

PREFACE

November 20, 2011

1300 Hours

Rennie's Landing

Eugene, Oregon

Interview duration: 49 minutes, 47 seconds

Interviewee: Sean Jin

Interviewer: Alexander Dracobly

Transcribed by Davyd Hamrick

TRANSCRIPT

Alex Dracobly:

Alright here we go. This is November 20th; Tuesday afternoon it's about one o'clock. And I'm Alex Dracobly I'm going to be conducting an interview with-

Sean Jin:

Sean Jin.

Alex Dracobly:

And we are at Rennie's Bar and Restaurant, which explains the background noise. And maybe I should say this Sean is having a beer-

Sean Jin:

Yes I am.

Alex Dracobly:

And I'm drinking coffee. And before I start I want to say that um, I've known Sean for probably seven years now.

Sean Jin:

Going on, yes.

Alex Dracobly:

Yes, somewhere around seven years. I first met Sean in the very first edition of my Iraq War class back in summer 2007 so I guess it's been 5 years.

Sean Jin:

Uh huh.

Alex Dracobly:

After that Sean took several more classes with me and I got to know him a bit, so that will explain for anyone reading this why it is that I seem to know a bit more than I should about Sean's background. So let's just start. I happen to know you did ROTC¹ here-

Sean Jin:

Mmhmm

Alex Dracobly:

And so maybe you can say something about why you decided to do ROTC.

Sean Jin:

So, it was the spring term, or, yeah, it was the spring term or winter term of my freshman year and I had been looking for a summer job, something to do, make a little bit of money. And in my student mailbox was this little slip that talked about the Army ROTC Leader's Training Course. And, my first thought was to throw it away, just whatever. And I held onto it for a moment and I thought, well, this is something that as a kid I was always interested, you know, playing soldier whatever. It was kind of one of those off-hand thoughts and I thought a little more about it and you know what, this is something I wouldn't normally do. And it just seemed an interesting challenge to do, and to be honest it kinda scared me the thought of doing something like this -

Alex Dracobly:

Chuckles

Sean Jin:

And so I thought, "Well, let's go for it." So I contacted the Army ROTC unit on campus and they actually got me into some classes in the spring term where I got to do a bit of -

¹ ROTC: Reserve Officers' Training Corps. One of four ways to become a commissioned officer in the US armed forces, along with OCS, military academies (West Point, Annapolis, etc.), or by direct commission (for physicians, lawyers, etc). The University of Oregon offers a ROTC program for the US Army.

Alex Dracobly:

And you were still in high school?

Sean Jin:

I was a freshman in college.

Alex Dracobly:

Oh, OK, a freshman in college.

Sean Jin:

I said “Hey, I want to do this leaders training course in the summer,” and they said, “OK, great, why don’t you do some classes with us here in spring term and then you can go and go do that course.” And so I did what they call basic military science and military science lab where you actually put on the uniform every Thursday and you would do very, very basic training. And you would go on the weekend on field exercises up on near a military base near Astoria.² So that was basically the beginning of my ROTC life.

Alex Dracobly:

So what year was that?

Sean Jin:

That was in 2006 so the 2005-2006 school year.

Alex Dracobly:

And I remember you telling me your parents weren’t too enthusiastic about this.

Sean Jin:

That’s correct. So I called my dad after I signed up for this program and said, “Oh, I’m thinking about joining the Army.” And this was after I started the military science classes. They were

² Likely Camp Rilea in Warrenton, OR.

okay with me taking the classes but I actually really liked it and thought this was really cool. And part of it was because in the beginning when they're trying to recruit you they throw all the really cool stuff at you, you know. I got to ride in a helicopter and shoot an M-60³

Alex Dracobly:

Rappel down a-

Sean Jin:

Yeah all that stuff. Do a fake ambush or assaults on positions, you know, all the stuff as a kid I dreamed about doing and all the stuff I saw on video games and movies. So I called my dad and said, "You know, I kinda like this army thing." And their first reaction was like, "Nooooo." And like it was 2006 so the bloodshed in Iraq was the worst it would be in the whole war. So they were very nervous about me joining, specifically the Army a ground based ...

Alex Dracobly:

So it was really the prospect of you having to serve in a war zone that scared them.

Sean Jin:

Yes, absolutely.

Alex Dracobly:

So it wasn't that they were hostile to a career in the military.

Sean Jin:

Absolutely, I think if it had been in 1995 they would have been yeah, sure go try it. So yeah, they were very nervous about that. I came back from the summer training even more motivated because it was four weeks of watered-down boot camp. So we got the whole breaking down and they got to yell at us and the drill sergeants were yelling at us. And we got to come together as a

³ Crew-served machine gun used to provide local fire support against primarily soft (unarmored) targets.

team and got to do land navigation courses and all kinds of training. And so I came back really excited about that stuff and I think that scared them even more.

So I was actually about to contract with Army ROTC, meaning sign up, you're going to be commissioned as an officer in the army after you graduate from college. And it was the day before the next school would start and I was about to contract in and I had a conversation with my parents and they said, "You know what, we decided that if you do want to do this, we won't disown you or anything but you do have a tendency to get really into things and not like them later, so maybe you should take a year of classes and see if you like it in a year." And I said, "Yeah, that's prudent."

Alex Dracobly:

That is prudent.

Sean Jin:

So I sent an email to the military instructor and said, "Sir I really like this but I was discussing it with my parents. I'm going to take a year doing the classes and then see if I still want to do this at the end of my sophomore year." He said OK. So I kept doing the classes and it's basically I kept doing ROTC but it's right around then that my actual decision to join the military changed.

Alex Dracobly:

So this all against the back drop of GWOT, Global War on Terror, how did you think that might have shaped your interest at all. I mean you describe it as having got a little bit of notice and this might be interesting.

Sean Jin:

If anything, looking back at how, at the naïve 2007 version of me, I think I wanted to go, I think I wanted to be part of that. As bad as I knew it was, I was still in that period of life where I thought, "Well, you know, it's happened to everyone else, but it probably won't happen to me and I'll come back and I can say I've been there." There was definitely a cool factor about it, you know the whole "I'm gonna go be a warrior" kind of thing. The fact that a war was going on didn't deter me if anything it might've attracted me a bit.

Alex Dracobly:

But it was more the idea of being a warrior, the adventure rather than, say, that we're in a war and there's a sense of duty or obligation.

Sean Jin:

I may have felt that, but ... maybe. I know for sure -

Alex Dracobly:

Tough to recreate this.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, for sure after 2001, after September 11th, I did feel that way, and there might have been some residual feelings. But when I think back the thing that really sticks in my mind is more the cool factor. And then, I would also be able to say yeah, I served my country, yeah, my duty. But I don't know if it was necessarily a call to duty that I felt.

Alex Dracobly:

So somewhere around this time you got involved around the "Telling Project". How did that um, how did that come about. So you're in ROTC at that point, is that right?

Sean Jin: I can't remember now.

Alex Dracobly:

I think you must've been because that's how were portrayed in the play. So the "Telling Project" was, Sean was in the first production, which was a play that was done primarily with vets who in some ways reenacted their own experiences as soldiers. So a playwright wrote up based on their interviews their roles and then they played their roles and Sean was in the very first production of this at the Vet's Center [Vet's Club] down on Chambers [Willamette St. and 16th].

Sean Jin:

So I remember “Telling”, the first “Telling” happened the fall of my junior year. So when it actually happened I had already decided not to stay with the ROTC program. But the precursor to that was meeting a guy named -

Alex Dracobly:

Oh I see! You left ROTC.

Sean Jin:

Yes.

Alex Dracobly:

Oh, I didn't understand that, OK.

Sean Jin:

Because I switched over to the Navy. But while I was in ROTC, I think it's was important to know I met a guy named Cain Kim, did you ever meet ...

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah, yeah I remember him.

Sean Jin:

And he actually introduced me to the Veterans' Association, at the time it was a kind of a conglomeration of veteran students. So I started kinda hanging out with them and thought well this would be a good experience, to hear what their experience in the military was like. See if they have anything to add to someone who might be an officer later in the military. That sorta led into the “Telling Project” because the development was going on through my sophomore year. So, by the time we had actually done “Telling” and were practicing it and preparing for it I had already signed up with the Navy.

Alex Dracobly:

So you made a decision then to leave the Army ROTC and sign, basically sign with the navy. Why?

Sean Jin:

So, When I had first walked into the army ROTC office they asked me what my GPA was, they asked me a little bit of basic info. And, you know, when they found out I had pretty good grades and I was interested, they basically started throwing money at me. And almost every other recruiter I talked to started throwing money at me. So I was kinda playing the hard to get, like, “Well, you know, they obviously want me, so I’ll see what else I can get.” At a career fair in winter term of my sophomore year, so this was early 2006, no 2007, I had gone to the career fair and I talked to a Navy recruiter that just happened to be there. And I was interested in getting his little squeeze ball and his pencils, you know all the free stuff at this career fair. And he told me about this program where I would be enlisted while I was in college and commissioned after I graduated. But no training requirements while I was in college, you just gotta keep in touch with your recruiter, keep your grades up, you know. And you get paid your recruitment leave and I realize now how big a benefit it was. At the time I was like, “Eh, sounds kinda cool, I’ll think about it”.

And I had this strange kind of epiphany a couple months later. I was sitting in my room and I said, “Wow, if I want to join the military, this is the best possible program I can do.” And at that point I had experienced a pseudo-army experience for about a year now and I realized I wasn’t the strongest and I would probably not be the top army person because they focus a lot more on strength and a lot more on on-the-ground leadership. And I started to see where my strengths were and they were a lot more on the academic side. And the Navy seemed to focus more on grades, a little less on the physical fitness side, so that appealed to me.

When I finally called the recruiter, I had to dig up his business card from the bottom of my closet and there was a frantic search, you know like, “Oh, I hope I still have it.” And I found it and I called him up, and we talked for about 45 minutes and this is a Friday night. And he finally said, “You know what Sean, you kinda sound like you’re on the fence about this, and that’s fine, but until you’re fully decided that you want to do this, I’m not really gonna work with

you, cause you're wasting my time." And I don't think he said it in so many words. I think he said it more politely, well, he might not have said it politely, either option really. He was a pretty salty guy. Anyways, he basically said that, and I thought, you know what, we ended the phone conversation, and I said, this was the first time I've been challenged to go through with this and that was more attractive to me than any of these other guys who had just thrown money at me, they said, "Yeah we can do this, we promise you that." This guy says "I don't promise you anything if you want to do this ...

Server:

Do you want some more, do you want a warm up, some caffeine?

Alex Dracobly:

Actually I'll have a beer, whatever that thing was.

Sean Jin:

It was Jubal Ale, it's kind of a darker ... I'll have a Hef.

Server:

What's that?

Alex Dracobly:

That's a recorder, you're being archived.

Sean Jin:

Anyways, so he challenged me and so that's when I said, well, I pretty much went almost full speed on that time, and when I talked to my parents they were also more receptive to me joining the Navy, you know, at least you'll be on a ship, you won't be on the ground, it's a little safer.

Alex Dracobly:

So they thought they knew you would be on a ship?

Sean Jin:

Yeah, so I was starting to go through with that process, doing through that paperwork and that was through the winter and spring term of my sophomore year and I was still doing ROTC and I was still kinda on the fence of that. And at the same time I was also getting involved with the Veterans' Association and this idea of the "Telling Project" started ramping up. So, these things were all happening at the same time but the ...

[Brief interruption by the server as she brings more drinks, mostly unintelligible aside from a "nothing" from Alex]

Sean Jin:

So, these things were happening at the same time. The experience with the Veterans' Association was, in a sense eye opening. And it kinda brought reality home a little bit, it was a little scary because you hear about all the crap that they talk about like, "Oh yeah, I was here and that really sucked," and, "Oh, I was here and that really sucked," and, "Now, I'm here and this kinda sucks," ya know -

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah, vets talk.

Sean Jin: Yeah, exactly and so I was all "ooh", but it never really deterred me from continuing with my signing up.

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah I remember you saying it was part of your persona in the play was this-

Sean Jin:

Kid -

Alex Dracobly:

I'm in ROTC, I'm sort of committed, but I'm not sure what it's gonna be like and that uncertainty of the future.

Sean Jin:

That was very much true throughout my college period.

Alex Dracobly:

So once you signed with the Navy, was there anyway of backing out or were you committed?

Sean Jin:

Pretty much was committed. There were ways of getting out if I wanted to, but I was getting paid ...

Alex Dracobly:

So you would've owed them a lot of money.

Sean Jin:

Exactly, I was getting dental, medical benefits, everything. So I would have either to continue my enlisted contract or I would've had to pay the money back so it was some sort of payback. I was pretty much signed in by the beginning of my junior year, which was before the "Telling Project" happened and I told the ROTC guys thanks, but no thanks.

Alex Dracobly:

How'd they take that?

Sean Jin:

Um, they were, I think they were pretty used to it. They were fairly professional about it. Obviously they weren't saying "Heyyyy!, How's it Going?" When I walked into the office, and I actually still see a couple of the instructors when I walk around campus and they're still nice to me. And now they recognize me as, you know, I'm an officer in the military now so almost like one of their colleagues, sorta.

Alex Dracobly:

So were you still participating with ROTC or did you just drop that?

Sean Jin:

So while I was working on this Navy application I was still in ROTC, but as soon as I stopped it at the end of my sophomore year and by the beginning of my junior year I was contracted with the Navy and I said no, I'm not going to continue it anymore.

Alex Dracobly:

So just school then for two years.

Sean Jin:

Pretty much, just school, getting paid a lot more than I did as a student-employee it was pretty nice.

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah, that's pretty sweet!

Sean Jin:

Yeah, did the telling play, talked to, there are a couple of Navy vets there. They scared the crap out of me going in there.

Alex Dracobly:

One thing I think everyone remembers is the woman who talked about singing?

Sean Jin:

Yes, yes Shirley Cortez. She was talking about being sexually harassed by one of her officers. Yeah ... But the interesting thing was, they kept telling me, their experiences were all as enlisted so they kept telling me -

Alex Dracobly:

The other guy was the dishwasher!

Sean Jin:

Yeah, the dishwasher, there was the lady who'd sing, who worked on the elevators, there was the guy who... he never talked about his actual Navy experience but he talked about going to Australia or going to Hong Kong. So these guys told me about how shitty it is on the ship, but then they add the caveat, "Well you're going to be an officer, so it'll be better for you," and I'm thinking, "If it was that shitty, how much better could it be or vice versa?" You know? Or do they really know what it was like? So that was always an eye opening experience just sorta hearing. It sorta answered questions, but not really answered questions, and it led to more questions.

Alex Dracobly:

I kinda remember this next set of questions which is officer training school and I happen to be on your list-serve. And if I remember you were sending back emails, periodic emails.

Sean Jin:

Yep I do.

Alex Dracobly:

And um, telling the story of your time going through so I think at the beginning there was maybe just one in a two week period and then it became more frequent. But I remember the big thing there was the uncertainty, "Wow, what am I getting into, what's it going to be like?" So what was that like?

Sean Jin:

So, uh, I showed up to Newport, Rhode Island, August 23rd, 2009, almost showed up late cause I almost missed my flight, luckily still made it. It was like, when you first walk into the hall where they are processing the paperwork and everything, it's still calm. From anybody who's seen any kind of military themed movie or anything military themed, you know at some point they're going to start yelling at you. And at the back of my mind I was always thinking, "When is it going to start? When do they turn the switch on?" So they're quiet, they're nice, "Alright, fill this paperwork out"; "Here's a cup of water"; "Alright you can take this stuff in, you can't take this

stuff in." And I'm like, "When's it gonna start, when's it gonna start?" We got into a van and we drove out to a parking lot where the guys who drove a vehicle could park their own vehicles and then they got in the van. And as soon as they got in the van and then the door slammed shut a little harder. And then the guys who were also students, they were also students, they weren't instructors, they were like [in gruff tone]: "Welcome to Officer Candidate School." And that's when my heart rate started going up a little bit, I'm like, "Oh shit, now I'm here."

And then from there on obviously it was this continued crescendo of yelling at you, you're doing this wrong, and then you meet your drill instructor a couple days later. But I think now is when the reality hits, "Wow, I'm gonna be in this organization for four to x number of years." Before that the only thing that was in my mind, the cool, once again the cool factor like, "Cool, I'm gonna be in the military, I'm gonna do something that most of my friends have never done, will never do. I'm gonna be able to tell 'em all these cool stories" etc, etc. But now, now the reality sets in, like, now, I still have no idea what it's going to be like but I know it's gonna be challenging and very difficult. And then, yeah so we went through of twelve weeks of training at Officer Candidate School, did fairly well. It was, there was a lot of uncertainty while we're in school because you didn't know if the next day was going to be a beating or if it was gonna be a "Hey, you guys did a great job!" And now I look back and I realize it was based on the mood of the drill instructor and it was also based on, I'm sure they had a sort of curriculum like, "Hey, this day were going to do this, this day we're gonna do that."

Alex Dracobly:

But when you're there you don't get a sense of...

Sean Jin:

Exactly, you're a little hamster in a wheel and they could tell you to stop the wheel or keep spinning.

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah, I remember the tone [of the emails] at the beginning a great deal of uncertainty, you were kinda in survival mode. You know, in the beginning part, it was "Am I gonna make it?" And then

there came to a point where you actually have a message where you said “I’m fine, there’s still six weeks to go, but everything has gone well so far, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

Sean Jin:

I remember, I remember feeling it I don’t remember exactly what day it was cause the whole four weeks is kinda a blur, but definitely in the beginning, at least in the first four weeks I don’t think a day went by where I didn’t wonder to myself, “Am I gonna make it or not?” I never seriously considered quitting, but there were times when I was like, “You know what, what if I did quit, is it really worth it?” And I would question myself. And we got a phone call a week and, the first four Sundays I’d call back to my parent and I started bawling, I just could not control the tears. We weren’t even talking about anything sad. And I went to church, even though I am not really religious, I went to Catholic mass and when the music started playing, the first time, just started bawling. And I guess it was because it was the first time I heard something and it wasn’t someone yelling at me for a week.

Alex Dracobly:

You were in a comfort zone for a moment.

Sean Jin:

Yeah really it was. And so-

Alex Dracobly:

What were your parents like, what was their response to these phone calls? It’s gotta be a bit scary for parents.

Sean Jin:

I don’t remember. I think they understood that, that I was going through a challenging time and so they didn’t try to worry me with their stuff and we mainly talked about, ya know, “Hey, how’s it going? How ya doing out there? Do you need anything?” Very basic, survival level items. Nothing too much, we didn’t have much time to really delve into details. Um, I’m sure the first phone call must’ve been really, really rough for them because I had a completely hoarse voice

from screaming the whole week. And then I started crying and they have no idea what I'm going through other than what I'm telling them.

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah, and then they don't hear back from you for a week. This isn't the same kind of thing, but my mom tells me when I was in college, my first year, I would call her when I was having serious writer's block and I couldn't get my papers done and I wouldn't call for another four weeks.

round of laughter

Alex Dracobly:

And my mom wouldn't have any idea if I ever finished this paper that I ...

Sean Jin:

So she's thinking, does he still have writer's block? I'm sure they felt the same thing. Um, but yeah, I remember at some point, I think it was after, we had certain set evolutions. We knew like, week four, we would have this big inspection where that was kinda like the first test of whether you would make it, or you were gonna fail and have to redo it, or if you were going to roll back to the previous class. And, so there was, so when I passed that one, I thought to myself, "Wow, you know what, I'm OK." That was the first moment of truth because I realized, in my first ever real test in the military I made it through. It was nothing leadership related; it was nothing about me as an officer, it was just, can you do this stuff yourself. And I'm sure the whole inspection itself was gamed, because I know they failed a lot of people that shouldn't have failed, but somehow they picked me to pass.

Alex Dracobly:

Huh, interesting.

Sean Jin:

And I think, at least the way my class went out was, I looked at everyone else that passed and we had all been really quiet for the first four weeks. I know like in your class, I was normally always asking questions or raising my hand, but I kept my head low. That all kinda panned out for me

because I think they wanted to see if we could break out of our shells. So I think that's what our first inspection really was about. But when I passed it, it was really a moment of validation, because even though, now when I look back it wasn't based on me -

Alex Dracobly:

So when you say that they didn't pass people who should've passed, you think they do that deliberately?

Sean Jin:

At least for my class they did, at least I think that's why they picked it.

Alex Dracobly:

And then those people then, they had to redo that section, and most of them got through?

Sean Jin:

Yes, so we had fifty students, actually I know for a fact that they picked who failed, because I met someone in my fall in unit who was at that school as an instructor and he told me the whole game. But we had fifty students in my class, and forty of them failed the first inspection, only ten passed. And then three days later there was a second inspection and only four failed the second time. And those four who failed the second time went back to a later class. They were held back for a week.

Alex Dracobly:

So why do they do that?

Sean Jin:

I think for my class they picked people that were quiet. But my understanding is that they want most people to get a taste of failure. Because as a leader, one day you will make a bad decision. You will get somebody hurt; you will get somebody in trouble; you will be in trouble. Whatever it is, you need to be able to experience failure and move on. Which I think is an important lesson to learn.

So, that was the first inspection. And then about two weeks later we had another one. We had academics as well but I was smoking the academics, they were really easy. And yeah, there was this one point, probably halfway through, where I thought, "You know what, I think I'm gonna be alright. I'm kinda getting ..."

Alex Dracobly:

Definitely came through in the emails that I remember. I think I got them filed away somewhere I don't know if you have them.

Sean Jin:

I don't. They were on a training email account that I don't have access anymore.

Alex Dracobly:

Do your parents have them?

Sean Jin: I'm sure they do. I'd be interested to look at it. If ... funny story about the emails, actually I was blogging while I was there too.

Alex Dracobly:

I remember that. Was I getting, was I looking at the blogs too or was that separate?

Sean Jin:

I think they were probably the same. I think I was probably posting the emails as a blog post. Turns out the blog was a big no-no while I was there. I didn't specifically get in trouble, but a couple of people asked me if I was still blogging and I said, "Well, no." It ended up getting some later classes, like their computer privileges locked down, but for some reason I never directly got any kind of ramifications. And now, I still save the blogs, it's actually been a useful tool for future officer candidates going into the program. So it's actually benefitted some people.

Alex Dracobly:

For the record, I don't think that there's anything that shouldn't have been said.

Sean Jin:

No it wasn't that it was sensitive stuff.

Alex Dracobly:

They're very descriptive: "This is what I'm going through, this is how it's going."

Sean Jin:

Yeah, I just wasn't supposed to-

Alex Dracobly:

You weren't supposed to be blogging. [Chuckles]

Sean Jin:

Doing that while I was there. So, uh yeah; Anyways so yeah six weeks and I kinda get a good feeling about things going and I continue on and get to commissioning day. My dad came out for my graduation and it was kinda surreal thinking, "Wow, I'm in the military now, I'm a commissioned officer in the military." And I still look back at completing OCS as probably one of my prouder moments in life because I went through all the challenges. And, an interesting anecdote, just a couple of days after commissioning I had a dream that I had gotten pushed all the way back to the beginning. And I started going through all the crap, like they're giving all my shots, and doing all this. And the second day in my dream I quit, I said "I can't do this again; I'm not going through this crap."

Alex Dracobly:

Here's a question I kinda forgot, your email [user name] used to be ambivalent monk. And I'm not sure what the ambivalence was or the monk was for that matter. But, I do remember talking to you before you -I actually didn't realize you were contracted at that time, I thought you were in ROTC. I remember you saying that you were still somewhat ambivalent about going into the military. Where did that, maybe you're still ambivalent, I don't know, but did you feel like when you left officer training did you feel that you made the right decision, or that this was for you or?

Sean Jin:

I was still on the fence about it. Still definitely ambivalent, and I still am to a certain degree at this point, three years later, three years after commissioning; almost to the day.

Alex Dracobly:

What's the ambivalence? What was your ambivalence, can you remember the ambivalence was, like the year before you went in?

Sean Jin:

Um...

Alex Dracobly:

Actually, was the email, was it about the military or-

Sean Jin:

No, it was just about something else.

Alex Dracobly:

Cause it was kinda striking. I do remember you, I knew that was your email.

Sean Jin:

But I think it was, I think it was meant to be a reflection of myself because I tend to stay on the fence without making, but some of them make rash decisions too. So it's not a hard rule, not a hard and fast rule -

Alex Dracobly:

Not always.

Sean Jin:

Um, so, I think probably a year before going in, I definitely questioned whether I would be a good officer or not. I questioned whether I would like it, what it was even going to be like.

Because at that point I was pretty sure that what I saw on the commercials was not what I was going to experience. So, all those things, very simple things, like; where do I live, after I'm done? Do I live on base or what? And I remember asking my recruiter this and he said, "Well, you could live on base, but you probably don't want to because if you live on base you won't get any housing allowance and if you live off base you get a housing allowance." And I was like, "Well, how did you know that, how did you figure that out?" And he was like "You just gotta figure that out on your own." And so, that was like extremely difficult for because I like, how do I even know where to go, what other of those questions are there that I haven't even thought of, are there gonna be? How do I conduct myself, how do I do the paperwork, how do I go talk to somebody?! You know, all these things, because everybody keeps telling me, "You're gonna be in a different lifestyle now, you're not gonna be a civilian anymore." Yeah, got it, but how am I supposed to be?

So I felt like before the training, and I thought that "Well, you know maybe the training will take care of it and things will be clear of it then." Training didn't take care of anything, I didn't really learn anything in Officer Candidate School and if anyone that was at Officer Training Command hears this, I apologize but I, all they taught us was here's kinda how to be a sailor and here's how to wear a uniform well, they did teach us that. But nothing about, here's how you're gonna be a leader, here's how you're gonna be an effective officer. And I think you really learn that from the job. But to their defense, the CO of the officer training camp on the last day said, he was actually talking to the parents and he said

"Your sons and daughters are... we did not teach them to be good officers or good leaders, they came in...we basically polished whatever they came in with. Anything that's gonna make them a good leader comes from their heart and their soul came from what you taught them as parents beforehand. We just maybe polished it, and taught them how to wear a uniform properly."

So to his credit he understands that as well. There's no way you can teach someone to be a leader.

Alex Dracobly:

Then you, like in most things, you learn part of it just on the job.

Sean Jin:

Yes definitely.

Alex Dracobly:

And, there's only so much you can learn about how to deal with complex organizations, what to do with superior officers that you're mad at ...

Sean Jin:

All those things. The fifteen different websites and databases that you need to operate at one time or another for your career. All those things, you can't teach that in twelve weeks, you definitely learn that on the job. So, even after commissioning, to get back to the question, I was still unsure of whether I would like it, what I wanted to do, and so I kinda adopted a one-tour-at-a-time approach just so you know what, we'll see what's next, focus on what's next, don't get too far ahead of yourself.

Alex Dracobly:

So, I remember, tell me you wanted to go in intelligence way long time ago, and you ended up in logistics.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, um so intelligence sounded a lot cooler than logistics...So intelligence sounded a lot cooler than supply, and now that -

Alex Dracobly:

OK, supply.

Sean Jin:

And now that I've been a logistician for about two years, I think logistics is probably one of the coolest things you can go into, but that's after having experienced it. But at the time intelligence sounded like, I'm gonna interrogate people, I'm gonna compile trends and brief the commanding officer with this and I'm gonna be a sly, you know, everything that you could think of that would

go with intelligence. And so I tried to transition before officer training, I talked to my recruiter a couple times, said “Is there any way I can get into intelligence?” Because I had already signed up for the supply option he just said, “Sure we’ll take a look at it.” So I went through this whole effort of letters of recommendation and I think I had to do another application or something like that to get redesignated to the intelligence committee and it ended up not happening. The whole time the recruiter told me, “Trust me, you want to be in supply, it is a really good deal.” This guy, he was a service worker (?) officer who had been on a ship for about four years, and he said, “Trust me, you want to be a supply officer.” I just didn’t believe him.

But nothing really came of that. It kinda got squashed and looking back it was kinda the best decision I never made. Because, intel officers, at least junior intel officers, they prepare Power Points. And after having two years of experience as a supply corps officer, looking back, I learned some really good stuff. I mean what twenty-five year old can go out in some market and say, “I’ve managed a two million dollar a year budget.”

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah at this point, you have marketable skills. It’s something I always find amazing about being an officer is how much responsibility they’re given at a very young age, much more than I think pretty much anywhere else in American society.

Sean Jin:

Yes, absolutely! Definitely, we’re essentially given the rope to hang ourselves, and for the most part I’d like to say that we don’t do so. There are some that do hang themselves, but I mean, it is really in a sense, trial by fire, but you know, see what happens. And so it’s really cool that there’s almost that faith put into us. A little nerve wracking too but, but for me, at least for people like me who needed a challenge, I think it came out for the better.

Alex Dracobly:

So you leave Officer Training School, and where do you go?

Sean Jin:

So I was actually able to come home for a couple weeks. I came home on leave; and that was like, the first surprise of being in the Navy. 'Cause, I thought that four years in the Navy would be a black hole in everybody else's life which is why I was in such a frenzy to email people like, "Hey, I'm ok, this is what's going on," 'cause I thought no-one would ever see me, that I'd be on deployment that I'd be here, "I can't tell you where I'm at." I came home right after training, and I saw my parents, and I saw pretty much all my friends from college that were still in the area.

Alex Dracobly:

Is that when you had that party at your parent's house or was that for graduation?

Sean Jin:

That was before. So, yeah, I came home for a couple weeks then I went to Athens, Georgia, which is where my follow-up training as a supply corps officer, supply corps school was there. Started school in January, and it was a six month school where they taught us basic stuff like, "Here's how you operate the program that you'll get on the ship as a food service officer," or as a disbursing officer, "Here's the program you're gonna use." They'd test us on it. They'd also evaluate us on our officer qualities, and that's where we actually picked our actual assignment, our first operational tour as a junior officer.

So around May or so was when that picking happened and it was based on academic grade and once again I was able to do pretty well on the academics. I actually got the first pick in the class in terms of position and, heh. So going back -

Alex Dracobly:

Now that doesn't surprise me.

Sean Jin:

Going back to the parents being OK with joining the Navy thing. On the billet list there was a, uh, one, no there were three units that were ground based engineering units and the rest were all ships. And at the beginning of the class we had all joked like, "Oh, I'm gonna get the Seabee

billet” because there’s usually one, and there happened to be three in our class. Seabee unit is a ground based construction-engineering battalion, that is a part of the Navy but they doctrinally operate with the Marines. So there were three, one out of California, and two out of Mississippi. I thought to myself, “Well, I do still want to go to the war at some point.” The thought of being on a ship, even though it was a reality, now that I was given the option I was thinking, “Well, it would be kinda nice to not be on a ship” -

Alex Dracobly:

*And you’re navy! *laughter**

Sean Jin:

Now that I’m given the option, I was prepared to go to a ship, but I thought, “Here’s an option to not go on a ship.” So all these things were all factoring in the decision and there was kinda the prestige about it, just based on how everyone else was talking about it. There’s a lot of other people who wanted to go to that unit.

Alex Dracobly:

Did you know you were going to Afghanistan?

Sean Jin:

No. But I had hoped that I was going. So I think there was still that feeling that I want to be part of the war effort. So I ended up picking up that unit, I got that assignment, I remember calling back to my parents saying, “Hey, this is what I ended up picking,” and I don’t think my mom quite understood, cause she said, “Oh yeah, cool,” and then when I was home on leave I was showing her pictures of Afghanistan, of the war effort, and I said, “Oh, I’m probably gonna be out there in a couple months,” ‘cause by that time I had found out what the unit was and I had discovered that, yes, we were deploying to in November to Afghanistan. And she said, “What? Where are you going?” I said, “That’s Afghanistan.” Whe said, “Why are you going to Afghanistan?! I thought you were going to a ship!” I said, “Well, I told you I was going to a ground based engineering unit,” and she said, “Yeah, you told me that, but I didn’t think that ... why are you going there?! There’s no water there, why is the Navy going to Afghanistan?” And

so it wasn't the same big battle I had when I first wanted to join, but it was still a little bit of contention.

Alex Dracobly:

Fair enough, yeah they didn't like that, or your mom didn't like that.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, they were worried more than anything at this point. They had already come to terms with the fact that I was in the military. And I think they saw that overall it had been a positive experience for me so far. But bottom line is any parent would be worried that I would be hurt and I could totally understand that. So I get that unit assignment -

Alex Dracobly:

So what year were you in -

Sean Jin:

2010. I reported to my unit in September of 2010. So we're about two months away from deploying and I'm just checking in. So I'm brand new guy, new guy. My eyes are wide open and I'm like, "Holy crap, what do I do?"

Alex Dracobly:

Your first assignment.

Sean Jin:

First assignment. I remember one week where I had five needles stuck into me, like thyroid, no, typhoid, yellow fever, anthrax, HIV blood draw, going to combat life saving skills, where you learn how to put a tourniquet on someone in case their arm blows off. I learn about sucking chest wounds and just blood clotting agent that you put on and that's when the reality sets in like, "Shit, I'm in a unit where people might get killed." And at that time there had been eighteen Seabees killed in action between Iraq and Afghanistan. Which is fairly small in terms of the rest

of the war effort because we're not a combat unit, we're a support unit. But it was a reality that I could happen.

So there was that. Shot the M16, qualified on that, qualified on the M9. Went to the gas chamber where I took my gas mask off and felt like half my face was burning off 'cause of the tear gas. You know, all of these various individual training evolutions before we were there to get ready. And while trying to figure out what my job was going to be like.

Deployed early November and, Camp Lovenak, Afghanistan, and still have no idea what's going on, really, and we took over the camp there and basically just started going to work. I had probably one of the best mentors as my boss as the supply officer. Oh, and I should add in this unit I was the assistant supply officer, which we called the S4 outfit based on the staff codes of any, of the Army or Marine unit. Like, S1-through 6, or S1 through 7, where S1 is admin, S2 is Intel, S3 operations, S4 is supply. So, S4 was the supply department, it was also, we called the supply officer the S4. And the S4 Alpha was the S4 assistant. So I'm the S4 Alpha in the battalion, or I was, I should say.

My S4, Lt. Commander Michael Clark, he's actually getting out now, he's probably, will remain one of my most important mentors, because as a brand new guy to the Navy, he basically took me under his wing. Partially because he was my boss, but partially because he was a really nice guy. And he could see that, the first week there I was freaking out, 'cause I had no idea what to do, I was getting a turnover from the previous S4 Alpha from the previous battalion like, "Hey, this is what you gotta do. This is where you go for this. You're going to execute these contracts. You're gonna do these packages," 'cause she was a contracting officer representative and she was doing service contracts for the whole battalion, like contracting out vehicles for us to drive, and getting matting for all these buildings, and all these things I don't have any idea about. And I just, I'm just going crazy and there's this moment where the S4 pulled me aside and said, "You know what Sean, if you're having trouble with anything, this what I'm here for. If it's too much, just come talk to me because you can talk to me about anything."

At that moment I kinda had tears in my eyes 'cause I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is ... " It was one of those moments. So anyways that was when we first got there and started going to work. We sent out Seabees to a couple other Operating Bases in the Helmand Province to

support the Marine operations there. We got wind soon that the surge⁴ was drawing down, 'cause we were there in the middle of the surge and there were four Seabee battalions in Afghanistan and it was drawing down to two. Now one of them up north was gonna send down their entire allowance of equipment to us. That was directed from way up high, saying, "Hey, you guys are gonna take on this," what we call a table of allowance, which is all the trucks and equipment we need and all the tools we need to operate. And we had an old set of equipment still on site and we're like, "We don't have room for two sets of equipment," plus on top of that we have a bunch of Army-owned equipment that we've, basically on loan from the Army, called theater-provided equipment. And we're like, "What do we do with all this stuff?" Most of this was antiquated, used in 2005 in Iraq, and had been moved over when the focus had changed to Afghanistan.

Our main focus for three or four months was, how do we get rid of this?

Alex Dracobly:

[Laughter] Can't just abandon it.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, exactly, you gotta document it, you gotta give it someone else, whatever.

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah, there you go. Just gotta dump it off on someone else.

Sean Jin:

And I mean it was truly an expeditionary environment. Because when we needed stuff, we would be borrow and steal if we could not get it through normal means. And people would steal stuff for months. I was put in charge of this Army-owned equipment and S4 said, "Your main job is to get rid of as much of that as possible because we're gonna have Navy owned equipment coming in here and we don't need Army stuff." And the Army stuff was a pain in the ass because we had to inventory 100% every month. And we're talking like, thirty pieces of trucks and equipment, plus 600 armor plates, all this random crap that we didn't need from the Army. But needed to

⁴ President Obama's continuation of President Bush's 2007 increase in American troops in the region.

inventory it every month, so I wanted to get rid of it too. And I remember this one time, we had this trailer, that these special warfare guys, these Navy Seal guys, they came into our compound and they talked to a couple guys over in the equipment yard and said, “Hey, can we try and see if this trailer works on our truck?” And they hooked the trailer to the truck and just drove off. And so I’m doing my monthly inventory with one of my guys -

Alex Dracobly:

And you’re missing a trailer and all its stuff.

Sean Jin: And it was like a twenty thousand dollar trailer and I’m like, “What the fuck, where the fuck did this trailer go?” This trailer suddenly disappeared. We have a lot of stuff, but it was there before, and now it’s not there. So we found out later, and luckily one of the people in the equipment yard knew the guy, like they’re shit, had been friends with him before. And so she emailed him and he was like, “Oh sorry we took your trailer, we’ll bring it right back.” They brought it back two months later and it had been hit with like a mortar. But no big deal because the nice thing about that was we could ...

Alex Dracobly:

You could get rid of it.

Sean Jin:

Exactly! Anyways so, eight months spent in Afghanistan basically getting rid of twelve million dollars of equipment and I got rid of about six. Which was, as a new guy, I felt pretty good about myself. We accepted the new stuff sent in from up north.

Alex Dracobly:

So to get rid of stuff, what do you do?

Sean Jin:

Um, basically, I found out, found units that wanted it. Sometimes a couple of guys that would ... I happened to be in the hall and I remember this one time specifically, he was a Navy officer who was in charge of the blimp program, which basically we would put blimps over each base and we

would have cameras on them, because they were a lot cheaper than UAVs and see when insurgents were coming up to set up an ambush or whatever. So he's like, "Uh, I'm looking for some trailers." And I said "Sir, you're looking for trailers? I have trailers for you, you want them?" So basically it was a lot of shoot from the hip ...

Alex Dracobly:

So a lot of it was keeping your, antennae out, hearing where you could dump stuff. So what you get him to sign a piece of paper saying it's yours now?

Sean Jin:

Pretty much. Um, so there was that and there was a couple times where I actually got a unit to agree to disposition them, basically they would mark everything that was broken and missing from them and based on the cost, it was like totaling a car, based on the cost, it would be better to send it to, like basically to the landfill, junkyard, whatever. So I did that and had to figure out all those processes. And that was quite the experience. I actually gotta go to the bathroom real quick.

Alex Dracobly:

OK, let me just pause this.

Alex Dracobly:

Alright, so we're back again.

Sean Jin:

So I was in Afghanistan. At the time, since I was a really new officer I didn't really actually interact much with my sailors directly. I kinda let my chiefs, the senior enlisted guys, really were the ones who run the show. I remember being extremely shy, not really comfortable with my authority, which therein didn't mean I didn't have authority, 'cause I didn't take it. I remember all the sailors being extremely polite all the time, you know, "Yes sir, yes sir." They were all very professional about it but I'm sure they laughed about it later, you know, how awkward I was.

Alex Dracobly:

But you'd only joined the unit just shortly before going to Afghanistan.

Sean Jin:

Correct, correct, I had not gone through, any of the group ... any of the training evolutions with them. I hadn't experienced much with them. I really didn't know them very well. And I remember thinking about all the different things that they taught us before training; like you should, you know, keep a running notebook of all your sailor's biographies, you should meet all of them, and you should do a speech in front of your division so you meet them and stuff. And I never actually did that and I remember thinking to myself, "Man, should I be doing these, should I do that?" Now I look back and think if I had or hadn't [I don't know how] much of a difference it would have made because I was still very much ... I was not very comfortable with myself in front of them. So really it was my chief and then my boss that was really running the real work, as far as the sailors were going. And I was kinda given my own little program, the Army-owned material, and the barracks, and managed the services of the battalion.

Alex Dracobly:

So what's exactly involved when you say you got your sailors, what exactly do they do in a supply unit?

Sean Jin:

So we have basically two rates, which is the logistics specialist and then the culinary specialist. The culinary specialist when they're not cooking, we actually don't cook that often, it's only when we go on our big field training evolution. So when we were in Afghanistan they managed the barracks, made sure everyone had keys, make sure that the barracks assignment was done properly, no females mixed with males, and you know E6's with E6's, etc. So they handled that,

and basic trouble calls. They would do, they would procure food when we had convoys going up, issue out food and stuff, so basic, very basic services.

Logistic specialists, they managed the money for the battalion, managed the budget. They will ... do a lot of purchasing so any kind of stuff the battalion needs whether its office supplies, more parts for vehicles that break down, or regular maintenance parts for those vehicles, any kind of purchasing, tracking. And then with the financial system that the Navy runs, there are inherently a lot of reports that need to be done every month. Like, you've ordered this much stuff, and how much of it have you gotten, but have you not received in the system yet. Because unlike your own credit card where you swipe it and it automatically pays the vendor, in the Navy system, you would put it on order, but until the unit gets the stuff, the big Navy won't pay out to the vendor, so there's an additional facet to the vendor system. So a lot of reports ...

Alex Dracobly:

So as an officer, you're telling people to go do these reports, and with inventory too, I see.

Sean Jin:

Inventory definitely. Inventory is everything from the repair part for the vehicles, to basic storeroom stuff, which would be like binders, notepads, pencils, office supplies, what else ... uniforms, table-of-allowance management because all of the stuff that was part of the unit set that wasn't vehicles fell under supply, so it's about 270 containers of tool kits, and various - it's supposed to be everything you need to operate and we kept accountability of all that stuff. That was actually the units that we were receiving from the other unit that was leaving. So that all fell under supply. So we put two guys in charge of the table of allowance, and we put one person in charge of the storeroom, and one in charge of financials. We had a couple of LS's that were credit card holders. Basically they have a government purchase card and they can make small purchases for stuff that the normal supply system wouldn't be able to take care of in terms of time. So that's basically what my troops do, money related stuff and procurement. So they're actually trained up in the programs that we used to procure material and all the rules and regulations and as the officer, we kinda just oversee it and make sure that everything is good.

Alex Dracobly:

So in some instances they actually know the rules and stuff better than you do.

Sean Jin:

In most instances they did. And you know now I think I'm pretty good at most of them, but at the time they definitely knew. We also handled the travel system for the battalion so managing the travel budget. There's actually a specific program that we need to use and that was my purview. But we didn't use it too much in Afghanistan so I didn't get to use it too much into that until later after that deployment and that's pretty much all my guys were doing.

Alex Dracobly:

So you're saying to begin with you didn't take on the leadership role, how did, you eventually did?

Sean Jin:

Where it really changed was where my boss left and I think it was really a function of how much of an officer my first boss was. He just was that charismatic, he was ... he could put his foot down saying, "Hey, we're gonna do this," but he did it in a way that no one really ever felt slighted by it. He was extremely personable. And so I ... I never felt the need to be that leader and, two, I just never felt I could fill his shoes. And then, below me I guess sorta below me was the chief who really ran the day to day of the department. And he was a very big personality, um, wouldn't hesitate to tell me, "No, we're not gonna do that." You know like ...

Alex Dracobly:

There's your sergeant ...

Sean Jin:

Exactly, the very stereotypical and to be honest I was kinda scared for about a good year or so to say [unintelligible] cause I felt like he would just tear me up. Even though he would call me sir and I was technically senior to him, that didn't mean much. So I basically spent my first year sorta figuring out my way, which they basically tell you when you're going through training was your first. I did have my fair share of trial and tribulations of trying to figure out where ... what I did and didn't like, what would bug me, and what wouldn't.

Mainly with my peers, actually; with the enlisted guys I was more lenient with them and they were always very professional. But with the fellow junior officers you weren't senior to them, if anything, you know, I was the junior guy. It wasn't like they would haze me or ever do anything really stupid, but it was just like little things. Like when I would talk, they would be like, "You don't know anything," it was always that little feeling. So it kinda got a little frustrating in the beginning and I think I soured a couple of relations in the beginning that I may not necessarily need to have, just based on pride and ego. And I look back now and think, I could've done that better. But, all good experiences; everyone was tense because we were in Afghanistan, from the CO down. The CO was extremely concerned with people getting hurt, people getting in danger. Because we weren't ... once again we're not a combat unit but we did go out on convoys. And whenever there's any kind of kinetic action going on nearby, you know, our command would kinda go high and to the right.

Our first week and a half there, we had a couple of big safety mishaps. Because we are in construction, an inherently dangerous occupation, like a dump truck tipped over and there was this one time a front end loader, the bucket didn't have the safety pins so it kinda spilled its load prematurely. Somebody cut his hand on the table saw, somebody else shot a nail-gun nail through his hand. And this was probably first two to three weeks of working. And really it was a sign of everyone one: we were excited but two: just trying to move too fast. Because as soon as we got there we're getting all these taskings from the Marine Expeditionary Force that we were basically supporting and they say, "We need you here, we need you here, we need you here," like, everyone wants engineers! Even though when the surge was drawing down they tried to

draw out the non-essential, everyone wants engineers because everyone wants something built, or air-conditioning fixed, or equipment or road built.

The Marines loved us. There is this time when at a Marine headquarters, there was a sergeant working there who was in charge of moving us to a different set of barracks rooms and he gave us priority over all the other Marines that were supposed to move in there. We got the best mattresses, the best beds because he said, "You guys built this headquarters group, this building for us, so you guys are gonna get the best." So anyways, everyone loved us. But we had a few incidents in the beginning so it was a tense time. And because there were so many changes, because of the draw down in the surge, we were closely affected by that because of the draw down of the units. And so it was very interesting perspective to see, you know, some of a big policy of how it could affect an operational unit ...

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah, how it could affect on the ground ...

Sean Jin:

At the same time, the MEF was bringing in tanks to support combat operations there, and they were paving roads to Camp Leatherneck from there because before that they were all just compacted dirt. And so when the tanks would rotate they would tear up the dirt. So before the tanks got there, they were paving the roads. And so that was an interesting tidbit to put those two together. Cause I just remember I was thinking, "Cool, paved roads! No more dust, no more dust storms! It's gonna be nicer to walk on," and it was really because of the tanks. It was surreal being in Leatherneck because it was such a big Forward Operating Base. It was a logistics hub, fifteen thousand Marines supporting the littler outpost on the Helmand River and so we never saw really any action. Because Leatherneck's in the middle of the desert and you could see someone coming from probably two or three miles away.

But what we would see was the occasional firing of a rocket, artillery rocket from our base, either going northeast to Sangin Valley or south to, what was the other big hotspot, wherever Operation Mushtar⁵ was.

Alex Dracobly:

I don't know. Afghanistan I just don't know.

Sean Jin:

Two big hotspots in Helmand province. The other one was south, someone will look it up. Anyways, so you know, based on the rocket you could see where it was going. You'd think, "Well, something's going on." And every once in a while a helicopter would come in and it would land right at the British side which was where the big echelon three hospital was, so you knew someone had been in, there was some sort of trauma. Other than that, really not much. It was very surreal; it was like being in a construction zone like a very big industrial area, just lots of moving parts and seeing the aftermath of war.

Alex Dracobly:

So you didn't see any Afghans?

Sean Jin:

No, not at all.

Alex Dracobly:

Not even at all?

⁵ Operation Moshtarak, took place from Feb 13th 2010, to Dec. 7, 2010. Operation goal was the removal of Taliban forces from the town of Marja, and in doing so remove their last stronghold in the central Helmand Province.

Sean Jin:

Not at all. Well, I might have seen a couple because I did ... while I was able to visit a couple of their bases. But not really, some of my colleagues were able to because they went out and they were building forward operating bases, smaller forward operating bases for Marines to actually do patrols out of. And they would interact with the locals at times.

But mostly in terms of non-coalition forces, I would see a lot of Sri Lankans, Indians, Nepalese, and Filipinos working as contractors exactly. They would run our laundry, they would run the galley, and they would run the ... basically anything that didn't need to be military personnel would be what we called "third country nationals." You could consider it derogatory, now, but basically it was non-coalition forces. And they were paid, very little for American standards, probably quite a bit for their country's standards, to do jobs so that we didn't need troops there to do that. And it was very interesting for me because having come from the University of Oregon where I had heard about ... I was fairly politically aware as far as the war went before I joined. I remember thinking, "This is why we can say we only have 160,000 troops in Afghanistan." Because there are three hundred thousand, or however many hundred thousand contracted to support us; and if we had gone in with a purely organic support force it would have been half a million. So, yeah, interacted with them a lot on the logistics side, interacted with civilians, but not with local Afghans. Yeah, definitely an interesting time because we were supporting the MEF and the MEF was trying to draw down. The big operations had kinda quieted down a little bit because I think the big pushes in the valleys were in 2008, so it was limited.

Alex Dracobly:

So you had a sense of that. You went over if I'm understanding it right, aware that you were part of this Afghan surge. Then you also had a sense, on the ground, of drawing it down.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, definitely and ...

Alex Dracobly:

You think that was more because you were in supply or ...

Sean Jin:

Yeah, definitely ...

Alex Dracobly:

You think everyone saw it?

Sean Jin:

I don't think everyone saw it. If you were to ask the E3 who was working in my unit at the time, they probably weren't aware unless they were actively looking at the news. I think a lot of it was because of the logistical ramifications of the draw down. That I felt that ...

Alex Dracobly:

I see, so you were there for about a year?

Sean Jin:

Uh, eight months.

Alex Dracobly:

Eight months?

Sean Jin:

Yeah. November 2010 to June 2011. Yeah, successively drew down to two Seabee battalions while we were there. I think the MEF started drawing down to ... actually one MEF relieved ... two MEFs from the east coast relived one MEF while we were there; it was like a two month

transition period while everything shifted over, like all the units, um. The Headquarters units were there for a year and a half, and then the combat units were there for about seven months, so it was an interesting rotation cycle to see all that.

Alex Dracobly:

Guess I should say, forgetting my rules, but MEF is Marine Expeditionary Force?

Sean Jin:

Correct and that's like a scalable unit from eighteen thousand to fifty thousand Marines, generally for large-scale war. But as a part of the surge we had deployed the MEF to Afghanistan and created a new sector called Regional Command: Southwest. Just in Helmand and part of Kandahar provinces to supposedly quell the insurgency, the Taliban insurgency in that area. We sent out three, four missions to do a lot of freedom of movement operations, so building roads, interacting a lot with British engineers, marine engineers to build roads along the Helmand river where the ... where a lot of posts were where we had a lot of operations going on. A lot of the other projects we did are negligible in terms of mention, they're just, you know, self-sustaining operations.

Alex Dracobly:

I'm actually curious, you said you were in the middle of the desert, where did you guys get your water?

Sean Jin:

The water was bottled and was trucked in, the bottles ...

Alex Dracobly:

For the entire camp??

Sean Jin:

For the entire camp yes. Pallets of bottle water.

Alex Dracobly:

But how about for showers and stuff?

Sean Jin:

Non-potable was also trucked in by the truck.

Alex Dracobly:

Ah, ok, so you had the big bladders that you would ...

Sean Jin:

Correct, yeah, huge bladders there, potable and non potable, and the waste water was also trucked back out. It was just a huge ... Camp Leatherneck was a logistical miracle. Yeah, miracle or nightmare, I mean whoever had to coordinate that from the beginning would have been tearing their hair out but the fact that something like that was about - it was a city essentially, fifteen thousand people, in the middle of nowhere.

Alex Dracobly:

Do you know what the water requirements were per day?

Sean Jin:

I couldn't even imagine. Because all of us were able to take a shower and there was not really a strict limit on how much we could shower. We were not rationed on how much drinking water or anything. It was really something. But yeah so the water, bottled water was trucked in. We'd get some from Turkey and then a bunch from the UAE actually. And it's kinda, we'd avoid the Turkish water because it tasted like shit and the UAE water always tasted good. I actually went

and researched, one of the Emirates in the UAE has like, pristine drinking water, and so that's where we get all our stuff. Um we have steak and shrimp like, every Sunday, which is unbelievable to think about, to realize.

Alex Dracobly:

Caviar Wednesdays ...

Sean Jin:

Yeah, I know, right? Later on it switched to every other Sunday, and I think that was when the border with Pakistan, when stuff started going on, as far as the logistics train. That was the big eye-opening experience, like realizing what the logistics train of our military is, anywhere we go. It was definitely very eye opening; I was able to go to Bagram Airbase and Kandahar Airfield as well, see those places. Different feel because they weren't trying to be as expeditionary of a base, but let's face, they were very permanent bases. Yeah, very different areas. I distinctly remember the flight back from Bagram to Camp Leatherneck because it was on a, basically a civilian plane, it wasn't a military aircraft. It was a contracted flight so I was able to see the entire landscape as we flew over. Just mountainous, just mountains and valleys and mountains and valleys and I remember thinking, like, before the advent of helicopters there was no way anyone could ever claim to keep this country, and even with helicopters it's just ...

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah, it's already a problem.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, and so I remember thinking there's a reason why Afghanistan is barely a country in terms of incorporation, it really is still tribes. And so, that was an eye opening experience, seeing the mountains. It was very cool.

Alex Dracobly:

So you couldn't see anything from your base?

Sean Jin:

No, no we uh ...

Alex Dracobly:

I'm struck by how many soldiers have been to Afghanistan just talk about the beauty of the landscape ...

Sean Jin:

Yeah, a lot of the Army units would definitely because they were in the north or the east areas so they were patrolling in the mountains or the valleys. For us it was the desert. It would be like if someone lived in Grand [Le Grand?] Oregon or somewhere in eastern Oregon and they compare their account to someone who lived in the Willamette valley. We think Oregon is beautiful but someone who's lived in eastern Oregon their whole life ...

Alex Dracobly:

Now, wait a second Sean, you better be careful!

Sean Jin:

But uh ...

Alex Dracobly:

Depends if you like high desert.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, sure, it was very desert like actually when I went to Bagram it struck me how mountainous it was, colder; it was actually beautiful in Bagram. The air base is surrounded by mountains.

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah, I've, seen photos it looks cool.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, I was actually there when Osama bin Laden was killed, and ...

Alex Dracobly:

Ah, what was that like?

Sean Jin:

It was something, operations continued as normal, work wise, but it was more interesting to get the civilian response as in like my parents and family and friends were, "Oh, hey, this happened." Because I think they heard more about it than they have. And I remember my mom she's like, "Hey, you can come home now right?" She was of course being facetious, but it was interesting. We actually had one retaliatory attack on Camp Leatherneck because of that. There was a couple of guys that launched a rocket in our base. And that was first time our base had been attacked in a year and a half or something like that.

Alex Dracobly:

Wow, so that was a really secured base.

Sean Jin:

It was very, yeah. I remember hearing the alarms going off for indirect fire, and they ran drills all the time so I thought, "Meh, just another drill." Then I heard the blast. The thing about the blast

is the explosive disposal units there always did controlled detonations so I thought, “Oh, it’s a controlled det!” Then I saw people run for bunkers and I said, “Oh shit, it’s real!” And so we all ran to bunkers and then we got out a couple hours later and found out that a couple of rockets had been set off. Ours had been launched and no one got hurt. Well, no one got killed. One guy got hit by a ricochet of rocks from the blast, but nothing significant. There were a couple of retaliatory attacks on the Bagram airfield and other places, but the ... as far as me if I had just been living in a tent in Afghanistan I wouldn’t have seen anything. I heard mainly stuff from the net and from emails and Facebook and stuff. But it was kinda cool to be in country while a significant historical event happened. Some of the more gung-ho red-blooded patriotic types in my unit were very excited about it. I remember walking into one building and the guy was like, “Yeah, did you hear? They shot him in the face!!” And I was like, “Yeah, cool.” Didn’t think too much about it because nothing really changed for us as far as operations. I mean, I think that in terms of the war we had passed the whole capturing Al-Qaida and killing Bin-Laden, it was more about rebuilding Afghanistan, or Taliban, exactly.

Alex Dracobly:

So, let’s see where are we at?

Sean Jin:

That’s May. The rest of the deployment nothing really significant ... Yeah, we got our relieving unit in June and redeployed through Kuwait to ... back to Port [?] California. Interesting thing about redeployment, returning home is that no matter how long you’re deployment is gonna be, the last month feels like it drags on forever. And I think it’s a psychological expectations thing. If you tell someone that they’re gonna be deployed for a year and then they ... you know, by the eleventh month they’re gonna start to feel stressed out like, “When are we gonna go home, when are we gonna go home?” If you tell someone they’re gonna be deployed for four months, by the third month they’re gonna start feeling like that. And this happened for both my deployments. By about the month before we’re about to return, everyone’s getting stressed out: “When are we gonna know when our flights are. I need my plane tickets to go home while on leave,” all these

things. For some reason that was the most stressful part of it, and if we had been deployed longer, it would have been, once again, the last month ...

Three days, the last three days in Kuwait were the worst days of my deployment, because we were supposed to spend about six days in Kuwait for Warrior Transition to allow us to decompress, not do anything. Even though we were not in combat, it was still, before you go back home to your families and civilian society, get this chance to transition sorta. We're supposed to be six days, but the flights just ... the plane kept breaking down or it showed up late or something like that. We kept showing up to the airfield day after day, this in June in Kuwait, so it's about 130 degrees and we're sitting in the busses without really knowing what's going on and we kept hearing, "Yeah the plane's not ready yet, just hang out a bit longer," and the busses were struggling to keep us cool in the air conditioning. Eventually the contract for the busses ran out so we had to get off the busses and go into this terrible, humid tent and new busses would come in, and we went through that cycle for three days with 200 people and that was pretty miserable.

Alex Dracobly:

I didn't actually realize that they were running people through Kuwait now, from Afghanistan, we used to go through Turkistan wasn't it?

Sean Jin:

Kyrgyzstan actually, the Army still goes through Kyrgyzstan, at least for the Navy we were going through Kuwait still. Marines might, not sure where they go but ...

Alex Dracobly:

Do you think it's deliberate they put you in really boring places?

Sean Jin:

Yeah, at least a couple of people were kept saying yeah. The point of Warrior Transition is to do nothing. Basically you're given time to play video games if you want or talk to people back home and just kinda sleep and get back on the ...

Alex Dracobly:

Well, I've heard people joke that the one thing they don't want is for you to land anywhere close to a bar because you will lose half of your unit.

Sean Jin:

I would believe that. We actually tried to phase it back in cause we had a stopover in Germany and our CO said, "Yeah, you can have two beers." And for some reason, those two beers were like the best two beers anyone ever had. Everyone was like, "Arrrgh yeah, two beers," cause it was the first time that anyone was supposed to have drunk. I'm sure there was drinking going on. Yeah, transition going back, we did have a couple alcohol related incidents on the return - actually we redeployed in two phases, an early party and a delayed party. And the early party went back, there was a guy, within twelve hours of landing had already been locked up for a DUI. So he lands ...

Alex Dracobly:

I think you're telling me this, this is last year you told me this. Funny to process.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, he lands, goes to base store, gets a fifth of vodka, a fifth of tequila and a twelve pack of beers, has like half of the twelve pack, does three shots of each kind of alcohol, and then decides I don't want to stay on base anymore, I want to drive somewhere. And he actually fell asleep at the wheel while the car wasn't moving, he was at a stop light, but then a cop came up and knocked on his windows and was like, "Hey man, what's going on" and got booked for a DUI. And so that was within twelve hours of landing.

Alex Dracobly:

At least he didn't crash.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, seriously. Couple of other less serious incidents but nothing too bad.

Alex Dracobly:

And you bought a motorcycle.

Sean Jin:

I did buy a motorcycle, well I had already owned a motorcycle, I was just upgrading.

Alex Dracobly:

You should be explaining ...

Sean Jin:

Yeah, we all had our own ...

Alex Dracobly:

This is, we met last year you told me you just bought a motor cycle just right around the time where there was all these news reports where the military had just issued general rules, "Don't buy a motorcycle!" And you just showed up, remember we had lunch, you showed up with a motorcycle and I was like, "What?"

Sean Jin:

My CO, he had three policies, he said, "So my command philosophy is don't drink and drive, don't lose your weapon, and don't wreck your motorcycle." At his top was his motorcycle save.

Alex Dracobly:

So you can have one, just don't wreck it. Fair enough.

Sean Jin:

New CO was, didn't really care too much about motorcycles, but yeah it's kinda funny because it was at the time when there was a lot of motorcycle related deaths both in the Navy and the Marine Corps, so it was a lot of awareness. I'm sure there were difficulties with some people transitioning to being with their families. Again I didn't hear too much about anything significant though, for the most part it was fairly smooth. Come back in June and most of the unit was on leave for July, and then August hit, and we kinda went right back at it. We had about, we were supposed to have ten months at home and then go on to EUCOM, European Command. It got shortened to about eight and so-our normal home period is supposed to be twelve, so we're really basically packing twelve months of training and requirements into eight, and so it was a fast, just go at a hundred mile an hour, get ready for this next training evolution, get everyone, these kind of shots, get everyone their medical exams, get them this kind of training, all stuff for eight months straight pretty much, it was pretty intense.

Alex Dracobly:

And you were where at that point?

Sean Jin:

Port Hueneme California.

Alex Dracobly:

And by that time you had been with the unit for a while, so you're feeling pretty ...

Sean Jin:

Yes, for about a year, so I'm definitely feeling more comfortable, you know, got to know my sailors better, had good working relationship with the enlisted and my officer, my boss, the senior supply officer. Nothing really significant about being home other than I was working until about seven every night, from six to seven every day, so it was pretty rough. But other than that just getting ready for the next thing. But I think being at home port was when I realized that the Seabee unit was really crazy. On deployment it was pretty straightforward, it was "alright you're here, you're gonna do this work." When were in home port, it's like we want 100% of everyone to go to three different places at the same time.

Because the command will get multiple training requirement saying, "Hey, everyone needs to get this done right now," and then they say, "Oh by the way, everyone need to get this done right now," and so we're stretching for people all the time, but we don't have everyone because people are on leave, or they're in training school or they're going to a temporary duty somewhere else, so it was always a struggle 'cause with trying to get my troops all the requirements, and then I also had my own requirements for the battalion to get. Everyone needs to get their government travel cards done, get basically for the next deployment; you know just travel related stuff. Make sure everyone gets their gear for the next deployment, various ... it was very crazy. And the way I always describe it ... we always have twenty different trackers going around, all of them 100% battalion trackers like, "Hey these people haven't gone to their medical exam," and then another tracker's, "These people haven't gone through this training," and these were all spreadsheets that never talked to each other or anything like that and so you had to sort between different spreadsheets, so that was very crazy.

But very interesting thing about our unit is because we are a Navy unit, we get sailors that have gone to Navy boot camp, but doctrinally we operate with the Marines, so we kinda try to be like Marines, we sorta adopt a pseudo-marine mentality, but our sailors don't have the Marine training and I think that makes a huge difference in sort of their attitude and their esprit du corps and all these things. 'Cause the Navy really tries to be more like a business to where it tries to make its employees happy for the most part ... more than any of the other branches of the ... maybe the Air Force. But the Marines are like, "I don't give a shit, suck it up, you're gonna go

do that, everyone's gonna stand in line until you get that done." But for us we try to optimize, "Alright, well you don't have this, so you go here now, and you don't have this so you go here now," and people get lost because you wouldn't be able to track them all the time.

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah, there's different things' going on.

Sean Jin:

And on top of that, all the officers in the battalion, except the supply, medical, and dental officer, and the chaplain, are all engineers. Because they're all civil engineer corps officers, so they have to be civil engineering, mechanical, some sort of engineering, so they're all very, very smart but they tend to what we call nuke things which is, over think it basically. They just, "Hey, we have this problem, and this many people, how can we make it best." And instead of going the Occam's razor, "Hey, this is the simplest thing," they're like, "Well we could do it this way, but well we could probably do it this way and we can probably do it this way." And if you're at an engineering problem, that's awesome. But sometimes in this unit where you're talking about people and instant, "We need to get this done now", it's not necessarily the right approach.

So we have that, the Marine mentality, the Navy training, and the engineering approach there, and then you know, with all my love to the Seabees, they are not necessarily the smartest people in the Navy. Because ...

Alex Dracobly:

That's a little harsh.

Sean Jin:

Because the type of people that are really good Seabees are good construction workers. They're not necessarily sought after for their brains so much as their construction skills. They're not the guys that are operating the radios or doing cryptology, and there are some very, very smart Seabees ...

Alex Dracobly:

That knows how to pour concrete on sidewalk ...

Sean Jin:

Yeah, and there are some Seabees that are not, the smartest. So you get all these things and it makes for a very, very bizarre culture at times.

Alex Dracobly:

I can imagine. So you didn't go with them into Europe, or did you?

Sean Jin:

I did. So we deployed again in February to Spain, and Djibouti Africa,, so we split our unit and from there we pushed out teams to, up to, I think we had eighteen, nineteen countries. A lot of what we call phase zero operations; which is like pre-combat, before any kind of hostilities commence, we're trying to win hearts and minds. You know, painting schools, building wells, that kind of stuff. We had teams in Croatia, Bosnia, Ukraine, Italy, um, Israel ...

Alex Dracobly:

So you had them across commands actually. You had some in somewhere in the European command but some weren't.

Sean Jin:

Yes, there were some that were tasked to combined joint task force ...

Alex Dracobly:

So how does that work, you just transfer them over or ...

Sean Jin:

Overall, well see ... it worked out, command and control-wise it didn't really change because Navy Forces Europe is the same command as Navy Forces Africa. So it's basically a dual habit. But yeah, basically half of our unit was under AFRICOM and half our unit was under EUCOM. But overall the entire unit was still under Sixth Fleet because Sixth Fleet is NAVEU and NAVAF are the same. But, yeah, so Croatia, Bosnia, we had a bunch of countries in Europe; Morocco, Senegal, Liberia, Cameroon, Ghana ...

Alex Dracobly:

Where'd you end up?

Sean Jin:

I was in Spain. Where the flagpole was, where the commanding officer and the supply office was. So that's where we supported all of the battalion. And that's where I really learned the art of being an expeditionary logistician. Because I had to figure out how to get stuff ...

Alex Dracobly:

All over.

Sean Jin:

Everywhere. And it was like, "Alright, FedEx will go here but DHL won't go here, and DHL will go here but they won't go to these places," and then we're dealing with customs issues. And these projects, these guys out there were doing these projects, and they needed this stuff to continue on the project or they wouldn't finish on time, so all these stresses. And then, a month into the deployment my supply officer changes. He leaves cause it was his time, it was done, his tour was done and a new supply officer comes who, really nice guy but just did not know the job. As any new guy would be like. And that's really where my turning point was where I stepped up into the leading department. Even still he was still the supply officer, the boss, pretty much everyone know it was me and my chief that were running the show, people would come to me

for stuff. And that was, even though I was sad to see my old boss go, that was probably the best experience of my whole two years, because I was really given the opportunity to run the department after some experience.

Europe was in some ways, actually in many ways was more challenging than Afghanistan. Afghanistan was challenging because it was hard to get stuff to our location but money-wise, no problem, money was never an issue. In Spain it was sometimes the opposite, because we would rarely have enough money to get stuff or we would have to budget very well. But actually getting stuff to Spain was easy, 'cause it's, you know, a first-world country. So, share of challenges like, every couple of weeks a new tasking would come up and say, "Hey, you guys are gonna deploy a team to X country," and then we would have to figure out how are we gonna feed them there, where are we gonna stay, how are we gonna fly them down there, how are we gonna get the equipment there, how are we gonna maintain the equipment, that's pretty much it. Are they gonna have cell phones there, whose gonna pay for this, whose gonna pay for that, and so that was a lot of our job, was figuring out who's paying for what.

And a lot of the confusion was because we basically had three different bosses to report to; our unit had three different bosses. There was the Sixth Fleet Element, which is like our operational boss and then there was sort of an advisory regiment that was back in Gulf Port, Mississippi that knew a lot about the EUCOM area of operations as far as the Seabees went. They weren't officially in charge of us, but they oversaw the camp that we were on, and then they oversaw the unit set of equipment that we had, so basically they were our bosses. Because they owned all the stuff we needed to operate with. And then we also had our regimental unit back in Port Hueneme that was cognizant of our people and our administrative issues. So that made for a very interesting-that was challenging because it would come down to sometimes saying ... I would send an email out to five people saying, "Who's paying for this?" 'Cause I have no idea.

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah I can see that. That was gonna be my next question was: where does your budget come from? Is it actually cobbled together from different ...

Sean Jin:

Depending on where the tasking come from, we had our own operational budge that would come from the regiment that ran the camp because we had to use that money to maintain the equipment set that they were maintaining on the camp. But for all the teams that we would push out, that was funded depending on who the customer was. Usually the customer would come through the Sixth Fleet entity, the operational. And then usually our administrative one back in Port Hueneme would not, they usually did not have much to do ...

Alex Dracobly:

So you would go to Sixth Fleet, and basically go scrounging for money.

Sean Jin: Sometimes, yeah. Had a fair share of trials and tribulations there, because my boss was so new there were times when I was directly talking to the commanding officer about very supply related stuff. Not often, more often was directly talking to the operations officer, who basically reported directly to the CO. And so the operations officer is an O4 and I'm an O2 and he would be like, "Jin, we need to get this for these people right now or blah blah," and then sometimes I would say, "Sir, I'm sorry we can't do that," or for whatever reason. And looking back, there were times where I could've curtailed my attitude a little bit or been a little more ... talked back less but that made for an interesting dynamic because I basically didn't bow down to him, even though he was a senior guy. In my mind I was thinking, "I don't work for him, I work for the supply officer. He needs stuff from me and, yes, I'm gonna support the unit, but I'm not gonna yield for his every way." And there were times where I made a couple decisions basically without consulting him, the operations officer and he likes having all the decisions going through him, of course. Probably because he bore the brunt of the bad decisions directly from the CO. And there were a couple times where I made a couple of important decisions and incurred his wrath, which was kinda interesting. Because on my going away photo frame one of my friends signed it, he said, "Sean, I always appreciated you getting the Operations Officer fired up for making," what he called "Big D Decisions," big-dick decisions.

Alex Dracobly:

In some ways, that sounds like normal bureaucratic change in command, same kind of thing I think you see in places in a university. Not with the formal command hierarchies, but still ... it's frustrating when, you're always waiting for someone else to make the decision, or even when you're making the decision for them to say ok. You know what they're gonna do anyways, so just go ahead.

Sean Jin:

Definitely, and yeah there were a couple of time where I did that. And for better or worse ... you know, there are times when even though the actions taken, and the outcome would've been the same I could've gone about it differently. But I definitely got a good first-hand experience of making decisions, living with the consequences, and leading a department. Because my sailors really did look to me for guidance and leadership while my boss was getting up to speed. But yeah, definitely some tough challenges in the Europe and Africa area because of the shortage of money and the logistical challenges.

We had a team in Croatia who they were supposed to get a restaurant contracted for the whole duration of their team detail, which was two months. And a week before they're supposed to leave, the restaurant contract fell through. And the desk officer in charge came to me and said, "Sean, we need prepackaged meals ready to eat, everything for the whole team," and so we got that all out to him, to go out with the team with him, but then while they were out there, the unit that they used to cook the stuff, because they had meals-ready-to-eat, and they also had meals that you could prepare that were a little higher quality. But the ones, the unit they used to heat up, broke. And so they basically, what it came down to was they ran out of food. And basically they paid out of pocket for two weeks until we could get them reimbursed. And I had basically fought to get them per diem, basically money for food for the rest of the duration of their detail out there.

And it was slow; it was agonizing at times, where I was talking to the Sixth Fleet representatives and the various higher units saying, "What's going on with this money? When can we get it to these guys?" And there was this time when the detail officer called me and he

was extremely frustrated and he said, “You’re not doing anything; you’re not taking care of us.” I can understand his frustration because from his perspective I’m sitting at this nice desk and I can go home every day to my room and I have food, I don’t understand what’s going on and that was his perspective. And was also extremely frustrated too, because I was kind of the in-between and I was trying to make it happen. And so I snapped back at him, and it basically came down, he actually started crying because he was so frustrated. And we worked it out like a day or two after that. We actually got the funding through, but there were some very tense times when, we had to ... there were some tense times just because of the logistical challenges. And I think I really learned the importance of supply on the deployment because ... one thing fell through and there wasn’t redundancy in certain systems, they would basically cause our sailors to suffer. And so I got a very good awareness of that. And also learned a lot of mental flexibility, operational flexibility, where one thing wouldn’t work out and instead of thinking, “Oh crap, what do I do now,” don’t worry about what failed, just move on to the next thing, ‘cause it was extremely fast paced. But definitely a good experience, more challenging than Afghanistan, in many ways, but I think I learned more from the second deployment than the first.

Alex Dracobly:

Yeah, wow that’s interesting. Yeah, being in Spain can be more challenging in some ways, present more difficulties than being in a warzone. And you didn’t get paid as much.

Sean Jin:

I know right! Oh, not as much. So, I had actually another job, so there was the one which was supporting all the details that were out but the other one was to actually procure materials for the projects we were doing in Spain. And that’s a job normally given to a civil engineer corps officer that falls under the supply officer, but they kinda gave me two hats for the duration which was an additional challenge. My guys would go out in town to Spanish vendors and get material. And that had a lot of challenges of their own the difference between a 16D nail and the metric equivalent is just enough where it will split a two by four, when you’re nailing it in width-wise.

Alex Dracobly:

That's interesting, yeah. I could just imagine.

Sean Jin:

For about three months we couldn't figure out what select fill was called. Select fill is basically gravel and dirt an aggregate between gravel and dirt and it compacts really well for a sub grade for roads. And so kept asking for what we thought was select fill because I had a Spanish speaker, a Mexican descendant in my department, and we kept getting gravel. And so the guys that were doing the road building were, "We'll use gravel but it's really not good enough." And so we spent three months trying to figure out what select fill was in Spanish. And then there were times because we would work on Saturdays that the project would come and say, "We need more of this now!" and we're like, "Worry, they close Friday afternoon." And so we actually got very good at figuring out, working around the Spanish schedule saying, "Alright, if you want to do concrete pour you got to do Monday through Thursday," and you know or whatever days. And then we would have to go out to quote material or whatever for procurement. When you first thing in the morning go out because they open from seven to eleven, or seven to twelve and then twelve to four you would not find anyone because of the siesta.

Alex Dracobly:

I can imagine, and then just identifying stuff, I've been in France and gone to hardware store, I can't read a single sign. "What's that supposed to be" And you don't know how to ask for anything.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, so that also presented some ...

Alex Dracobly:

Well then when you don't even know what it is in English.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, and that was for me difficult because I had to learn that job, I don't know anything about construction. I know how to balance a budget. And so I got a firsthand learning, first hand education on construction.

Alex Dracobly:

Construction materials.

Sean Jin:

Construction material, and I started getting pretty good at it too, because, believe it or not the projects, the people asking for the stuff would not know what they were asking for a lot of the times. And I got good enough where I would be like, "Well do you mean this or do you mean that?"

Alex Dracobly:

So they recognize it when they see it but they don't recognize the actual name.

Sean Jin:

Mmhmm, or they would use one thing which was colloquial but was not necessarily the correct term, then it would get lost in translation. So I would get pretty good at, you know, based on what the project needed, and depiction of the project like, "Well this is next and this is next." Something that most supply officers in the battalion don't learn but I felt more involved on the projects, which was good and very challenging at sometimes too.

Alex Dracobly:

So let's see, so you came back, after how many months were you there?

Sean Jin:

Yeah, we came back ... six-seven months in Spain, so we came back in August of this year. And when our deployment ended I know I was at the end of my tour. A relief had already been identified for me and so I knew at the end of my deployment and was kinda like, "Alright, I'm on my way out," even though I had a couple more months after that. And the moment we got back was a huge relief. All the construction material woes, the fights I had with the operations officer, all those things were, I think my, the construction material division that I was, those sailors I think we were kinda close to a meltdown too, like just a lot of tension amongst them. Their personalities didn't really match well and the senior enlisted guy running it was kinda rough with them. He was a really good sailor, a really good leader, but some of the junior sailors felt a little irked by him sometimes. So I feel like I kept it past for the whole deployment, but if it had gone on a little bit longer it might've fallen apart.

Alex Dracobly:

So it was a big sense of relief when you got home, huh?

Sean Jin:

Yeah exactly. And I knew my relief was just around the corner. And I basically kinda stepped a little more into an advisory role, was not as big on the, you know, on the day to day operations I started handing that off a little bit more. I started training my sailors who would sorta fill in when the new guy came in. And started advising the new supply officer; you know, things he could improve on what he would need to be focused on, but it was actually a really good time because I had two years of experience both on deployments and in home point periods. So I ... there rarely was something that came up that I didn't know how to do. But I didn't have the burden of responsibility because I knew I was going to be leaving soon. So I actually think the most influence I had on my department and on my unit was in the last couple months before I was gonna leave. Cause I was able to make decisions without necessarily being afraid of too many ramifications and consequences. And because of, of the proficiency I had gained, I remember talking to the command master chief who's the senior enlisted guy, the most senior enlisted guy, who had been in for about thirty years, and he said, "Two years is just too short for an officer or

anybody to make a big difference.” And he said, “Just imagine if you had three year tour and you were here and you had another year left, how much more good could you do.” And I thought that’s a really good point. And I’m at the point where I know where I could improve things, and ...

Alex Dracobly:

That’s interesting because of course the other side of that is the, all the military wants their officers to rotate in various positions. So both to prepare them for the possibility of promotion, but also so when they are promoted, they’ve seen a lot of things.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, because we’re supposed to be generalists, we’re not supposed to be a technical specialist, that’s what our enlisted guys are for. And also, I think they do it because you never know if an officer, you know like your commanding officer is gonna be good or bad. Imagine, a commanding officer tour with our unit is two years, imagine if it’s a four year tour ...

Alex Dracobly:

And they’re not good. That would be pretty rough.

Sean Jin:

Yeah.

Alex Dracobly:

So, when did you find out about your next deployment?

Sean Jin:

That was ... my next tour I found out actually end of 2011, so about a year ago.

Alex Dracobly:

So you actually knew.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, I had applied for the particular program where I was gonna learn what they call a “Supply Corps Internship”. Where you’re gonna be in a big command and you’re gonna learn a different set of skills whether it’s acquisition or joint logistics. Through there’s various programs so I applied for the program, got accepted, and then I chose Washington DC as my location. So I’ve actually been penciled in for a good year or so. But it didn’t really sink in until my relief showed up, and I started doing turnover with him, and I showed him ... “This is what you’re gonna do, these issues might come up here, here’s the program you’re gonna learn, here’s where you’re gonna sit, you know, all this stuff.” And when I started going over all the stuff that I had gone through two years before that’s when I thought, “Wow, I’m gone, I’m on the way out, I’m going on to my next thing.” Even now, I still kinda ... I still sorta feel like I’m gonna go back, I still kinda expect a phone call, someone calling me saying, “Oh, this issue has come up, I need help with this,” or whatever. I even checked my email the other day.

Alex Dracobly:

But you’re formally now ...

Sean Jin:

I am formally detached. November 14th, my first tour is done, which is crazy to think, it’s gone by really fast. I would say it’s been fairly successful, I think it went well. Especially near the end I was able to positively influence my sailors, I think, had a good relationship with them, and a lot of those questions I had in the beginning of whether I would be a good officer, whether I would be a good leader, not fully answered to the point where I know for sure I will always be one but I know I was, at one point I was and I have that potential. And I know I can do this.

Alex Dracobly:

For your next deployment, your next tour, gonna have any sailors under you?

Sean Jin:

That's correct; I'll be mainly working with civilians it will be an acquisitions job, yeah, no deployments of anything. So it will be a very different kind of assignment. But in the future if I do decide to stay in, which I'm kinda leaning towards at this point, it would be like a supply officer position, where I would be my boss's position.

Alex Dracobly:

So at this point you haven't been on a ship?

Sean Jin:

Not yet.

Alex Dracobly:

You're gonna have to at some point.

Sean Jin:

At some point, I'm open to that possibility.

Alex Dracobly:

And this is coming before we're, you meet people in the Navy and I think people who know nothing about the Navy that are shocked to learn you can be in the Navy and never be on a boat. I had a student years ago who had been in for eight years, he'd been on docks plenty of time, and he had an office job on the dock. But he, and he'd say, "Of course I'd walk on the ship occasionally," but he'd never been on a tour, or deployed on a ship.

Sean Jin:

I have a friend, who's actually a fellow S4 officer, so he's an assistant supply officer for another unit, so he's actually going for the same job as me in DC, anyways he spent twelve years as an enlisted special warfare craft, like those special boat teams guys. So, then he chose to become a supply corps officer, went to college, and then when to the Seabee unit. And we looked at it, by the time we're done with our shore units, shore assignments which would be out next assignments, he would have been in the Navy for seventeen years and never have been on an actual ship.

Alex Dracobly:

That's funny.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, and he's like "Well, I'm gonna see if I can go all the way without it."

Alex Dracobly:

Really?

Sean Jin:

Yeah ...

Alex Dracobly:

But there must be a limit to where you can rise if you don't go on a ship?

Sean Jin:

Yes, it would be a career dampener by like O5, commander point if you hadn't been on a ship tour, cause they look at like, "You've been expeditionary the whole time where you've done this

the whole time and we don't know really what you've done." They want to see diversity and platforms just like you were saying. Me, I'm completely open to the idea of going onto a ship.

Alex Dracobly:

So if you re-up you're gonna probably gonna be looking for that kind of assignment.

Sean Jin:

I would be. Most likely what's gonna be going on from here would be two years in DC, either another shore duty, so another two years or one year, or something like that or going back to see as a supply officer for a small ship, like a cruiser or a destroyer, so as a lieutenant, basically reporting directly to the CO on supply issues. And I'm completely open to the idea. After having heard what going to see is like, being on a ship is like from my sailors, even though they were in a Seabee unit, they're all fleet-types; most of them have been on a ship before. They say, yeah, they had a good time, so I'm looking forward to.

Alex Dracobly:

I would think that if you're gonna be in the Navy, you'd go out to sea at least once.

Sean Jin:

Definitely, and after experiencing the craziness of the Seabee units, I want to see ...

Alex Dracobly:

A little calm?

Sean Jin:

I want to see what it's like, how different it is, and if there's any similarities if there is some. I want to see the different sides of the Navy.

Alex Dracobly:

I can see that. So I got a couple set piece questions. Um, just last things. One question is: anything that really surprised you about your time in active service that you weren't expecting at all?

Sean Jin:

As an officer, how much Outlook and Microsoft Office I would need to do. We never talked about that all in any kind of recruiting programs or anything like that. But the moment I got to my unit it was just Outlook; I'm on Outlook all the time. Like hundred of emails a day, if I'm gone for a week, I have 200 emails in my inbox. And just the massive amount of Outlook we use. And then all the Excel spreadsheets and the PowerPoints, I didn't have to do too many PowerPoints, but just how computer based at least ...

Alex Dracobly:

So you put a lot of time on a computer.

Sean Jin:

Especially as an officer, um almost everything is web driven now in the Navy. So that's a big surprise. Other surprises, I honestly didn't think that "Don't Ask Don't Tell" was going to be repealed in my time, at least when I first joined the Navy. Haven't seen any big effects of it, haven't had any sailors that came out. That there were some sailors that we knew were homosexuals before, we had inklings, and it wasn't a big deal to us before. "Don't Ask Don't Tell" was kinda like, cool that's there thing as long as they don't bother anyone else than whatever. It was kinda cool because it was a historical moment, but ...

Alex Dracobly:

So you feel that's gone down fairly well that you've seen?

Sean Jin:

Yeah, I haven't seen really any big blowback. Part of me was a little afraid, like, "Man, what if there's gonna be beating," just, you know, nightmare kind of stuff. But nothing really happened that I know of. But I didn't really expect the actual repeal to happen, so that was a big surprise.

Alex Dracobly:

Interesting, huge numbers of people say they knew on deployments, that they knew certain people were gay, is that's just something you know, expect and yet when these people will also say they didn't support the repeal of DADT and I've never quite understood how that fits together or what?

Sean Jin:

Yeah, I never, it wasn't really a conversation I ever engaged in with anyone ...

Alex Dracobly:

So it just came through as an order-

Sean Jin:

Pretty much. Yeah, we had a little bit of mandatory training. So that's another thing that kinda surprised me was like ... I don't know if it was a surprise but it was like, "Man, this is a really pain in the ass," like all the mandatory training we do every year. And I sorta understand where it comes from, it's, for lack of a better term, a cover-your-ass strategy. Because whether it's a loss, or a leak of private information or personal information, or solicitation of prostitution or something like that, then the Navy can say, "Well, we trained these people, these people knew the consequences." Which is important, but it really feels kinda like a lawyer sometimes.

Alex Dracobly:

Did you guys have to participate in the, the stand down ay for suicide training that the army did. The entire Army stood down and all National Guard units for an entire day of anti-suicide training.

Sean Jin:

We did not have to do that, but we've done regular stand downs in response to various events. We actually, now that I think about it, we had a suicide while we were on deployment in Spain. A guy in Africa who hung himself, and well, I should say allegedly because technically the investigation is still ongoing. Anyways, alleged suicide we did do a bunch of training for that; that was at the unit level though.

Alex Dracobly:

So here's my other question, standardized thing. Is there anything you imagine someone's reading this fifty years from now, is there anything you think would really surprise someone fifty years from now about your military experience, your naval experience.

Sean Jin:

Fifty years from now...

Alex Dracobly:

Should've given you a warning on that question.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, that one ... maybe the fact that we tried to make everything computerize but we only have a ratio of one computer per six people in our unit.

Alex Dracobly:

Now that's interesting, that surprises me.

Sean Jin:

Yeah, the fact that we're still on windows XP, even though the fact that it's ten to twelve years after that operating system has been released. I mean, I think you can see my experience is very computer-centric.

Alex Dracobly:

So when they issue computers, do they recycle the same computers over and over again.

Sean Jin:

The hardware's fairly up to date, but they reimage them with the old operating system, I think it's because the Navy's not ready to cough up the money for a new operating systems and because the entire networks based on XP. But uh, yeah I mean we ...

Alex Dracobly:

That genuinely surprises me, I can't imagine not having my own computer. I mean, I couldn't do my job.

Sean Jin:

Well and that's the ... where it becomes a challenge because the officers and the chiefs sorta dominate the computers because most of our work tends to be computer based. So what ends up happening for the junior enlisted guys is that the ratio ends up becoming more like one and ten.

Alex Dracobly:

Right, so if they have to do something on a computer they have to wait their turn.

Sean Jin:

Pretty much. And a lot of training is computer based.

Alex Dracobly:

I understand that, to get your qualifications and stuff, it's increasingly on computers. Is that right?

Sean Jin:

I think they're good initiatives, but there are a lot of hardware issues. As far as surprising stuff goes, maybe how many uniforms we have. I don't know, that might be a Navy tradition, but I can think of in my first tour I wore four different types of utility uniforms; the blue camouflage, the new green digital camouflage, the old green woodland, and the old desert pattern. I probably have six or seven different uniforms, we seem to change uniforms every couple of ...

Alex Dracobly:

Do you have to buy them every time?

Sean Jin:

Yes.

Alex Dracobly:

Thought so.

Sean Jin:

Well, the organizational ones, the ones we need for our particular unit, were issued to us. But that might not surprise someone fifty years from now, because it might still be traditional for the Navy. Yeah, that's a tough one though.

Alex Dracobly:

Well, anything last things you want to say?

Sean Jin:

No, not really. I would just add that this is a very new perspective I guess on the military because I'm still only three years in. And still not sure exactly where I want to take it but definitely will be experiencing it more, but I guess more to follow.

Alex Dracobly:

Well get it, because the aim of my big idea for this project is that if I can, I'm gonna re-interview people a few years down the road, so we'll get you in a few years.

Sean Jin:

All right, cool.

Alex Dracobly:

All right, thank you very much.

TRANSCRIPTION NOTES

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Footnotes and additional info drawn from Wikipedia.org