PREFACE

February 3, 2014

6:00 PM PST

University of Oregon Knight Library

Eugene, OR

Interview duration: 2 hours, 13 minutes, 05 seconds

Interviewee: Isaac Wiggins

Interviewers: Nate Ariel and Alex Aiken

Nate Ariel is a psychology major and a senior at the University of Oregon. He is twenty-four years old and an Army veteran. At the time of this transcription (February 2014), he is a sergeant in the Oregon Army National Guard and spent ten months in Afghanistan (2011-2012).

Alex Aiken is a history major and a senior at the University of Oregon. He is twenty-two years old.

TRANSCRIPT

Nate Ariel: Alright, so I'm just gonna start by getting some of the logistics out of the way. Today is February 3rd, 2014, it's approximately 6pm, we are in the Knight Library at the University of Oregon. My name is Nate Ariel, I'm twenty-four years old, a senior at the University of Oregon, and an Army veteran.

Alex Aiken: I am Alex Aiken, a senior at the University of Oregon and a history major.

Isaac Wiggins: My name is Isaac Wiggins, I'm thirty-one, I'm a junior … or senior, I'm not sure which actually. Psychology major, Army veteran for … fourteen years now.

Nate: Cool. Alright, well the goal for this is basically, as we talked about earlier, to establish some sort of narrative for your service … so logically, the place we'll start is at the very beginning and we [the interviewers] have some of this information, but just so that it's in the actual interview, why don't you talk to us about when you were in high school, and your junior ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps].

Isaac: Alright. My freshman year of high school, '96 [1996], I didn't know what to take, so I ended up in junior ROTC, and stayed in it for all four years … loved it. And I think about my sophomore year I realized that I wanted to join the Army and became friends with a recruiter who knew I was going to enlist, so we'd just BS and tell stories to each other. Graduated in 2000, left for Basic Training, got into the Army on the twenty-first of June, and … still there.

Nate: Okay. So you enlisted in 2000 as you said, and your job was …?

Isaac: I was infantry, went to Basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia. It was … hot. Especially after most of my life in Alaska, going down there in June or July and starting basic training … [chuckles]

Alex: Most difficult part of basic training was …?

Isaac: Probably just dealing with the heat, and … [exhales in thought] … I think what I missed a lot was being able to read what I wanted and listening to music whenever I pleased. They wouldn't let us read anything except religious material and the few military books that they had, and I think we were allowed to listen to music maybe an hour or two, once a week … and everybody had to agree on the station, and if we couldn't agree, we didn't listen to the music.

Nate: Do you think that since you joined in 2000, before both of those wars [Afghanistan and Iraq] got started, that your experience [in basic] was different than somebody who would have joined just briefly afterwards, like somebody you met in your unit?

Isaac: Umm, I don't know; it's hard to say. I did it because I felt like it was something I should do; I really enjoyed the high school [Junior] ROTC, and knew that's what I wanted. It wasn't because I felt a need to do something special. I really honestly couldn't tell you why I joined, what the defining reason was. So it wasn't a sense of patriotism and having to get back at Al-Qaeda and all that … it wasn't a revenge motive. Just something I felt I had to do, and [would] be good to do.

Alex: So you were enlisted then, when September 11th occurred. Could you just talk about your reaction to September 11th and the perspective from a soldier when such a momentous event occurs?

Isaac: Yeah, I remember watching the second plane hit when I was at breakfast, obviously it was on TV. I was in Fort Drum, New York, which is eight-to-twelve hours north of New York City, and so we watched it on TV. Everything got deathly quiet, and everybody just kind of just went back to their rooms in the barracks and were kind of shocked. All activity stopped on base – well at least in our unit, platoon, company. And people were just rooted to the TV, watching. And there was, at that point, no idea who did it. So it was all just kind of like, "What just happened? Are we under attack? Are there future attacks coming? What's going on?" I'm fairly certain that everybody was just huddled around either their TV in their room or the TV at the end of the hall. No one really knew what to do, or what to expect. And then a day or two later, we were told that we were going to New York City to actually help clean up and pull away bodies, which I'm

honestly terribly happy we did not do, because that would have been awful. But then we found out that it was Al-Qaeda and whatever country was supporting them, so we just got ready. We knew we were going to leave, we just didn't know when.

Alex: So would you say the military as an institution – how would you say it changed after that day … became more prepared? You went from a sense of, "Maybe we could go to war" to, "Oh, we're actually probably going to do this." What was the mindset?

Isaac: [sighs] I was at such a low level, I … I have no idea. And even today, I still … I mean the Army is definitely changing, tactics are changing, new procedures are being written for things that I learned eight years ago, ten years ago.

Nate: Alright. So just to bridge a little gap there, you got out of your basic and your job training, and was that all one long training session?

Isaac: It was. The infantry goes through what they call OSUT, One Station Unit Training, and I was in Basic Training essentially from, I think I actually started in June, July sometime, and got done in October – actually Friday, October 13th is when I graduated basic training. I thought that was a fitting premonition. But, yeah, it was all one group of people, one group of trainers all the way through. The only reason I knew I hit the Advanced Individual Training [AIT] that comes immediately after basic was they said, "Hey, wake up. You're now in AIT. Congratulations; keep doing pushups."

Nate: Ha. Okay, and so when you graduated, that's when you went to Fort Drum … and that was with the 10th Mountain [Division]?

Isaac: Yes.

Nate: Alright. And then we talked about September 11th, and shortly thereafter you deployed, in October, is that right?

Isaac: Yes, October 2001.

Nate: Okay, and where did you go, right from the States?

Isaac: From the States, after a couple detours through different European countries because of airspace clearance – at least that's what I was told – [we] went to Camp Doha, Kuwait. And from what I've been told, it's no longer the same Camp Doha that a lot of people went to. Ours was right there on the coast, right there on the Arabian Sea. We were right next to Kuwait City by about thirty minutes drive. It was just the desert. It was really kind of shocking to see how accurate all those cartoons about the desert are. Flat nothing, then like a mound, however many miles away, and then nothing.

Nate: So was it what you expected when you showed up, or …?

Isaac: Actually, we didn't know really where we were going even until we got on the plane. We were about to land, they gave us Desert Camouflage Uniforms, but we weren't allowed to wear them until we actually like crossed a certain point in the air. Then we put them on, and got everything ready for the desert. And then they were like, "Okay, yeah. At this point we can tell you, you're going to Kuwait." "Uhh … alright then." And of course they told us, "Don't tell anybody where you're at, it's a secret," and we were like, "Okay, cool. We're going to Kuwait."

Alex: So what did you do while in Kuwait?

Isaac: There we had three missions. We had convoy security, perimeter security, and regular training. So, like a week, two weeks at a time, any convoy that left Camp Doha or went through the Kuwait International Airport to whatever FOB's [Forward Operating Bases] were out in the middle of the desert – again, those have changed since I last knew – we would just ride in HMMWVs [High Mobility Multi Wheeled Vehicles, aka 'Humvees'] with machine guns mounted, ready for attack. None ever happened, thankfully. But they always had to be sure, and be prepared. And then for camp security, we were on what's called QRF, the Quick Reaction Force, and one squad of us at a time would wait in a building centrally located on post, and wait

for the call that the base was being attacked, then we'd do a training mission to rush out to wherever it was, set up a perimeter, and get ready to do something. The other one, the training. With the training we had our kind of rest cycle mixed in with that. We would do MOUT [Military Operations in Urban Terrain] training at the prison next to us. We would do various other operations, you know, find a room, clear it; do your basic infantry maneuvers out in the desert. That's when we got most of our rest and relaxation in. We were allowed to wear civilian clothes when we were off duty, to an extent I mean. The PX [Post Exchange] there was small and limited, so everybody kind of wore the same clothes, everybody looked the same. But it was great. I absolutely loved being on Camp Doha. We had a movie theater that was free for soldiers, I'm sure it was free for everybody but they played movies that were just recently in the theater in the States, and [they would] bring them over. There was a place called Uncle Frosty's, or Frosty's, or something like that, and they had all the hamburgers, cheeseburgers, hot dogs, chicken burgers you could eat. Fairly certain it was never actually hamburger; maybe a camel burger or two [chuckling]. But they had video games, like Xboxes and Playstations you could rent and plug into one of the TV's they had there, and you know, play it for two hours, give it to somebody else. They had gyms, they had the PX like I said, they had the morale center where you could go and use the computers. It was … a blast.

Nate: So how long did you spend in Kuwait?

Isaac: About four and a half months. We got there in the beginning of October 2001, and left for Afghanistan, March-ish, end of February. March timeframe.

Nate: So you were one of the first units to arrive in country [Afghanistan], I would imagine – at least a unit that wasn't Special Forces. So did you know, did you have any advance warning? You said when you went to Kuwait that you didn't even know where you were going until you were already in the air. When you were being, basically geared up to go from Kuwait to Afghanistan, did you have any warning there, or was it another question mark?

Isaac: We knew we were going to Afghanistan. It was, one day word comes down, "Hey, your unit's going to Afghanistan." [Our] commander pulls us all together and he kind of explained the

hammer and anvil tactic that the military was using at the time, like one group of units was right here [motions with hands] and the other units would come sweeping in, driving all of the enemy in front of them towards the first unit that's sitting there. Then they kind of meet in between and do that kind of thing. We were told we were going to be the anvil. I was like, "Okay …" One of the downsides to being in Kuwait was we didn't have, you know, real media access. So we had no idea what was going on. Other than, I mean some people probably did, they made the effort to go out, but the TV in the chow hall was the only one that would play news. But it was all of the US military news, so it was really kind of hard to get an idea of what was actually going on. And so we didn't really watch TV; we didn't have any in our rooms. We essentially lived in a hangar, a covered hanger with dividers for units. So, yeah, we found out we were going to Afghanistan, and then I think it took a day or two of preparation to actually get us there. I remember having all of our gear lined up, and sitting down I told the guys I was with, the junior soldiers that had come into country after us, "Hey, it's okay to be scared. Hell, I am. But we gotta go," and I'm sure that was just as much to make me feel better, and you know hype myself up as it was to actually do anything for anybody else. Yeah, I had no idea … I don't think I even knew where Afghanistan was on a map. I barely knew where Kuwait was, and that's bad enough to admit.

Alex: So you said you didn't have much access to media sources. Did you guys understand that you were going into Afghanistan because they harbored Al-Qaeda and that they were responsible for 9/11 [September 11th, 2001], so you were basically trying to hunt down the perpetrators, or …?

Isaac: It might have trickled down. I don't remember hearing a lot of people talk about it. I'm sure the top-level commanders knew what was going on, knew what the deal was, but at least from my point, I don't remember anybody going, "Hey, Al-Qaeda attacked America. Afghanistan is harboring Al-Qaeda. We're going there because of …" It might have been an implicit thing that we understood, but I don't remember anybody coming out and spelling it out for us. I mean, there were drills that we did on Camp Doha that were still reminiscent of the Scud [ballistic missile] attack drills. They had an NBC [Nuclear, Biological, and/or Chemical] alarm that they'd sound every week, and one week they forgot to tell us it was a test beforehand. That was a lot of fun, hearing the alarm go off, "Oh crap! That one means chemical!" Everybody's

running to grab their stuff; people have the hypodermic needles for the anti-gas drug ready to stick in their leg. People throwing on gas masks, then somebody comes rushing in, “No no no no no! That was a test. Sorry guys, we messed up. Put down the needles …”

Alex: [chuckling] “Our bad.”

Isaac: “Our bad.”

Alex: So you said while in Afghanistan, you guys were the anvil of the hammer and anvil approach. Can you describe some more of what you did in Afghanistan during that first deployment?

Isaac: Yeah. So we arrived, and we went to Bagram Air Field, which is up north. At the time, it was still one of those under-manned, not really secure or guarded bases like it is today. We arrived, it was the middle of the night, pitch black, because you know, everybody is worried about security, rockets coming in. It was an old Russian base that the Russians used back in the seventies and eighties. It’s just in a valley and there’s mountains on all sides, so when you fly into the airfield, you could easily be hit by an RPG [Rocket Propelled Grenade], or surface-to-air missile. So we get there, and we lived in tents, thirty people to a tent with all of our gear. Cots. I think I slept easily arms length next to somebody else. No electricity, no real running water near us, porta potties all over the place, which were really just wooden crap-houses with a fifty-five gallon drum underneath. So yeah, we got there, and actually the first night we were even there, somebody didn’t know we were coming and didn’t have any place prepared for us to sleep. So our unit essentially slept inside of an old bombed-out building, you know, in hallways next to offices that people were still using. They didn’t have tents for us, nothing. Another funny story, we were walking to wherever we were supposed to be setting up all these tents, and at this point in some areas there’s grass, but mostly gravel. There’s a road, there’s a patch of grass. Well, after being in Kuwait for four and a half months, we hadn’t seen grass except where it’s growing underneath tubes coming out from the crappers [portable toilets]. So everybody’s like, “Oh, wow! Grass!” and they’re walking in it, and enjoying grass. Our platoon sergeant comes running out, “No! No! Get off the grass! You gotta get back on the stone, ahh!” And we’re like, “What

the hell is his problem? Just trying to sit down and enjoy." Come to find out, any areas that have grass haven't actually been de-mined, and the only safe areas to walk on are the areas with gravel, because that's where someone came through and laid it down, so that's kind of the situation we rolled into. [We] spent maybe a week or so there, because we had come from Kuwait, sea level, to Bagram, which is, I think, fifty-three hundred, six thousand feet, somewhere in that neighborhood. Now all of us are sucking because we don't have enough oxygen. They were trying to get us to do training and I remember one time we did a two mile run with weapons … my normal run time was, you know, thirteen-thirty, somewhere in that neighborhood. I think as a group, we might have gotten it done in forty minutes. I mean we just had, even though we were doing fifteen mile road marches once a month in Kuwait, we were not prepared for the altitude that Bagram was at. So we did our train up there, got all of our gear, all of the weapons handed out, grenades, the rocket launchers, the claymore mines, things of that nature. Put it all in our bags, and loaded up into Chinooks [large cargo helicopters] one day, and went flying off into the mountains. The helicopter was packed so tight, that, you know the common phrase [in the Army] is 'nut to butt.' It was literally, we were sitting on the floor, and there were three rows of people inside the helicopter on the floor, and then there's a row of people on each side of the bird [aircraft], facing inwards. Well those people on the floor were packed in so tight, we were sitting there with our rucksacks [backpacks], on our ass with our legs spread, in someone else's rucksack, right in between our legs, pushed up against our groin. And it was that way all the way down the length of the aircraft. It was enough that I actually lost feeling in both of my legs and had a hard time getting out of the aircraft, because I couldn't feel them. I actually fell out of the back of the helicopter when we finally touched down. It was packed. There was probably thirty people, plus gear, inside one of these aircraft. I mean, that's … that's tight.

Nate: It's a lot of people.

Isaac: So we get into the mountains, and we were told before we left that, "There is no friendly up here. Anybody that's up here in the mountains, unless we tell you otherwise, assume they're bad guys." So we come rolling off the aircraft and we'd actually been told the mission right before ours from the 101st Airborne [Division], I don't remember exactly what unit they were,

the Rakkasans [187th Infantry Regiment], I believe, is their unit. They were the unit that the instant they landed in the helicopters, they were under attack by mortars for like eighteen hours. So we were like, super prepared to just land and start immediately taking fire. So everybody's like rushing out of the aircraft to get into their secure positions … I come rolling out 'cause I can't feel my legs, SAW [M249 Squad Automatic Weapon] goes muzzle down into the dirt. I was like, "Dammit, that's not a good way to start this thing ..." So we're up there, we're starting to move, and at this point we were at somewhere around the neighborhood of eight-thousand feet. Three thousand meters or so, whatever that is. Come to find out later, when I was back in the States with my dad, we were higher than the Donner Party Pass in Nevada [7,056 ft]. I don't know what that altitude is, but that's what we were at. Within thirty minutes of us landing, we saw some guy come walking up and of course no one's really sure. "Do I shoot him, what's going on?" Because he's not really carrying anything, he doesn't look dangerous. People are using common sense, thankfully. Yeah, he was some civilian, well, U.S. government employee, up there. He goes, "Yep, I'm friendly, it's cool. Don't shoot me." Pulled out his credentials of some sort, and ... continued on his way.

Nate: Was he armed?

Isaac: I … don't remember. I honestly have no idea. It was like, "Okay, well that's an interesting start to all of this." So then we're hiking up the mountains and we had easily a hundred pounds worth of gear in our rucksacks. People were doing double combat loads. So as a SAW gunner, what I was carrying was eight hundred rounds just for my own personal weapon, plus I think I had two or three hundred rounds for the heavy machine gun in my rucksack … one or two grenades, the claymore antipersonnel mine, food for four or five days, because we didn't really know how long we were gonna be up there. That was another fun part of it. It was, "You're going to the mountains, and we'll pick you up at the end." "Oh, okay…great …" So anyways, we're hiking up there, and it was the craziest thing, because the infantry, we trained to be in a wedge formation. Anytime you move, you kind of move in a triangle, and everybody is spread out and doing their thing so nobody gets shot – well, so two people don't get shot at the same time. And then we get to Afghanistan, and we're on goat trails. Quite literally, the entire company of a hundred-plus people, strung out in a single file line, you know, five or ten feet

between us, but it’s literally a goat trail going up the side of this ridge till we hit the top. And once we were one the top of the ridgeline, it was five, six feet on either side and then it dropped off into a valley. “Boy, if I fall, I’m dead … hope I don’t drop anything.” So, yeah, our mission was to start on one end of the ridgeline, the … whaleback? It’s in the Shah-i-Kot valley, that’s all I know. Start at the northern end, and move to the southern end, clearing out all caves and personnel that we found. I think we were up there for three or four days, and we actually had to cut it short because some of our engineers got altitude sickness, and actually went into hypothermia. So they were like, “Well, you’re close enough to the end that we’ll just pull everybody out when we medevac [Medical Evacuation] the engineers out.” Whoever they were, I don’t remember exactly, I think they were engineers. So yeah, we did three or four days worth of missions up there, sleeping every night, pulling security. One morning I actually did drop my sleeping bag down one of the ridgelines. I took off running after it, and everybody’s like, “Yeah, you made the perfect dive and rolling catch to get it!” I actually tripped on a rock, I’ll admit that freely. But it was a great swan dive, into a roll, got the sleeping bag and was like, “Yeah!” Hiked my ass back up the fifty feet that I had run down, sucking the entire way.

Then one night we were up there, I think it was the night before the first firefight we got into but it was so … weird. We set up our patrol base, and started pulling thirty-three percent security, which meant that every third man in a group of people was up. It happened to be my turn, we’ve all got night vision goggles and cold weather gear, our weapons. And we’re sitting there and a firefight broke out in the valley below us. And it was so … surreal watching this thing, because you could watch the tracers from each side going back and forth, and you could tell the advancing unit, and everybody conflicting. Every so often they’d shoot a flare up into the air, and it’s like, if the people going one way turn left, and the people going the other way turn right, they could start shooting at us. Granted, we were up on a hill; it’s not going to be a terrible thing, but that could be a problem. But there were only a handful of us watching this thing go on. Everybody else is asleep. That’s just … the most bizarre thing I’ve ever seen. You could see what was going on, and it was like watching a movie. That’s the only way I can think of to describe it. So as the day progresses, we get rolling and it’s freezing at night to the point that if you leave something wet out on the rocks, it’ll freeze. I mean, I’m not saying it was zero degrees, but it was at the freezing temperature, because it’s March at eight thousand feet in a mountainous

area. So we were prepared for the cold but it was definitely chilly. Anyways, the next day we take off, and we're doing our trail excursion again, and our lieutenant told us that there was a cave down in this area. We needed a team of people to go down and try to clear it out. Well, it turns out it was just a depression in the mountain, so it wasn't anything big, it wasn't a cave, but it had made enough of a shadow that it looked like an entrance. So they're like, "Well, we're not exactly sure so we need people to go and kind of scale the rock face on that side, and look for stuff." Yeah, got picked for that one. That was a fun one. Had my weapon slung over my back, wearing body armor, trying to … I'm not saying it was a sheer vertical cliff, but it was enough that you were like, "Okay, handhold, handhold …" Nothing technical of course, but it was enough to go, "Oh man, I'm gonna die. If I fall, I can get shot in the back, I've got no idea what's going on." Nothing happened; it was an uneventful little moment of terror.

Then we got back up and the other platoon in front of us, I think they started taking fire. They found a cave and started to clear it, and we had to run in order to support them, to get behind them. But it was weird, because you know again, you're on a mountaintop trail that you're trying to run down, you've got all your gear – actually, at one point we dropped all of our stuff, so it was just us, body armor, Kevlar [helmet], weapon, but no rucksack – so we're running along, leaping from rock to rock, trying not to fall down the ridgeline. Pulled up behind the other unit that was doing its thing, and just sat there, ready to go. But there was nothing we could do, other than going way left of them, up over the top of the hill, and then going back down the other side. Again, another bizarre moment of, "There's shooting going on, there's firing, but what am I gonna do? Over the top [of the hill]? That's about it." So they did their thing, and … I don't remember all what happened, but we got our Combat Infantry Badge [CIB] at that point, and I think the next day was the day the engineers went down for altitude sickness, and we got medevaced because of that.

Another thing that happened that I think sent them into hypothermia was the medic gave them an IV [Intravenous fluids] too late at night, and so, you know a full one thousand milliliter bag of IV fluid in their system, and it was already cold and then the temperature dropped even more. I mean they were having people get naked in sleeping bags with them. The whole, "You need to get naked and generate as much heat as you can." It was awful because I remember laying there

– not in the bag – thankfully I'm not big enough to be picked for 'sleeping-with-a-naked-dude duty', but I remember laying there and hearing them moan, and whimper and cry, because they were hypothermic or altitude sick, or whatever it was. But just that awful, human, "Waaahhh …" [moaning sound] like all night long, and they just couldn't do anything to get them to stop. The next day, we got picked back up, and that was our first successful mission up in the mountains.

Had maybe a week between [that and] our next mission. And the next one was just a twenty-four hour mission. They dropped us off first thing in the morning, again the cramped Chinook flight in – thankfully I didn't go numb this time. [They] flew us in [there] in the morning and then picked us up the next day. On that one, my squad actually was responsible for blowing up a weapons cache, which was … simply amazing. We thought it was a bunker, so we were doing our bunker drill to get ready and blow it up. One of the first things you do when you clear a bunker is you peek in, you dart your head around, look back to make sure that there's no chicken wire or something in front of the entrance so that when you go in to throw the grenade, it doesn't bounce out and roll. So the squad leader did that quick cursory check, "Okay, nothing …" The next time, he threw the grenade in but he was able to see a little bit clearer because he had to get his arm around the corner. And that's when he saw all the rockets, and mortars, and bullets, and everything else that was inside this weapons cache. He threw it in, saw that, and then just yelled, "Duck!" It was the biggest explosion I've ever been a part of. I mean, there was a whole box of mortars … just went spiraling through the air. And, of course, mortars won't explode unless they've had enough revolutions to arm the trigger. So everybody's just watching this box spiral up through the air, knowing it's coming gonna come down, and, "Oh crap, I hope it's not armed yet." Bam, hits the ground … nothing happened, but I mean it was five, ten feet from one of my buddies. All sorts of other secondary explosions that are going off. One of the igniters on the rockets goes, so now you've got a flaming rocket pointed into a weapons cache. That thing goes off, sets off all the other rockets, and these are unguided missiles. It's like taking a straw and throwing it. That's as much guidance as these things have at this point. Just a cylindrical object, no fins, nothing. So we're continuing to do our operation for the rest of the day, clearing the valley and all that. And for like the next four hours, rockets would just come screaming past us and then make a bee line to the left, "Boom!" Hit the wall. "Well, good thing we weren't right

there." Five minutes later, "scheeeew!" Another one goes whipping by. "Well, thank goodness I wasn't right there." No injuries.

So we started out in the south side in one valley, we were moving north and then at one point we turned around and came back south again. Well, on the way back we ran into another little hut – a house, I don't know what you want to call it – that actually had smoke coming out of the chimney. So we knew somebody was there beforehand. But for whatever reason, we had these 'bunker-buster' shoulder-fired missiles that people were carrying. Everybody's like, "Come on, let's use it, let's use it!" For whatever reason, we weren't allowed to. I don't have any idea why, but we had to keep creeping closer and closer, and finally ended up clearing it like we would a room. Had a stack on the door, lead man kicks it in and realizes that it's not big enough to actually go into. So he just starts firing as he's falling down out of the way, so that the next people can do the same thing. Finally the last guy comes in and throws a grenade inside, and blows everything in there to hell. And we're like, "Well, that was … great. But what the hell was that all about?" I'll finish that one up in a second, but we make it back to Bagram, and at that point that was the last of our missions. We were only there for the very tail end of Operation Anaconda. The [Army] Ranger, Roberts or whatever … sorry, I can't remember his rank, but Roberts, the guy who was presumed dead that the Rangers had to leave behind. I don't know if you've ever read Not a Good Day to Die,[1] but there was that operation where a helicopter got shot at, and it was a big deal. Our platoon found the guy's Kevlar [helmet], because that was missing. It was presumed that all of his weapons got taken away and drug into caves and everything. I think we blew those up; I don't remember. Anyway, we found his Kevlar; that was probably the most connection to the other operations [Operation Anaconda] that we had. A couple days later, the other platoon went out on a mission and did their thing, but as far as our guys were concerned, that was it.

So when we got back to the states, we got a new platoon leader. And before he came to us, he was actually the intelligence officer at the unit above us. And we were like, "Yeah, you know we did this mission, and blew up this little hut, and we have no idea what actually happened, we

[1] Sean Naylor, Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda (New York: Berkley Books, 2005).

have no idea if it was even worthwhile." He looked at us and he was like, "Yeah, you guys blew up some good intel [intelligence]. The enemy had names, places, locations, ways of detonations, times and dates. Then you guys blew the crap out of all that. So yeah, you did … something." So that was nice to hear.

After we finished the missions and we're hanging out back in Bagram, we just did security around the base. Me and a couple other guys would climb up to the tops of roofs of buildings, and watch over the airfield. We had a night vision device that we could use, and we'd just keep guard. But the one building we kept having to go up was awful. It was a rebar ladder, like, vertical ladder on the side of the building, barely bolted into this old crappy concrete that's been there since the sixties, and it's like forty feet up. And then there's all sorts of rebar and crap and broken stuff on the ground. "If I fall backwards, I'm dead. Hopefully it kills me soon." Because I mean, I had my weapon, body armor, and so you're already kind of barely able to use your upper body. I had my weapon slung over my back so it was pulling me backwards, and the entire ladder was made out of rebar. So you had to really grip on, in order to get a grip, because there was nothing substantial. It was just a … rebar ladder. Then you'd have to climb over the top of the ledge of the building, so it's like, "Oh geez. I throw one leg over, the other one's gonna slip, and oh, I'm dead again."

Nate: So, did you ever have … I know a lot of people that have been overseas talk about having that moment in the first few weeks they're there, where they realize that they're really in a combat environment. Did you have a moment where you, was it when you were watching that firefight from above, or was there something else where it was kind of like, "Okay, I'm definitely in Afghanistan now."

Isaac: I don't think there was one definitive moment but there were a lot of little pieces that, you know, looking back I was like, "Okay … definitely there." The firefight; being loaded up for bear with all of the weapons and all of the explosives, that was another one. Before we went on the first mission, the U.S. hadn't done mountain warfare in, what, eighty years? Since World War Two, up in Italy. And they're like, "We've never actually cleared caves," so the platoon sergeant pulls us off to the side on the airfield, and it's just a corrugated metal [wall] that you'd

make the side of a greenhouse with, except metal, not plastic. And he was like, “We need to figure out a way to clear these caves that we might possibly find.” Because the Army had no real, “This is how you do it.” We haven’t done it ever. “So, let’s figure out what works.” That was probably another one. Landing in Bagram itself was a definite moment of clarity, because we had to fly in at night, and they did a ‘combat landing,’ which you might circle at three thousand feet, for just long enough for the tower to say, “Okay, you’re cleared to go.” And then in about a minute, if that, you’re on the ground and wheels are stopped. So they like black out the plane, turn on the red light inside, everybody turns off all light-generating devices, and they spiral and spiral and bam, you’re on the ground. It’s one of those, “Holy crap! What the hell was that?” So that was one. Sleeping in the old bombed out building was another one. Setting up our tents for us to sleep in …

One of the neatest experiences that I had while I was there, we were there for Easter Sunday, 2002. My friends knew that I was at least moderately religious; they knew that Easter was a big, important day for me. So one of my friends volunteered to take my shift on guard so that I could go and do the morning service for Easter. And it was really neat, because it was the sunrise service, so the sun’s coming up over the mountains, and [they’ve] got beautiful snow on them, and it’s reflecting over this giant metal airstrip with attack aircraft lined up on it. I mean, Apaches [attack helicopter], Black Hawks [utility helicopter], Chinooks [cargo helicopter], AC-130’s [heavily armed ground-attack airplane] with their beautiful howitzers sticking out the side, A-10 Warthogs [anti-tank airplane], all of this U.S. military might, sun’s coming up and it’s Easter morning. He let me go to that church service. So it was …

Nate: Sounds like a hell of a view.

Isaac: It was beautiful. Afghanistan, honestly, the mountains - once you get out of the cities themselves - beautiful.

Alex: So after Afghanistan, where’d you go? After that?

Isaac: We went back to the States. Got back in April 2002. And just did training. I mean, we went back into the regular, sleep in the barracks, general, basic soldier life. Go out and do training exercises out in the woods. Run around, do more MOUT [Military Operations in Urban Terrain] training, weapons training. It's hard for me to describe what an infantryman does back in the barracks, because it's not like we have vehicles to work on. It's not like we've got airplanes to supply and support. It's, get prepped, just walking through the woods, and learn how to kill people. It's pretty much that. You learn how to take out bunkers, you learn how to deal with trenches, and clear trenches, and mine wire obstacles. How all of the planning works, you learn how to do 'op orders' [operational orders], things of that nature. Then you'll go out into the woods for two weeks, and not have a shower, and crap in the woods. Then you come back, clean all your stuff, and have a week's worth of classes.

Nate: What was the transition like, coming back from that month in Afghanistan or so, what was it like coming back to the states and changing that mindset back?

Isaac: It was really … weird … because at this point in time, the military didn't really have a "decompression" for after a deployment. So we came back to the States, say we arrived in [Fort] Drum on Monday. By Friday, we had everything turned in, cleaned. Saturday we went on leave. And I spent two weeks in Nevada with my dad. And I … went on a walk with him one night, and it was just like, "Dad, I have … no real idea what's going on. Three weeks ago, I was staring at the same sky from Afghanistan. Now I'm here wandering around with you." But one of the nice things about active duty is you just roll right back into the swing of things. You just take what you've done over on a deployment, integrate it into what you're doing, and move on to the next thing. There's no real dealing with civilians; you're with the same group of guys that you deployed with. You all know, what stuff happened, what was good, what was bad. And no one really stops to decompress. There's no counselor that you all go to, you know [to tell you], "Hey, these are the warning signs of PTSD, these are what you look out for. Don't drink to excess." So the transition, just back into the States was more of a … cultural transition. I mean, we hadn't had fast food in six months. I remember the first time I had Burger King and it destroyed me. I couldn't eat fast food or even regular civilian food for the longest time. The month and a half I was in Afghanistan, my meals were a T-Ration in the morning, a T-Ration at night, and an MRE

[Meal, Ready to Eat] for lunch. There was nothing else. And a tee rat [T-ration] … [chuckles] … they'd cook the food, whatever it is, and then put it into a pan to be boiled at a later time, to serve. So we had "Texas style eggs" - it was scrambled eggs that had all been cooked and everything, and molded into this pan, and then given to a supply person to put back into boiling water, to heat it back up. Open the thing up, "Here's your square of eggs." So it was food like that, and then going back to civilian food. All the grease, all the extra things they put into it, it destroyed people's guts. It was awful.

Nate: So you said that they didn't have any counselors, or any sort of reception for you guys when you came home. In the military right now, PTSD is almost a buzzword, it's just how much focus there is on it. Was there any discussion of it?

Isaac: No.

Nate: Nobody even threw that term around?

Isaac: No. When we got back, we did our welcome home briefings, and you know, getting kind of back into the swing of things, they were like, "If you start drinking too much, go talk to somebody. If you can't sleep at night, eh … suck it up." I mean, I'm not saying that they just dismissed it, but it just wasn't talked about. It was like, "Hey, you did your job … so be it." And I had actually a number of people have issues after we came back. One guy attempted suicide, because he got drunk one night and broke a beer bottle and tried slashing himself. He went to the hospital, I don't think we ever saw him again. Another guy supposedly, I don't even know the whole story, went crazy. He was drinking too much, he might have done drugs, who knows what all of the extraneous factors were, but alcohol was definitely involved. Apparently, he dug himself a little fighting position in his front yard, and was throwing grenades and stuff as they came by, and yelling. And it was like, "Okay …" And it was one of those, "This guy's not coming back." No one ever actually talked about what he did and no one ever said, "If you have these issues, go to talk to somebody." Yeah, now it's a buzzword. It's like, "Hey, I almost got in a car wreck." "Oh no! Do you need a counselor? Do you need to talk to somebody? Are you gonna drink because of this?" Back then it was like, "Hey, you guys going to the bar this

weekend?" "Yeah." "Don't be stupid. Have a designated driver." "Alright, well … rolling right along."

Alex: Yeah, you said the culture around PTSD changed throughout your service. Could you go into a little more detail? Just how it differs now from how it was back in 2002.

Isaac: Yeah. I mean, maybe the change I'm seeing is because I went from active duty to National Guard, and I think we'll get to it. In 2004, I got out and joined the [National] Guard. But, yeah, in 2004 there was no discussion. People didn't talk about it. There was … I'm sure a stigma attached to it, and people didn't want to admit, because they didn't want someone to come down, and have it adversely affect their careers. Yeah, then I went on a deployment in 2006 with the Guard, came home in 2007. You came home, you did your medical, you know like, "Do you have any suicidal thoughts?" And all this other stuff, and then like thirty days later, "Okay, so … it's been a month. Do you have any symptoms? Are you drinking? How's your family life? What's going on with this? What's going on with that?" Three days worth of classes and workshops. And then thirty days after that, "Okay, it's been sixty days. Do you have any issues? Are you drinking too much?" All of those questions. Thirty days later, I mean it's now a … you will go and talk to somebody the second you even say, "You know, I wasn't feeling too hot for the past month." It's like, "Oh, crap. We need to get you into a counselor." And … it's a wonderful thing. It's good, because a lot of people don't realize that it's happening, and it needs to be addressed. But, I mean, 2000 to 2004, it was never talked about. Swept under the rug, whatever euphemism you want to use for it, but it was just never discussed.

Nate: I see. Alright, so moving on in your narrative … you came home and you were training for a while.

Isaac: Mhm.

Nate: And then in 2003, you deployed again.

Isaac: Yeah. 2003, deployed back to Afghanistan. And that was an interesting one, because we were told three different places. We were told we were gonna be deployed to three different places. This was right after the initial push into Iraq, when all this other train-up [stuff] started. And it was like, they told us, "Alright, you're gonna be the spearhead. Here's what the villages are like in Iraq, here's Baghdad, here's where we're [going to be] situated, here's these rivers [Tigris and Euphrates] and they intersect here, and here's the history, here's the political structure …" It was probably two weeks' worth of, "You're going to Iraq. You're going to Iraq. You're going to Iraq. You're going to Iraq." Then stopped, and we'll say on a Monday they were just like, "Alright, you're going to Djibouti [Africa]." "Why the hell are we…Djibouti? Where the hell is that?" So people like started figured out online, and it was a week's worth of prep to go, "You're going, you're going, you're going." Thursday night, "Oh, well no, actually you're going to Afghanistan." "Son of a bitch … where are we going?" "Well, you're going to Kabul." So the second trip to Afghanistan thankfully was someplace different. We went down to Kabul, which is the country's capital, most populated city. Hit the hardest, backed by the Taliban back in the seventies and eighties. And we did security on Camp Phoenix, which is maybe thirty minutes drive from Kabul itself. I believe it's east of the main road. We were told that we were going to be guarding Camp Phoenix for the Afghan National Army trainers. So we were security guards. We again had a rotating schedule, we'd do a week on tower security, and then a week on gate guard, and then a week on presence patrols through the village, slash rest and relaxation, slash QRF [Quick Reaction Force].

The towers at that point, when we first got there, weren't built up; they were essentially just little two-by-fours with a tarp over the top of it, and as we were there longer, they built them up, made them nicer. Had actually enclosed guard towers at one point. "Damn, this is nice …" But they told us, "You're not allowed to read, you're not allowed to listen to music, there are two people up here at a time. You must be out, watching. There's a radio in case anything happens." "Alright ..." And then it seemed like once a week, or at least once every cycle I was on, they'd come and, "Alright, we've got this massive intel tip. A truck full of two hundred kilograms of explosives is gonna be coming through the field, this time of night. Be ready for it." And then it never did. It was just a constant … and that got old really quick, because you're all amped up, and then nothing. All amped up, and then nothing. So we go from that to gate guard, which was

as it sounds. Searching vehicles as they come onto Camp Phoenix. And we had mirrors, and we learned how to search a vehicle, where the most likely spot an explosive would be, how to do personnel searches. Because we had to pull the people out of the vehicles, well, not pull, but had the people come out of their vehicles, did a body search on them … those are some dirty, dirty people. We're talking like, you start out at the beginning of a shift with white plastic or latex gloves. An hour and a half later, they're covered in black. I mean, and you're doing the whole, up the leg into the groin, down the other leg, arms out. So we did that, searched all the vehicles, eventually it got to the point where people would roll into post and it was a multinational post, there were Germans, and all these other French and everything else. Well, the Americans were honestly the worst, because they'd roll through in their vehicle and make jokes while you're sucking out there in the heat. I mean, it was late May, early June in Afghanistan. And now we're in a desert, "Hey, it looks like you guys are hot out there." "No man, I'm perfectly fine." Or they'd make jokes, you know, we've got the hood up and for the American vehicles when they'd come through, we'd just do a cursory, 'nothing is there' inspection. We wouldn't pull them out of the vehicles. But we'd have them pop the hood, and you'd hear them go, "Hey, can you check the oil while you're at it?" Or, "Hey, there's a muffler bearing loose in there, can you fix that one for me?" And it just got old. We'd start making jokes you know, you'd come up to the window after the search, "I've got good news and bad news. Which would you like first?" "What's the good news?" You'd look at your watch, "Well, the good news is I'm off shift in fifteen minutes, and I'm going back to my tent." "Oh, that's good. What's the bad news?" "The bomb is set to go off in twenty minutes; have a nice day." [chuckling] The Americans just took us for granted, it seemed. Just, "Hey, sucks to be you, lowest of the low, out searching vehicles. We're not going to do anything to make this any easier for you. We're gonna be complete jerks." Everybody else was like, "Hey man, how's it going? How's your day? I'm sorry you guys are out here … that must really suck." And the civilian Americans were good too. You know, the guys that would roll up in the bulletproof Suburbans [SUVs]. They knew what the deal was, because they had been there before. It seemed like all the other American soldiers were just complete pricks.

Then we'd go out on our patrols and wander through the villages that are surrounding Camp Phoenix. [We'd be] out there for two, three hours, a day, a night, you'd have an interpreter that you'd take along with you. Just kind of do a feel of the local population, see what they liked,

how we were doing. It was really neat. We'd go into the local factories. I went into a marble factory. They've got huge chunks of marble, I mean like six hundred pounds worth of marble. You were watching them carve all of these super intricate things. I got a chess board from there. It's easily an inch thick and like four different colors of marble, all hand done. It's got, 'Wiggins, Afghanistan 2003' and 'Kabul' engraved in it. I mean, I saw the guy that made it! Really nice, fifty bucks.

Nate: That's awesome.

Isaac: Went into one of the local bread factories, because you know we were trying to make people comfortable with us. So we're going and seeing how their life is, seeing what they're doing and if there's anything the US can do to help out. So we got to see a bread factory that was right next to us, we'd pick up tea from the locals. I think one time we bought a watermelon and went and sat and had lunch with one of the brick factory workers. Yeah, there were ups and downs to it. One time, we ran out of personnel because one of the platoons in the company went to - it wasn't Jalalabad, it was farther west past Camp Eggers - it was a prison, a complex that we manned while they got it all set up. And when they did that, it stretched us so thin that the people on tower guard were doing four hours on, four hours off, for an entire week. And when you've got twenty minutes or so to get ready, twenty minutes to stop being on guard, plus any showering or eating or technology you want to use, we were all run ragged. We were like, "Just let me sleep in my tower. I wouldn't care if I had a cot, let me sleep there because at least that way I get three hours worth of sleep." "No, no, you've got to come back to the tent." It was, that one sucked.

One night, my buddy was on gate guard, and during the night only American vehicles were allowed through. Even at that point, the vehicles were stopped, searched, IDs are checked, and then they're allowed on the post. So one night, my buddy is on shift, and he told the story that this guy rolls up on the gate, gets in, gates shut behind him. Go to search his vehicle, and the guy in the vehicle goes, "No. You're not searching my vehicle." "What? Yes I am." "No. You are not allowed to look in my vehicle." "Alright, well you're not coming on post." "Yeah, I am." "Nope. If you don't agree to be searched, you don't get on post." I don't know if the guy inside the vehicle told my buddy to call higher [command], or if my buddy decided to call higher. Anyway,

higher gets called and this guy comes down. We'd seen him before; he was "Chief Mike." That was all we knew; that was the only identification we had on this guy, was Chief Mike. Don't know if that was a rank [Chief Warrant Officer], just a nickname, but we had seen him before and he was one of those kind of squirrely guys, not really sure what he does because when he goes outside the gate he's by himself. He's got a nine-mil [nine millimeter pistol] vest on for body armor, he's got his boonie cap and a nine-mil strapped to either side, looked like a male version of Laura Croft [Tomb Raider reference] with body armor type of deal. Didn't really answer to anybody as far as we knew. So Chief Mike comes out and, "Okay, yes, I verify that this guy is safe, he's who he says he is, but you aren't allowed to look in the vehicle." "Well we've got to search the vehicle …" He goes, "Alright. Here's the deal. You can look under the vehicle with your little mirror, that's it. You are not allowed to look in the vehicle, whatsoever." So everybody agrees on this and higher blesses off. My buddy uses his mirror, just peering underneath. Doesn't look inside, he's not – at this point – going to bother with it. But the vehicle gets searched. Chief Mike goes, "Alright. Here's the deal. I have people that come in here. You're not going to know who they are. They're probably going to lie when they tell you their name. They'll have ID, and they'll be allowed to come on, but you aren't allowed to search their vehicle. And we'll do it the old fashioned way; if you see a [hypothetically] red truck come through with a diet coke can that's sitting three quarters of the way from the driver's side to the passenger side and it has a rose hanging from his window … that's my car. Call me when that car comes in, I will vet the vehicle, the driver, you will search it, and that will be it." "Okay." And it would happen from time to time and it was down to that detailed description of the vehicle.

Nate: Did you ever find out anything about it?

Isaac: Nope. There were rumors that would go around, but no one ever knew exactly what it was. Not a clue. And there were some secret squirrel people that would come in every so often. One guy, I remember when I was on gate guard with a buddy, he walked in, and he's American but he's middle-eastern skinned, speaks perfect English. He's wearing desert camouflage pants, a civilian shirt, one of those wraps that the locals would have around them, and the head scarf … and a nine-mil. "Who's this guy?" Well he comes up, he goes, "Hey, I'm so-and-so ..." And he

starts to pull out his ID, and I notice a military ID, an AAFES [Army and Air Force Exchange Service] worker ID, and like two other forms of ID. "Yeah, that one looks legit … uhh … you're free to come on…" So he comes on, and goes, "Oh, I should probably give you my weapon." "Yeah…yeah sure, sounds good." So at this point I'm like, "Who the hell is this guy? Alright, we'll figure this out." Grabbed his nine [pistol] … we couldn't find a serial number on it. [chuckles]. Pop open the magazine, "Yep, those are definitely US nine-mil Beretta rounds but that's all we know." Put the magazine back in, wiped off all the prints, set the gun down and just stared at it. That's it, "Not touching it again." Guy comes back, picks it up and leaves. "Alright then."

Alex: And you guys were never given any …

Isaac: Oh no. No. Not at all. "Hey, I'm allowed on post." "Well, you don't have ID." "Call your commander, and tell him so-and-so his here." "Alright, so-and-so, you are allowed to come in the gate." So there were things like that which would happen. It was definitely an interesting scenario. Nothing ever really happened on the patrols.

Alex: How did the civilian population respond to your guys' presence on patrols?

Isaac: Generally friendly. No one ever went out of their way to come over and shake our hand; nobody came over to us and tripped us. As far as I can remember, they were just kind of like, "Freaking Americans," and let us kind of do our thing. Of course there were naturally some that hated us, some that loved us. Like a week or so after we got there, we were on gate guard and a bus full of Germans that were going to be going home after their deployment came rolling past us, "Boom!" Bus blew up. Apparently it was a suicide bomber in a vehicle, came up next to them and detonated himself, like thirty Germans, no more. Yeah, it was definitely a little nerve-wracking walking around. Again, we're on the main road, where it's the most heavily mined road in Afghanistan, and patrolling along it. Vehicles come whipping by - you know, we had been told that out on the local black market you could buy pen guns, which were exactly what they sounded like, a little silver pen and when you click the button, a bullet fires. It was like, "Alright … cool. So anybody could be armed at any moment?" "Yeah …" "Alright, rolling out

the gate." It was interesting because we would go out the gate, we'd lock and load. You know, magazine in, round in the chamber, weapon on safe. Strolling along, and thought nothing of it. Everything's good to go. Future deployments, they wouldn't even let us put a magazine in the weapon. We weren't actually patrolling out through the villages or anything but still. "Nope, you don't need to have the magazine in there." And you'd get in trouble, I mean like they did not want this at all, and you'd have to do weapons checks at all entrances to facilities to make sure there wasn't a round the chamber. It was like, "When the hell did all of this change?"

Alex: Did they give you a reason for it?

Isaac: No, so that was the deployment to Afghanistan. I turned twenty-one on that one.

Nate: And what rank were you during that?

Isaac: That one, I think I had been promoted to E-4 at that point. I was a specialist. Not quite at the bottom of the totem pole, but still enough to get crapped on.

Nate: Okay, so you got home from that – how long was that deployment?

Isaac: Almost six months exactly. I mean, it might have been more, I remember we left in late May, because I was there on June 13, and we got back for Thanksgiving.

Nate: Okay, so somewhere in the neighborhood of six months.

Isaac: Yeah.

Nate: And how long was there between that and when you got out of the Army?

Isaac: Six months? Right there about. And on that one, I wasn't even sure if I was getting out of the Army. So I went through the whole process [of getting out], and it was like a week's worth of turning in gear, submitting all this paperwork, clearing the unit, "No you don't have any more

gear," and all this other stuff. Get all of your records together. Well, again we'll say it was on a Monday that I started the process … Wednesday afternoon, my platoon sergeant comes up to me, he was like, "Hey, I need to talk to you." "Okay, what's wrong?" "Well, we're in your room, do you wanna kick your roommate out … have him leave?" "No, I'm just going to tell him everything we talked about as soon as you leave; no he can stay." "Alright, I don't know if you're going to be able to get out of the Army." "What?" He goes, "Yeah. There's a stop-loss coming down and we don't know when it will take effect. We don't know if you'll get out of the Army." "Alright … I've already turned in all of my gear. Do I need to go and draw it back out?" "No, no. Keep clearing like you think you're going to be getting out, but be ready to come back in." So I was like, "Okay, do you want me to stay in?" "No, no. Keep clearing, it's cool. I'm not going to look down on you if you get out." "Alright, well look. If I get stop-lossed, cool. I'll draw my stuff, you tell me to come back, I've got my stuff, I'll come back in a heartbeat. If you need me, I will be here." He goes, "Okay, good." I looked at him and was like, "Did you really think that I was going to say screw you, and leave if you needed me?" He goes, "Some people do." "No, I'll stay if you need me."

So I went through the entire week thinking that I was going to be called back at any moment. And it was down to such a wire that Friday afternoon when I turned in my paperwork at the unit to finally get out, they took my paperwork and went into a different room and talked for about a minute and a half. I don't think I took a single breath during that entire time, because I knew that we'd be going to Iraq or back to Afghanistan or something. I would've gone, I wouldn't have had any problems, but I just wanted to know. So they come back out, stamp my paperwork, and say, "Alright. You're done." "Like, I'm not stop-lossed, I can get out of the Army? I'm out of the Army?" "Yep." Took off like a shot out of that office. Waiving my discharge paperwork in everybody's face, and they're all pissed at me and everything, but they can't do anything about it now because I'm out of the Army.

So that night I went over to my buddy's house, probably drank myself into oblivion celebrating. Well, I came back the next day to say my official goodbye and hang out with people before I left, and I honestly expected to be rolled up and taped to a post, or thrown in the mud and drug around in the water. You know, something like all the frat people would do, I guess. I don't

know. But that whole going away ceremony, “Hey, thanks for being here, peace out, and good luck.” There was nothing. Because they had been stop-lossed and they had orders to go to Iraq. That next morning, they were told they were going to Iraq, and I was one of like two people that summer, out of a dozen that were supposed to get out.

Nate: Why is it that you decided to leave active duty?

Isaac: I was really disillusioned with my unit. I had heard E6’s [Staff Sergeants] and E7’s [Sergeants First Class] that had been in for fifteen, sixteen years, telling the commander, “You’ve ruined my career. I’m getting out.” And when somebody that’s three or four years away from a full federal retirement says, “Screw this,” it was really hard to stay motivated enough to stay with the unit. I had been passed over for promotion a number of times, so I was probably a little bitter about that. It was always like, again on a Monday, “Hey, you’re in charge of these people. If we don’t have anybody by Friday, we’ll promote you and make it official.” Wednesday afternoon, Thursday morning, someone new would come in and take my spot. Not promoting from within, unit morale was in the crapper, I mean the company had been called to a conference room to try to figure out why morale was so low. And the commander was like, “You guys that have been in for two, three years, what’s going on? What’s different? Why does nobody want to be here?” “Sir, I have no idea. Just, for whatever reason, it sucks right now.” So there was a lot of that going on. I figured I’d go home, join the National Guard, have fun … yeah.

Nate: Okay, so you got out in 2004, and you basically went right into the Alaska Guard?

Isaac: Yes.

Nate: And that wasn’t as infantry, right?

Isaac: No. I went in as a fifteen-papa (15P), which is flight operations specialist, and boy did I get the demands I asked for. Monday through Friday, nine to five, and I didn’t break a sweat unless the A/C went out. That was what I told the National Guard recruiter … boy did I get it.

Nate: When you're talking about Monday through Friday, is that for your job school, or?

Isaac: Just anything. Instead of working seven days a week and being on call at any time, and having to work on weekends and missing out, and like fifteen days out in the field. I was like, "No thanks." Just Monday through Friday; I want to be a person for a little bit.

Alex: So did you choose to go into the Guard because they satisfied your demands?

Isaac: Yeah. That, and I had another four years of service that I had to be wary of. Everybody when they enlist goes in for eight years at least. And then depending on if you're active duty for four of those, you have four reserve years remaining. And during those four years, for my situation, I could be called up at any moment and be told, "Hey. We need bodies. You've had the training recently. You're getting into a unit and you're getting deployed." So I figured the Guard was a safe way of riding out those other four years, because at least then I would know who I was working with. I would have some idea, good or bad I didn't care, but I would know that these are the people I will be deploying with. Not just some random, "Hey, I'm from Alaska," now you're going to the Nevada or some eastern state National Guard unit, and shipping off to do something else.

Nate: So you got into the Guard in 2004, and it looks like the next year is when you went to Haiti?

Isaac: Yes. Went to Haiti in early 2005, March, April, sometime in there. Spent three weeks there and it was wonderful. Coming out of the deployments I had been on, "We have a day off? I only work Monday through Friday, and I'm only there nine-to-five because that's when the flights stop? Okay!" We were right on the Port Au Prince airport. I mean, you landed in Haiti, drove down the runway, "Hey! You're at your barracks!" Slept in a tent on a cot, three weeks. I was one of the only people allowed in the air-conditioned room, so when everybody else was out sucking in the sun, I was getting really cold in the air conditioning. Because I had to deal with radios, and computers, and flight schedules, and things of that nature. I would have stayed the

entire time, but they wouldn't let me for some reason. Don't know why, I think they just wanted to rotate us so everybody would have a chance. I kept volunteering but they were like, "Nope, you're going home."

Nate: What was everybody else doing there?

Isaac: I was with an aviation unit, so the aviators were flying supplies to the different villages. There was one or two that we supplied most often. It was just to help them build schools and wells and homes, things of that nature. It was more like a relief mission. They needed stuff; we helped. It was a lot of fun. I went to the ambassador's house and got to swim in his pool there.

Alex: So safe to say, a bit different than your Afghanistan deployments?

Isaac: [chuckling] A little different, yeah.

Nate: So what were you doing when you got back stateside, and even before that, what were you doing when you weren't doing drill weekends and all that?

Isaac: Nothing, really. I worked as a gofer for a construction company that my friend owned, or his parents owned. So I'd drive a truck all day. Not a big truck, just a Ford F350, delivering supplies to various jobsites. And it was right around that time that the VA [Veterans Affairs] finally caught up on my disability claim. So I got like six or seven months of back pay from the VA. So I'm living on like four thousand dollars in my checking account, just hanging out. I didn't have a job that I really cared about. Then I worked at Walmart for a while. Yeah, that wasn't the best job I ever had. I was an unloader and I was like, "Okay. I need a job that will somehow ease me back into being a civilian. Not really people-oriented, but still have to deal with them on occasion." Yeah, being an unloader, I worked from four in the afternoon till one in the morning, in the back where I didn't deal with anybody except the other unloaders. And trucks would come in with all of the Walmart gear, and we'd send it down the line, and put it on the pallets to take out into the store. I think I worked there for three weeks, and then said, "Nope. Gonna do something else." And then my disability check hit, so I didn't have a job but I paid my

rent and utilities perfectly fine. Then finally decided I needed to do something, and one of the nice things about the Guard is that they offer a full-time job, Monday through Friday. So I went in and I started really learning my job, because on drill weekends you'd deal with things that came up, but you didn't really learn how to be a flight operations specialist, at least not the detail. You didn't really do flight records, you didn't do flight scheduling, because as a part-timer, you could mess up somebody's flight record really easily, and lose a lot of data and flight hours. So the full-time staff was the ones that took care of that. The part-timers didn't do it. They might write the flight schedule on the board that had already been decided, but they were just monkeys writing on a white board. I was a monkey a number of times, until they discovered my handwriting was atrocious. And you'd watch the radio and listen for flights, so I wanted to really learn how to do my job full-time, and that was what I did Monday through Friday when I wasn't working. I quit once I got into a wreck, the boss and I mutually decided that I shouldn't work for him anymore. He told me to come back if I ever needed to but I never did. So I just learned how to do the job, and then finally after I became fully qualified as a fifteen papa in June or July of 2005, I got a full-time job and just worked at the facility there. It was a lot of fun.

Nate: And then in 2006, you were promoted to Sergeant [E-5]. Do you have anything you want to say about that, about that transition?

Isaac: Not so much … the promotion, I felt, was overdue. I had been an E-4 for three years at that point, and felt like I should be promoted. I felt like I was good enough that I could do it. I wasn't being arrogant, but I was tired of being an E-4. Got promoted, the Sergeant Major [E-9] of the unit promoted me, did pushups while having water dumped on my back, you know, the whole, "Welcome to the NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer] Corps," kind of thing. And that was right before we went to Afghanistan, again. Volunteered for that one. After Haiti, this was the first deployment I volunteered for, because I really, really wanted to go again.

Alex: Why'd you want to go so bad?

Isaac: I was tired of being in the States; working as a construction gofer really didn't do it for me.

Alex: So you just found it difficult to transition to civilian life?

Isaac: I just didn't feel like I belonged, so I guess, yes. I knew I liked being deployed, and honestly I felt a little bit guilty because my friends were in Iraq and I didn't go with them. So it was like, I've got to do this to make up for that. I'm choosing to do this, because I chose to get out of active duty to miss that deployment. It was a really hard one for them. They lost a couple of people, landmines and stuff like that.

So I went to Afghanistan, this time it was down in the south, in Kandahar. Spent a year there. My office was a multinational office: it had Americans, British, Canadians, and Australians, all working in the same room. But then there were Dutch, German, French, I worked in a multinational compound which was really, really cool as a brand new American sergeant in this compound. I was actually pulled from two different units by my boss to get me with him. He liked how I had worked with him in Haiti and he pulled me specifically to work for him. So I'd come in the morning, and flash my multinational pass and walk into a building full of all these other different nations' armies. I think there were six Americans in this little compound, and our office was responsible for scheduling all of the rotary wing [helicopter] flights in southern Afghanistan. So all of the regular resupplies that happened at different outlying bases in southern Afghanistan. I don't even know exactly how big it is, but it was four different provinces, and there were like thirty bases scattered about. So our office was responsible for trying to make sure that all of the bases got resupplied, mail got dropped off. And we had American Black Hawks, American Apaches, and American Chinooks. Then we had British Pumas and Cougars, general aviation lift helicopters, and Dutch Apaches, and two Australian Chinooks. I mean we had all of the different details, how much they could lift, what time of day it was, what part of the year it was in, and when they could fly because of the night. It was … so much fun! So cool, because instead of being at the bottom-level, the microscopic, I was a little bit more removed and could see what was actually going on.

There was one mission, Operation Medusa, to help start clearing out Kandahar [province], because at the time Kandahar was having an influx of insurgents that were coming in, so the

Americans and the Brits [British] and the Canadians and everybody else had to go back and push them back out. We got to plan the helicopters for like the four days prior to that, knew exactly which units would be dropped off, when the Apaches were going to be coming through, and all that detail was so cool to watch. It was so hard to keep track of what day it was because we were doing twelve-hour shifts, six days a week, and the seventh day was a half-day, and my free day. We would plan three days out, so if it was Monday, we'd plan out through Wednesday. Then at the same time, I was building briefing slides for the next days' missions, plus doing a two and three day roll-up of the mission that had happened previously. So at least for me, if you asked me what day it was, I had to actually stop and think about it because I was switching back and forth between them all the time; I had no idea. Working twelve hours a day in one room, it all just kind of blended together.

Went to the bazaar on KAF [Kandahar Air Field] a couple of times. Yeah, you go once and you've pretty much seen it all. They've got the same crap every time. People selling suits that are handmade, which I got, jackets, bootlegged DVDs, Rolexes that are spelled with 'K's", all this crazy stuff. There was so much money that goes into it, but there's nothing else to spend money on. And I mean, hell, a custom-made three-piece suit for a hundred bucks? "Okay." I got like two of them, I'm not gonna lie. I'm a stud in those [chuckling]. We didn't have much interaction with the Afghanis on that mission; I was just too far removed from it. I wasn't on a gate; I had it pretty easy in comparison to a lot of other people. After the two deployments I'd done to Afghanistan previously, it was funny watching people complain about what was going on at this time. It made me laugh. I mean, people would complain about the food in the chow hall. It's like, "Dude, you're in Afghanistan. You're getting steak and lobster every Friday night. Yeah, it sucks because they boil the steak to cook it, but it's still surf 'n turf, man. You could be eating MRE's and T-rats."

I really liked that deployment because I knew what the effect we were having on people was. I could look at a map and after a couple months it was like, "Okay, they're going here, that's going to be a thirty-minute flight. Then they go from here to there, that'll be another forty-five minutes," and you could start planning based on the different aviation regulations, a pilot's flight day. We would hand the missions down to the unit to let them plan but we told them, "You're

going to be flying all this. Figure out how." And we knew that they could do it, but there were some places that they would fly that they would have to have an Apache escort, or some places you could just walk to. We started doing parachute drops out of the back of a C-130 [large propeller aircraft] closer towards the end, like six or seven months into it, because there were some areas we just couldn't supply all the time. We didn't have enough aircraft, or it was too high or whatnot, so we worked with the Canadians to figure out a way to do parachute drops. They'd load up palettes with GPS-guided parachutes to adjust for drift and wind and all that. Fly over, "Boom, boom, boom, boom."Four or five palettes worth of gear goes floating down to the ground, and it's like, "Hey. I helped out with that." It was kind of cool.

Alex: So you found it a rewarding experience then?

Isaac: Oh, it was very [rewarding]. Days were long, it was stressful, but I had a Dutch two-star general in my office at least two or three times a week. They got that involved and you knew exactly what was happening. It was very rewarding.

Alex: Did you notice any difference between how other nations' militaries operated in comparison to the American military?

Isaac: Actually, yeah, specifically the British. In the U.S. military, we put a lot of trust and confidence into the NCOs. They're going to do it; they'll pass it along to the officers when it's been done. In the British Army, at least from what I saw, the lower enlisted were not tasked with anything to be responsible for. And you could hear it when I'd answer the phone, "Operations, Sergeant Wiggins speaking, how can I help you?" "Oh, well, is this officer there?" "No, he's not, can I take a message?" "No, I'll call back later." "Okay, I've been in the Army for six years; I can take a message …" "Nah, that's alright. We'll call back. Let him know I called." "Okay." And just their attitude, at least from what I saw, you could tell that the British lower enlisted were not given much … it was all heavily tasked to all of the officers to get things done. They were really the only ones I noticed a difference with.

Nate: Did the living conditions between that deployment in 2007 and the earlier ones that you did during active duty, were they noticeably different?

Isaac: Yes, very much. The living conditions in the early years, 2001, that first deployment it was literally a GP-Medium. It's a big canvas tent, that's it. Wooden frame structure, and they'd roll the sides up and that's your ventilation. The second deployment in 2003, there were still GP-Mediums, but they were like plastic, and they had really nice frames, we had bunk beds instead of cots. I think that's where my back got jacked up. And it was only ten to twelve people per tent, instead of thirty to one. And then in 2007, we were in hard buildings. I think I had three people in my room. TV, bought an Xbox, Playstation. Electricity, showers, hot running water any time I wanted, local nationals would clean out the showers, there really wasn't even any maintenance, we didn't have to clean anything, just keep the hallways swept and mopped. The local nationals would come and clean out the shower. It was wonderful.

Alex: So in 2007, you came home from that tour, and started college at the University of Alaska Anchorage. What led you to start pursuing your education at that point?

Isaac: I was around all officers on the deployment, so they were heavily pushing education. They were like, "Just get a degree. Do it, get it done. You'll need it. Doesn't matter what it's in; just get the dang thing done." So I applied to the University of Alaska, got accepted, and I had kind of thought about going officer, but I wasn't too sure. But I was like, "Hey, I'll get it done. I've got the GI bill. I'm not paying for it." So it was kind of, "I need to get it done. If I get much older, it's just going to be incredibly awkward in classes." I just kind of felt a need to.

Alex: Did your military experience influence your behavior as a student in any way?

Isaac: Oh yes. [I would] walk around, still liked having my hair short, so I'd usually have at least a buzz cut. I didn't talk to a lot of other students, and I found that the ones that were older, and there's only a couple of reasons an older student is at school. Military, [or] just needs more education, or they had family first. I felt I could talk to them a hell of a lot better than the people right out of high school. So ordinarily, unless someone else interacted with me, I generally didn't

talk to them. I made a couple of friends that were underage, under twenty-one, but at that time I was twenty-six-ish, somewhere in that neighborhood, so it wasn't too terribly bad. But they would have to talk to me first. I wouldn't just go up and start conversations with people. I had a lot of derision towards the students that didn't give a crap. I mean, I had one friend that I talked to, she was in my psychology class. She turned in one essay at the beginning of the class, then got a sixty on it, did another test, and didn't turn in her next essay. I'm like, "I've gotta ask, I don't mean to be a jerk, but why are you here? What are you doing? What's the point?" "Well, my parents said that if I didn't go to college right out of high school, I never would … so I'm here." And I'm like, "Do they know you're failing, because they're paying for it, right?" "Yeah…" "You're wasting someone else's money. Why? Why are you here?" And so I just honestly felt superior to a lot of the younger students. Probably not a great thing, but just didn't like them. I felt no connection to them. Which is getting better, thankfully.

Nate: So you were in school for, it looks like, just about a year and a half or so, before your next deployment?

Isaac: Yeah. Next one was Kosovo, and that was the next one I volunteered for. And on that deployment, it was yet another mission completely different from what I had done in the past. We were providing presence patrols and supplies and generally keeping the peace between the Serbians and the Albanians in Kosovo. Since I was flight operations, it kind of never really changes. We go in, we fly helicopters, my office and my job is responsible for tracking the helicopters, records, and all of that stuff. But at that point, I had been promoted, I was now the battle NCO, so I had two or three people working for me doing various records and flight tracking and upkeep. I was just kind of monitoring everybody and responsible for them and what they were doing. It was another blast; there was nothing to complain about on that one except that it wasn't long enough! I loved being in Kosovo. I'd go back there again in a heartbeat. We had shifts, we were living in four-man rooms. I probably had ten square feet to myself. We all had TVs, Xboxes, that's when 'Rock Band' [video game] really started getting big. People were playing Rock Band and stuff in their rooms, you'd go up, you'd do your shift, you'd come home, done. There was a day off every four days. Taco Bell delivered! They had a Taco Bell on post and they would deliver to your room. It was awesome! People had internet, this was the second

deployment where I had internet. I could chat with my friends, do MySpace [social networking website] and update people back home, send out emails … wonderful. And I chose to go to Malta on R&R [leave]. Spent ten days on a Mediterranean island and all I paid for was the room and what I did - ticket was paid for. Wonderful. Learned to scuba dive, drank myself to death. It was wonderful.

Nate: And you were there for how long?

Isaac: Nine months or so? We arrived the February that President Obama got elected the first time, and we were home for Pearl Harbor Day [December 7th]. I was in Hawaii on Pearl Harbor Day. So yeah, right around nine months, plus two months of train up. We went to Germany for a while, trained up there. It was great.

Alex: So in 2011, you went to Afghanistan on your fifth deployment. What were you doing in Afghanistan this time?

Isaac: In 2011, I was part of Task Force ODIN, which stands for Observe, Detect, Interdict and Neutralize, I believe. How I even got on that deployment is kind of an amusing story. The highest ranking fixed-wing pilot in Alaska for the National Guard found me at the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars Department], and he knew I was there and he knew that I loved being deployed. He comes up to me and he goes, "Alright. I've got this deployment that I know is coming up and I am searching for people. Do you want to go with me?" "Well, what is it? I mean, probably yes, but what is it?" "You'll be pulling surveillance from the back of a plane, and talking to people on the ground. That's really all I know." "Hell yes, sign me up for that one!" "Alright, I'll come back and ask you again tomorrow when you're sober."

So he came back the next day, "Remember what we talked about last night?" "Yes, sir." "Do you still wanna go?" "Yeah! Absolutely." I had four other people ask me if I really wanted to go on that one, because they couldn't believe I was volunteering for another one [deployment]. At least one sergeant major of the unit I was in pulled me into his office and was like, "You volunteered to go on this one?" "Yes, Sergeant Major." "Well, okay. Are you going to come back to this

unit?" "I plan to." "Okay, but what if we get deployed right after you get back?" "So I'll deploy again." "What do you mean?" "I'm in the Army, it's what I do. I get deployed. This one just sounds really cool! I'm volunteering for this one." The next day, I got a call from an O-4, a major, "Are you really going on another deployment?" I mean, it happened like three times, people were just incredulous that I wanted to go again. At this point, they should have known better.

So this deployment was … amazing. We did five weeks of training at Fort Hood, Texas to learn how to use all of the equipment in the back of this airplane. It was in a small, C-12 King Air 300, and it was wide enough that if I was sitting in my seat [and] I had my shoulder pressed against the right side of the airplane, I could reach out with my left hand and touch a rack of radios that were pressed against the [left] wall. If it was a commuter plane, there'd be a row of seats on each side and that's it. And there were four or five seats, maybe six going down the length of the plane, and then two pilots. Just a little twin-engine prop [propeller] plane. We worked a video camera that was mounted on the bottom of the plane, and various other intel-gathering equipment, and talked to units on the ground.

Alex: What were you telling them?

Isaac: Whatever they wanted to know. We had missions where we were overwatching units that were going to mount an attack on a village, so we would fly over where they were at, check in with them and let them know we were there, and they'd go, "Okay, I want you to keep track of any movement in these four buildings." And they'd tell us where they were. And we're like, "Cool, roger that." And we'd just monitor those buildings. Or we would track them as they were doing the patrol up to the village, and keep doing sweeps to make sure that there was nothing going on. Sometimes we had really, really boring missions where we were watching riverbeds. There were a number that I would just sit there for … hours …. no movement. No movement. You know, the pilots are up there talking and having - they'd essentially just get to where they were supposed to be, set it on autopilot and just kick back and relax, read <u>Stars and Stripes</u> [military periodical], drink some coffee, listen to music. I remember one flight, we went up there and it was completely clouded over where we were at, but we weren't allowed to come home. So

I played on my PSP [Playstation Personal] for four hours. "Yep, still cloudy out there. Is there anything we could be doing elsewhere?" "No, just stay in that area." "Okay…cool." It was really great because it was the day after I got my PSP for Christmas. So I actually got to break it in pretty well. Anyway, there were other missions right before I left country to come home. There was a mission where we got called out and it was some British unit that was under attack, and I was tasked with finding the bad guys, tracked them to wherever they were at, and then watched two gunships with rockets and mini-guns, as they came rolling in. I was trying to keep track of the bad guys on the video camera, and talk to the pilots in the plane, and tell them where to fire at. There were flights where you didn't do anything, and then other flights were it was just "balls to the wall."

There was this one mission, there was this hotel in Kabul called the Kabul Star Hotel, cheesy as it is, that's what it was called. Initially, we were tasked to just go to Kabul and kind of pull security. There was nothing really going on, but then all of a sudden we got the call, "Hey, there's bad guys on top of this hotel." "Okay." Went and found the hotel, I think I looked at two or three different hotels. And one of the neat features on the plane was an IR [Infrared] spotlight. So I could hit a button, and shine, we called it the 'Finger of God,' because only people with night vision could see it. So we'd shine it down onto this building, and I'd be like, "I don't see anybody." And I could just imagine somebody [on the ground] popping up with night vision and going, "Nope. Move eight hundred meters that way." And then I'd shift the camera, "Nope, don't see anything. Where are you?" Shine my spotlight down, "No, no, shift …" Finally we found the hotel. Word had come down that there were some sort of bad guys, and you know we never used 'Taliban', we never used 'Al-Qaeda,' it was just, 'the bad guy.' You never know who it is; there are so many different factions. So the bad guys are in this hotel, they've taken it over, and they are now firing down into the local area. "Alright, well we need to stop that crap." So I was put in contact with the British unit on the ground, Special Forces guy. I was like, "Alright I'm here. What do you want me to do?" He goes, "We are setting up to assault this building. I need you to tell me any sort of movement," and he briefed me on his plan, and I could see six guys come up to one side of the building and start laying down support-by-fire, suppressive fire, with machineguns and rockets and stuff, just firing into the building. The other guys come around from the other side and start going into their assault positions. Watched everybody run into the

hotel, and they just cleared from the ground up. I have no idea how many people they killed, but nobody did much after that.

What was really neat about that one was that it was one of the few missions I'd flown where I got to talk to four or five different people. I had three radios set up in my plane, and each one had nineteen different frequencies I could program into it. So on one radio, I was talking to the British guy on the ground. Then we got word that we were getting helicopters to come in and provide air support, so on another radio I was talking to the two Black Hawks that were flying and firing into the hotel, at the same time. And on another radio, I was talking to a UAV [Unmanned Aerial Vehicle; drone] that was circling, looking for more stuff. And I'm passing information to everybody, and everybody is talking on the radio. It was really cool. Again, it was one of the first ones I got to do where I was coordinating with all of these different elements. I mean, I was talking to the pilots of the Black Hawks, "Okay you're going to want to come in from the west, the guys on the ground want you to aim at the fourth-floor windows, and just light it up." "Alright, roger that." Talked to the JTAC [Joint Terminal Attack Controller] on the ground, "Okay. These guys are coming in; they said they're about five minutes out." And then we actually got relieved by an Air Force plane when we finally ran out of fuel and had to turn around to go home. And on the computers we had in our office, we could watch the video feeds from the different planes. So I got to watch the entire assault on the hotel go down. One of the downsides to our planes was that IR spotlight I was talking about: we couldn't see it in our own camera. All we could pick up was heat-sensitive. So if it was a regular IR flash from NODs [Night Observation Device; night vision], or the spotlight we were using, we couldn't see it. We just had to hope it was working. Well, when I got back to the office, I heard that they were still doing their thing, ran in and jumped on the computer. We pulled up the other aircraft's feed, and you could see that spotlight coming down. It was just like the Finger of God, because anytime that thing lit up, you knew everybody was just like, "Okay, where are the bad guys?" And then, "Pop pop pop," and it would turn off. Point at something else, it was like, "Oh, somebody is having a bad day down there. If there are any civilians trying to sleep in that hotel right now, they are getting their money back." And it's cool, because it turns out that Nate was on the ground, this interviewer here [motions to Nate] was on the ground for that same mission. So it's really neat to talk to somebody that has some idea of what I'm talking about.

Nate: Yeah, it's definitely cool to hear about what it was like from the air, because like you said, I was just on the ground and didn't have nearly the perspective that you had. I did have night vision but I don't remember seeing the Finger of God, as you called it. Sort of wish I had, but it's very interesting to see how all of that was coordinated from the air.

Isaac: Yeah, that one, other than the Kandahar [deployment], was the most rewarding deployment I've ever been on.

Alex: Why is that?

Isaac: I got to interact with so many different people, and do so much for so many different units. I mean, I supported Brits [British], Dutch, Germans, French, Americans, Aussies [Australians], Special Forces units, non-Special Forces units. People that just happened to be out there, they called them Other Governmental Agencies [OGAs]. I helped them out, and I could see it. After being in the infantry, and being on the ground, I had a unique perspective of what to tell the other people that were on the ground. I won't know if any of it ever came through but I'd like to think that experience made me a better operator. It was just, other than the missions where we didn't do anything, you knew that you were talking to somebody that cared about the intel you were giving them. You'd see the fifteen people walk up on a village, and you could tell them, "Okay, there's movement at these streets. Be careful, because we see somebody that might be setting up a firing position. Watch out." "Oh, hey, thanks. We won't take that street." Nothing ever like that but it was what it seemed like. And just the coolness of the mission was another big part of it. For the Alaska Guard, there were a dozen of us that left, and I think it was like half pilots, half enlisted guys in the back working the camera and stuff. So I'm in flight gear, I'm getting flight pay, I've got a flight record somewhere, it was just the uniqueness of it all. Task Force ODIN was formed back in 2006 by General [Richard] Cody in Iraq, to do counter-IED [Improved Explosive Device] work. So the Iraq mission had been going on for quite some time, since 2006 or 2007. We were the fifth rotation in Afghanistan. It was that new of a unit there – at least for the Army – that we'd only had four units that came before us. The first one I don't think ever left the states, because of equipment issues or something, so they didn't do anything. And

then it seemed like there were issues with at least the second and third unit, and then the fourth and then us. I've got friends that were on that deployment that ended up getting full-time civilian jobs doing that mission. It was something else, for sure.

Alex: Do you wish you had a Task Force ODIN helping you out when you were infantry on your first few deployments to Afghanistan?

Isaac: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. We were flying in a prop plane high enough to be above the mountains, and still able to see down on the ground, that would have been so useful. One of the great advantages to Task Force ODIN, as opposed to just a UAV somewhere, is that I was providing, not real-time intelligence, but within like ten seconds because you know I had to track the radio and figure out what was going on, but it was real-time, right there. I was talking to the guys on the ground making decisions, as opposed to a UAV pilot who is however many thousands of miles away. The UAVs are great, but they don't replace somebody actually talking directly with the unit, and viewing the feed. So having that back in 2001 when we were up in the mountains going, "Where the hell are these caves?" Or, "Is there somebody coming out of that one? Am I gonna get shot in the back?" Yeah, it would have been great. Just the presence of somebody else up there helps. I remember in 2001 doing a patrol through the mountains and watching two US Cobra gunships come flying through the ridges and the valleys, and we go, "Oh, that's wonderful!" They'd come flying down, and you'd see them doing their thing. Or you'd be up in the mountains and you'd watch a bomber fly over, miles away, then all of the sudden, "BOOM!" Dropped a five hundred pound bomb on somebody. [We'd] cheer, "Yeah!" So having somebody like Task Force ODIN for the first deployments would have been great. Knowing there was actually somebody there you could talk to.

Nate: It's really interesting to compare the dichotomy you had between your initial deployments and your later ones, just in terms of the military climate and its shift during that time period. The technology went from the ground to the pinnacle of American technology up in a plane, coordinating all of these operations. So you have all of these technology shifts, but what about, you were back at Bagram [Air Field] for that deployment, right?

Isaac: Yeah.

Nate: Had it changed much?

Isaac: It was incredible; the difference in those ten years, went from the tents that we set up to actual hard buildings. There was a whole PX [Post Exchange] now, I mean they were selling Playstations and Xboxes, there was security that was actually on post, there were walls, gates, I remember I'd go on walks to try to figure out where exactly I was at before on the first deployment, and I'd have no idea, because it just changed that dramatically. Land had been smoothed out, flattened, new buildings have been put up. They've got flag poles here, they've got an actual entrance to the airfield that was never there before. That building that I was up thirty feet on pulling guard from? I remember I'd go looking for that building in 2011, 2012, going, "Where the hell is it?" And I'd have no idea because there were all of these other buildings out there now. The road wasn't paved but they had buses running. I mean, my brother was there at the same time I was and it was an hour bus ride from my door to his door. It was just huge, but we had buses; we didn't have to walk. It was … shocking. It was its own little miniature city. They had traffic cops, MPs [Military Police] doing traffic detail on the roads. Seriously?

Alex: Big difference.

Nate: You just mentioned that your brother was there also? That's interesting. So how often did you see him?

Isaac: Sadly, not very often. He was in the Nevada National Guard, he was an MP over on the prison center on post, I don't remember what it was called. But I was generally working the night shift, and he was working the day shift. So we'd have to coordinate on somebody's day off, "Okay well we're gonna try and make it over …" "Oh, well I had to work late today." Or he was doing twelve-hour shifts, so he was like, "Look, I'll be honest. All I want to do when I get off work is go to my room and go to sleep." A twelve-hour shift really sucks. So I was like, "No, not a problem." I kept trying to get him up on a flight with me, because we could take passengers on

some, but was never able to. We hung out a couple of times, got a couple of pictures together, sent them to our dad. It was really neat seeing him there.

Alex: So going off of what we were talking about earlier, how with all of your deployments to Afghanistan you really witnessed the change in the global war on terror. How would you describe the military attitude. How did that transform from your earlier deployments to your later ones, in regards to how you guys view what you were doing in Afghanistan?

Isaac: Uh, I don't know how to answer that. As neat of a level as I was at on the last deployment, I was still low enough in the pecking order that I just wanted to do my mission. I think a lot of the people did think that it was a just cause still, but a lot of people saw it as a waste of time. I don't know really how to answer that. Sorry, I know that doesn't help.

Alex: No, no – that's fine.

Nate: Okay, so you came back from that fifth deployment in 2012, and how long was it between then and when you moved to Oregon?

Isaac: Two weeks.

Nate: Two weeks? What happened there?

Isaac: A whirlwind of crap. I got back like June 10, so I think I finally spent a birthday in the US. Re-met my wife. We'd gotten married like three months before the deployment. We'd known each other in high school, we'd been dating for a year, but anyway I spent a lot of time with her, but then it was, "We're moving to Oregon," so we needed to get all of our stuff packed up, we needed to get a rental truck, we needed to say goodbyes to all of her friends, all of my friends, we needed to make sure that we had everything, we needed to find a place to live [in Oregon]. It was just a, "Alright, I'm home. Let's go." When we left Alaska, we had a twenty-six foot U-Haul that was packed full enough that you had to press in on the stuff inside to pull the

door down all the way, and then a full trailer with our car on the back. So we had all of our stuff, and we left Alaska and drove down to an apartment in Springfield.

Nate: Is that when you started attending the University of Oregon?

Isaac: Yes. We moved in the middle of June and it only took us four days to drive down here. Unloaded all of our stuff, turned in the truck, and then went on a massive road trip across the US because school didn't start until the end of September, which blew me away because in Alaska it starts like the first week of September. I had actually enrolled in the U of O in Afghanistan, did all the paperwork and got all of that done, so I knew I was accepted, knew I was going to be a student. The worst part was that as a transfer student, I couldn't just roll right into classes. I couldn't schedule anything; I had to attend their IntroDUCKtion [orientation session at the University of Oregon]. The only reason I went was because I had to so that I could enroll in classes. Sorry UO but it was a waste of my time. So there was only one of those that we could do, because there were like four that I was going to miss because I was in Afghanistan, one in the middle of the summer, and then one a week before classes started. And if you attend the one a week before classes, who knows what classes are going to be open: everybody else is already registered. Luck of the draw at that point. So I attended the one that was the middle of August and got enrolled in my classes. Went back to sitting in my apartment not doing a damn thing. My wife and I went house hunting and found a house, moved in around November of 2012.

Nate: So you enrolled in the University of Oregon while you were in Afghanistan. What made you choose Oregon? Why the U of O?

Isaac: Well, I had to leave Alaska, because the psychology program up there at the time was not accredited by the APA [American Psychological Association], so the Army would not pay for it if I got a graduate a degree. So since I was planning on getting a graduate degree and wanted the Army to pay for it, I needed to find other accredited programs. And I told my wife before I left, "I don't want to be east of the Mississippi." For whatever reason, I don't like the East Coast. Maybe it's just my association with [Fort] Drum and Fort Benning; I don't want to be over there. West of the Mississippi sounded good. And I hate the heat, so we're looking at northern

California and up. I looked at the University of Washington because they have a really good graduate program in psychology and their [undergraduate] psychology program itself is really good, but they wanted two hundred dollars, non-refundable, for an application fee in addition to their refusal to tell me which of my classes from Alaska would transfer over. Also only twenty-eight percent of their incoming students are out-of-state students. So I had a one-in-four chance to start out with, pay two hundred dollars, and not find out which – if any – of my classes would transfer into Washington and what credits I would get for them. So I looked at that and went, "Nope. Let's see [motions like typing on a keyboard] northwest schools University of Oregon. Hey! Two hundred dollar application fee, they'll tell me exactly which of my classes will transfer over right away. I don't have to pay for that either. Screw it. Apply."

Nate: So it was really like an internet search?

Isaac: Yes.

Nate: That's funny.

Alex: What do you want to do with your psych degree?

Isaac: I'd like to counsel veterans.

Nate: That's interesting, so would you want to do that through the VA, or …?

Isaac: Sure. I mean, I'll work for the VA. What I'd really like to do would be to get my degree and go back into active duty as an officer. Finish my active duty time so I can retire in my early forties and then go work for a private company. I've toyed around – who wasn't – with CIA, FBI, some other federal agency that does neat things, but I would like to counsel veterans. It's important. I've seen, a number of times what not getting help can do. I'll admit I've had my own issues. It just seems important.

Nate: Have you had much interaction with the VA, and if so, do you feel like you've been taken care of since you've been, at least trying to go to school? You know, the GI bill, the National Guard's tuition assistance and all of that?

Isaac: As far as the educational portion of the VA goes, I have nothing really to complain about. The application for the GI bill is confusing, but it's easily done online or with the help of a school counselor. We've got one here [at the University of Oregon] that is pretty freaking outstanding at what she does. So that portion, the education benefits, yes, the VA has taken good care of me. Medically and health-wise, they are taking good care of me when they see me. I came off of active duty in August of 2012, somewhere in that timeframe. Applied for the VA benefits in like October or early November, I waited until June 2013 before I was seen by a VA doctor and had my benefits turned back on. It just takes a long damn time. I know this, I'm prepared for it, I'm used to it, it sucks, and I wish it was faster. I told them I needed physical therapy in June [2013] and I have my first physical therapist appointment in February [2014].

Nate: Wow.

Isaac: Yeah.

Nate: Alright, so just to cap off, we set up a pretty good timeline here, you're in Oregon now, you're in the Oregon Guard, right?

Isaac: Yes.

Nate: And are you still doing the same type of job?

Isaac: I'm doing the basic flight operations specialist type of job, back to the flight records, tracking flights. I'm a platoon sergeant, so I've got a dozen people underneath me that do what I tell them to do. I spend my drill weekends writing paperwork, herding cats, and sitting in briefings.

Nate: And do you know what year you're set to graduate?

Isaac: I think I've got it figured to winter [term] of '15. What threw me off, and always throws me off, is Alaska was on a semester system, so it was easy to tell exactly when you'd graduate. Here, we're on quarters and I came in just under junior level; I was like three credits shy of being a junior. So it's thrown off exactly when I'm going to graduate. I think it should be one year from now. I hope, it would be so nice. I'm a senior for registration purposes, I know that.

Alex: So, we've kind of done the basic narrative; now I think we're gonna hit some bigger, more philosophical questions.

Isaac: [Jokingly sarcastic] Awesome …

Alex: [chuckling] So what would you say was the most rewarding part of your military service?

Isaac: Just the fact that I was probably doing something for somebody else. I volunteered, I wasn't drafted, and everything I've done – most of the time – has been my choice. It's something that makes me feel good about myself. As selfish as it may sound, I'm doing something that not a lot of other people are willing to do for whatever reason; it's their call, but I just love being in the military in general. It's very rewarding to go to work and see people that are putting other people in front of themselves.

Alex: So is that why you were always willing to be redeployed when a lot of people were trying to avoid it as best they could?

Isaac: Possibly. I also just liked being deployed. When you're deployed, you've got it very [simple], "This is what you're going to do, this is your mission. Go do it." And here it's like, "What do I want, fast food wise?" It's just a lot easier to be deployed.

Alex: Going off of that, what would you say was the most difficult part of your military service?

Isaac: Could it have been the uncertainty when I was active duty? I never really thought that what I did was particularly difficult. Again, it's one of those, "If you like what you do, it's hard to be pissed." Most recently, and as cheesy as it sounds, the last one when I was deployed and wasn't with my wife. It really shifted my tone and perspective on deployments, because now I actually had someone, other than my parents or my brother, back home that gave a crap about me.

Alex: So it was difficult to be separated from your family, especially when you had a wife?

Isaac: Yeah, kind of. I mean it's not like I cried myself to sleep every night, wishing I was home. But it definitely made me think like, "Oh man. It would be nice to be lying in bed next to her watching a movie and having a beer." I mean other than that, nothing was particularly difficult. Some of it sucked, yeah. In terms of pure physical fitness, basic sucked. It was difficult, but I made it through.

Alex: Awesome. One last from me, did you have any preconceptions of the military before going in that were just completely different from how it turned out to be?

Isaac: Well, again, I didn't know a lot of what the infantry did on their active duty time, so I guess I had it in my mind that we would always be out in the woods doing patrols, doing things like that during training. Come to find out, "Well, we spend quite a bit of time in classes, doing basic first aid, combat lifesaver," I went to a field sanitation class, just kind of the random things like, "Oh. I didn't think we'd be doing that." But I knew I was going to join the military from my sophomore year in high school, so I spent most of my time at the recruiter's office ironing out exactly what the deal was like. And they stopped lying to me, if they ever really do lie to people. I know there are some shady ones out there. They knew I was going to join, so they weren't trying to pressure me into it. They knew I was going to go infantry, so it wasn't like they were, "Hey, so we'll give you this and we'll give you that," you know trying to entice me. They were more like, "Okay, you want to do it? This is what it's going to be like."

Nate: I've just got one question, it's certainly something that I've thought about, being a veteran who served in Afghanistan as well, and that is, what would you tell somebody – it doesn't have to be fifty years from now – let's say your grandkids. You're seventy-five, eighty years old, what would you tell your grandkids about that war, about Afghanistan? If you just had to explain it to them or give them a brief synopsis about what that war was, what it meant?

Isaac: That's a really good question. I think maybe I would tell them it was a justified war. We were attacked, flat out, no question about it. Something needed to be done to tell other people that it was not okay. Ideology aside, they believed one thing, we believed another. It's okay for people to have differences; it's okay to disagree with people. But you have to remember that you can't take it to that level. I don't know, I'm getting sentimental and all of that. But it was a justified war, it needed to be done.

Nate: Great. Is there anything that we maybe missed that you wanted to touch on?

Isaac: Nah. Overall, I'd do it all again.

Nate: You would?

Isaac: Absolutely, in a heartbeat. I don't regret any of my decisions for a second.

Nate: I guess that makes sense if you're planning on going back to active duty.

Alex: Yeah … [laughs]

Isaac: Well, I mean either way. I don't have anything terribly negative to say. I guess some of it sucked, sure. But there was a lot of really fun freaking times.

Alex: Yeah, that definitely came across in the interview, sounds like you had some great times out there, great stories.

Isaac: Yeah. I did a lot of neat things.

Alex: Certainly got to do a lot of things that most people can never say they did.

Isaac: Yeah. That's alright.

Nate: I think we'll end there, unless there's anything else …

Isaac: Nope.

Nate: Well thanks so much for your time.

Alex: Yeah, awesome … thank you!

Isaac: Yep.