California, which were a lot of colorful people, and to try to get them all to mesh together would have required a really good drill instructor and since we really didn't have one at that point, essentially at that point it was, we got the time, so anytime we had a drill instructor, it was because they were taking a break from their flight that they were drilling. So, which they're supposed to be with for 24/7, so you're with them all the time, so you know, during their breaks and their lunch, they tag team and they would have someone else come in and backfill over there. But because of that we never as a flight, we never got the opportunity to have, like them dial back the intensity, because every drill instructor we got was like, "Oh, this is a new flight." This was week zero again. Week zero to week two is the most intense. It's like

push push push, and because of that I think we went from, we started at sixty people and then every flight and every group that goes through attritions some people, some people just don't make it, some people change their mind, some people break, and some people just get recycled, which means you go back two weeks and go to somebody else's group, but ours went from, but usually that attrition rate is like ten people. You might lose ten. So you start with sixty and ended with fifty. We started with sixty, ended with twenty-eight. So, we just like, they were dropping like flies. And then I think it was just, it was the throttle was never brought back, it was never lessened so a lot of people were just dropping out, a lot of people just got recycled because it was easier to recycle them into a dedicated flight. So, it was like, "Okay, let's just recycle this one, drop them back two weeks, and they'll be in a flight that actually has a drill instructor, cool."

I don't know if they tried to do that with everybody but the people who were left were the ones who were just willing to just grit through it and just whatever, make it to the end. It's the easiest way, and to me that was like and to get a drill instructor that would tell you the fastest way out of basic is to just finish it. If you tried to go get a medical thing, or whatever, you might be there for eight months, or if you try to leave, if you try to be like, "Oh no, this isn't for me," you might be there for eight months. You might be there for a year. They don't take kindly to people changing their mind. They should but they'll find ways to keep you. I'm sure there are very legitimate reasons, they have very legal reasons.

Anyways, so basic was interesting. I don't know if I'd ever … I don't think I'd do it again. It was interesting time of my life. Prepared me for being a parent and not sleeping at all. Over those eight weeks, I think I got probably two hours of sleep a night for eight weeks. I'm pretty sure most of the people in my flight got the same, didn't sleep much. You got back to the barracks at night, and you'd be up all-night prepping for the next day, you'd get a couple hours of sleep, wake up, and do it all over again. It also helped to not think, you're just going forward. You didn't have time. It was interesting.

Caitlin: It sounds like you made it to the last twenty-eight people. What did you do to succeed or do well in basic training?

Nathan: Just one foot in front of the other. I don't think that's what I did. I just kept moving forward. You know, in my mind, it was just as long as I don't break, as long as I don't blow a

muscle, break a bone, whatever, then it's all just a head game. That's all it is. So, if you can just literally think, all I have to do is get around and put one foot forward, just got to get around that corner, just got to get down that street, just got to stay awake for this one class, just got to do whatever it takes just to, it's just setting little waypoints and achieving those waypoints every, like, you might have the thousand waypoints a day, but it's really just keeping your eyes on those micro lens. Being just kind of nutty in the first place. You go kind of crazy after getting two hours of sleep for a long time. You just, it just, you start seeing things in a different way. But then they also keep you busy, I think that's really, it's designed to kind of keep you moving forward. You start the day at like 4:30 [or] 5 in the morning and by noon, they loved to say that by noon you'd do more, actually by breakfast, you do more in your day than most people do all day, so in the first three hours you're doing more than most people do in their twelve hour/fourteen-hour day. I think that pace and that being so full with activities, and so full with training and drilling, and all of that kind of stuff, I think it just helps. You just have to. You have so many things that you're like, "I have to do this and that and now I'm going to do that and I'm going to do that." It helps you just stay in the moment and not look forward to other things.

I think people who couldn't make it. But people who were part of the thirty-two people, a lot of them literally broke, they tore muscles, broke bones, or just generally atrophied out and now they're out of, so that was a good portion of those and so some people again. And were just, I think, in a different, having a dedicated drill instructor would have been fine. The drill instructors that we had, they couldn't let off the throttle, they were more apt just recycling, just get rid of you and throw you back to and hope that the other person has better luck with you. Then they keep you around and that's why a lot of people just got dropped. Or just got out. Then they were trying to think, there were four people that just failed to acclimate to military life. And those they just probably shouldn't have been in the military in the first place and they're pretty easy to see. So, I think that was it. I don't think it was anything special. Just was looking at the here and now and just move forward.

Paul: So, what happened immediately after basic training?

Nathan: So, immediately after basic training, that last sort of week of basic training you have basically like the graduation period, so you're finally seen as like an actual part of the military,

but you could still be recycled in a heartbeat, so you don't want to [fuck] up. You know your family comes and that was also a really big push because your family finds out week two, I believe, or somewhere around there, when your graduation date is going to be. And we have no way to communicate to them outside really. We can, and usually under a normal military experience, that I have heard, you usually get more phone calls home, not a lot, like once a week. I needed more time to write letters. I think I wrote one letter in eight weeks, which was like a couple lines a day, a couple lines a night and finally was able to finish it and I had to like snake it to the mailbox. So, because of that lack of communication, and I knew like, "Oh, my family already bought tickets, my family is already, like they bought tickets, my girlfriend/wife already did that, they're all coming out, I need to make sure that I made it to the end, because if I don't, well they're all non-refundable and I just won't see them." They might come and I won't be able to say, "Hi," because I'll still be in basic. Another big carrot to get through, but also yeah lastly, your family comes and you get a little bit of opportunity, a couple days to go into town and hang out with them and then you have graduation, you do the whole parade and marching and swearing in the actual office. Then after all that's over, I can't remember if you get another one or two more days but that's like a weekend and then the following Monday you immediately go to wherever your tech school was. For me, that was some other place in Texas, and then you just go there and then you start your tech school. For me, it was about an eight-month tech school and yeah, so, that's what immediately followed basic.

Caitlin: Can you describe tech school and what did you learn?

Nathan: So, tech school was interesting. I think it's, you know, we learned the basics of intel and gathering and you learned the basics of intel in general, and the concepts of it. Then for my career field, specifically you learned, let's see what I can say. So, we deal with a lot of different censors, and a lot of different censors read data in a lot of different ways, and they appear different. And so you learn all the ways to interpret that data and to be able to determine what is actually being received. What's actually being scanned and what not. You learn how to synthesize intelligent products. You learn what's important, what's not important, you learn more about kind of like, what it means to be in the military and kind of like that kind of, they indoctrinate you more into the culture of being in the military. That kind of stuff. And then,

oddly enough for my … I feel like that's kind of, that's calm, I think, in life. But my specific career field, because it was so new, I mean it wasn't super new, but it was. In my opinion, it was still on the wild west type of stages of its growth. It was a very adamant that eight months of how learning had every different censors and how to synthesize information. How to get into the client or how to get it to the person who needs it and how to, all of that fun stuff. My specific job was I think, two weeks of training in maybe a week. And this is kind of like, "Oh yeah, this is this offshoot branch of intel and now onto other things." And so, lo and behold, oh that's actually what you're going to be doing for the next eight years, so it might have been good to have actual eight months of that training but it was more, that was more OJT, so once they got to my actual duties, that's when I learned how to do all that fun stuff. They did end up going back and changing that so now there's eight months of intel training and then there's four months of that specific little niche job.

Caitlin: What's OJT?

Nathan: On the Job Training

Caitlin: Oh, okay, and what was the specific task that you did? What was the specific job title?

Nathan: The specific job title was, with whatever type of censors you were working with. We were working more with … So a lot of the training was dealing with the eight months was dealing with information gathered by satellites and you choose, so very, your typical, your classic way of gathering just spatial information, but during that transition we were dealing more with drones. So, we have, now we're moving to the drone warfare, which then that, so that was the emphasis in the infancy, the kind of like, eh, that niche was working with a drone asset versus more traditional forms of intel gathering.

Paul: Was it something that you were interested in doing, with drones, working with drones?

Nathan: I mean, I don't know, once you get in the door of the military, it doesn't matter what you're interested in. They will tell you what you are going to do, but I think it was as interesting

as anything else. Anything can make it interesting. I felt like at that point in my career, I still felt like, you know what, I don't want to call it like … I wasn't yet disillusioned with the whole process. So, I think that it seemed interesting that you're working with a more dynamic form of a more dynamic platform. You're working with a platform that was far more, I wouldn't call it tactical, but a lot more like, just you had a lot more versatility in it, satellites, both you and the enemy know when that satellite is going to be taking information, you know any First World country, or even Second World country, who kind of knows anything about the military type of operations, knows when a satellite is coming over, so it's very easy to go, "Oh okay, we want to hide the fact that we're moving missiles. Okay we'll put it in the bush." Or you know cover it up or use some type of deceptive camouflage. So, it's, that stuff will pick up stuff, you'll definitely get information from it, but you know, if a country really wants to hid something or to mislead you, it's a lot easier to because they know when you're coming. You know when an enemy is going to look at you, you can fake them out. And then with U2, they have a very specific track that they're following, they're not super dynamic.[4] You know, it's a really big aircraft and it takes a lot of fuel. It's versatile but it's not as versatile as I think drones can be. It also relies a lot on humans. Obviously, it's a piloted platform, so there's no toilet on it, so you're going up there for a long time and you got to hold it. If you got to pee then you're good, but if you got to go number two, like that's mission abort. So, it's a lot more susceptible to human error whereas drones are not. So, I think that's interesting. I think they're more dynamic in nature and they're, what they can be used for there's potential there, but there's also potential for the people who are analyzing everything going on, to be very detracted or distant from what's actually happening, so it's a double-edged sword.

Caitlin: So, you were in the Air Force during the Iraq War, during the reconstruction and then during the Surge, how would you describe the use of drones during this time in the Iraq War?

Nathan: I think in the beginning, it was like I said, it was very, our rules of engagement were very, let's see, I think early on it was still in its infancy and so it was still like with any new program that you're trying to figure out how best to employ it, how best to operate it. I think

[4] The U2 is a high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft.

those early conflicts really kind of exemplified that fact. There was a lot less oversight. There was a lot less kind of like before, you know, I want to say buddy checking, there was a lot less kind of like before actions were taken. They didn't require the same amount of oversight that wasn't necessary until it became necessary. I think that was the biggest thing that I observed was extreme change in the rules of engagement and on the oversight of the program itself. I think when I left it was very robust. It was very, you know, it was a lot less, you were far less likely to have a civilian casualty unless it was, you know, an acceptable loss of life, which starting out, when we started the acceptable civilian casualty rate was thirty-two civilians for one high value individual. So that was what we were working with. I think that was very challenging. It didn't happen a lot but there were definitely instances where it happened, where it was deemed worth it. You know, you were in the middle of the conflicts and unfortunately civilians got the shaft. I think that was the big change that I observed, was kind of how much really, how much oversight and what not was kind of implemented in the program.

Paul: How did that effect you mentally or emotionally?

Nathan: I think emotionally, I became extremely detached. I think that was one of the biggest reasons that I got out, was the detachment. I think when I started, I was extremely devaluing human life that I was like, you know, you have to have a dark humor to be able to do that. People who didn't, ended up as a failure to acclimate, so they would, they'd end up getting canned or they'd end up getting moved to a different career field if that was available, if not they were just discharged in general. So, you had to develop somewhat of a sick humor. Same with, what I imagine police officers and firefighters and EMTs[5] kind of develop over time. You see enough people that, you know, you deal with enough corpses, you deal with enough criminals, eventually you have to find some way to kind of normalize that or at least not let it affect you as much. I think that's what I did in my career field, that's definitely what most people did, was to just kind of dial back their emotional engagement, and it was easier because you're dealing with an enemy. Humans are generally good at, you know, justifying heinous acts and we can come up with a million justifications for it. I think that's what you inevitably do. We justify that they are

[5] Emergency Medical Technician

the enemy that they were “other” than us, you know, it’s us versus them, if we don’t get them then our people are going to be taken out. That was kind of a frame of mind that you had to develop. I think the biggest thing is when I started joking about the loss of life of other people in other countries that I realized, I really took stock of that and I was like, “Oh, wow, I’m starting to lose a bit of late.” People shouldn’t be joking about that stuff, that’s not human. I think that I started to really reflect on my participation in the war and kind of how it kind of progressed. I started to realize that, you know, it wasn’t for me. I think being deployed in that type of career field for eight years indefinitely, I don’t know there’s a lot of people in my career field that make it ten years or fourteen years and they’re just like, nope, you know, I know it’s another couple of years and I’d retire, but it’s just not worth it. It’s, you know, another six years of this or it’s another ten years of this and it’s, they just can’t make it. I think that’s pretty common. People go on two enlistments, maybe three, and then they’re out. So yeah, I think it was a - it did not do well for my mental state. I think you just change really. I think it kind of like knocked off the rose-colored glasses, which is similar to a lot of people in those Third World countries that we operate in, you deal with them on any type of level and you can see the devaluation of human life in a very different way, just people, they could have a best friend that they’ve had since childhood and then they can talk in a nonchalant way about how they stepped on a mine and they died that morning or, “My house was bombed two weeks ago so we’re with my cousins.” Just to talk to them, it’s very amazing how and you have to develop that type of self-preservation mechanism. If they don’t, they eventually, they mentally collapse and just can’t go on. I think to see that, you know, that’s kind of what happens in any time if, a situation where you’re dealing with that, you find a way to acclimate and a lot of times it’s dissociation. A lot of times it’s just reevaluating how you value life. I think once I started noticing that it felt like I need to change because I can’t go through my entire life feeling that way about life in general. I felt that was very not human. So that’s why when I got out, that was a direct correlation of how that type of operation made me feel.

Caitlin: In retrospect, do you think you would have had similar feelings if you were in security forces or, I think you called it artillery gunman?

Nathan: Artillery gunner. So, if it was EOD, I think I would probably have had a different, I'd probably be crazy, a lot of the EOD people are…

Caitlin: What's EOD?

Nathan: Explosive Ordinance Disposal. So those are the people when deployed who are doing, "Oh, hey, we found [inaudible]." "Okay, go up there and defuse the bomb." So you're defusing bombs, dot bombs, sometimes under enemy fire, or sometimes just waiting for, hoping it doesn't explode in your face. So that would have been a very intense job. I'd probably be weird in a different way if I had that job. Aerial gunner, I think you're doing similar things to what you do in the drone program. As weird as it may say, or as weird as it may seem, you're just in a different position on the weapons system. Then security forces, I don't know I've talked to a lot of security forces and they usually think that their command structure is different and I think that a lot of them ended up just sitting on posts. So, I think that would have been really boring, but who am I to say? I'm not security forces. I'm sure some people have really interesting experiences, but I think more often than not, I hear people talking about how they were just stuck on a post for their entire lives. So, I think that would have been boring, but it thinks that would have probably, I think in retrospect I probably just wouldn't have joined the military, but I did. And I'm here.

Paul: So, did you have any regrets of working with the drones or were you okay? Everything, looking back?

Nathan: I think looking back, I'm happy with, well, not happy with, but I'm okay with the oversight role that I played, I think a lot of it was kind of dialing back, the pilots and the sort of thing screeners who are kind of like, at the end of the day, they're the ones that release the ordinance, but we're the ones kind of telling them where it should go and, you know, when it should go. A lot of times, especially, early on, they were very very very gung ho. So, I think playing the role, eventually I started to change year and I was like, my role was to just make sure that we really get the right person. We're not just going to go out and well, they seem like the right person, so why not? More like, no, they need to have a lot of different elements in place

before we really engage the target. I think in that role, I was happy that I was able to do that. Also, later in my enlistment, I played more, as long as you're in longer your, you go up in rank and you end up training with people coming in behind you. I felt like, I was able to train the people coming in to operate in that way. I appreciate that. I think that I that's what I take away, was that I hope that I mitigated some people being killed that shouldn't have been killed, and I got the right personnel more often than not. I think that's some solace that I've taken from it. But no, regrets in general, I don't know if I do. I would have to talk to my younger self to figure out if I had any major regrets. I know I'm not the same person I was when I came in. I don't think you can be. There are certain things that you see and things that you did that you just can't come back from. I think, I have ratcheted past those points in my life. I wish I could look at the world and say, "That's so amazing and there's so much good in the world and that's all I can see," but in reality, that's not what I see. So, that's a little regretful is that I can no longer just look at the world and be like, "Oh, it's amazing." No, it's like, I can see what people do to each other and it's really really bad. I try not to look at the other side.

Caitlin: So, you were in for eight years, can you describe where you were stationed and how the decision to be stationed in different places occurred?

Nathan: So thankfully, when I wasn't deployed, I was stationed in sunny Hawaii, so that was nice. That was, that provided a lot of people stationed trying to, there's a lot of interesting places to know. So that's one of the fringe benefits, is that you're usually assigned to bases that are pretty decent. They're good bases so that at least when you're not working, [and] now you're state side, and you're in a nice place. You can go to the beach and go do other things, so that's nice. We were there for the majority of my time because the squadron that I was with was changing so a lot of, no they were people who had been there and we learned from a squadron of, which also a kind of big tell of how the drone program was, but when I started there was forty, it was like thirty-eight or forty of us to start out with. By the time I left, there were about three hundred. So, there was a pretty big uptick and which meant that a lot of times they were asking people to stay, like, "You've been here. You've been trained up on all the information and we need more people so we'll keep you and bring in more people." That's how, so a lot of people

were able to stay there for multiple enlistments and they just shuffle around different jobs. That was the main, that was pretty much the place I was for the majority of my time.

Caitlin: Earlier you mentioned how Hawaii wasn't very welcoming compared to Eugene, what did you mean by that?

Nathan: It was one of the few places I've experienced, you know, I'm a white male and I think that as a white male it's like, what the whole United States is. And if you're white, you have it made but it's, I think, being in a non-dominant like whatever, sex and race. It was very interesting and it was awesome that, I think, it was cool to see that white people in Hawaii are definitely in the minority. On top of that, you're seen as if you're there and you're living in the community, you're either seen as a tourist, or you're seen as military or as college students, even if you're born there and you're white. They don't see you as a native Hawaiian or anything like that. So, you get a lot of, I've talked to people who are, my wife went to school with people who were white, were born there. And they just talk about how they're constantly bullied and like kind of like people [there] are very unwelcoming to them, even though they were born there and lived there, and they lived there all their life. That's their home. They were still treated as if they were, you know, invaders. I think there's a very big culture there with people who are native Hawaiians and who have lived there and are either Polynesian descent or just Asian descent. You know it's kind of like this love, hate, you know. I think people are aware of that, the American culture is a huge, like the tourist industry is big. Like it's one of the biggest employers, that and military bases. I think there's a hate that that is the case, I think a lot of people who lived there for a long time have seen the change. You talk to some older people, like seventies and eighties, they talk about how it has changed drastically since they were a kid and how the tourist industry is kind of destroying Hawaii. I remember there is an instance when me and my wife and my daughter were walking around downtown and we went to … this palace, which is one of the few palaces in the United States. We went there and we were just walking around and it just happened to be like in the walking path. And like, "Oh, this is cool. There's like a cool little festival or fair going on. Let's go check it out." And so we started walking through, we got a lot of weird looks and we were like, "Okay, cool." Started listening to music and this is interesting music. And then we ended up getting to a point where we can look back and look at the banner

and it was like, “Take back Hawaii from white people.” And I was like, “Oh shit, we should probably not be here right now.” So that was definitely a moment and there’s a ton of people [and] it wasn’t like there was like four people carrying banners, there was probably two to three thousand people chilling by the palace looking at us like, “Oh, these guys are shit heads.” That was definitely, it was in retrospect, I’m happy that I had the experience, because it’s an experience where I felt definitely like the other in this position. There were times we went out to eat to traditional Hawaiian places that weren’t necessarily, that were off the beaten path and not part of the tourist area. And it was like we’d sit down and it was like radio silence. People would not, like the waiters would not look at us, not acknowledge our presence, they’d serve people that came in right after us and sat right down like right next to us. They’d serve them but not us. It was just kind of this feeling like nope we’re not going to take your order and we’re not going to look at you and we’re going to pretend you don’t exist. And so, that was, that happened on several instances where I went to go buy things from the market and you’d wait in line and they would just ignore you when you were in line and people would like come around you and they would get help and look at you and look at the cashier and the cashier would check them out and you would just be standing there with your items like, “Okay, I see what’s going on.” Put down your stuff and leave. So, it was definitely eye opening and I think it was being from like the quote-unquote dominant culture in the US, I think it’s a valuable experience to get them to realize that, “Holy shit, like this sucks,” and it sucks to be on the receiving end of this treatment.

So, I liked it in that sense. I think it was valuable, but it was not, you know, in the eight years we were, we were there about six years, and so the six years we were there, we like made friends with one other family and they were white. And that was when we went to parks, we would try to talk to other kids, our kids would play with native kids, like native sound bad but you know native Hawaiian kids. Like people who had been born there and they’d be fine but the parents were like completely, like they might talk to you but it wasn’t like, “Let’s get together on the weekend and go do this.” It was like, “Yup, those are our kids.” And in retrospect we come back here and it was weird coming back to a place where white was the dominant culture because it was just like you’d come back to Eugene and it’s like, “Holy shit, there is a lot of people that look like me. This is crazy.” Like we haven’t experienced that in like six years so that was nuts. And then within the first month of us being here, we had tons of, our kid had friends and play dates and all this kind of stuff. And we had like four or five people that we’ve met at

parks that we'd go over to on weekend. Our social life here developed really quickly in retrospect to what it did and why. I think that was kind of the takeaway. We will still go back because it's amazing but I mean you'd go back expecting we're going to be kind of a loner family, like we probably won't have friends, but yeah.

Paul: So how was that assimilation back into the civilian life for you?

Nathan: I think the assimilation coming back from working in, I think that's when I noticed the biggest. I'm trying to think of a good way to explain it. I think, um, you realize how much you change when you deal with a lot of, like when you're dealing with people who've changed in similar ways. It's not very obvious. I think when you come to the civilian world and you're like, I think that was my biggest challenge was listening. The biggest challenge was listening to people complain and to really, like, to take it in perspective. Like, you know, all complaints are relative, you know, you have a bad day, it's just as bad as my bad day. It's just, you might be dealing with a nail in your tire and I, you know, I might be dealing with a hangnail and you know, so it's like they're all different, you know, so it's like, a bad day is a bad day.

Um, but I think when I got out it's like, my bad day is pretty stellar, you know, is pretty like, you know, it's up there. When I got out the military, you know, obviously we didn't have those experiences when I was in civilian life. I'm coming back, but you know, it's like dealing with that. It's like, wow, like I know you're complaining about whatever, like how your next-door neighbor was walking around, upstairs or whatever. Your upstairs neighbors walking around and it kind of made it hard to fall asleep. And that's just like … My life is over. So, I think that kind of like really trying to dial back in the perspective taking and kind of like, okay, yeah, now I can see how that is bad. I can see outside the box and trying to see stuff. I think that was challenging and it still is challenging to some degree, but I've gotten a lot better now that I've gotten more distance from, um, from when I first got out. I'm dealing with people who, uh, you know, when I did start working again, dealing with the civilian workforce is challenging. Just because, you know, being in the military you expect a certain amount of professionalism and a certain amount of ownership. A certain amount of punctuality is a certain amount of professionalism, I said that already, but when you're dealing with the civilian population that is almost non-existent now, they, they're out there. But I would say, I would say that when you're working with military

people in the military, you're marketing [?] with the, some of the most professional people that you'll ever work with and to work with people who are coming out of high school and who had never held a job that was, or like all the jobs they've held were like, yeah, but don't show up to work. A couple of burgers don't get flipped. Doesn't matter, you know, or somebody else will flip a burger or somebody else will sell this jacket. It doesn't matter. So to deal with that type of mentality where it's like, well, if I could, I don't need to show up, I don't need to show up. I show up late, I don't need to call anybody. I don't need to let anybody know, um, you know, I can come and go, it doesn't matter and they can be here and not take it seriously. I think dealing with that was kind of, that was a big transition.

And then also initially just having a ton of free time. When I got out of the military, I was on terminal leave, which means that any leave that you had coming in or out, you still had, you would use at the tail end of your employment, want to call it bait whatever your enlistment. And so, for three months basically was getting paid from the military, but it was just off. So, I just didn't I just was at the house and I think my wife was going nuts, that it was like, you need to find something to do because I'm not used to having you around this much. But you know that was the transition being home, more being around dealing with a slightly less professional workforce and then dealing with people whose perspectives on life were a little bit different. And then just really kind of like, I think that was a big time and when I was reevaluating the things that I had done like when you're in the military, you don't really have time to take stock of everything that you've done but I think when you're out and things have slowed down, you have a little bit more time to really kind of tally it up and you know when you check it out and really see what's going on. So, yeah, I think it was all pretty challenging.

Caitlin: So, I know you have to go here soon, so last question. It's kind of a two parter, how would you describe Air Force culture and how you describe the way the Air Force encourages unit cohesion?

Nathan: Um, I can really only speak to probably security forces, because I had security forces friends and I'm an operator, a culture, and then I'm like my specific intel culture. Um, but I would, I would say it's different. So, like the culture and therefore is, is really dependent on the career field that you're in to begin with. So, for security forces, it's, it wasn't firsthand, but talking

to people who are in it, it's very much more, um, to your bases. So, it's like you really only talk to your same rank if someone's under you, you talk to them as if they are under you, like they are definitely less than you. And if they are over you, you talk to them as if they are over you, like they are more important than you and you respect the rank. And so, it's very kind of like structured in, in that way. In my specific intel culture, I feel like it was far more you are valued for your position. So, if you hold a high position, you might be lower ranked than someone else, but you're still treated. I'm in a different, you're treated as like, "Oh, we're going to give you that respect and listen to what you say," and have you had value in who you are. Um, and so that was interesting. And there's a lot more interplay. Like you can have a, um, a mission floor where you have junior enlisted, where you have um, senior and COs [Commanding Officer] and when you have a ton of like officers and everybody really communicates like you're respectful where expected to do. But like, you're not, like there's an officer, I can't talk to them because I'm like a junior enlisted. Like, no, it's like, no, they have information you need, you go up and talk to them and you might talk about other things too, but you're, you know, you might build some type of rapport, but it's not, you're not looking at rank as a preventative, um, you know, the, "Oh, you're too close to the sun I can't touch," you know. You're more like everyone you can talk to, whoever you can really see, you know. Um, and so it's, you know, it's encouraging and you know I went through some stuff when I was in that, I needed support and I feel like the Air Force really did while I was in, they had my back to some degree, which was cool. And I could definitely see where, uh, the military would, if you stayed in the long haul, they would have your back.

The funny thing is, is once they know you're quitting, they'd pull out as well. You know, it's like once they know you're no longer committed, that's why a lot of people who, in my opinion, or at least in my career field who were getting out, definitely did not let that out of the bag until it was, like, "Oh, yeah, now it's time for reenlistment. Yeah, I'm not very interested." Um, and that's like real close to the end anyways. So, but you never talk about it like, you know, you're two or three years out now cause you're not going to get anything at that point. Like you're just like, "Okay, well, we're just going to burn you out then we're going to give you all the shit jobs and we're going to give you all the, you know, you're just going to be working and not really all that happy and we don't really care cause you're quitting anyway." But no, it

was okay. Culture was fine. Don't know what you'd expect. I think it was better than better than other jobs and probably worse than some others.

Paul: So finally, if you were back to the first day you enlisted, would you do it all over again?

Nathan: Probably not, Probably not. Or I would choose a different career field… because I think the military if you use it, it sounds bad, but if you use it to your advantage, you can make a pretty good life for yourself and you can come out with very minimal mental hang-ups. But it's still the military, so you know. But no, I've known people who have done it intelligently they, they'll move someplace and they'll stay in for twenty years. The first place they move, they'll buy a house and they'll have the military pay for it because the military gives you a housing allowance. Then when they go somewhere else, they'll rent it out because there's always a military person and they rent it out and they'll buy another house and then they'll have the military pay for that one and will go to another place. And by the time they get out they have four or five houses. And then, they have renters in all of them and then the first one's pretty close to being paid off and then, you know, and they have a pension and they're good for the rest of their lives, you know, and they might have had, a job in transportation or they might have had a job in finance and you don't really do, you might be dealing with, enlisted people who are very upset that you missed their belongings or lost them or a shipping container got dumped in the middle of the Pacific or somebody missed a couple hundred bucks on their check. But that's it. That's your bad day. So, I think that's pretty, that'd be pretty decent if you're going to use it just for a way to get yourself ahead. I think that that's fine. But if I had to, do another job, that was my only options were, um, mission related. I don't think I would, I don't think it did. I think I'd probably seek other opportunities first. And then maybe if they didn't pan out, I don't know. It's hard to say.

Paul: Thank you so much for your time and we really appreciate it.

Nathan: No problem.