

PREFACE

Date: February 23, 2015

Time: 2:51pm

Place of Interview: Student Veteran Center, Mac Court, University of Oregon

City, State: Eugene, OR

Interview duration: 56 min, 35 sec

Interviewee: Spencer Johnson

Interviewer: Jennifer Esparza

Jennifer Esparza is a Marine Corps veteran. She served for 11 years, reaching the rank of Staff Sergeant. As an administrator, she served at units on the west and east coasts, including tours to Iraq and Okinawa. She is currently a student at the University of Oregon, majoring in International Studies.

Jennifer Esparza: My name is Jennifer Esparza and I will be interviewing you. Your name, please?

Spencer Johnson: I am Spencer Johnson.

Jennifer Esparza: Spencer, what branch of service? Spencer is good, right?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, that's fine.

Jennifer Esparza: What branch of service were you in?

Spencer Johnson: I was in the Marine Corps.

Jennifer Esparza: And when did you join?

Spencer Johnson: I joined in 2010, in October.

Jennifer Esparza: Was that right after high school?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, it was the following year. Yes. I graduated in June and then I went to boot camp in October.

Jennifer Esparza: Okay. What made you decide to join?

Spencer Johnson: All my dad's side was all military. So, even in, like, in all high school I knew I was going to join the military. I just didn't know what branch, really. And so one day we just kind of went to the recruiter ... me and my dad. I did Air Force ROTC my freshman year when I lived in Pennsylvania. So went to go talk to them for ...

just because it was like the only one I had actual experience with. They weren't there. And I kind of just knew I didn't want to go to the Army. I talked to the Navy guy for a little bit, but ... I don't know ... but nothing really resounded with me. I'm not sea sick, but I'm not a fan of boats. So I went to talk to the Marine recruiter and my grandfather was a Marine, so I kind of knew a little of the history. And just talking to him, just I guess kind of just selling points ... he kind of really sold me on it. I didn't sign right then, but I got kind of like a little contract and everything to look over and go through with my family.

Jennifer Esparza: Did you say your dad served?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, he was in the Navy for 21 years.

Jennifer Esparza: Oh, wow!

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, so he was a big proponent of me going into the military also.

Jennifer Esparza: So he was probably there to help you make sure you got everything you wanted out of that contract, right?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, yeah. He was definitely asking some questions that at the time just went right over my head. I would have not known a lot of things or just different phrases that not necessarily a recruiter would try and screw someone over with, but just maybe would be a little tricky for someone who was 17/18 years old.

Jennifer Esparza: So did you know going in there what job you wanted to do?

Spencer Johnson: No, I didn't have any idea. I went back later and we went through kind of all the jobs and whatnot. The things that always grabbed me was just like mechanic jobs, anything. Didn't really matter what it was, just something like working with engines or mechanics. Or ... something that moved.

Jennifer Esparza: And so then your MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] ended up being ...?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, so I was a Heavy Equipment Mechanic.

Jennifer Esparza: Okay.

Spencer Johnson: When I signed up it was just like an engineer field, was all I was told. That's all I knew, even until really the end of boot camp. It was just some kind of engineer somewhere, working on something, was the most I knew about it.

Jennifer Esparza: And what did it end up being?

Spencer Johnson: So, it's 1341 Heavy Equipment Mechanic. Working on construction, deconstruction equipment and then it ended up kind of me working also with generators and A/Cs just because they're always in the same shop together. And that was for my unit that I was with, just all the gear we had was that. There wasn't a huge need for what my actual job was.

Jennifer Esparza: Okay, so going back to when you joined ... you went to boot camp in October.

Spencer Johnson: Yeah.

Jennifer Esparza: And you went to Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego I'm guessing?

Spencer Johnson: I did. Yup. I went to MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station] to processing before. I wasn't supposed to go until a month later but we had this kid that was supposed to go and he was actually underweight, didn't weigh enough. So he couldn't go to boot camp, so my recruiter calls me and he's like, "Hey, do you still want to go to boot camp?" I was like, "Well yeah, obviously, yeah." He goes, "Okay, do you want to go tomorrow?" And I'm like, it kind of sucked, but at the same time I was going to leave in like a month. So, it wasn't that big of a deal but it was more I guess for my family than anything. I was like, "Yeah! Let me call you in like 20 minutes." I go up to my family and they were fine. I was already pretty much ready to go. We had a party and whatnot because I was leaving and so I go and I get on the flight. There are like six people that are there as replacements, like the guys that couldn't do pullups or were overweight and I was the guy that was underweight. So we go and we fly down and everything and we get to the airport down there. We didn't have a bus or anything. There weren't sixty of us, it was ten guys. So ... I don't know ... I don't think he was a drill instructor, but this Marine comes and picks up in a little duty van, like a little Ford Econoline Van. We put our heads down and everything and he drove us around in a circle and everything. We finally get on base and we didn't have the speech that's in all the commercials, like "Welcome to the Recruit Station, I'm your new drill instructor, this is how it's gonna go ..." Blah blah blah. It was, "Get the hell off the van." I didn't even honestly stand on the yellow footprints.

Jennifer Esparza: What?!

Spencer Johnson: I didn't until graduation day. Me and some people did it as a joke because we literally just ran straight inside. We were eighteen hours behind everyone and we had to catch up that night. I didn't even get a haircut until the second week of boot camp because I missed it. It was just, they were just pushing us through.

Jennifer Esparza: Wow! I feel like some of those things are the trademarks of the Marine Corps!

Spencer Johnson: Yeah! It was just funny talking to people as you go through the Marine Corps. Like, “Oh, remember this or that.” And I was like, “No, I ... I don’t. I didn’t get to.” I don’t know. It was interesting just to be able to just do it. Well that was just kind of the circumstance. I mean, they were kind of more assholes because there’s just ten people. There wasn’t like sixty people and they’re being watched, and this is how you do it. It was, there’s ten guys that need to hurry up and be at this point. So just however it gets done make sure they get through.

Jennifer Esparza: You said you flew in. Where were you flying in from?

Spencer Johnson: From Portland.

Jennifer Esparza: Okay. And I imagine that your family was all supportive of you going.

Spencer Johnson: Uh, yeah ... my dad definitely was. My older brother was also in the Navy. He did four years, so he was okay about it. He kind of didn’t like that it was the Marine Corps because he called it a bullet sponge, was his definition of going into the Marine Corps. That I was just going to like ... die or something? But he was on submarines so he was all nice and safe, so whatever. My little brother, I don’t know. I guess he really didn’t understand. He’s only two years younger than me, but he doesn’t have a real strong grasp of the military, so it’s just another brother is going to do something. My mom almost didn’t let me join because I was seventeen for two months, or I was two months short of my 18th birthday to sign the paperwork, so she had to. But I told her that if she didn’t, in two months I was just going to sign it myself when I was eighteen anyways. And so she signed it, she cried or whatever. Right at the end of it, she’s like, “Oh well, at least the Marines have the best uniform.” So, that was her rationale for it, I guess. It may be good that I was already better than the Navy that my dad and brother were in, so ... that was good.

Jennifer Esparza: Nice. Alright, so boot camp. What was that experience like for you?

Spencer Johnson: Boot camp. Boot camp was really shitty. [Laughter] Obviously looking back it’s like fun or well, looking back it’s funny, I guess. But there? It really sucked. I was a pretty skinny kid, but also being 6’3” I was pretty easily spotted. We had one drill instructor that was just crazy. Even after graduation he was legitimately crazy. He has some problems. I don’t know what was wrong with that dude, but he was really tall. He was 6’5”, 6’6” or something. And I was the only person near his height, and so the whole time he just hated me and I guess held it against me that I was the same height as him. It didn’t make him look as scary. So he just hazed me. I got IT’d [Incentive Training] constantly, I guess. I never really fucked up a lot. I just kind of stood out because I was so tall.

Jennifer Esparza: Right! So you got picked on because you were tall.

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, for the most part. There was, I mean, a couple times I would smile. Obviously, you're not supposed to smile, but no more than anyone else. I never got special attention because I messed up or did anything. I was kind of just normal with everyone else, just kind of doing the things. You messed up, you did this, go, you know, go get IT'd or whatever. I don't know, it was mostly normal boot camp experience, but it was still shitty.

Jennifer Esparza: Right, except it's funny now ...

Spencer Johnson: Except now, yeah! Oh yeah! Looking back, the stupid things that you do and I don't know. Just the ridiculousness of sixty guys standing in a row in their whitey-tighties at night. It's just, it's funny. I don't know why that would ever ... I thought that was okay for three months. That was normal, but now looking back that's just stupid. Like, why? I don't know why they do that, but there's a reason for everything.

Jennifer Esparza: What were you doing? Can you tell about that experience, standing there in your whitey-tighties?

Spencer Johnson: Oh, yeah, so before bed you're getting a hygiene check. So, making sure you don't have an ingrown toenail or you have sand all over you because you didn't really take a shower because you're being nasty or whatever. You got some weird thing growing on you because you got guys from all over the country suddenly living with, in a little concrete squad bay. All the drill instructors walking by making sure that you actually took a shower, that you don't got some crazy disease going on or whatever it is.

Jennifer Esparza: Gotcha. And then you left boot camp and what, where did you go next.

Spencer Johnson: So I graduated boot camp in January. I went back to help out recruiting for ten days. And then from there I went to Marine Combat Training [MCT] at Camp Pendleton for a month.

Jennifer Esparza: What was it like going back home after boot camp?

Spencer Johnson: It was good! It was really cool just to be able to come back and ... obviously it was only boot camp, but you can kind of tell that you were a little bit different. I mean, everyone else kept saying it, so maybe that was a part of it. Everyone's like, "Oh, he stands up straighter or does this or does that or whatever." I don't know, you feel a little bit better about yourself? I don't know in any specific way really. It was just like you kind of had a purpose now instead of hanging out all summer after high school.

Jennifer Esparza: That's a good way to put it. Okay, so ... I'm sorry. After the ten days where did you go?

Spencer Johnson: MCT in Camp Pendleton.

Jennifer Esparza: Okay. What was that like? How long were you there?

Spencer Johnson: I was there for one month. It was good. I liked it because it was basically just camping for a month. Then shooting more guns than we did in boot camp, instead of just the range (so, the 240 and the SAW, the big machine guns, shooting your rifle more). I never had a problem with hiking or doing humps or anything because I'm kind of tall so I just kind of put one leg in front of the other and kept going. It was never a problem. We'd like digging foxholes and doing like the little simulation war games and stuff, I thought it was fun. It was definitely tough sometimes but I liked it.

Jennifer Esparza: And MCT, after MCT is that when you found out for sure what your MOS was going to be?

Spencer Johnson: Kind of. They gave us the number, or ... yeah. They gave us the number of what it was and then where the school was, but after that ... I mean, everyone just googled it on the weekend when we had our liberty pass, was just trying to figure exactly what that meant. People texting their brothers or cousins who were in the Marine Corps, "What does this job mean and what am I getting myself into now?"

Jennifer Esparza: Was anybody really disappointed?

Spencer Johnson: There were a couple guys that were, yeah. They thought they were going to get something like some science thing or something really cool and they were like "water purification" or something. There was a couple jobs definitely for sure ... I was a little disappointed because I was told like "engineer." And so, I didn't think I was going to be a combat engineer or anything even though I could have easily because that was in that realm, but I just figured it'd be more building things or ... kind of like equivalent to a Navy Seabee is kind of what was in my mind. But I wasn't upset because it was still fixing something; it was just big trucks and whatnot. So it was still cool with me.

Jennifer Esparza: So where was your school at?

Spencer Johnson: Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

Jennifer Esparza: And I'm guessing you went there right after MCT?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, just right after. Graduation day, packed our stuff up, got on the plane and we were there that night. So, yeah, that was interesting. It's like in the middle of nowhere. There's nothing to do after school is out, because you're free at the end of the day until midnight. And the weekends, you're kind of free all weekend. But you're in the middle of nowhere in Missouri. So nothing is going on, nothing's happening. The only fun thing was just that all the other Marines there, whether they're your schoolmates or even just the instructors and everything, because sure you were still a student but it

wasn't like MCT or boot camp where you're a recruit. It was more like you're actually a Marine now, so I'll treat you like one.

Jennifer Esparza: So you felt like you were treated like a Marine at school.

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, yeah. So if I messed up or something, it was something that was real. It wasn't because my left foot went when my right foot was supposed to or I didn't march right, or something. It was just ... I don't know, I can't remember anything that I really did. If you every messed up, it was something that you actually did.

Jennifer Esparza: Gotcha. And how did you do in school?

Spencer Johnson: Good, I got "class high." I got meritoriously promoted to Lance Corporal when I graduated.

Jennifer Esparza: Nice!

Spencer Johnson: Yeah. That was ... that was really cool. I was PFC [Private First Class] for all of one month because I wasn't a contract PFC or anything. So I went from private and then halfway through school I picked up private first class, and the next month we graduated I was a lance corporal all of a sudden. Not that I really knew what that meant until six months, a year later, when I actually understood what that really meant.

Jennifer Esparza: How long was your school?

Spencer Johnson: The school was three months long. We were probably there for four because we were waiting for a while to get into the school. There were a lot of people there, so the classes were filled up. So, we were just waiting around to actually get into the real school.

Jennifer Esparza: And when did you find out where you were going after that?

Spencer Johnson: We found out our last two weeks. When we were in there, they asked us what coast we wanted to be on: west coast, east coast or overseas.

Jennifer Esparza: Did you get first dibs since you were class high?

Spencer Johnson: No! Not at all. I put west coast, east coast, overseas [rated in order of preference] and I got east coast. [Laughter] So, that kind of sucked because I lived on the east coast before, growing up, and I didn't really like it. I kind of wanted to be in California, Hawaii, or overseas somewhere ... Yeah, I got North Carolina. That was kind of a bummer. [Laughter]

Jennifer Esparza: Did anybody get west coast or ...

Spencer Johnson: We had two who got west coast. One was a cool guy that I knew, we all liked him, he's a good guy. The other one was our class fuck-up. The guy that couldn't do anything right. He couldn't run, he couldn't do pullups, he couldn't figure out calling people the right rank, he was really dumb in class ... I don't know how he made it. We all hated him, and he got sent to the west coast, to the same unit as our friend. *[Laughter]* The rest of us all winded up on Cherry Point or on Camp Lejeune. So, at least we could ... we saw each other of the years and stuff, kind of irregularly, but at least we were all on the same coast.

Jennifer Esparza: That's good. This was your first duty station and what was the duty station/the unit?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, so I was stationed at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point in Havelock, middle-of-nowhere, North Carolina. I was with MACS-2, so Marine Air Control Squadron. So it's part of the air wing, the whole base is the air base. So, they're mostly responsible for the radar of whatever unit they would go out with and so we just supported them with the generators for power and A/Cs, and then the big forklifts and tram, just to kind of move gear and get things around. We also were a joint Motor T (motor transport) shop, so we worked with the guys with the 7-tons and Humvees.

Jennifer Esparza: Do you remember the day that you checked into that unit?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, yeah. So, I'm in my Alphas [Service "A" Uniform] all dressed up and everything. I didn't know ... none of us knew where we were supposed to be. We checked in super late at night, so we had the duty check us in for the whole base. We get a tiny little room somewhere. The next day, someone picks me up from the unit ... the duty driver. I go to check in, I'm in Alphas, spend half the day doing paperwork. I finally go to check in and everything was pretty good. I didn't mess up or call anyone the wrong rank, or just be an idiot. I just tried to be smart about everything. They asked me dumb little questions, like Marine Corps knowledge or things to trip me up to see how I was. I think I did pretty well. And then I remember our CWO (Chief Warrant Officer) wanted to talk to us, to come check in with him. There was me and another Marine, he was coming from Okinawa. We just happened to be checking in the same day so I went around with him because I was a brand new lance corporal (LCpl). He kind of knew the way the Marine Corps was. So, he tells us to change into cammies to talk to the CWO and because I had been meritoriously promoted I had never actually got pinned on, they just handed me a promotion warrant and said "you're a LCpl." So my Alphas were PFC...

Jennifer Esparza: Good job. *(Sarcasm)*

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, yeah! So, all day they're like "oh you're PFC Johnson," checking in everywhere because you're a brand new Marine so that's not ... normal. I'm not going to correct them and be like, "no, I'm actually a LCpl." I didn't actually get in trouble at all because I had all of two days to change it somewhere in between three flights, so everyone understood. But I got yelled at first and then I would tell them and

they'd be okay with it, so that was fun. And then, yeah, so we have to go see the CWO in our cammies and I had to pull some LCpl chevrons out of the cargo pocket of my seabag where my cammies were and quickly pin them on myself and then go check in and hopefully I did it right. No one ever said anything so I guess I did pretty good.

Jennifer Esparza: Hopefully you got to do that ... correct, somebody else later on. Did anybody make the same mistake?

Spencer Johnson: No, everyone was the right rank when they came! I was the only one I think I ever saw that was the wrong rank checking in.

Jennifer Esparza: Well done.

Spencer Johnson: Yeah. I am very proud of that.

Jennifer Esparza: That's good. *[Laughter]* So you check into your unit, you're there now and what did you think of it, now that you're doing your job.

Spencer Johnson: I liked the Marine Corps. I liked being in the fleet. I like the people. There were a couple people different rank that I didn't like, but most everyone else didn't like them either. It was just different types of people because whether it's because they were a dick or whatever, or maybe they were just a hard ass. Maybe they were actually a good Marines and no one saw it, but they were just a hard ass to them so no one liked them. The unit was good. It was, again, somewhere in the middle of NOWHERE. That kind of sucked. I didn't really ever get to do my job. There was one piece of heavy equipment, a tram. Basically a giant forklift and it never broke. It was under warranty for another year, so even if it did break all I could do is say this is what's wrong and then call John Deere to come fix it. I kind of just ran around, I helped out Motor T for a while. They put me with the engineer section and that's really where I learned generators and a little bit of A/Cs. So for the year and a half I was there it was mostly just working with engineers. I basically just became a generator mechanic.

Jennifer Esparza: Interesting. You said that there was nothing to do there because you were in the middle of nowhere, so how did you guys occupy your free time?

Spencer Johnson: We would drive far away to try and do something. If it was the weekend, we would go north or south, somewhere on the coast of North Carolina and just find a big town or out to Emerald Isle, this little beach town. Hang out there, try and sneak into a bar if a couple people were twenty one. That worked out pretty well for the most part. *[laughter]* If it was the weekdays, we would just be in the barracks. There were a couple nights where we just binge-watched TV shows. We would go through a season or a whole series. We watched all of *The Office*. It would take three weeks, but we'd watch an episode during lunch break everyday and then come back and hang out and watch two or three more at night.

Jennifer Esparza: Nice. That's a good show.

Spencer Johnson: It was a good show, yeah. And it lasted for all of a month. Then we had to find a new TV show or new something to occupy us or try and sneak into this new bar somewhere and see if it would work.

Jennifer Esparza: Were you twenty-one?

Spencer Johnson: No. I ... [*laughter*] I was nineteen ... yeah ... I was nineteen the whole time.

Jennifer Esparza: So, when you say someone had to sneak in ...

Spencer Johnson: Yeah. Someone ... I had to sneak in and my friend or something. There were like two other guys that were twenty-one and one guy I kind of looked like, so he could use his ID then hand it off to me. Then I would go last and use his ID again. That worked out every time except for one time. The bartender remembered my buddy's name and then saw the ID and was like, "Wait, I just let this guy in." So me and him got kicked out. That was all that happened. We just got kicked out, so that was pretty good all things considered. We were pretty dumb. Probably shouldn't have done it, but ... oh well.

Jennifer Esparza: Did you deploy?

Spencer Johnson: I did, yeah, I was on duty one day at the barracks and my platoon sergeant called me and asked me if I wanted to deploy. Being a nineteen year old that was in the fleet for a year, I was, "Oh yeah, absolutely, that'd be great." He goes, "Okay, I'll call you back later." And so I was on duty for twenty-four hours, I don't know what's going on. He called me a couple more times, getting info and whatnot. He finally calls me at 8 o'clock at night and goes, "Alright, you're deploying. Be ready to go in a month to this other unit." Ended up being me and my staff sergeant and a couple other guys, actually two guys from the school house that were in different units were going. We got FAP'd [Fleet Assistance Program] out to 6th Marine Regiment in Camp Lejeune. They didn't have an engineer section at all. They didn't even have gear. When they deployed, they needed one, so they pulled from Cherry Point, couple people from Lejeune. So my staff sergeant ran it and this brand new lieutenant ... he was actually really cool. He was our OIC [Officer in Charge] and that was it. We were just a rag-tag group of people from all over and no one ever messed with because they just didn't know we were there. They didn't know we existed. We weren't ever part of the unit. We didn't do anything either. The build up – we were there for three months training and did ranges or the Humvee rollover training and whatnot. No one ever knew where we were or what we did because we didn't have any gear to fix. We were Motor T or the embarkers. We weren't planning anything. All of our gear was in Afghanistan, so we just hung out and did stuff together and just waited to deploy.

Jennifer Esparza: And what kind of unit was this that you were deploying with?

Spencer Johnson: It was an infantry unit.

Jennifer Esparza: Okay.

Spencer Johnson: When they deploy they become RTC-6, Regimental Combat Team.

Jennifer Esparza: And where did you deploy?

Spencer Johnson: Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

Jennifer Esparza: What did your family think of that?

Spencer Johnson: My dad, I don't know. He was okay, I guess. He didn't like it, but after twenty-one years in the Navy he just kind of knew. He expected it. It was, "Whatever." My mom cried and everything and hated it. Even when I was there if she'd try and call or she'd face [FaceTime] with me, send me a bunch of boxes and whatnot. My older brother, he was pretty cool with it. He just liked talking to me and being supportive. I think he kind of got over the fact that I joined the Marine Corps already, so he was pretty cool. And then my little brother, even though he's only two years younger than me, he just did whatever my mom said. So if my mom was crying, he would text me and be like, "Ahh, that's not cool! You made Mom cry!" And, "Well, uh, it's my life so...sorry, but make your own decisions not based off what Mom wants."

Jennifer Esparza: This is something that you wanted to do anyway.

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, I mean that's kind of why I joined. I mean, it was 2010 when I joined so 9/11 was a good time ago, so it wasn't this happened, I want to join. I don't know. There was a war going on and I liked the military and I thought that's what you should do. So when I got the chance to deploy, I felt like that was ... especially the unit I was at, it was more worthwhile and actually meant something [more] than fixing generators in the middle of North Carolina.

Jennifer Esparza: Good point. How long were you there?

Spencer Johnson: So we got there Christmas Day of 2011 and we got back home Halloween of 2012. We were there for pretty much ten months.

Jennifer Esparza: Wow.

Spencer Johnson: Yeah.

Jennifer Esparza: That's a little longer than normal, wasn't it? [Average deployment cycle in Corps was 6-7 months]

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, it was pretty long. We kept getting different word. When we deployed, we were told a year. After being there for two months, they told us we were

only going to be there for six months. It changed back to nine and then it changed back to a year. Then a month before we left it was, “We’re going to leave next month. This is actually happening.”

Jennifer Esparza: Do you remember when you first got there [to Afghanistan]?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, we got there. It was noon, the middle of the day, hotter than hell even though it was Christmas Day. It was just weird because it was just totally flat, there was nothing around. It wasn’t ... Afghanistan is pretty “mountain-y”, but they’re really far away from where we were. So it was just the middle of nowhere and I don’t know. It was just interesting. No one really knew what we were going to do. We were just there and it was just happening. It was like, “Alright, now what to we do? Where do we go? I guess we’re going to get a room somewhere. I guess we’re going to check out where we’re going to work. What are we going to do?” It’s good. I’m glad we had the higher-ups that had deployed before. Even the sergeants and stuff, and at least in my section, hadn’t, so the only person that had ever deployed was our staff sergeant.

Jennifer Esparza: Were you a LCpl at the time?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, yeah. I was a LCpl the whole time that I was there, all ten months.

Jennifer Esparza: Okay. Once you figured out what you were responsible for, what was it like?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, so we took over our section of a big lot that the previous unit (forgot who we took over for) had owned. It was a pretty crappy little lot. The guys, they were kind of shitbags. They didn’t really do their job very well. They fixed gear pulling parts off of other gear, so we didn’t know what was wrong with this other piece because it was pulled from that part and it was all just hodge-podge. The lot wasn’t organized well. They had two big ISO containers with some netting over top, and then was there workshop. So we got there and we just had, not full funding, but we could kind of do whatever we wanted because no one knew who we were but money was allocated to us so we could spend it however we wanted. Almost jokingly, but because I got meritoriously promoted and I was the smart guy, I ended up being the paperwork dude on top of fixing things. I was also, I think, the oldest LCpl or the person that was a LCpl the longest. I ordered all the parts. I ordered all the things we needed. I organized all the parts when they got in. I told people to work on this as opposed to work on that, or tell me this part number so I could order ... everything like that. So we got there and then two months in, we had a big netting ... like a dome. We set it up. Took us two days to set up a big heavy piping thing. We set that up, we took pallets and laid that down as the groundwork. We organized the whole lot. We took the trams and put the big bucket on it and flattened out the lot. It was gravel, so at was at least level in some way. We totally redid all of it, put new barbed wire up and everything. We just went to work and it was just work for the other eight months. We supported the rest of the regiment and then mostly the Georgian Army.

Jennifer Esparza: Where did you sleep?

Spencer Johnson: We had these ... we call them cans, little aluminum buildings. They held four bunk beds, so technically eight people. It was in the middle of base and our workshop was on the opposite side of base. We just had to walk to work everyday and whatnot. Most of them had four to six people in it. It was kind of cramped. It wasn't too bad. By the last half, we kind of all had it set up the way we wanted it. We had to ... no, there were no windows, it was just a door, but we had everything set up the way we wanted. We bought a stupid little TV that was super cheap. We plugged our laptops in and watched movies when we were on our off time. Someone bought an XBOX and we played that when we weren't doing anything. Our last two weeks, we didn't do anything. We had already turned over to the other unit so we just sat and didn't do anything all day, playing XBOX.

Jennifer Esparza: So it sounds like communication was probably fairly simple for you to do back home?

Spencer Johnson: Ummm ... yeah, it was all right. Whenever we were at Leatherneck, we were there probably half the time, so whenever we were there, we could go to the USO and you get a call card and you could just spend 15 minutes, call your family. There was kind of crappy wifi or if you went to the USO, you could get on one of their computers and get on Facebook or Skype or whatever you wanted. That was all right. The only problem was time change. It would be super late at night for me and I need to go to bed because I had to be up at 7 in the morning, but for my family it was 8am. Some of them weren't awake yet and I had to wait, but we figured it out eventually and I was able to talk to them once a month.

Jennifer Esparza: You said that was at Leatherneck. That's Camp Leatherneck, right?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, that was the big camp. That's the big one in Afghanistan. We were actually the only ones there, us and the Motor T. The rest of the unit was all at Delaram. They ran the whole base. That was their entire base. Leatherneck is too many units and it's right next to ... literally connected to Bastion, which is the British camp which is every unit they have there It's just a really big base, but Delaram was ran by 6th Marines and it was their base. So we'd convoy out there probably twice a month and just exchange gear or trade out people if people were there for too long. Just get people moving around so no one was in one place for ten months.

Jennifer Esparza: Could you tell me about those convoys up there?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, they're probably three hours long going about 55 MPH, and the only paved road in the whole country, well most of it. There's a couple parts where we had to get off and on, but it was mostly paved. There'd be these buses full of people and probably overfull of people. They'd be passing us going eighty. I mean, they were barely on the road, I don't know how they did it. They broke a couple side-view mirrors.

Jennifer Esparza: Wow! So it was a safe route then.

Spencer Johnson: Fairly safe, yeah yeah. Whenever we went to Delaram there were no worries. I mean, we had gunners and everything and I was always an A-driver on the radio. Our last two months there, there was an accident. There was this giant boulder that was on the road and everyone passed it and then an oncoming truck flipped it. So it came into road, so our last vehicle hit it and went off the road. They never called because the A-driver didn't have control of the radio once they crashed. We didn't realize until probably a mile down the road that they weren't readying up on the radio. Like, when we did our checks, they wouldn't check in so we turned back around to go get them. The driver was all right; he got knocked out. The A-driver broke his arm, it's kind of messed up still. Then the gunner, he's paralyzed.

Jennifer Esparza: Wow.

Spencer Johnson: Yeah. They got life-flighted out of there. They called in an "EVAC" [Medical Evacuation] and they got pulled back to base and we cancelled the convoy and went back home. It was moderately safe, but yeah ... crazy shit happens, not even like related to the bad guys or whatever. It was always pretty sketchy out there because you're really ... you're in the middle of nowhere.

Jennifer Esparza: Did anything else ever happen to anybody there, from your unit?

Spencer Johnson: We got blown up a couple times. Whenever we went to the smaller bases, we basically make a big loop every month. We'd go from Leatherneck to Delaram to the smaller bases and we would either just check gear or see if we could fix it there or just check it and make sure it was running fine. If we knew it was broken, when we'd go back we'd bring gear with us the next time and then change it out. Bring the bad one back so we could fix it and give them the good one. Just keep doing the rotations like that or if we needed to we'd take a convoy just for a piece of gear if it was needed. There were a couple times that an IED would go off but they were always pressured. They would just hit the mine-roller in the front of the 7-ton, of the very front vehicle. It's a big "V" with eight wheels in the front of it that cost a quarter of a million dollars and its entire purpose is to blow up. There are no sensors on it, there's nothing. It just weighs a lot and has eight wheels in the front. You hook it up to the front tow-bar of a vehicle and then it just rolls in front of your wheels so that when you roll over an IED, it blows up and you're fine. That happened like three or four times.

Jennifer Esparza: Wow! That's pretty smart.

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, cost a lot of money but it worked.

Jennifer Esparza: What vehicle were you in?

Spencer Johnson: I was always fourth vehicle. Always A-driver, assistant driver with the radio.

Jennifer Esparza: Were you ever worried when you were out there?

Spencer Johnson: Umm ... a little bit? Just kind of generally worried. I think the only one time I was ever, not scared but an actual level of worried, was when we did this mission that was two weeks long. We didn't go back. We were just out in the field for two weeks.

Jennifer Esparza: Where?

Spencer Johnson: We were ... I forget the name of the town. It was just past one of our outposts. We went through this town, EOD [Explosion Ordnance Disposal Technicians] went through and they took all the IEDs and they blew them up in a pile. They were taking pop shots from far away but they didn't even reach our vehicles. They were hitting the ground 200 feet away. We were going to this town, took us like three days to get there and we took it over. We kicked the farmer out and we made an airstrip. I don't know if they ever made a base out of it or if it was just that they needed the airstrip for a couple days. We had tanks on the side of the hills next to us. We were in the valley, tanks around us and near the end of it there were jets flying overhead. So it was interesting. EOD caught a couple IEDs and whatnot. It was interesting. We finally get to this town and it was 10 o'clock at night, pitch dark. Everyone parks in the town ... not really town square, there wasn't one, but in the center. The bulldozer gets out and builds a big berm all the way around us. We and the Motor T guys go out and we flattened out an airstrip. Then we put ... we called it rhino snot because the logo on the barrel of this company was a rhino and it's this big thick glue-type stuff that was purple and you shoot it out of an air cannon or a water cannon. You just throw it all over the dirt and it hardens and makes it so you can land a helicopter without kicking up dirt everywhere. I think you can even land an Osprey on it without sinking into some dirt. So we did that at midnight. I was just up providing security. Nothing ever happened but it still interesting, something I'd never done up until then.

Jennifer Esparza: Did you get to work with any of the locals there?

Spencer Johnson: We didn't really work with them. We had interactions with them, a good amount. There was the Afghan Army, they had a base attached to Leatherneck. So we went over there a couple times. We gave them a big water purification thing right outside the mosque they had, and a generator to run the water pump so they could pump water out. It wasn't so much for them. There was a good population of civilians that lived at the base because it was really the only safe place around because anywhere where there were Marines, was where the Taliban were. There were plenty of safe places, I'm sure, in Afghanistan for civilians, but if we were around, it wasn't really safe for them. So the safest place was literally where we were, around us. They were on the base, surrounded by the Afghan Army and kind of surrounded by us. They had a mosque, and a little school or something. We refilled water and checked the generators, made

sure the water pump was working. They were pretty nice. We never really talked to them or hung out with them because they were kind of skittish and we kind of were too. We didn't really want to do something inappropriate and somehow offend everyone and start something bad because we were there the summer that the Army guys were burning Qurans, that whole little incident thing. We were all very aware of not doing something like that. So we just figured we should not do anything and then we can't possibly mess up!

Jennifer Esparza: Gosh. Did you at least get to learn anything about their culture?

Spencer Johnson: Not really. I mean, we had a couple guys that went before and they took Pashto classes because that was the language for the area we were in, Pashto. They never really even used it. They did a little bit, just like, "Hey, go here," or, "Go over there." "Stay back," or, "Hey, come over here," but we always had interpreters whenever we went, if we ever needed them. We never really interacted with them other than interpreters. But those guys are, half of them were in school for three years or they went to this country or they went there so their English was pretty good. They weren't really Afghan people. They were maybe born there or lived there the last three years but they couldn't really give you any insight into the normal day-to-day life. They jumped around from a police to a school to a ... now they're working for the U.S. military being an interpreter.

Jennifer Esparza: Gotcha. Is there anything about your deployment that sticks out for you?

Spencer Johnson: I think just all the people. The other Marines, we were really close. We still are. A couple of them got out and they're in New York and California, a few guys are still in. Regardless of rank, we were all pretty tight because we were, we weren't part of the unit even. So even with the other Marines we weren't super tight because we weren't apart of their unit. We hadn't been, we didn't go on First Sergeant So-and-so's moto [motivational] run two years ago. We weren't there for the last Marine Corps Ball. We were just this rag-tag group of guys, so we just stuck together and we hung out. When you're deployed, your sense of military rightness goes out the window a little bit? So like, I wouldn't call my staff sergeant "dude", but I could just be like, "Hey, do you know where this is?" And he would tell me. I wouldn't have to stand at parade rest in front of him and be like, "Wxcuse me Staff Sergeant, I have a question." It would just be like, "Oh, hey, Staff Sergeant, you wanna go get lunch? Can we go get lunch?" "Sure" "Alright, bye." And that was, I don't know, we were just really close together and we functioned really well. We did a lot for ourselves and for the unit, just setting things up and getting everything running. The unit that took over for us had it easy as hell. We took three months trying to really get up and running and those guys had it made by the time we switched over with them.

Jennifer Esparza: So you went back home Halloween, you said, 2012?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, I want to say it was Halloween. Maybe it was November the first. Yeah, of 2012. We landed, we come in and everything. We go to the armory to turn in our weapons and we're all hiding behind the corner of these buses.

Jennifer Esparza: Why?

Spencer Johnson: Because everyone had to go turn in their rifle and so we didn't want to have everyone go turn in your rifle and then go see your family. And then all the families are waiting and waiting and waiting, for everyone to turn in their rifle. We all got on buses, turned in our rifles and the bus drove away around the corner, two blocks away. Then we waited for all the buses to be done. Then we all rolled back through to the front of the unit where all the families were. That way everyone's family was there at once.

Jennifer Esparza: Who was there for you?

Spencer Johnson: No one was there for me, I was one of two dudes, no one came. I'm still kind of pissed off about that! My family never even said anything about it. They knew when I was coming back, granted they were in Oregon and this is North Carolina, but there are dudes from Cali all day. Plenty of Marines from California and their families were there. I didn't have no one. No one even fucking showed up. I don't know why, I don't know. It was weird. I texted them when I landed but at four hours later we actually were free. You could do anything. We got there, it was Thursday, we were free all the way to Monday. And no one ... no one showed up. I don't know. I got a barracks room and put my stuff away, changed and I don't know what I did. Oh, I went to go pick up my car because it was in storage. Just kind of like another day, it's weird.

Jennifer Esparza: And the other guy?

Spencer Johnson: Umm, I don't know. I don't know where he was.

Jennifer Esparza: Same scenario?

Spencer Johnson: Same thing, yeah. I didn't really know the guy, but, yeah, he was somewhere else. Maybe we went to a different barracks, or maybe he was married and he met his family later. Oh no! His family was at his wife's mom's place. So they were there the next day.

Jennifer Esparza: So you were the only one!

Spencer Johnson: So I was the only dude in 400 dudes and ain't nobody there. Granted, 200, 300 were married so their wives lived there already.

Jennifer Esparza: And you weren't dating anybody?

Spencer Johnson: No, I was when I left. I was not when I returned.

Jennifer Esparza: Oh!

Spencer Johnson: Yeah! I got a Dear John a month in.

Jennifer Esparza: Ouch.

Spencer Johnson: It was whatever because I knew it was coming. A ten-month deployment, I'll be fucking surprised if I don't get something, but it was whatever. I think everyone, yeah, everyone that was dating someone wasn't dating someone when they came back.

Jennifer Esparza: Really?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah.

Jennifer Esparza: How long had you two been together?

Spencer Johnson: Three months or something. It wasn't very serious at all.

Jennifer Esparza: Oh, okay.

Spencer Johnson: So it was a little bit better for me. I didn't so much care. [*Laughter*]

Jennifer Esparza: What was like when you got that letter, if you don't mind me asking?

Spencer Johnson: No ... it wasn't a kick in the pants or anything because I kind of expected it. It was just really shitty for a couple days because we work six and a half days. So we work Monday through Saturday and half day Sunday. We worked everyday so just work. After a week it was whatever.

Jennifer Esparza: Yeah. You don't still talk to her do you?

Spencer Johnson: No. I never talked to her after that.

Jennifer Esparza: That's good.

Spencer Johnson: Yeah. [*Laughter*]

Jennifer Esparza: When did you go back to your original duty station?

Spencer Johnson: We got all of November, we got a month off of leave, so we could go home. I went home for a month, or no ... sorry. We did training and stuff in November, we got all of December off. My birthday is December 5th, I turned 21, so I was on leave December 3rd and went home after deployment and after two days I was 21.

Jennifer Esparza: Nice!

Spencer Johnson: That was really fun. I went out with my dad and my stepmom because I had already been drinking for two years ... And I mean, I'm in the Marine Corps so it wasn't like, "Oh, I'm 21, I'm going to buy my first beer!" I was able to go out, so I went out with my dad and my stepmom and we had a fun time. We went out to all the little bars in the area. It was good! Then Christmas, New Year's parties that my friends had, we went out to the bar and oh we're all twenty-one and yay! It was a good time, just hanging out and first time on leave for a while so that was good. It was a whole month of just doing nothing. That was kind of nice. Then I got back just after New Year's. I was there for two weeks and we were just checking out the whole two weeks. Then I went back to Cherry Point the very beginning of January of 2013.

Jennifer Esparza: When you went back was it the same?

Spencer Johnson: It was a totally different unit, basically, for my shop at least. There were three people from the shop that I knew; it was a shop of about 40 people. The OIC, the SNCOIC, everyone was different. They retired or moved on. I actually liked the second ... when I got back, I liked that group a lot better.

Jennifer Esparza: Why?

Spencer Johnson: I don't know. They were just better I think. Maybe they were better for me or maybe they were just actually better. Our master sergeant was cool as hell, and he understood everything. Don't mess up around him because he'll definitely, he'll getcha. If you're not doing anything wrong and you're doing what you're supposed to, he'll take care of you. He'll make sure that you're field-daying for eighteen hours, and that you're not at work on a Friday at 6 o'clock just because. Our OIC was "hands-off," which was better. The last one was a brand new lieutenant to the Marine Corps and wanted to do everything. This guy was just ... he was a warrant officer, so he had already been enlisted. He knew what was going on. He knew how to run it and he ran it perfectly. Everything was smooth and we didn't ever have any problems.

Jennifer Esparza: Did you stay with that unit or did you transfer to any other unit?

Spencer Johnson: No. After I came back to MACS-2, I was there until I got out. I stayed with them the whole time. I picked up the end of summer, in 2013.

Jennifer Esparza: To corporal?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, to corporal. In November. So it was cool. Even before that, I was the LCpl that had been there three years. Technically I had been there for three years even though I was gone for a year for deployment. I was the lance corporal there the longest. I was one of the people there that had been there the longest, regardless of rank. My buddies who I met when I first joined the unit were corporals now. So, I hung out with them. We respected each other. I respected the fact they were high rank. They

would still treat me almost as an equal. I could lead other guys and make sure other people were doing things. It was people out of their hair and it was less stuff I had to do. I was able to delegate a lot.

Jennifer Esparza: Were you also treated differently, or given more respect having done a deployment?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah. Especially at an air station, at Cherry Point ... hardly anyone had deployed. There was one other person, he was a corporal. The next person that had deployed was a staff sergeant. I got, yeah, a little more leeway just for having deployed and having done that. Not having real leadership but real leadership for that unit. If you're in the Pentagon or something, there's obviously a very much different level of leadership because of the serious nature of it or some other higher level headquarters. But for a little thing like Cherry Point, that's kind of how you do your job, by deploying. That's really how you get a sense of leadership and how you really do your job. To be able to come back, I kind of had the leg up on a little people.

Jennifer Esparza: Gotcha. When did you get out?

Spencer Johnson: I got out in June of 2014. I did an early release program because I wanted to go to school. My end of contract wasn't until October so even with a little waiver to get to school, I wouldn't be able to get out until the beginning of September which would give me no time to ... I could sign up for school, but I would be out and two weeks later I'd be starting school. I didn't want to do that. I actually didn't even know I wanted to get out. I just knew if I wanted to go to college, I had to do an early ... I had to VEERP. I had to do a Voluntary Early Release. I put it in, I put in the paperwork for it. I was like, "All right, cool. If I want to go to college, I have to get this. So if I get this, I guess I'll go to college." A month later, I check online and it was approved and I was getting out June 3rd. And I was like, "Well, I guess I'm getting out." It kind of solved it for me. Not that I wanted to stay in but I also didn't need to get out like some other people. I was waffling between the two. It made the decision for me. It was, "Alright, I'm going to college. I'm getting out."

Jennifer Esparza: Do you think about going back in?

Spencer Johnson: I ... I don't. I don't think I would ever go back in. I think about if I had stayed in a good amount though. I think about what I would have done if I had chose to stay in then or if I had chose to go to a different unit. If I was going to stay in, I was going to do a lat-move. I wasn't going to stay at my job. I just didn't like it. It didn't interest me, really. Especially I saw with the same people in higher rank, I didn't like doing that. It was just checking things and making sure a piece of gear ran right which is what I was doing anyways. It bred laziness in what I saw, maybe it was just the guys above me weren't very good at it. A couple of them were really good Marines; they had knowledge, they had PT, they had everything. When it came to the job, they didn't do much. I didn't want to do that.

Jennifer Esparza: What would you have lat-moved to?

Spencer Johnson: I don't know. I didn't ever really make up my mind. I thought about something intel or counter-intel. My grandfather was counter-intel back in the day. That really interests me. Intel did too but I really couldn't even choose. Those are still really only fields, I couldn't find a specific thing I wanted in there. Right around that time is when the VEERP came through, so I stopped thinking about it. Now, being out I wouldn't go back. I love being in college, I love being out. I love doing whatever I want. Especially talking to my friends that are in or have gotten out that I served with, it's definitely just remembering all the fun things we did and all the experiences that we shared. I kind of miss it a good amount instead of being with a bunch of eighteen-year-olds in class that their parents pay for everything. Even people my age, I guess this one guy, he's twenty-three. We're decent friends. He's like, "Oh yeah man, I understand. Yeah, you're twenty-three too ..." but he's twenty-three and a senior. I'm twenty-three and a freshman and it's totally different, just life choice. I don't hold it against him. It was my choice to do my thing and his choice to do his thing, but it's just not relatable.

Jennifer Esparza: Sounds like you're a little ... like, you miss some parts of the Marine Corps, but not enough to say that you'd ever go back.

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, being out I'm definitely glad I did it. I would do it again if I was eighteen, but I won't go back in.

Jennifer Esparza: Same branch?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. I don't know what the Air Force does, they do things I guess. Every other branch has planes so I don't know how many branches need planes. I guess the Air Force needs to have their own planes also. I don't know. [Laughter] The Navy is cool. I love the Navy. Besides the Marine Corps, they're the branch I like the most whether from family or just from serving with guys. I figure if you were going to join the Army or the Marine Corps, I would just go to the better one. So I would just go to the Marine Corps again. I guess that's why they put the Army and the Air Force together, kind of on their own redundant thing over there. Yeah.

Jennifer Esparza: Is there anything else that you want to tell me about your experience?

Spencer Johnson: I think a lot of people should give it more thought. I think a lot of people write-off the military, not even necessarily the Marine Corps, just the military as this thing they definitely don't want to do. Or they don't get anything out of. They don't want to be American Sniper and get shot at, or be this or that. Or infantry. There's a lot of different jobs and training. Every branch has its own thing, to even just to travel. I know that I matured a lot from it. I grew a lot as a person just because I did it, not even because I like the military. It's just because of what it was.

Jennifer Esparza: Do you feel like your feelings about the deployment to Afghanistan changed at all from before you went to now?

Spencer Johnson: Umm ... not really. I guess I'm a different Marine. I wasn't like, "Fuck that country they're not America," spitting in my dip bottle or anything. I was from Oregon and I was this smart guy that ... whatever. I knew it was a country and I knew there were people there. I might not know them or like them, but I don't just hate them because they were born there or because they look different. Going there, I didn't get an appreciation to like them more. There were a lot of asshole people that were screaming and yelling or kids throwing rocks at us when we drove by. I don't hate them any more or like them any more, I think they're just still people on the other side of the world that are doing their thing and I'm doing mine.

Jennifer Esparza: Makes sense. Is there anything else you want to tell me?

Spencer Johnson: No. I think that's everything!

Jennifer Esparza: You're happy to be here?

Spencer Johnson: Yeah, I'm happy to be here.

Jennifer Esparza: All right, well thank you for your interview.

Spencer Johnson: Thank you.

-----**END OF TRANSCRIPT**-----