PREFACE

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Interviewee: Dallas T. Gray
Interviewers: Joseph Foley & Nick Squires
Transcribed by Joseph Foley

Biographical details:

Joseph Foley is a junior at the University of Oregon majoring in history and minoring in political science and is a student in the Student Veterans Oral History Project under Professor Dracobly.

Nick Squires is currently a junior at the University of Oregon majoring in history and is a student in the Student Veterans Oral History Project under Professor Dracobly.

TRANSCRIPT

JOSEPH FOLEY:

My name is Joseph Foley. I'm here with my colleague Nick Squires. We are interviewing Mr. Dallas Gray. It's Sunday, February 7, about 9:45 a.m. and we are in room 248 of the Knight Library. Thanks for being here, Dallas.

DALLAS GRAY:

Yeah, no problem. It's my pleasure

FOLEY:

So, we'll just start out from the beginning. We wanted to ask you what brought you into the armed services, and what brought you to the air force?

GRAY:

I mention this story quite often in just applications and scholarships. When I was 15, I remember it pretty vividly, I was driving to my aunt and uncle's farm back in Minnesota and we took two separate vehicles. So, my two older brothers were with my mom in the truck and I was riding with my dad in the car and I remember just out of nowhere he kind of asked me what I was planning on doing going forward. And I didn't know what he was getting at so I kind of said, 'I don't know, I'd like to maybe go to college, if I can find a way to do that.' And he kind of pretty point blank gave me an ultimatum and he said, 'I gave the same speech to your brothers — any child of mine is going to give themselves up to some greater good.' He's like, 'It doesn't need to be the military, per se, you know, Peace Corps, Americore, some sort of organization, but it becomes something bigger than us to, you know, learn humility and give back.' So that was something that stuck with me and obviously meant a lot to my dad. My dad was a Vietnam vet. He voluntarily enlisted out of high school and then did two tours in Vietnam. So, sort of service and giving back was something that was pretty important to him. And, so, with that ultimatum in mind that I watched my two older brothers. They joined the air force. And when I graduated high school, there was no organization I'd rather join than where my brothers are at.

Like, if I'm going to go serve alongside someone, it's going to be them. So, that's what led me to join the air force. I joined the same base as them — the 133rd in Minnesota. And, actually I was in a pretty similar career field to my oldest brother, so we had the chance to deploy a couple time together. I think that definitely brought us a lot closer together than we had been.

FOLEY:
And that was your older brother?

GRAY:
Yeah, that was my oldest brother. So, my oldest brother is 7 years older than I am and he had joined aircraft maintenance and then my middle brother became a firefighter, so he was at the same base but kind of did a different job, and then when I joined, I became electronic warfare technician on the planes. I deployed to Afghanistan once with my oldest brother and then Germany another two times.

FOLEY:
And you joined just straight out of high school?

GRAY:
Yeah, I actually joined while I was still in high school. I knew it was something I was going to do, so I just thought, why put it off. So, when I was 17 — it was just before my 18th birthday, but I was still technically 17 — I got my parents to sign off all the paper works that they had to do since I wasn't a legal adult yet. Joined when I was 17 in my senior year of high school and then as soon as I graduated, they sent me off to basic training.

FOLEY:
Yeah, and getting the opportunity to serve with your brothers, that's incredible.

NICK SQUIRES:
Yeah, you hear about the comradery of the armed services, but you actually had that family growing up. I really think that's special.

GRAY:
Yeah. It was good to have that support, and then just have not only my parents, obviously with all of us being in, knew what we were going through. Like if I was ever having any troubles with anything, I knew both my older brothers had been through the exact thing that I was going through. So it was just good to have a support network that very accurately knows what you're going through and what it's like.

FOLEY:
And did they kind of promote it for you where you were growing up and coming up to that age? Was it something all three of you knew you would do together?

GRAY:
No, in all honestly, not at all. My oldest brother joined, and he was very close to joining the Air Force Academy or possibly the Coast Guard Academy and ended up just joining the

international guard unit. And then my middle brother was extremely close to joining and signing with the Marine Corps. I think my older brother maybe just talked to him, but that's jumping in pretty deep, and said, 'You know, the unit I'm in, it's not a bad gig.' So, at the last second, Rory changed and joined the Air Force. Then, I was in the application process of joining the Coast Guard and, same thing, last minute I just am like, you know what, I can change and alter my course or maybe just stick around home join up with my brothers for the time being.

FOLEY:

And then, how about, was your mom in the armed service?

GRAY:

No, my mom was just a, kind a farmer's daughter.

SQUIRES:

How did she feel about you joining?

GRAY:

I think she's very proud. With my parents, it was a big stress on them. It still is. My oldest brother's still in. He's made a career of it so he's been in for 18 years now. But, when all three of us were in, and especially when some of us would be deploying at the same time, it's a big stress on them. And they always say — and I totally agree — it was harder on them than it was on us. We knew that we could go to Afghanistan and be fine, but just the unknown was a big stress on them. They had a hard time with it, but they were always supportive of anything we decided to do.

FOLEY:

It seems that you kind of have a real strong philosophy on service and your own kind of service.

GRAY:

Yeah, so that was something part of the ultimatum that my dad gave me. He said, 'The key to living a life worth living is to give yourself up to a greater good and to always try to give more back to society than you take.' As a 15-year-old, I don't know, I just couldn't comprehend it. But, after joining the Air Force, and especially going overseas, it was like realizing how much bigger and more complex the world is beyond just my scope of view, and that I'm in a position where I can give back and try to help other people rather than just fulfill my own needs. And, so ever since I've graduated, that's something that has stuck with me, and so whenever I can, I try to find volunteer opportunities or, like, with the trajectory of my career path, I try to find ways that I can just give back — keep working in service to others.

SQUIRES:

I have a question about your service — you said you were an electronic war fare technician?

GRAY:
Yeah.

SQUIRES:
So, does that mean you were on one of the radar planes? Like, a Century Plane?

GRAY:
Close. So, electronic warfare is the blanket term for any sort of offensive and defensive capabilities of an aircraft. So, yeah, it could be anything from working on A-WAC systems and radar listening systems. I was assigned to a C-130 unit, so my scope was all the aircraft's defensive capabilities. So primarily systems that detect enemy missiles launched against a plane and then the systems that detour it, primarily chaff flare or infrared laser systems that can essentially track onto a laser and burn it's heat seeking radicals with a laser.

SQUIRES:
That seems really exciting, to be honest with you.

GRAY:
Yeah. I loved it. It was totally something. And that was the one piece of advice my brother gave me. My oldest brother gave Rory and myself the same advice when we joined the Air Force. He said, 'Determine what you want to do for the rest of your life, like what you want your career to be, and then in the military, do something totally the opposite of that.' So he said, that way, if you do stay in the rest of your life, it's not just a huge burden of doing the same job constantly. So, yeah, that was my brother's philosophy. And at the time, he was trying to become an airline pilot. But, when he joined the Air Force, he said, I'm not going to do anything with the flying — I just want to, like, work maintenance and become essentially an electrician. When Rory joined, my brother told him that, but Rory ignored him. He had always wanted to be a fire fighter, and nothing was going to stop him, so that's what he did. And then, I knew from the get-go that I eventually wanted to study architecture. So I thought, 'What's something that sounds cool, but has nothing to do with building and planning?' And missile defense systems sounded pretty awesome.

SQUIRES:
Let's talk about things that influenced your positioning overseas. So, Joint Forge, that was early in 2004? And was that in Bosnia.

GRAY:
The Air Force is really complicated in their deployments, so the planes are what we are attached to, so we just go where the planes go. They are pretty high-value assets, and so whenever possible, they try not to stage the aircraft in hot conflict zones. So, we were serving Joint Forge but I was stationed out of Ramstein, Germany and then would fly missions out of Germany into all the other theaters of operations. So for Joint Forge and my first deployments were that I was in Germany, which was a pretty good first to kind of get your feet wet to being overseas. And then, once we started deploying to Afghanistan, that was, like, mission critical that you needed the planes in the air unit to respond pretty quickly, so for those, we actually went into country.

FOLEY:

Just to take a step back, it sounds like obviously with the family preparation you had an idea of what to expect. But, do you mind describing initial training and boot camp?

GRAY:

Yeah, that's where it was great to have brothers who had gone through it because they gave me a lot of advice on just the best way to survive it. And the two things that stand out are just the general comment of like, keep your head down. You're not there in any way to like make ripples. And you're not there to bring anything to the program. You're not going to change or add anything to basic training, so just keep your head down and do exactly what they are telling you to do. Let them take care of training you. Don't try to be an individual in any way. And then the second thing that maybe helped most was, they just told me, look at everyone you've seen in the military and obviously there's a lot of great people in the military, but there's also, like any career field, some people who just make you shake your head a little bit. But even just on the sheer numbers, he said, look at everyone you've ever seen in the military, and they've all made it through basic training. Everyone has done it. It's not an insurmountable thing. You can get through it, too. It was definitely good motivation and advice to help me get through it. I did just fine in basic training — didn't have any problems.

FOLEY:

Where did you do basic training at?

GRAY:

So, that was down in San Antonio — god, where was it? — Lackland. I mess up the base names since it's been so long, but yeah, Lackland is the primary and that's where all the Air Force basic training it. I know some of the other services have a couple of different spots for boot camp, but everyone in the Air Force goes through San Antonio.

FOLEY:

Did you like it down there?

GRAY:

I kind of liked everything. I liked just the structure. I kind of dug the demands of basic training.

FOLEY:

What were all the places you were stationed just after training?

GRAY:

So, I did my initial basic training in San Antonio and then from there you go on to tech school, where you get your actual vocational training for whatever job you are going to do. Scheduling wise, they couldn't just fit me in straight out of basic training, so once I graduated high school, I think it was like a week or two weeks after graduation that I went to basic training for the month-and-a-half, two months. Then, after that, they flew me back home for a couple of months and I was working at the home base back in St. Paul until a slot opened up that I could go

through training. From there, I went to Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi. I got the first stage of my training, and so that was — I'm trying to think of when I flew down there — like, end of August, and I was there through Christmas, so that was what was called "electronic principles." It was just the intro kinds of electrics — how electronics work. And then, from there, my parents paid for a ticket just to fly me home for Christmas, but over Christmas break was a kind of transitional period just to see my parents, and from there I flew to Sheppard Air Force Base in Witchita Falls, Texas and was there from the end of December through May. That's where I got my actual electronic warfare training. And from there, back to Minnesota. I just started doing my commitment at the 1-33rd. As I had time, I started going full time at school and would get several semesters done at school and then would have to drop out to go on a deployment, then come back and just re-enroll, get some more education, and then leave again.

FOLEY:

And then, how many deployments did you have?

GRAY:

I lose track. I did two to Afghanistan, to Bagram, I went in '07 and then again in '08 into '09. And then probably another half-dozen to Germany. And then one to Norway. It was kind of a special training. It's called NOREX and it's a troop exchange between the U.S. army and the Norwegian army, and it's specifically set up with an army unit out of Minnesota called the Red Bulls. So, every year, they send about 100 soldiers to Norway to train with the Norwegian army. Then, every couple years, they pick a few Air Force people just to be part of the experience, and so in February of '09, I was picked to go to Norway, so I got to spend a month training with both the U.S. Army and the Norwegian army is the instructors.

FOLEY:

Is that a random selection?

GRAY:

You had to apply for it, and it was merit based. They try to pick the best representatives of our unit to represent the Air Force.

FOLEY:

Did you enjoy that?

GRAY:

Yeah. That was unbelievable. It was kind of a mini winter-warfare, mountain-survival training, so it was in February, in the heart of winter and we did a lot of snow camping and skiing and stuff. I'd been a Nordic skier my entire life, so I was pretty strong at that. It culminated with skiing up to the top of a mountain range and then, in the big drifts at the top, it was above the tree line, and digging out snow caves and spending the night in a snow cave. Yeah, it was pretty awesome.

FOLEY:

How long were you there?

GRAY:

It was just under a month, I want to say about three weeks, maybe just under three weeks. It was real fun.

SQUIRES:

What was your experience like in the Norwegian military? Was it a lot like your experience in the American military? Was there any parallels that you can draw between the two experiences?

GRAY:

Their structure and just their openness was completely different. They seemed like they had a much larger female soldier presence. They were much more relaxed and less segregated and gender-specified than the U.S. military. I thin they even have, like, coed barracks. They seemed a lot more — I hate to use the word 'liberal' — but, yeah, I guess like open and accepting in the way their military was run, whereas the U.S. is still steeped in their tradition and segregation. So, yeah, they seemed a lot more open and accepting and kind of loose compared to U.S. — and even just seeing the way they talked to each other, there wasn't just the rigid procedure that the U.S. had. A lot more relaxed, so yeah, it was a different experience to see how they operated.

FOLEY:

Did you guys work well together?

GRAY:

They were great. Good instructors and unbelievably friendly and inviting. It was a real good experience.

FOLEY:

I was going to ask about your experience with your first deployment …

GRAY:

Yeah, so my first deployment was, I don't know, it was a little nerve-racking and it was a big test. So — I'm trying to think — I came back from tech school in kind of early summer of what would have been '05 and I spent the summer working out at the base and doing on the job training, and then that fall I did my first semester at the University of Minnesota. Then, it was that next February. So, since my training, I'd had less than a year of on-the-job experience and so that was the biggest thing. Just, you realize how little you know and how young and naïve you are, and the incredible trust and dependency they have on you to — I mean, they obviously view you as a tool that they invested a lot of time and money and training on and they expect you to preform — but it was a lot of pressure being my first time deploying. I was like, 'I sure hope I can do what I'm sent here to do.' So, my first deployment was definitely nerve-racking. There was just a lot of self doubt that I would be able to do my job. My entire time in the military, that was always in my mind. There's just a lot of people are depending on me to do what I'm supposed to do. But as you get more training and the resources to do your job better, you get more comfortable and that becomes a quieter voice in the back of your head. It never went away,

but it was certainly pretty loud that first deployment. My first deployment was one that I went on with my oldest brother, and so he was there to kind of hold my hand with anything that I had doubts about and make sure I was where I was supposed to be and on time. And I relied on him a lot.

FOLEY:

So where was your first deployment?

GRAY:

The first one was to Germany. It was for about just shy of three weeks. The Germany deployment, they typically do them for about two-and-a-half-week intervals and so, like, travel time on each end. Sometimes you just go for one rotation or sometimes our base would link two or three rotations together. Just by the nature of my job, our shop was pretty small. There was only five of us because when we are stateside, they don't really use our systems. They aren't concerned about anti-missile threats, but they're heavily used once we get overseas. So, they keep our shop small because we're not needed when we're at home, but when it comes time to deploy, they need as many of us as — let's say — electricians. So, there's like 20-plus people in that shops and in guidance and control, there's like 20 people in that shop, and we have to send the same number of people overseas — say, like, two or three guys — when we deploy, so just the nature of my job, I tended to deploy a lot. So, for those Germany rotations, when they would link two or three rotations together, I'd tend to go for all of them, so I'd be there for, like, a month-plus. So, I'd go with one group of guys, and pretty much all of them would leave once the new group of guys would come, and I'd just stay. And it was the same thing in Afghanistan. They'd tend to try to do shorter rotations. That one was more because the desert environment was incredibly hard on the planes. The planes can't take being there for a year at a time, which is what differentiates typical Air Force deployment stays from, say, the Army. The Army might deploy a unit for a year-plus, and then they go home and have a couple years before they deploy again. The Air Force does anywhere from 2-6 month deployment stays, and does them, like, every year-and-a-half. That's why I went in '07 and just did one rotation in that time, and then when I went back in '08 to '09, I did all three rotations, one with one group of guys, watched them leave, and then a new group of guys came, did the middle chunk with them, watched them leave, and then a new group of guys came in and we went home once they were done. (24:13)

FOLEY:

Did you find that beneficial? For me, I can imagine coming and going so much …

GRAY:

If you go to Germany, even two-and-a-half or three weeks, it seems like you just get there and are just getting set up and you leave again, so it's hard to get set up with a solid routine. You can go for a couple deployments when they're shorter. When I was in Afghanistan, the second time was for six months, and even that was just starting to get into typical routine and day-to-day life and getting comfortable with what I was doing. The only thing that wasn't as great, especially in the desert, with length of rotations was watching the guys go. In the beginning, it wasn't as bad because I was like, 'Yeah, I'm here for another two rotations.' And then watching the second guys come in and experience everything new, and you're like, I've already been here a couple of months. And then you watch them be so excited to leave. And you're like, 'I've been

here months before you, and I'm going to be here months after you.' That was on a micro-scale what was kind of hard to deal with, but I just tried to stay humble and look at the soldiers and the marines that are there for 12-plus months, and I just realized I had it easy, so I tried not to complain.

SQUIRES:

That's good perspective.

FOLEY:

Did you get to spend much time outside the base?

GRAY:

In Afghanistan, obviously there wasn't much time outside the base. We were pretty confined. But in Germany, whenever we could, as long as our commander was okay with it, they would try to set us up. There was a rigorous schedule, but we tried to do a true 48-on, 48-off. So we'd get there and we'd split the entire package in half, so there was an A shift and a B shift. Typically how it works in the military is that you do 12-on, 12-off. But, then you're just there everyday. So our commanders, if everyone was fine with it, would try to do it like fire fighters and do 48-on, 48-off. So, it was a long 48 hours. You were there to launch every plane and we'd have 2 or 3 planes there. Sometimes we'd get up a O-300 and start prepping the planes to launch, and launch one them and then go back to catch breakfast at, say, O-600 then go prep the next plane to launch, and that one would leave at say, 10-hundred, so then you'd have an hour-and-a-half to grab lunch and grab shut eye and then the next plane is there to launch or you'd have planes coming back so you'd have to, you know, a true 48 hours. But they do that so you'd have a true 48 hours off. In Germany, you'd get off and get your buddy or a couple guys and you'd all chip in on a rental car, and it was almost like a contest to see how far can I get, what can I go see. We ended up going to France, Luxembourg, Belgium. We tried to go to Czech Republic and that kind of fell through. But, Austria, Switzerland and Italy were all just in our rental car. So, you just get up early one morning, hop in your car, and drive for 8, 10 hours down to Italy and then you get there, like, late afternoon and just explore. Explore in the morning until afternoon, then hop in your car and drive back. We tried to see as much as possible when we were in Europe.

SQUIRES:

Now, in the media, there's this idea that American servicemen aren't exactly liked by people in Europe and people in the Middle East. Did you have any negative experiences being off-base in Europe, in terms of, like, people singling you out or people not treating you very well? Those nasty things that you hear in the media, did you experience any of that?

GRAY:

We tried to avoid that as best we could. Any time we would deploy, we would get pretty good intel briefings and they would track through every country we were going through, and every possible country that we could be going through, and they pretty in-depth go over what is the local government doing, is there any political unrest, what are the specific targets that Americans could face. So they do a pretty good job on briefing us on what we could face. Germany wasn't so bad and central Europe, pretty good allies. But, given that we worked on cargo planes, we flew with our planes, like, physically on our planes and being C-130s as prop

planes was incredibly slow, so for instance when we would go to Afghanistan, we'd fly from Minnesota to St. John's Newfoundland and spend a night. Usually from like, Newfoundland, Canada to, like, England and spend a night. From England, we'd fly to like Turkey or Greece to Romania or the Republic of Georgia, and then we'd spend a couple of nights there just to get in sync with the schedulers and operations in Afghanistan before we fly in-country. So, the first couple nights are fine, and usually when you're in a country like Turkey or Romania or the Republic of Georgia, you've got to start being a little more diligent and make sure you're not putting yourself in a situation to get taken advantage of. So, yeah, I didn't really witness anything first-hand, but we've heard lots of stories and they definitely warn us. A big one is just that they tend to prey on American servicemen because they know we don't know local rules and customs and if we were to get in trouble with the law, there's all sorts of stories of people going into a bar or a club to buy what they think is just a drink and essentially getting shook down by the property owner whose like, 'There's a minimum' or 'You've got to pay a couple hundred dollars if you want to get out.' And they know that they are going to get away with it because just as a serviceman, you can't call the police and expect them to be on your side. So, we heard lots of stories of that, of people getting kind of shook down for money. So definitely, when you're in countries you're a little less sure about, you try to stay hyper-vigilant. You travel in groups that aren't so big, it's a big target that you're a big group of servicemen, but not so small you can be preyed up. So, typically 4-to-6. You get in groups of 4-to-6 and you still try to have a good time, because some of my best nights were in Bucharest, Romania, but you definitely got to be careful to make sure you're not getting in over your head.

FOLEY:

In Romania, what made that … was it just time, place?

GRAY:

Yeah, it was time, place. It was my first trip over to Afghanistan … that was … my first trip over in country, the last night we stayed was in Turkey, but it was the first place we stayed coming out of country in Afghanistan. So, just kind of a time and place of being out at the desert and knowing you were headed back home to your family and the, like, I'd been in Germany before. But typically we just visited a bunch of small towns. We were stationed in Kaiserslautern, which is maybe of comparable size to Eugene, here. It's not necessarily a big city. But then we went to Bucharest and it's a city of, like, a couple million and it was probably the largest city I had ever been in at that time. So, it was just kind of a cultural awakening to be in a city that, like, it would be like living in a small town and going to New York City for the first time. Just like the awe of the size of it and the sheer number of people and I just remember going out on my balcony at two in the morning and I couldn't sleep and I was looking out over a major intersection and seeing just, like, a traffic jam at two a.m. It's just a city so full of people, it never sleeps. I'm sure part of it is that I'm just, like, romanticizing it from coming out of the desert, but I enjoyed it. We ended up going back another two times during the second deployment to Afghanistan we staged out of there and then on the way back we staged out of there again, so yeah, it was just a very unique city and didn't have any problems.

FOLEY:

Did you get a chance with brother at all to have any free time outside the base?

GRAY:

Yeah, I won't get into too much detail, but so when I deployed that very first time to Joint Forge with my brother, I was — what would I have been, 19? — yeah, it was before my 20th birthday, so yeah, 19-year-old going over to Europe and it was legal for us to drink over there. Even in Canada on the way over and so I was a pretty straight-laced kid growing up. I didn't have a high school party side or anything, so some of my very first times getting inebriated were with my older brother, so yeah, that was pretty cool to share. And not only sharing that with him, but in a place like Germany.

FOLEY:

Yeah, of all the places to start …

GRAY:

Yeah, we got to do it. And then on a couple of trips to Germany after that, I'd been in a couple years, and yeah, we took a couple of trips together. We took a trip to Brussels and Belgium together one time, with two other guys. We got out and saw some stuff together. He's a pretty big fitness nut, so he'd always drag me out and want to go on hikes or runs, so yeah, he was always dragging me along to work out with him. We did quite a bit together.

FOLEY:

I can imagine that for your parents, that must have been such a huge …

GRAY:

Yeah, I think it would help their worry some, at least to know that … in Germany, it eased their worry some to know that we could take care of each other and someone was always looking out for us. I think from a parent's perspective, that's maybe the biggest thing. They don't know that anyone is necessarily looking out for their kid. Having a brother there was a relief because they knew that we could help each other out if we needed to.

FOLEY:

I was going to ask a little bit more about life on base, typically. I know you said you did the two days on, two days off initially, but even like what your actual job kind of entailed, as much as you can.

GRAY:

Yeah, so life on base, like specific to maybe Germany was just, like, we'd stay in a dorm. Our unit would try to set us up on a base right outside Ramstein which is the main Air Force base, and then surrounding Ramstein, there's a bunch of smaller bases that have nothing but barracks on them. So, they'd try to set us up with those, just so we could have a little more privacy and not be on, like, the big base where, you know, regulation and all that stuff is as strictly controlled. So we would live in a pretty secluded base. It was usually underutilized, so maybe just us and a couple of other Air Force units there, but we were pretty isolated and kind of could do our own thing when we were at where we were living. And they'd provide us vans, so we would carpool for the commute to the air base for our 48 hours on and then we just hung out at a little shop right outside the flight line right next to our planes, and we just tried to hang out

there. Kind of, out of sight, out of mind because coming not only from an Air Force unit, which people, like, the broader military tends to razz the Air Force for how easy and lax we have it, and for being a guard unit from Minnesota, that even just takes it to another level. Like, we were very serious about our job and we had really high mission completion rates, but a lot of people weren't too bothered by, like, marching around. We just thought, as long as we're doing our job to the utmost, just leave us be. So when we were on the base, we'd try to stay out of sight because no one wants to try to go walk to the BX to get chewed out because they're like, walking wrong or not in step, so we tried to stay pretty secluded and keep to ourselves and just focus on keeping the planes flying.

FOLEY:

I have a good buddy who was in the Air Force and some of his funniest stories, especially in the desert, are interactions with other groups and those dynamics that you were hinting at.

GRAY:

In the desert, that definitely came out a little more because it was just unavoidable. They warned us that unlike previous deployments, we are fully going to be surrounded by active duty military and some people who are much more stringent on the rules. By nature, I'm always a rule follower, so I always made sure to dot my I's and cross my T's and do everything right, but there are definitely stories of guys from our unit not paying attention and walking by an officer and forgetting to salute him and getting chewed out for that. It's definitely, coming from the National Guard side, some of the guys had a hard time jumping back into the super rigid mindset, but I didn't have much problem flipping between the two.

FOLEY:

What kind of difference would you explain being on a base in Germany and being on base in Afghanistan? What does that look like?

GRAY:

From the work side of it, it's not a ton different. You go to your work area and hang out and go out and work on the planes and from that side of it, it was no different. And then at the same time, at both of them we still tried to have as much fun and comradery as possible. But, I think in the desert, there's always this stress behind it. It's always like a forced fun. We played a lot of table tennis and do a lot of things like that, and tons of working out. A lot of people use the desert to get in shape, so there was a lot of activities like that, but there, it was always an underlying to stress that you're doing it just to keep your mind off of like, a lot of the guys I was with had wives and kids back home and stuff and were worried about them. So a lot of the fun times in Bagrum had an underlying nervousness to it, you're just trying to keep your mind busy. But in Germany, it was a little more pure, like, we're actually going to go out and do it because we wanted to do something fun together, and let's go do it. So they were similar, but there's always that underlying stress in the desert.

FOLEY:

How often, and or say with family in different areas, were you able to communicate back and forth with family?

GRAY:

It was surprisingly, like maybe even easier to get in touch with the family back home when I was in BAGRUM, Afghanistan, just because they realize how critical it is. To be honest, the communication sometimes would be spotty. Like, if you were able to get on the phone, it would be the things where there was like a 5 second delay in the audio, and so there was some things that just the technical logistics of it was a little harder in the desert but I feel it was just more readily available. In Germany, you kind of use your own device and try to find a place that had internet or a computer. They didn't readily have phones to call home, just because they figured it isn't the desert, we don't need to provide that for you. If you want to call home, you just figure out a way to do it yourself. It was easier to get in touch with family back home, but when I was in Germany I don't know if I ever really called my folks. The only time I did desperately try to get in touch with my family, I was deployed in Germany without my brothers, so just my unit — you know, another 30 guys from Minnesota — and I don't know if you guys remember back in like — what year was it? — like, 2007, when in Minnesota the I-35 briGRAYe collapsed over the Mississippi. We were in Germany at the time, being a Minnesota unit and so we got up and were getting ready for work and we flip on the TV with limited a.f.m. but you could get generally Fox news or something, so I flip on the news and I see that there is a briGRAYe collapse and people dead and people missing from your home town and so that was the only time that it was hectic, like, how do I get in touch. And then just knowing the details of trying to piece it together of when it collapsed and knowing that was the way my brother drives home and being terrified that it was right at the time of his commute, and so just trying to get in touch with family, and there was one computer that we shared, and people primarily used it to look up things to do and go see and maybe train schedules if they didn't have a car and so everyone trying to cram in and just shoot off an email and then not being able to check it and not having access to phone and that was the only time in Germany I was pretty desperate to get in touch back home and didn't have the best communication available.

FOLEY:

Yeah, I can imagine that would be stressful, to say the least. I was going to ask you, obviously your family I really dedicated to service, so I kind of know the direction of the answer, but just your perception of the armed services before you joined, and did that change at all when you were involved in the armed services? Is that different now?

GRAY:

No, it did evolve. I guess I didn't know what to expect going in. I didn't know that I had a lot or preconceived notions about what it was going to be like in the military, as a whole or on any scale. I don't know that I had a lot of thoughts going into it. And I think maybe it came from after my father gave me that speech and told me it was something that I should do. Like, maybe I purposely didn't want it built up in my mind. Once he told me that, I kind of knew I'd join the military, just given, at the time, you know my oldest brother would have already joined. I don't know if my middle brother would have signed up yet, but just knowing that my father is a Vietnam vet, I knew that I'd join the military if I was going to do anything. So I think I tried to not build up expectations or preconceived notions of what it would be like, so I kind of came into it and took it like it is. The one thing I'll say is that the military is way more complex, just like a whole, all the people who make up the military is a lot more diverse and complex than a lot of

people give it credit, and for good and bad. So some people have notions that it's just like a bunch of valorous people trying to do their best, but that's not what led everyone there. Some people were just led there because it was the only way to keep them out out of trouble. Some people were led there because they didn't have any other way out of their old way of life. So it's just all walks of life and just like any job, or at the university, you are going to have some people who are just really bright and inspiring and make you feel incredibly good about the organization you're a part of and you are going to have some pretty questionable thoughts and ideologies and ethics, so it's just like a university. Everyone perceives a university as being full of a bunch of young, educated people but there's a broad walk of life of every different student. So that's my biggest take away. I enjoyed my six years and I got out just because the deployment rates were getting so high, and with it being a small shop, I think I was just burning myself out pretty quick. And then balancing my education with the military, I felt like I was putting in a lot of work and effort to try to get my education in architecture and I didn't want to stay in the military and see if I could just get my education in architecture and so I decided to get out, but when I separated it was always with the contingency of I could go back in at any time. And so I separated just to make sure I could finish my degree and without having to take too long. My oldest brother ended up getting his bachelor's degree, but he's seven years older than me and go his degree one semester before I did and so it took him six years longer to get it than I did, and I didn't want to spend all that time and money working on a degree to either not finish or not do anything with it. And so I say that just to say that I got out knowing I could always get back in and without any hard feelings toward the military and so I do always, almost on a daily or weekly basis, miss my time in the military and I know that I could have been incredibly happy and fulfilled if I had just made it a career, but I chose to get out just to see if I could make a go of life otherwise. And so I have no, to kind of round back to your original question, I hold the military in the highest regard with it's positives and negatives. I know there's a lot of unhealthy things about the military, but there's also a lot of good. So I appreciate it for what it is.

FOLEY:

I think, yeah, especially growing up with a father that had served in Vietnam, you kind of saw the extreme that the American public can bring about, which is quite off base, in regard to what's actually going on. So, you said you left with the idea that you could always go back in, so is that still something that you entertain?

GRAY:

It is still in the back of my mind. It's just a timing thing, like if I were to join up with the Guard unit again, like, making sure I'm in a position in my life that it's not going to disrupt anything. Like, I'm in grad school at the moment, so it's not the time to do it and leading out of grad school it's going to be finding out what I'm doing for the rest of my life so I always keep that option open. If I did, it would just be a matter of making sure it was the right time and the right choice to make. But not only have I thought I could, but it's always my contingency. So when I was applying to grad school, I had pretty low — what's the word? — not self-esteem, but I was just pretty unsure of myself, so that was the agreement I made is that just, timeline wise, I separated from the military and a couple months later, a semester later, I graduated with my degree and then worked four years at an architecture firm in Minnesota and then decided that I was going to apply to grad school. So I applied to six grad schools and I made a promise to myself that I was just nervous and I was sure I wasn't going to get in to any of the schools I

applied to, and I made a deal with myself that if God declined or rejected all six schools that I applied to, that I would take it as a sign that I gave it a shot, but architecture's not for me and I'd re-enlist in the military or I'd use my degree to become an officer, but there was a point where I was on the door step of, if grad school falls through, the military is the rest of my life. So it's always right there. I thought I was pretty successful and I enjoyed my time in the military and it wouldn't be a bad way to spend the rest of my life. I'm just kind of taking the architecture thing one day at a time.

FOLEY:

Yeah, that's another thing we wanted to ask about was just kind of, from what we understand you're a Tillman scholar?

GRAY:

Yeah, so I applied this last year, before I came to Oregon and was very, very fortunate to get selected. To be honest, when I applied, I was just searching for scholarships for military vets. I knew grad school was going to be expensive and I needed additional ways to help fund it and I was just looking for scholarships for veterans and I came across the Tillman Foundation, and there's a big part of guilt inside me that I didn't know what the Tillman Foundation was, and what their mission and objective was and so I just applied to it as if it was another scholarship, and I guess that's the only redeeming things is that I know in my heart of hearts that I in no way tried to pander or tried to address who they were, I was just incredibly true to myself. Like, this is who I am and this is what I want to do, and just thought of it as another scholarship, and it wasn't until they contacted me and said that I made it through the initial selection process and outlined that it was like this multi-stage process and there will be background checks and we will conduct interviews and then suddenly, I was like I didn't realize, it was like, you apply for a scholarship and you get it or you don't. So it wasn't until they told me that I made it through the first round that I researched what the foundation was, and then I was confident that I wouldn't get it. I just read everyone's stories and there were people who had traumatic life experiences and had turned that into an incredible drive to better the world and there's incredible humanitarians who just want to serve, and in my application, I pretty much just talked about sustainable architecture, because that's what I want to do. So, I didn't think I'd get it, but I'm very fortunate that they saw something in me that they wanted to support. So, they selected me and went through all the process and found out I was selected and was unbelievably happy and excited. Then, pretty shortly after that, they flew us to Chicago to attend the annual leadership summit with all the other scholars and a bunch of returning scholars. That was the first time, meeting everyone and hearing all their stories, was maybe like the single most inspirational and humbling thing I've ever done in my life. I've said it before but without a doubt, those are some of the greatest human beings on the planet. Everyone just so unbelievably dedicated to giving back and serving others and incredibly inspirational. Just drawing on them to push my own education forward.

FOLEY:

Do you mind explaining just a little bit about what the Tillman scholarship is?

GRAY:

Yeah, so it was founded in honor of Pat Tillman who went to ASU and was an all-star collegiate athlete and then was drafted into the NFL and was an NFL player for several years, and then after 9-11 kind of took stock of his life and realized maybe there was something more that he could give. He'd enjoyed his career in the NFL, but knew there was more that he could do, and so him and his brother enlisted in the Army and went overseas, and unfortunately he was killed in action over there. So the foundation came about because it was, given his nature and his career in the NFL, so it was a pretty high-profile story, and just given the nature of Pat himself, there's a tremendous outpouring of support and Pat's wife and Pat's brother-in-law just started getting money and donations and people just saying do something to honor Pat. And they didn't know what to do, so it started small and they started to funnel this money into scholarships for students and student veterans and the foundation just grew from there so they thought, let's expand this and make it kind of a national thing, and let's find the best and brightest, and servicemen and veterans and their spouses and let's give them the support. Kind of there thing was people living in the way that Pat lived — people who are trying to better themselves through education, but people who are dedicated to giving back, and yeah, people who are contributing, so yeah, that's how the foundation came to be and that's their mission objective. Just funnel support through the scholars and know that it's not just a scholarship of people who had a hardship story and to help them out, I truly think of it as an investment of investing in me and all the other scholars and knowing that hopefully we are going to go on to help others. That's kind of the rundown of the Tillman Foundation.

FOLEY:

So, has that heightened any of your service to fellow veterans?

GRAY:

It does. Yeah, it's something that when I was in my undergrad and just in the military, I had zero interaction with the fellow student veteran population. It just, I knew that I was in the military and that was all I needed and I didn't really need to reach out and connect with other veterans. Then, after becoming part of the Tillman Foundation and just seeing the network within the Tillman Foundation of all the military members and their spouses, once I got here, I realized that even on a school level, let's get involved with. I don't get over there as often as I'd like but I try to whenever I have free time, just swing over to the student veteran's center and try to spend some time going to any events that they have. I gave a speech at the Veteran's Day ceremony on campus, so yeah, it definitely, just through seeing the comradery, the Tillman Foundation made me want to be a part of that. After the summit, we all go in different directions. There's people going to Harvard and Stanford and all these other schools, and so we kind of scatter across the country and so I knew that I wanted to feel that network on here, so I try to do as much as I can with what little free time I have, I try to get in touch with other veterans. And then there's another Tillman scholar who is in the area — Mathew McCullum — and so I've reached out with him and we get lunch or dinner together every couple months.

SQUIRES:

It sounds like they've kind of selected a lot of guys and gals doing things right, living right. It sounds like you're pretty on top of things. Like, among my buddies, you'd be someone

who would kind of standout, who they could look up to and, like, a good example of how to keep moving forward and dedicate yourself to service.

GRAY:

Yeah, if I can be kind of corny, the closing line I used in my Veteran's Day speech, I realize I'm not in a position to tell anyone what to do. I don't hold any sort of authority, but I do always tell people to keep that drive of service and to try to give back in whatever way they can. Know that there's a lot of people in need out there and we are all in good positions to give back in whatever way we can and so I don't actively ever try to be a role model or an inspiration figure to anyone, but I constantly try to remind anyone I meet to have a sense of service and what that means.

FOLEY:

We wanted to wrap up just asking would you go through this process again, doing military service, and what did you gain that stands out to you the most?

GRAY:

I wouldn't change anything that I've ever done in my life. As I get more mature, there's obviously regrets of like, I wish I would have taken things more seriously. I have a lot of things I feel I could have improved upon in my life, but I certainly have no regrets and would go through everything that I've been through again. And as far as the most meaningful takeaway, again, it all just goes back to that ultimatum my dad gave me. Trying to give back more to society than you take. He did that obviously to just give me that push, and through the entire process and all my time in the military and through being involved in the Tillman Foundation, everything in some roundabout way has just reinforced that concept of just trying to give back more than you take. I don't want to use the word 'being a burden on society' but if we can all just be producers, the world will be a pretty good place, and so that's just the big takeaway from the whole thing.

SQUIRES:

With how positive dedicated your dad was with reinforcing this drive for service, do you feel that your experiences, will you give your kids the same advice when it comes to military services?

GRAY:

I would maybe even give them the same ultimatum that my dad gave me, from the stand point that he never said that it had to be military. He said that there were options. It didn't matter what. So that's the takeaway. I would never force my children to join the military if that's not what they wanted to do, but I think I would give the same speech that you need to do something to realize that there's a whole lot more to this world than just you. I know through the military made me mature pretty quickly and I like to think that all my military experience makes me pretty grounded in reality, and that's something that as a parent, your job is to raise your children to the best that you can, and make them the best people that they can. I don't know that I could give them that grounding and humbling experience on my own. So, I would encourage them, whether it's the Peace Corps or some kind of mission trip where you have the exposure to realize that there's a whole lot more than just you.

FOLEY:
Any closing words?

GRAY:
No, I think just the theme of continued service. That's why I live my life and I think that came across. If that's the one takeaway, I'm happy.

FOLEY:
Thank you again for taking the time to contribute to the project and for your service.
[End of interview]