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[Speaker 2]

All right, we're on. Hi everybody, I'm Dr. Chris Magra. I'm the Director for the Center of the Study of Tennesseans in War at the University of Tennessee.

It's our mission to research, preserve, and share the stories of people in our region who have been in wars from 1700 up to the present day. And we're privileged today to have Ben Hull with us. Ben wasn't born in Tennessee, but he grew up in Tennessee, and he had a 27-year career in the military, and we're going to talk about that today.

Ben, welcome, and thank you so much for sharing your story with us. Yeah, you're very welcome. I look forward to it.

Thank you. So you were born in Georgia, and it looks like when you were about two years old, you moved to Tennessee. Is that about right?

[Speaker 1]

Yes, yeah. So, you know, I was born in Atlanta, and my parents moved to Nashville when I was little so my father could go to grad school at Vanderbilt, and he ended up doing something else. He worked at Vanderbilt for years, but then, yeah, and then my mother started teaching at Tennessee State, and so I was the little guy that was hanging with her while she finished up her Ph.D. at Georgia Tech, and so she ended up teaching there, grew up in Nashville, and yeah, whole life except for one year we went to Texas just to see how hot it could actually get in Houston, and we discovered that that's it's super hot, so we moved back to Nashville.

[Speaker 2]

And so you're born in 1966 in Atlanta, Georgia, and you move up to Nashville around 1968. Your mom sounds like an all-star. You want to say a little bit about her?

[Speaker 1]

Yes, yeah, so she was the first woman to ever receive a Ph.D. from Georgia Tech, and so they didn't make it easy in the day. There was a lot of institutional resistance, and so, you know, I was the ride-along, so she had to do her defense while heavily pregnant, and my grandparents still lived in Atlanta, so we got to go back there often, but that was pretty exciting for her. She was leading the optics laboratory at Lockheed Martin.

It was just Lockheed at the time, near Marietta, where my grandfather had worked, and so she walked away from that to go to Nashville to kind of follow my dad and his academic career, which ended up going a different direction, and so, but she worked at Tennessee State for the rest of her career until she retired, and she's still alive in Nashville and still doing great at 87.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, wow.

[Speaker 1]

Well, what was it like growing up in Nashville? So, you know, so the 70s were as, you know, we had awful clothes. I had a terrible haircut, but we thought it was cool at the time.

I have an older brother, so it was the two of us. We lived in an apartment complex not far from West End Avenue. When they built I-440 through there, they kind of cut right past it.

You know, I was a little guy during that part. Had some adventures. The space program was hot and heavy.

Did an Apollo program. That's probably the most formative thing for me and my brother when we were little, was Apollo program. You know, so, you know, they dragged me out of bed at three years old to see the landing on the moon, and then we had the subsequent landings, and we were obsessed.

We had did everything with NASA and the lunar module all over the house. So, we were really into it, and we had a moon globe that I had probably still in my mother's house. So, that was kind of our formative years.

You know, both parents being in academia, you know, there were expectations, but my dad's a sportsman, so we ended up having to do sports. We were mostly, I'm the short one at six feet, so we were basketball-oriented, and then I ran track, and not like long distance, because then I'd get tired, but I do what we used to call the half mile. Yeah.

It's all metric now. You know, so, you have the 800 and the 4x800 relay, and so we lived in West Nashville. We ended up getting a house, which my mother lived in until fairly recently, and it's a nice neighborhood.

The houses are far apart, because Nashville's hilly and rocky, and so you can't put them close together, and then we had woods out back. So, my next door neighbor, when we became best friends, and he still lives near there. He's in Kingston, Tennessee, and he's a PhD in history.

So, we were history buffs together in slightly different directions, and his father had fought in World War II. So, his father and mother were both on a second marriage, and so they started late. So, he was my age, but his parents were like my grandparents' age, and so his house was filled with memorabilia from World War II.

His father had been in the 2nd Armored Division in Europe, you know, and they had all kinds of things, and they were very fascinating to a young man, and they had the big maps, and so that was probably the most influential thing for me of wanting to serve.

[Speaker 2]

I was going to ask you if it was a space program that kind of got you thinking about it.

[Speaker 1]

Well, so I think that the space program probably had me more interested in being an astronaut for a long time, but I think it was, you know, my friend George Graham Perry III and his father George Graham Perry II, Colonel Perry, who taught me, was probably the thing that got me most into military service versus, you know, my mother probably would have preferred if I'd gone to physics like her. I think I broke her heart when I majored in English a

little bit. I redeemed myself later on with doing statistical analysis and software development, but I was very interested.

So, the funny thing is, you know, when I joined the Marines, I was still in college at the University of Tennessee.

[Speaker 2]

Well, I was going to ask you about that too, Ben, because you're at the University of Tennessee, 1984?

[Speaker 1]

Yes. So, yes, from 84 to 86. So, I guess I was a smart kid, but I really didn't like school that much, so I wanted to get through school.

So, as a freshman in high school, I did the math as we got ready to apply for, to set up their classes for the second year. It's like, you know, there's really only three years of school that we have to do. So, I finished high school in three years, and then I finished college in three years.

So, I was a pretty young man when I graduated, but I met my bride at the University of Tennessee. So, we got married after I graduated. Go Vols!

Yeah, hey, so we're, I wore a Vol tie today. And so, then you enlisted in the Marines in 84. Yes, so while I was still in college.

So, the Marines have a program called the Platoon Leaders Class, or PLC for short. And so, that allows you to enlist in the Marine Corps and go to Officer Candidate School while you're still in college. And then when you graduate, then you get commissioned, and then at some point you get orders to active duty, which for me, I had to wait about six months.

So, I graduated and had to get a job and help pay for the honeymoon and stuff, which was relatively convenient.

[Speaker 2]

So, you went to college in 84 and enlisted in the Marine Corps.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, yes.

[Speaker 2]

What made you choose the Marines, and what made you?

[Speaker 1]

Great, great question. So, I had initially wanted to be a pilot. So, if you look at the military service and the space and those things, I wanted to be an aviator.

And at the time, I had great vision. And so, I applied for, I looked at the Air Force. The Air Force really wanted you to study engineering, and the Marine Corps was like, we don't care what you study for.

You just have to have a C average and go to OCS. I'm like, I like what you're selling, because I was interested in the arts and something a little bit more liberal artsy than, because I started in engineering. And, you know, it was kind of a weird place.

My parents had just gotten divorced when I was a senior in high school. So, I wasn't really in the best headspace to be a good student, right? And so, I was a mediocre student.

And so, you know, I was like, okay. And then the Air Force was pretty demanding. I was like, which is fine.

But the Marine Corps said, well, you can fly for us. So, I have to admit, in the 70s, there was a TV show called Bob, Bob, Black Sheep, which I absolutely loved. And it was on for several seasons.

And it was based on the actual Pappy Bowington, you know, the famous Marine pilot. And so, well, yeah, if you look it up, it's about the actual BMF 214, the Black Sheep squadron. So, during the Solomon's campaign, they, you know, the Marines were expanding up and fighting the Japanese who were based up at Reval.

So, there's a long campaign. During that campaign, a fairly colorful major in the Air Force by the name of, I think it's Tim, James, George, everybody called Pappy Bowington. So, Bowington was, he had served in the Flying Tigers with Claire Chennault.

So, he had a reputation. He'd actually fought and shot down Japanese airplanes flying with Flying Tigers. And he came back and was recommissioned back into the Marine Corps to fly with them.

And for folks that don't know, the Marine Corps has a large air, the Marine Corps right now has the world's ninth largest Air Force on its own. So, Marine Aviation is kind of a big part of what the Marine Corps does. And so, that TV show really got me interested in Marine Aviation.

They were flying the F-4 Corsairs, and they had a bunch of real Corsairs they had for the movie or the TV show. And so, the story was very, he was a colorful figure. He took a bunch of rejected pilots and formed a composite squadron, which later became VMF-214, which is still around.

VMF-214 is in Yuma, Arizona. It's one of our current squadrons in the Marine Corps, a very colorful history. Bowington shot down like 28 Japanese airplanes.

He was shot down over Reval, and he was thought, and he was awarded the Medal of Honor for basically sacrificing himself to save one of the other downed pilots. And everybody thought he'd been killed. And then at the end of the war, he appears out of a Japanese prison camp, alive and well, and became quite a colorful airplane racer after the war.

But they made this TV show, and it was, I think, Robert, was it Robert Conrad? The guy who used to like knock this off my shoulder guy with the batteries. I'm going to check it out after this.

Yeah. So, when I was a kid, this was about 1976, 77, 78 timeframe. The show started with a hand crank, siren, and they'd run out to their airplanes, and they'd go take off.

And they were flying a bunch of real Corsairs, which are beautiful airplanes if you're into aviation. And so, that got me interested in Marine aviation.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah. So, in 1984, your plan was you're going to be flying. Be a fighter pilot.

And you're going to be in the Marines, but you're going to do a few years at the University of Tennessee.

[Speaker 1]

Yes. So, you have to go to school.

[Speaker 2]

Now, that's kind of the odd piece of this, is because you're thinking to yourself, you're not really into school. And you're thinking, I'm not right now in my life, but you still want to get the degree.

[Speaker 1]

Yes. And so, I knew how to get there. Now, fortunately, I met my future bride, and so she helped inspire me to be a better student.

So, I was able to graduate with honors and kind of buckle down. And so, yay. So, she was a great influence in many things.

And so, now, as it would happen, you go through flight physicals, numerous flight physicals. And so, I had already gone through Officer Candidate School. 1985, then?

So, they break it into two. Well, you had a couple options, depending how much college you have to finish. So, for me, I did it, what they call junior and senior.

So, they break it into two six-week sessions each summer. And so, I completed both. And then, I was getting ready to graduate in December of 86.

So, it was 85 and 86, the summer of, I went to Officer Candidate School. It's here in Quantico, Virginia, just up the road. And I retired out of Quantico.

He's like, why are you back there? Well, I retired, just up the road. And so, yeah, which is hot and miserable.

It's July and August in Quantico, which is, you know, it's a lot like Tennessee. But it's super hot and humid because the Potomac and the Chesapeake is right there. So, we get plenty of humidity.

So, the northern kids really drop like flies in the heat. And so, you know, folks like us grew up outdoors in Tennessee. We're like, no, this is like home.

And so, we nugged on through. So, my final physical before, because he gets a bajillion different physicals. And they said, well, you got astigmatism in your left eye.

And I'm like, what? I've had like six physicals, and there's no astigmatism in my eye. Well, turns out they were right.

There is astigmatism. My vision is terrible now. So, it's not the worst thing that ever happened.

But they're like, okay, well, you can't be a pilot. I'm like, well, that just blows. That was my whole plan.

And they say, but you can come in and be a ground person, you know, but you're gonna have to compete for what your specialty is. Okay, sure. Right.

Because I had no other job. That's my plan. So, I know the job prospects.

You don't want to hang a shingle up and say, I am now a writer. That's a little bit harder to do.

[Speaker 2]

But that writing portion of it. So, this is around 1986, Ben?

[Speaker 1]

Yes. So, yeah, right in December of 1986. Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

And you graduated from UT with a degree in?

[Speaker 1]

Creative writing. Creative writing. And so, yeah.

So, we had, I thought it was a great program. So, most of what I did was, that stuff I guess it was most inspired with was play and screenplay. Two different classes, I had to write a screenplay, I had to write a play.

And it got good marks and said, hey, these are actually really interesting stuff. They were military themed because I was very military oriented. And so, but it's hard to be a playwright.

Right. Hard road to hoe, as they say. And I was getting married, I didn't want to live in poverty.

And my parents were in academia, so they're doing okay, but it's not like they're rolling in dough. So, you might know a thing or two, right? So, it's like, yeah, I had a good job.

And so, I said, okay, I'll take it. I'll take the ground assignable thing. So, then there was several months where I had to await orders to the basic officer course.

And also here at Quantico. Yeah. And it's a six month course, which it's a place called TBS, or the basic school.

And it offers a series of courses. One is the officer basic course. There's a warrant officer basic course.

And then there's the infantry officer course. So, all the Marine officers, whether you're going to be a pilot or supply guy or an infantryman, you all have to go to the officer basic course for six months. And so, that teaches you everything you know, how to be a junior officer, how to wear your uniforms.

And there was a plethora of uniforms, which you have to pay for. So, they walk in the door and they're like, okay, sign over \$2,800. And then there's an \$86, right?

[Speaker 2]

That's real money.

[Speaker 1]

All my pay. And you're like, yes, that is all your pay for the next three, four months. But, and it's funny because the young guys now don't realize, but we used to have a lot more uniforms and they've simplified it.

So, it's, it's less expensive, but we had like the famous, you know, green, you know, the class A green uniform. We had two different ones, one for wintertime and one for summertime. Now they've just said that we're going with a kind of a polyester blend that works all the time.

And you're like, well, that's not fair. I had to get two. And so, we got to get all those uniforms.

But we, one of the things they do at the officer basic course is they ensure that every junior officer in the Marine Corps knows the basic skills to be a rifle platoon commander. And so, whether you're a supply guy or a pilot or everybody, they just kind of baseline everybody the basic skills to be a rifle platoon. A rifle platoon for the general consumption is, you know, it's three rifle squads.

Each squad in the Marine Corps is 13 Marines. So, you're looking at 42 Marines because you have the three squads plus a staff sergeant to help you out. And a couple of guys secure your radio and telephone line and stuff.

So, you know, so this organization, that's the baseline that we send all officers to. And then, as you go through the school, you compete among the ground officers. The pilots, they're already kind of, we know they're going to go to flight school and they're going to compete for what kind of aircraft they want to fly.

So, the rest of us, we had to compete. And so, the Marine Corps uses a quality spread. So, they take all the jobs and they divide it in three.

And they take the class based on your scores and your scores are based around three things. There's academics, there's a lot of studying and tests you have to take because you have to have a lot of basic knowledge like military law, you know, ranks and customs and courtesies,

history of the Marine Corps, how to put in a repair order on a broken piece of gear, right? So, all this stuff is considered academics.

And then they do leadership, right? You know, everybody takes turns doing different roles in the company and the company has to manage itself and they grade you on how you perform. So, you get academics in the leadership and then, of course, the physical portion.

The physical portion for the Marine Corps is pretty tough. You know, we run a lot, we carry a lot of weight, we climb over things, we crawl through things. And so, I guess the capstone physical event was the endurance course, which is you run through the obstacle course twice, then you pick up your assault kit and you run for six miles and then you do another obstacle course at the end and it's all for time.

[Speaker 2]

So... Now, Ben, that six months, did that recalibrate you? Did you come down from wanting to fly and...

[Speaker 1]

Oh, well, yeah. So, I was pretty good at the infantry stuff. Yeah.

Well, so, I had to learn pretty quick, okay, I'm not going to be a pilot. So, I've got to be all in. So, in the Marine Corps, you know, the ethos is very infantry oriented.

Now, I do have, while I was still at the University of Tennessee, I do have to do a shout out to the Army ROTC there. So, you were allowed as a student to go and train with the Army. You don't have to be in the Army or be on scholarship.

They'll just take students and say, hey, I'll take your class or you want to do the Ranger Battalion. So, I joined the Ranger Battalion as a regular student. They knew I was going to Marine OCS, because a lot of the basic infantry skills are the same between the Army and the Marine Corps.

I said, you know, it's not a bad idea to help me make sure I've got the skills so that I have a leg up when I go to OCS, but also just, you know, it was fun. There was a lot of physical workouts and stuff. So, that just helped prepare me better.

And so, I had grown up living outdoors in the woods with my friends, because we were in the suburbs, but there was like kind of wilderness near us. So, we spent a lot of time out there. So, I had pretty good field skills.

And between the stuff with the Army ROTC guys and the OCS, yeah, it's like, okay, this infantry stuff, I'm pretty good at. And so, it was moderately ambitious. It's like, so, well, in the Marine Corps, the infantry kind of runs the show.

So, the Commandant of the Marine Corps is always an infantry guy. And so, it's like, well, if the number one post is always an infantry guy, so that's the way to go. Well, it was very competitive to get infantry slots.

And so, if you like doing infantry work, the worst thing you can imagine is being like the supply officer. Although, God love them, we need them, right? They do an important job.

But as a young 24-year-old, you're like, I don't want to be counting things the rest of my life. So, I want to go carry a gun, lead Marines, and blow things up, which is slightly mentally unstable, but that was, we were among friends, right? And so, of course, keep in mind, this is the 80s, it's Cold War.

We were very much focused on a near and present danger, right? Hey, the Soviet Union's there, we're worried about them, et cetera. Also, keep in mind, we had all our senior officers enlisted, had all fought in Vietnam.

And so, we had a huge background of skills that they had learned in combat. And so, I was like a sponge to absorb as much as I could for what they had to offer. And so, I want to be an infantry guy, so you had to compete, but they broke into thirds, so you have to.

So, some people try to game the system, saying, well, if I'm at the top of the middle third of the class, I'll get my choice. I'm like, well, yeah, I can't guarantee how that math's going to break, so how about you just do your best and be at the top of the top third? So, it was very competitive, and so I worked hard, got to the top of the top third, so I got my choice to be infantry.

And so, it was very competitive because it's a mix of people that go to different commissioning sources. We had a little bit of Naval Academy guys. Frankly, they were not the best infantry officers.

And we had a bunch of OCS guys, and then probably the strongest officers were the ones who had come through enlisted commissioning programs. So, one of my good friends, he was a gunnery sergeant, infantry, as he became an officer. So, we were all like, oh, well, Lieutenant Kenney, tell me how all this works.

You've really done this for many years ahead of us. So, he was a good friend to me and very helpful, helping me understand how to do the better. And so, I got infantry, which is what I wanted.

So, this was all in 1987. So, I completed the basic officer course in December of 87, and then I went to the infantry officer course, which is three additional months. So, if we say the basic officer course, you'd be a rifle platoon commander.

The infantry officer course focuses on all the advanced infantry skills. So, it's mortar and machine gunnery. So, we did 81 millimeter mortar, 60 millimeter mortars, every imaginable type of machine gun, anti-armor, and then coordinating all those things and doing fire support coordination, and a lot of those advanced infantry skills.

So, I worked every position on both 81 and 60 millimeter mortars. So, I fired hundreds of rounds. We were able to control live airstrikes, et cetera.

So, we did a lot of good solid skills that would come in handy. It also made us very credible when we went out to the fleet, because I had fired as many mortar shells as any of my enlisted Marines and really worked the gun crew. So, I knew every position on every gun crew, both machine guns, heavy machine guns, light machine guns, mortars, and anti-armor weapons.

So, we had a couple different missile launchers.

[Speaker 2]

And you come out of all this as a lieutenant, Ben?

[Speaker 1]

Yes. So, during the basic officer course, you're a second lieutenant through all that. So, you're already commissioned when you go to the basic officer course.

And then, you know, so by the time you come out of that, it's two years and you get automatically promoted to first lieutenant. So, you've done nine months. So, a little bit, you know, not too long after that, you'll become a first lieutenant.

Then, you have to compete for a promotion to a captain, and et cetera. But the promotion from second to first lieutenant is automatic across all the services. So, it's a title 10 function.

[Speaker 2]

And so, 1987, you are a lieutenant in the Marines. You are married. You have a degree from the University of Tennessee in creative writing.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, the 80s was a pretty big decade. So, I graduated high school, college, got married, joined the Marine Corps, and I would have my first child before that decade was over.

[Speaker 2]

You're a man on the move.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, I was moving. It slows down a little bit after that, because then you have to raise the children, which turns out is a lot of work. So, I would have three when it was all said and done.

So, it was 87, we finished the basic officer course. Then, the infantry officer course is January, February, March, which is insanely cold and miserable. It was an excellent course.

We had a very talented company that went through there. The instructors loved us. It also helped the company right before us didn't do anything right.

And so, then we had the halo effect of being competent made us look even better. So, I had the capstone event at the end of that is this, it was called the raid. So, you'll do a raid.

And so, we insert over distance in small boats in the middle of the night. And then we have to infiltrate through the woods, strike a target on time, and then exfiltrate through and lift, a helicopter lift out all under the cover of darkness. And so, I had the honor of being the raid force commander.

So, we all wrote the plan, and then they graded the plans and the best plan got chosen. So, I got chosen to be the raid force commander, which was a big honor, and it went perfectly. So,

we had a really talented team that pulled off all the parts so that the whole plan just pulled off.

And so, we were a great opportunity. So, I kind of left on high, we had a little bit of time off. So, this would be in early 1988.

And then I get my orders to Camp Lejeune. So, now everybody likes to call up Camp Lejeune now because General John A. Lejeune was Cajun, and they just inserted an R for no reason.

Lejeune is a word in common uses in French. But, you know, so a lot of folks will say, oh, it's Lejeune. I'm like, well, I'm just not that Cajun.

But okay, if it makes it feel better. So, Camp Lejeune is what we called it back in the 80s. I went there.

So, the Marine Corps was doing a lot of reorganization at the time. So, I reported into 2nd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment for a very short period of time. And so, they redesignated that battalion to be 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines.

And so, I'd spend most of my time following that with, but it was the same battalion. They just changed the colors because they were doing a bunch of reorganization and have to do it while some of the units are deployed. And so, they just kind of played kind of musical chairs.

So, we ended up at 2-8. And so, 2-8, we're at a place called Camp Geiger. So, if you know Camp Lejeune, it's a big camp, and it has sub camps around it.

And so, in the middle of Camp Lejeune is the New River flows through there. So, it's split. And so, the north side, and they call it main side, where most of the folks are.

South side had Camp Geiger, which was named after General Roy Geiger. And then the air station, where all the helicopters were based there. So, those two were on the south side of the river.

So, at that time, 8th Marine Regiment was on the south side. We took a lot of pride being at Camp Geiger. We were, because we were apart from everybody else, which made us special.

So, and we were based out of that. We trained in that south side of the river for most of our time there. From there, we deployed to Norway.

[Speaker 2]
It's 1988.

[Speaker 1]
Yes, this is 1988.

[Speaker 2]
Towards the end of the Cold War. Cold War is really drawing to a close at this point. Yeah, but we didn't see that coming.

Are you thinking in 1988, I'm going to have a 20-year career in the Marine Corps?

[Speaker 1]

No, I was not. So, there was a couple of things to think about. One is you knew you're going to have to move a lot and stuff.

And so, what really kind of focused that is when I had a kid. And so, the child kind of changes your perspective, not to sound too dry, but it really does. And so, I knew a lot of Marines were like, hey, I like having a family.

Do I really want to subject my family to this? The military life is hard. And so, but I know plenty of people have done it, and God bless them, but it is hard.

And I was like, yeah, I don't know. And I worked for kind of a mix of people. So, the military life is a little bit different than people expect.

It's not as rigid, but you can have very toxic leadership in different places. So, I was battling maybe 500. I have, oh, man, this guy is great.

I'll go with him anywhere. This guy is a nut job. I don't know.

If this is how you succeed, I don't know if that's really what I want to do. So, I had a couple of mixed messages about where that career trajectory would look. Now, the Vietnam veterans, the older crew were amazing.

So, when I was in the 8th Marines, both our battalion commander was, you know, had been in Vietnam and the regimental commander, who's Ray Smith, E. Toole Smith, the very famous, twice awarded the Navy Cross from Vietnam. So, you know, he was a great leader and learned a ton from him and many other Vietnam veterans.

So, again, that was just amazing. Like, oh, my gosh, we learned so much from them.

[Speaker 2]

But there was a middle tier. So, on the one hand, Ben, you're thinking in 88, I might have a career in the military. And on the other hand, you're thinking I've got a kid and there's some bad examples.

So, maybe not. Maybe not. Maybe a few years and then call it quits.

Yep. But then you're deployed to Norway.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. So, that was a fairly standard peacetime deployment. So, I go to Norway.

At the time, we were doing these a lot because the Cold War would rapidly end a couple of years later, but we didn't see that coming. So, everybody was like, OK, we got to be ready to go. Part of the Marine Corps' job in defending Europe is the northern flank.

So, it was us, the British and the Dutch would form a group to help reinforce the Norwegians to protect the northern flank of NATO. So, we did exercise every year to do that. The exercise we did was Teamwork 88.

And so, we'd go up there, we'd have a large amphibious operation. We had a task force with 65 ships. It was ginormous.

We had the Brits, we had us, we had the Dutch and the Germans, and everybody had part of that giant task force. The Russians were flying bear bombers over and made scramble jets to intercept and the whole Cold War deal. So, our ships, we had a lot of amphibious ships at the time.

So, right after Norway, we came back and then... What was your role at Norway? I was a Rifle Platoon Commander.

And so, I was commanding the 1st Platoon of Company F for 2nd Battalion Marines. The way we organized was each of the companies had a slightly different function. So, our function was the mechanized company.

So, there's an amphibious tractor called the AAV P7. It's a large piece of gear. The Marine Corps originally fielded in 1972 and we just got rid of it.

So, I was kind of in the middle of its lifespan. And so, we spent a lot of time as mechanized infantry. The other companies would be focused on helicopter inserts, and then another company would be focused on small boats.

And so, they would move around in these speedboats, basically, these fancy militarized speedboats.

[Speaker 2]

And you're still a lieutenant at this point?

[Speaker 1]

Yes. So, I'm still a lieutenant. So, as a Rifle Platoon Commander, I was one of the more senior lieutenants in the company.

So, after we got back from Norway, I would become the Company Executive Officer, or the 2IC if you're British. We call it the XO in the U.S. And it's funny. It's like, oh, you're the senior lieutenant.

I was like, well, okay, yeah, we're just lieutenants. So, our Company Commander, we had a little disconnect in the schooling, right? So, the Marine Corps would later fix this problem.

So, Captains, they go to a school called, at the time, it was called the Amphibious Warfare School. They changed it to the Expeditionary Warfare School. When I went to it, it was still called Amphibious Warfare School.

And it's the Captain's level course for professional education. And at the time, it did, it was a lot of academic work that was very focused on what happens at battalion and regimental level. So, it was a lot more operationally focused.

And then, these Captains would come back and be a Rifle Company Commander. But they were like, their skills had not been honed in being a Company Commander. And so, we came out of the Infantry Officer course, which was teaching us the latest techniques.

We call it TTPs, the Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures. We were getting the latest stuff from combat development of this is how the infantry should work. And then, we get a Company Commander who's not up to snuff in that yet.

And then, they don't want to be told that they're not up. And so, that creates a lot of friction. They've since fixed that problem.

They go, you know, that is a terrible idea. Let's take the Company Commanders and give them a refresh course before we throw them into the lieutenants that just came out of one of our premier schools.

[Speaker 2]

You had said before that you were in this bad headspace, and you weren't a good student. Has that changed?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, that had changed. Yeah, I was married. And, you know, so, by all accounts, I'm not a dummy.

So, if I apply myself, I'm a pretty quick study on many things. So, between me and my colleagues, we got a really, the latest and greatest, you know, education on infantry and tactics. And so, we kind of really got into it.

And so, I created some friction, which made it exciting as the Company Executive Officer. So, I ended up, you know, I had to wrangle all the junior officers and make sure that, hey, let's not have a mutiny. And, you know, the Captain, you know, I'll handle it, guys.

Let me work with the Captain, and we'll work all this out. And so, the Captain wasn't the most articulate guy, which didn't help. So, that made life kind of interesting.

That was another reason. I was like, I don't know if I want to make a career with that, if I have to do that much handling of folks. And so, but I had a great, the Marines were awesome.

I had a great company. We had, the junior officers were great. I mean, we had a little bit of troublemaking, you know, a little bit of drinking and fighting, but it was the 80s, right?

But it, all in all, they were really excellent, you know. Now, some of the things the Marine Corps would do later fixed a lot of some of the problems that I had to deal with was, one is the, they had streamlined the entry level training. So, the Marines that would come to the rifle companies were fairly basically trained.

So, we had to do a lot of fairly basic individual skills training on infantry skills. The Marine Corps has since really upped the game at the school of infantry. So, the young infantrymen that come into a battalion now are like months and months ahead of where we got them.

So, the capabilities are so much greater now, you know, it's kind of like, I wish we had known that. I wish, you know, but it is reassuring that they learn as they go. But, so, you know, so here it is, it's 1988.

And then, so I browned out that year, I'd become the same company, Company F, or Fox Company, as the XO, the second command, same captain, we're trucking along. And so, we start working up for a, we called the MEU, the Marine Expeditionary Unit. That's like the amphibious group that's forward deployed all the time.

At the time, we, the Marine Corps still has three MEU, one in the east, one in the west, and one forward deployed in Japan. Still have the structure, but we don't have as many ships as we used to have. So, we used to have a continuous presence in the Sixth Fleet, in the Mediterranean, the Seventh Fleet in Japan, and the Third Fleet in the Pacific.

And so, we don't have as many ships, so it's kind of discontinuous. You kind of have to deploy when the ships are there, which is sad in many respects, but that's the state of the fleet. And then, but at the time, there were boom, boom, boom.

So, I was with the 26th MEU. So, the MEU, we have this concept in Marine Corps, we call the Air Ground Task Force, the MAGTF. And so, there's a ground combat element, a aviation combat element, and a logistics combat element, and then a command element.

So, the MEU comes with its own headquarters. It's commanded by a full colonel, and the ground element is an infantry battalion, but it's been beefed up. So, it gets an artillery battery attached to it.

It would get a platoon of the amphibious tractors attached. It gets some recon guys. And so, we beef it up with some, and so that's called Battalion Landing Team.

So, battalions, about 900 Marines. Well, it ended up being a little over a thousand Marines when it's all beefed up. The aviation, we do the same thing.

We would take, at the time, it was a CH-46 helicopter squadron, and we'd have 12 of the C-9 helicopters, which go back to Vietnam. I flew in helicopters with patches of bullet holes from Vietnam. It was a great little airplane.

So, it looks like a Chinook. It has the counter-rotating rotor heads, but it's just a little bit smaller, but it can carry about 18 Marines. And so, it carried a lot more than like a Huey or even Blackhawk.

A Blackhawk on a good day can carry a dozen. So, it was a little bit bigger. So, that was our standard medium-lift helicopter.

Nowadays, we do those with Ospreys. So, an Osprey will carry about as many Marines, but way faster and much, much farther. So, at the time, that 46 squadron would also get some Harriers and some Huey, you know, some attack helicopters and some heavy-lift, the CH-53, C-9 helicopters.

So, it ended up having like 27 airplanes. So, it'd be a big squadron. So, that would be the ace or the aviation combat element.

And then, so we'd have the battalion beefed up, the squadron beefed up, and then we'd have this logistics battalion that was kind of a Frankenstein's monster stuff put together. And

then the command element would be the colonel and his staff to kind of make it all work. And so, then we'd get on ships, and it was the different configurations of ships sort of depended on what was available.

We were on three ships. I was with the mechanized. So, we were still mechanized.

We did the same thing that we're doing in Norway. It's still the mechanized company. And so, we were on a tank landing ship.

So, tank landing ship, we did commission those a few years back, but it's a smaller ship. It's flat bottom. So, it's made to beach in, which also means it rocks violently in the sea.

So, you know, I was blessed with not getting seasick, but that put me like me and like two other dudes on the whole ship that didn't barf their guts out all the time because the ship was constantly rocking violently. But, you know, it would carry like 55 pieces of rolling stock. So, it'd have our 14 Amtraks plus a bunch of other trucks and gear.

But it was about 550 feet long and 55 feet at the beam. So, it's kind of long and skinny. And so, and they were mostly built in the, like, 50s and 60s.

So, it was a bit older ship. So, something was always broken. So, they were kind of at the end of their life.

And so, but I spent a fair amount of time on tank landing ships. So, I do have a soft spot in my heart for them. And so, and I thought they were good little ships.

[Speaker 2]

And that was in 1989, Ben? Yes, that was 1989. And which part of the world are you in at this point?

[Speaker 1]

So, the 26th Marine would deploy to the Mediterranean. So, it would be the landing force for the 6th Fleet, which is the numbered fleet that's assigned to the Mediterranean. So, the numbered fleets stayed the same for quite some time.

So, in the Atlantic, it's the 2nd Fleet. The Mediterranean, 6th Fleet. CENTCOM is the 5th Fleet.

And then the Pacific has 7th Fleet and 3rd Fleet. And so, we would go out there to the Mediterranean. So, while we were there, we went to get this in the right order.

We meet up with the other outgoing MEU. So, we do a physical handoff at Roda, Spain, which is a U.S. Navy base in Roda, Spain. And then from there, we did an operation at Sierra de Breton in Spain, just down the coast near Cadiz.

Then we sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar. We went to France. There, we had some liberty.

We spread across the coast. We were at Villefranche, which is right next to Nice. If you go right over the hill, there's Nice.

It's beautiful. We had some fun there. And so, France, from there, we went to, again, I'll get this straight.

We had to go to Lebanon. So, there was trouble in Lebanon. We had to go there.

And now, our part was unexciting. We had to just be right off the coast, just in case. The larger formation did a noncombatant evacuation in 1989.

Very few Americans were left in Beirut. There was the embassy annex in the north side of town. And the different factions were fighting.

And the fire was going over the top of the embassy annex. And there was a few dozen Americans still there. And so, we were prepared to get them out.

And so, the preparation was great. I had a video of every place we had to go. We knew exactly, you stand here.

This is the door. And we had very detailed plans to get everybody out. And so, we actually did it by sneaking them out with the mail run.

There was a helicopter that would come in and do a mail run regularly. And then, we snuck the people out, so that nobody knew that we were trying to get them out. So, that was well done.

And our part was just to be there in case something went sideways.

[Speaker 2]

Now, Ben, are you in contact with your family?

[Speaker 1]

No, this was the bad old days.

[Speaker 2]

So, when you were on a ship, you just don't, you could not call home.

[Speaker 1]

And this is pre-internet.

[Speaker 2]

Now, what did your wife think about that? And what did your mom and dad think about it? And your older brother?

I mean, are they worried about you? Are they sending you care packages?

[Speaker 1]

So, you know, we're corresponding with like mail, right? So, there is mail that can go. Those helicopters will fly mail to the ship.

But there's not really regular phone contact. Nowadays, you can do that. It's not a huge amount.

But yeah, you can call home from a ship now. But you could not do that then. The only, you know, like if, you know, if somebody died, they would like set up and like you could do this crazy phone call.

But communication was pretty limited. It was snail mail. And so, we had planned to take some leave.

We were going to go back to France. And then we were going to go take some leave. But all that, that was really kind of a bummer to kind of put the train tickets back in the mail.

And since like, sorry, the leave got canceled. We're going to be here in Lebanon. We went, we, so the, you know, if my parents were worried, man, they didn't talk about a lot.

But I'm probably, you know, I correspond a lot with Stacey because I already had my first child, was already born by then. So, she was born in early 88. I mean, sorry, early 89.

I'm sorry, February of 89. So, we were in the Mediterranean. She's just a wee, wee lass.

And so, and then, and then I love to call her my sickly child because she was small at birth. And she just had one thing after another. She's fine now, except she has asthma, you know.

So, it's always something, right? The other kids are progressively bigger and don't have nearly the health problems she has. But she's fine.

She's married, has my two grandchildren. So, that part comes out, okay. So, spoiler alert.

But she, it was always something with her. So, she had all kinds of problems as a little baby. So, that was very stressful for Stacey.

And so, she would travel Camp Lejeune. Her parents were in Kingsport, Tennessee. So, she would schlep the kids up there.

Her parents were great. And my parents were very busy doing their own thing. So, not to impugn their reputation, but they had, you know, reestablishing their lives after getting divorced was still, you know.

[Speaker 2]

And so, I've been doing your own thing.

[Speaker 1]

Yes. And so, then we went to Egypt. Got some great photos, got to see the Great Pyramids and see Egypt after all that, the adventures.

We were in Israel. I don't have the exact sequence just right. So, we spent three weeks in Israel.

And so, we broke that up into two different exercises. And then, I had some time off in between where me and a couple of the other officers went to Tel Aviv and had a couple days at the beach. What did you think about Tel Aviv?

Oh, it's a lot of fun. But boy, they rolled up the streets on Shabbat. It's nothing.

But boy, there's a party right before. And then, sun goes down and done. And so, yeah, you can't get a cheeseburger, you know.

So, but it is a wonderful place. People were great. We had already been up.

We've been up in the Judean Hills at a place called Camp Adam, which is the infantry school for the IDF. So, we worked with them for, you know, a period of time. They were kind of interested in our techniques and the videotapes.

And we were able to, you know, show them some things. You know, my general impression of the IDF, their infantry, was like, I don't know, you know, you're not that good. Yeah, they were very Soviet-style, if you know how the Soviets organized.

I was like, how did they disorganize? But every military organization's reflection of its culture, they had a kind of a unique cultural background. And with the diaspora coming in and creating the IDF, it was not created on the Anglo-American template, right?

And so, we kind of look at it and go, I don't know how effective that is. But they were very interested in our techniques. I think what they were interested in is how do we develop a professional NCO Corps, because that's what they were missing.

The Soviet style is like, I have officers, I have troops. The officers do everything. But there ain't enough officers, right?

So, you know, so that creates some challenges. And they were trying to figure out how to do, how to get over that. And but we did get to meet some really good officers.

I met a really good Israeli colonel who'd been, he was there when they fought their way to the Wailing Wall. You know, very moving. And he was there at the Battle of Chinese Farm, if you're familiar with the battle there.

And that, which was fairly tragic, because the paratroopers were kind of thrown into a bit of a meat grinder. So, they lost a lot of getting those guys there. So, very interesting background.

And they were, we were doing some pretty complex infantry skills there. And then they were like, we're trying to do a non-illuminated night attack. So, that's like, you're sneaking up and lying and doing an infantry attack with no illumination, and while doing overhead machine gun fire, which is pretty dangerous and complex if you're not careful.

And so, it takes some careful planning and rehearsals to do that. And we got really good at it. So, that was a complex maneuver.

And the Israelis were like, how do you do that? We also, we spent some time at a place called Shifta, which is their artillery school. And we blew their minds on what you can do with artillery and maneuver.

They're like, how do you move so close to your own artillery? And I'm like, practice. But that's how it works, right?

Because as soon as your artillery stops, they come out of their holes and they will shoot you. So, you got to get close to your own supporting fires to get into the enemy positions. And so, so, they were very fascinated with what we trained.

We also trained, I believe it was Turkey, Italy, Sardinia. And then we sailed out of the Mediterranean, went to Portugal, and then back to Rota. So, we kind of hit a big chunk of the Mediterranean.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

And so, a lot of those were exercises with NATO partners. And so, that was a kind of interesting way to kind of see. We worked with some Italians, worked with some, the British, of course, were very professional.

The Portuguese are small, but very professional. The Fusileros, the unit there, the Langanari was the Italians. And then, of course, the British, Marines, of course, well-known, very professional.

So, that was an interesting experience. At the end of that, I've got some time on my obligated service. So, I had an obligated period of service after my commission because I signed a contract, right?

But I had a reserve commission. So, the Marines don't give out a regular commission lightly. You have to go to the Naval Academy or get maybe a ROTC scholarship or there's a few ways.

It says you're going to get a commission that goes at your leisure until we throw you out or you retire. But most of us had a reserve commission. So, if we want to stay on for an active duty career, you have to go through what we call an augmentation process to change from reserve commission to an active commission.

I wasn't really interested in doing that. I had made that decision while we were deployed on the Mediterranean that I was going to do my time and get out. I just had the little kid, little kid, you know, I just, you know, she needs a lot of care.

So, I got to make that. 1989, Ben? Yeah, this was 1989.

So, I come back at the end, you know, toward late in 1989. So, I still have some time left on my obligated time. And so, we had this newer formation in the Marine Corps called Light Armored Infantry.

Now, it's called Light Armored Reconnaissance, same thing. So, a few years before, the Marine Corps had invested in this new eight-by-eight armored vehicle family, and it would make a battalion of these things with all these interrelated vehicles and form this kind of armored reconnaissance capability that the Marine Corps did not have. And so, I transferred

from 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines to the 2nd Light Armored Infantry Battalion to learn how to do this thing.

So, I went from there to Alpha Company or Company A, 2nd Light Armored Infantry, and became a scout platoon commander there. And so, that's how I learned to operate the LAV-25. And then, we went through- Did that come with a commission, Ben?

Nope, nope. It was just a transfer. Now, I had been selected for captain.

So, in the process, you know, I went through the process, and they selected me for captain. And that's when I got over to what we call LAI. So, Light Armored Infantry is a bit of a mouthful, which is called LAI Battalion.

So, when I was over there, they're like, hey, you're a smart guy. We'd like you to stick around. And hey, look, you got selected for captain.

You can get promoted. And I'm like, nah, I got a kid. I really want to kind of settle down.

So, we were preparing for a deployment to Norway, doing another Norway deployment. And so, this now puts us into 1990. And, you know, so, by current events, there's in mid-1990, there's the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq.

So, the Iraqis invade there.

[Speaker 2]

So, we- And right when you're thinking, I'm going to get- Yeah, right in that time.

[Speaker 1]

And so, during that time, I was like interviewing with- So, I had interviewed with a couple companies. And so, I was lining up a job. I was going to go into the trucking business.

And so, I had interviewed with Schneider National.

[Speaker 2]

Why trucking, Ben? Because that'll come up later on.

[Speaker 1]

Well, that is a great question. It is because I'd worked with the Light Armored Vehicles and stuff. I knew, like, heavy machinery, right?

And the Amtraks were heavy machinery. So, I'd worked a lot with that. So, I was like, meh, you know.

And frankly, the trucking industry hires a lot of people coming out of the military because they're, you know, it is a bit of a hard-nosed business. And so, they needed folks that could be hard-nosed. So, it was an opportunity.

And again, I did not have any, like, crazy hot skills, right? So, I was like, I just need a management position. And so, you know, based on my experience, hard work, I can get somewhere.

So, I'd lined up a job with Schneider National, a good company based out of Green Bay, Wisconsin. But- That would have been different, Ben, moving to Wisconsin. Yeah, a very different trajectory.

But it does sort of work out in the end. There was what we call stop loss, right? So, we got hit with Desert Shield was the operation, and it came in two phases.

So, Desert Shield phase one was a big response, but it was defensive, right? We're going to move some forces into Saudi Arabia to make sure that the Iraqis don't do anything else beside Kuwait. And so, we put a Marine Brigade and Army paratroopers, kind of made this flash up.

And we were going to send an amphibious brigade because we were getting ready to go to Norway. So, we'd already kind of done the preparation to send an amphibious brigade to Norway. It's like, oh, well, why don't we just get on the ship and go to Iraq instead?

So, there was a little bit of- Little bit of difference. Yeah, but they swizzled some stuff around, but they got that brigade going. And everybody said, okay, well, that's it.

We'll go there, we'll fly the flag, and it'll be all over. And so, several weeks later, we get hit with Desert Shield phase two. So, Desert Shield phase two was everybody's going.

So, we cleaned out Camp Lejeune. We mobilized the entire Marine Reserve. And so, it was, we're going to war, boys.

Let's go.

[Speaker 2]

So, what does your wife think about this?

[Speaker 1]

Because- Oh, she is just unhappy. So, because we were all planning to get up and move. So, we had already had a job lined up.

We were going to Houston, which is not my favorite place in the world, but it was a good job, right?

[Speaker 2]

And so, we were going to- Oh, even though the company was based out of Green Bay, your job would have been in Houston. Yeah, gotcha. Yes.

[Speaker 1]

So, it was going to be at their Houston Operations Center. I was like, okay, I would end up being in Green Bay, but we'll come to that later. Because it's darn cold.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, I've been there. Blue Packers.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, they are all in. So, the whole shebang is going. So, one of the weird things that happens is they mobilize the reserve.

So, I'm still with this armored reconnaissance battalion at LAI. And so, it has four companies. So, two of the companies went with the amphibious brigade that left.

So, we're sitting there at like half strength. We have two companies. Where are you at then?

Still at Camp Lejeune, right? So, we're there at Camp Lejeune. We had two companies.

We had Company A and Company C. At the time, I had moved from Company A to Company C to be their XO, because we were short of officers. So, I was a platoon commander at Company A for a while.

Then, I kind of fleeted up to be their XO, because we were just short of officers. And then, Company C was really short. So, I went over there to be their XO and kind of get their weapons platoon kind of up to speed.

Then, there was a lot of reorganization. So, when the battalion was first made, it was three line companies and a weapons company. And then, when they kind of thought it through, it was like, well, this operates over a much larger area.

So, having a central weapons company is not good. So, we reorganized it so that you had four line companies or reconnaissance companies, and each one had its own weapons platoon. And so, we had organized that way, and we were still training that.

The guys in California had not. They had not changed, and that would later end up being a problem. So, we made that change.

We sent two companies forward, and then we mobilized the entire reserve component. So, there was four light armored infantry companies in the reserve that were reorganized just like we were, and they were all added to our battalion. So then, now we had six companies.

And so, we re-lettered their A and their C. So, we had A, B, C, D, E, and F. So, the six companies.

So, I would later move to be the XO of Company F, because when they were mobilized, they only had a single officer who was their company commander. And the XO in these armored units did all the fire support coordination. So, it was kind of a technical key role to control the air and artillery and mortar fire.

[Speaker 2]

There was a lieutenant?

[Speaker 1]

Yes, I was still a lieutenant, waiting for promotion to captain, which would, that took forever. You get selected, but then they promote you whenever they feel like it. So, they can be years before you actually get promoted.

So, I was still first lieutenant. So, I went over to now, it was Alpha Company 4th. Well, we re-designated Company F 2nd Light Armored Infantry.

And so, I came over there, we brought an active component first sergeant, myself as an active component officer who had recent experience.

[Speaker 2]

You're pretty experienced as a first lieutenant. You're pretty experienced by this point.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, I'd done multiple deployments, I'd done tons of exercises, a lot of live fire, been with Light Armored Infantry for a while. So, I was pretty comfortable in the job. So, I ended up there with Company F in Saudi Arabia.

So, our stuff came on ships, we flew over, and then we met the ships at the port of Jabail in Saudi Arabia, and we offloaded our stuff. That's where we came under, the war had started, we came under skid attack and all that fun stuff while we were in the port. So, and then we loaded up our vehicles.

So, the vehicles that we were allocated to come out of pre-positioned wartime reserve. And so, the first problem we had is, oh, well, they're in pretty good condition, but they didn't have any radios. Well, so if you know how reconnaissance works in armored warfare, you've got to have a radio.

And so, we discovered that was a huge problem. And, but part of it was the vehicles were designed to use the new Singars radios. So, we were just fielding our new Singars frequency hopping VHF radios.

Well, those were really expensive and they were still making them, which is why the vehicles didn't come with them. So, unfortunately, the plugs in the back are common. So, the Air Force had a warehouse full of old single channel VHF radios.

So, we took all of them, but they don't fit in the racks exactly. So, we're like duct taping the radios in and wiring it, but it plugs in fine and works. And so, we didn't have frequency hopping radios.

We had kind of standard VHF radios, RT-524. So, it can broadcast it up to 40 watts, which is a pretty powerful VHF. The desert's pretty terrible for radios because the sand is highly reflective.

It creates a lot of problems. So, you get reflected energy. So, when you broadcast, the energy reflects off the sand and it goes back into your antenna and damage your common equipment.

And it's not good for your alternator. So, we had all kinds of alternator problems that are just part of being in the desert. And so, that was an interesting education.

We had to figure out how to navigate in this. So, my maps that I got for Saudi Arabia, the joke is it was just brown paper with the gridlines. But it turns out there is terrain.

They just didn't map it in any sort of detail. So, I just said, oh, well, it's a brown piece of paper. And then we would start in...

Not everybody had GPS. We had one GPS for the whole company. And that was newfangled.

This is like the bee's knees. So, I could kind of survey a point and then from there kind of lay out where we were.

[Speaker 2]

This is 1990, Ben?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. So, 1990, we deployed over there. So, this would be early 91 as the war started with Iraq.

And so, as we're learning this, as we move up to the front and our first major combat action was the Battle of Khafji. So, the Iraqis saw us building up. So, they were going to launch a major spoiling attack into northern Saudi Arabia.

And there's a town there right across the border called Khafji. That's the name of the battle, although the battle went for miles and miles and miles inland. So, we were miles from there inland.

So, Kuwait, it makes like a straight border and then it makes a turn. We were up middle of that straight southern border. And there's a large oil field there called Awafra.

And Awafra is this big oil field. And next to it is a large, it was a compound where they irrigated it. And there's like a small forest.

And we've got an Awafra forest, which you could see. We were on high ground. We could see across the border.

And you see this like five square kilometer forest in the middle of the desert, which is very weird looking. But the Kuwaitis were trying to do something there. And so, the Iraqis would hide in there.

So, we got to blow it up. And my camera seems to be moving on its own, which is very strange. I don't know.

And so, that was where we were positioned along that portion. Now, the border had these large sand berms, I mean like 30 foot high giant berms of sand, which are uncrossable by even with a tractor. Nothing could cross because the sand is just soft and just get stuck.

And they were double bermed. So, if somehow you figured out how to get over one, you get stuck in the other. So, you weren't getting across the border except through gaps.

And so, the gaps in the border were where we were watching. And then, we had a little bit of guys watching the other stuff. So, the Battle of Khafi started for us.

Our company was in reserve. And we had two companies up and our company back in reserve. And we were on the battalion net.

And it's nighttime. And the Iraqis had moved fairly large formations across the desert without any radio communication. So, it showed a fair amount of skill.

That's not an easy maneuver to pull off. And now, I come to find out later that our JSTARS could see them moving, but they felt no obligation to tell us. So, they came as a complete surprise to us.

And so, the first thing we get is a flash message across the network, you know, tank, tank, tank. And we're like, oh, crap. This is game on, guys.

And so, we're on our forward left. The first tank that came through the berm, we were waiting for it. So, Company A was there with my good friend Dave Schneider was the XO there.

And they destroyed the lead tank with a tow missile. And the rest of the tanks kind of stopped because they know I can only get through this thing one at a time. I don't know how many missiles they got.

So, I'm just going to get fried one at a time. I'm not careful. Now, we got a map out of that later on.

It's hanging on my wall over here. So, the only souvenir I was able to bring back. And then, on the other side, there were three gaps in the berm, side by side, for whatever reason.

We didn't make them. That's just the way they came. Now, the folks right up in that sector was a Saudi Army unit there.

And then, our Company C was just kind of like off, just left of them kind of watching. And so, they saw the Iraqis come through there. And there was a big firefight, a lot of shooting.

And then, the Saudis fell back. And we're like, oh, okay. Well, there goes the flank.

But Company C hung in there. And we started bringing in air support. And then, they controlled airstrikes that kind of bottled up the Iraqis there.

And then, we did some airstrikes on the left side. Now, while that is happening, the next Light Armored Infantry Battalion over, which was First Battalion from the First Marine Division, they ended up, a company went forward, I believe it was their Company D, as an Iraqi tank battalion overran an outpost there. And so, from where we were, we could hear what was going on the radio on the division network.

And so, it was like a battalion of tanks came through there. And light armored vehicles are reconnaissance. They're armored cars.

They're not tanks, right? And they're not meant to take tanks on. And so, what proceeded there was a life-and-death knife fight.

And so, we were monitoring that in case we needed to adjust where we were. It was a couple miles over. But two LAVs were destroyed.

But they basically wiped out the Iraqi battalion. So, 37 tanks were knocked out or some number around there. There wasn't exactly 40, the whole battalion.

Not all of them were working. But that battle lasted several hours. And then, one of the anti-tank vehicles was hit.

And it was a friendly fire because in the confused state, one of the missile carriers struck one of the other missile carriers. And it was a catastrophic explosion, which we saw clearly. It was like the, I mean, the brightest flash I'd seen the whole fight was this, pow, the whole horizon lit up.

And we're like, holy crap. And then, when we heard over the net, I just lost one of my AT vehicles. I'm like, oh crap, this is serious.

Because that was four Marines that were killed right there. And then, one of the other vehicles was hit by a missile. And it killed seven Marines.

And the driver kind of miraculously survived. It kind of popped him out. It hit the back corner, blew up the vehicle, blew the turret off, and killed everybody that was in the back and in the turret.

But the driver up front kind of popped him out. But he was fairly badly burned from the flash of the explosion. And then, he sat out there all night because nobody, they figured nobody survived.

And nobody went to look. And then, they darn near ran him over the next morning. And he's like, oh god, I'm alive.

And they saved him. He's, you know, he made a recovery. But so, we were down 11.

So, we were very concerned, you know, what were our families think? Because this is, you know, this light armored infantry. You know, we could hear the BBC World Service at night with HF radio.

And you're like, oh god, what does our family think? Because there's no way to call home. We're writing letters.

And letters didn't even get prioritized. So, they would prioritize bringing packages. So, I could get a package.

But I couldn't get mail to them. They could send us mail. And, but we were 20 miles ahead of the front line.

So, they would have to schlep up mail every other day. And, you know, what was able to make it through. So.

[Speaker 2]

What about the Air Force, Ben, in all this? I mean, are the Marines just out there on their own in the desert?

[Speaker 1]

Well, there's always air power. So, a lot of what was going on was controlled by, you know, so we would be on the ground talking to air to bring it. And it's a mix.

So, we were pretty, this was, we do a lot of joint air tasking now. That's very, becomes natural. That wasn't as smooth then as it is now.

But there were some pretty standards. So, when an airplane would come on station, it could be Navy, Marine, or Air Force. One of the challenges we had though is, with the Air Force specifically, is there was a couple of navigation problems.

So, when those Saudis fell back, they were kind of off to our right. And Air Force would attack their position because they misread their map. And so, they thought we have lines on the map, but they're not real lines, obviously.

But we have what we call the fire support coordination line. And that beyond that line, air power doesn't have to check with the guys on the ground. If they see a target, they can attack it.

Well, they were way south of the FSCL, but they thought they were north of it. Because when you're going, you know, 300 miles an hour, you know, that line goes by fast. They identified the targets, and they rolled in and killed a bunch of the Saudis.

And, you know, we were, you know, we're like, oh, yeah. You know, we were very concerned about that. We didn't have the problem with Marine or Navy air.

They were kind of right on the target. We worked with those guys a lot. But the Air Force can make us nervous, frankly.

Nothing against our Air Force friends, but as long as you're ahead of the line. So, we set up a system. So, that was the Battle of Khafji.

That battle would persist for several days as we kind of mopped up the Iraqis. A lot of that, the rest of the action was around the town. We were farther west, but most of our fighting was that first night, and then we had basically shot them up.

And what was left behind in the town of Khafji itself, it took a couple days for the Saudis, did most of the footwork of mopping up. But we had a, fairly famously, there was a Marine reconnaissance team on the roof of a building that was surrounded by the Iraqis when they captured part of the town. But the Iraqis couldn't find them, and they were calling in artillery and air on the Iraqi positions while they were hiding on the rooftop.

And so, you know, that was a pretty brave and a very decisive piece of action there. You know, the Saudis lost a fair number of people retaking the town, so it wasn't an easy slog for them. And then, as we got ready for the main offensive, there was a series of, you know, like a shaping operation.

So, a lot of air power and some stuff trying to shape the battlefield so we can launch our ground attack. And so, what we ended up doing is, there's like, if you're thinking like football, where everybody gets up and shifts over. Well, we did one of these shifts where we were going to shift and move behind and around the first Marine divisions.

And so, we cleared out an area. And so, for part of that shift, which takes a lot of work, it's not something that happens in one day, we were part of what they call Task Force Troy. So, Task Force Troy was a mashup.

It had our company, you know, Fox Company was a screen line, and we covered 40 kilometers up front with, you know, 14 LAVs. And so, we were in the center, and I had a mast antenna, so I could speed 20 kilometers at max range to both ends of the line. And so, we were just screen line keeping eyes out.

We had a tank platoon and some other guys that could kind of move around to make it look like there was more Marines there while all the Marines were shifting farther west. And then, so, we did that operation, which involved moving up some artillery, shooting at some positions. We also did an arc light where the B-52s bombed that forest, and we got to watch them just lay waste to that because we could see they were doing something in there, but we weren't really sure.

So, but they had a lot of thermal imaging that was coming back from that forest. So, you know, it's like, okay, well, we probably ought to blow it up, which we did. It's pretty impressive to see an arc light of three B-52s, just really old school, wipe out that forest.

Then, we had to do our shift. So, and then part of that shift is our battalion then had to go into Kuwait four days ahead of time. So, we went ahead four days ahead of the main attack to, as part of a larger deception, we wanted to deceive where we were attacking, and it was pretty successful.

Now, part of it was to draw fire because when we were doing the shaping operations, we'd blown up a bunch of stuff, but they had tons of artillery, and we're like, you know, that artillery can make our breach of their minefields very difficult. We need to find and neutralize more of the artillery. So, what are we going to do?

We're going to hang these guys out here, get their artillery to shoot at them, and then when we find their artillery on our counterfire radar, then we will blast it. And so, that was four days of continuous combat. You know, we rolled in there and just, you know, got shelled for the next four days, and we fought back, and there was a lot of, there was a minefield between us and the Iraqis, so you could only get so close, but we did several direct fire engagements with 25-millimeter cannons.

We did mortar mortars, anti-tank missiles, lots of artillery airstrikes against them, and they were throwing everything they could at us, and so we were trying to get them to shoot at us, and the biggest thing they shot at me was a a Frog 7, which is a short-range ballistic missile, and it gives you no warning when it comes in, and it's a 500-pound bomb, which is a big, big boom, and it hit, you know, 100 yards away, and that will, that will rock you pretty good, and so made a really nice crater, and then that was, you know, pretty close. They shot, you know,

the BM-21 rockets, you know, the 122-millimeter rockets, 152-millimeter artillery, 122s, 120-millimeter mortars. We had a lot of duels between me and their forward observers.

We were, we use a bracketing technique to zero in on targets, which was much faster. We were firing at long range because of the desert, and they tended to walk the rounds out to you, which just takes longer, so we could adjust fire and then knock out their observers before they could adjust on us, but it got pretty nerve-wracking. They would start walking around, and they get closer and closer, and you're like, hey, easy, stay, you know, stay, stay, stay.

We're hitting them. We're hitting them. Don't give the ground, and so that duel lasted four days, and then the main attack went.

We did, we were successful because by all accounts, the Iraqis thought we were the beginning of the main attack. They had moved their reserves, and once they moved their reserves, we were able to strike them with air power and really do a lot of damage. We were, because they had two, two units that had T-72s that were, you know, more capable than a lot of the other tanks, which were, they had a bunch of these Type 69, which is basically a T-55, the old 15, which is a decent standard run-of-the-mill Soviet tank, but it was upgraded by the Chinese with some, a couple bells and whistles, but it turns out the 25 millimeter armored piercing will penetrate the, the T-55, which was, came in handy, and so we could penetrate those, knock them out if you had to. The, but we wanted to make sure we neutralized the T-72s because they were a more dangerous model of tank.

We were pretty successful at doing that with the air power. During a lot of that fighting, they'd set up a system with air power, which was really, we would end up replicating in later campaigns, is every seven minutes a section of aircraft would check in for four days continuous, so every seven minutes two airplanes would check in, and you had seven minutes to do something with that pair of airplanes, and if you didn't, they'd hand it off to the next, and there was an airborne air controller who would then had seven minutes to do something with it, and then they would fly. If they didn't get used, then they would fly in beyond the FSCL and attack anything in the kill box, and so that, that meant we always had air power, and that was decisive.

[Speaker 2]

And what about that minefield? I remember that. I remember that being a big deal.

[Speaker 1]

Yes, and it was a big deal, so we had to do minefields, and they were, and they were, so now, fortunately, we could tell where the minefields were, so you mark the minefields. Even the Iraqis marked them, because they don't want to blow themselves up, and they also want you to know that it's there, because the minefield functions not to blow people up. I mean, it can do that, but it's really meant to slow you down or stop you and make you go where you want to go, so we had to do a breach of the minefield, so the 2nd Marine Division did a large-scale breach that we would then move.

We were left of where they were attacking, and then once their breach kicked off, then we rolled and went through the breach, but they blew six lanes through the minefield, and they did an assault breach through the minefield, and then we would move through there. A

couple of our vehicles did hit mines, you know, so one LEV hit a mine, and one truck hit a mine, and then while we were fighting there, we had several Marines injured. We were fortunate none of them were killed.

We did have a Humvee that had our, we had a stinger detachment, you know, the air defense, in case they brought a helicopter, and it got hit by a mortar shell, and then miraculously, the Marines were unharmed. The vehicle blew up, and we had removed the windscreens from there, because we didn't want the windscreens. These weren't bulletproof glass, and they were thick, but they weren't bulletproof, so we removed windscreens on all the Humvees so that they wouldn't shatter under artillery fire, and when that ended up being a great call, because we were hit and exploded in the bed of the truck, the two Marines were thrown forward free of the vehicle, and the vehicle was a total loss.

It would catch on fire, burn to the ground, and the only loss was all their gear was in the truck, so we all had to kind of do a collection so they would have, you know, clean underwear, and so we were really fortunate in that regard. We only had one of the Marines from the battalion, so my company, we didn't lose any. All the companies had some casualties, but one company, in Delta Company, had a Marine was killed by a booby trap, so he was clearing some positions, and there was a booby trap laid there for him, so in the grand scheme of things, we were pretty fortunate compared to what we'd see in like Iraq or Afghanistan, so when we went through the breach, behind that giant assault breach, we then went back behind the other side of the minefield where we had been fighting, and that was very sobering because we had been shelling back and forth for four days straight, and that place was a lunar landscape.

We had just blasted the tar out of them, and we saw multiple artillery positions where guns were blown to bits, right, so that which meant that was very much what we're trying to do is disabled artillery pieces, and we had been very effective, but yeah, we had a Marine get injured there from unexploded ordnance. We had a, what do they call the, you know, they're like little cluster bombs, the improved conventional ammunition. It's about the size of a D cell battery, and the guy stepped on it and blew part of his foot off, and it could have been worse, but yeah, be careful where you stand.

Do not move anything, and so from there, we moved up to Kuwait City. There was some fighting as we, you know, the 1st Marine Division was on our right, and they ended up having quite a little fight, and we were kind of in a reserve position. We kind of watched this, we did kind of this pivoting maneuver as we moved up.

There was an army brigade that was attached to us, so it was the 1st Brigade of the 2nd Armored Division, and they pivoted around to kind of close the door, to close, and so we were there kind of pushing them into what would be the highway of death, you know, so that kind of trapped them in there as they kind of ran for it. There was a large armored counter-attack at the 1st Marine Division area. There was a Navy cross for one of the other light armored infantry companies, held that attack back, then Captain Gaskin, no, it wasn't Gaskins.

My memory is not as good. That was a few years ago, but a captain got the Navy cross for that, for leading that defense, and which, you know, and so several of our officers, you know,

our company commander for Company C, he was a Silver Star. They were pretty stingy with medals in that time, so to get a Silver Star was a big deal.

You know, I was there. I was like, yeah, I think he earned it, you know, through four days of continuous combat. Yeah, he did just fine, and so at the end, then we're stuck there in Kuwait City.

War's over pretty quick, and then we move into an occupation-type mode, but there's still some bitter enders kind of floating around, so we had a couple of incidents where we came under fire that were a little disconcerting. I'm like, was that an Iraqi? I don't know.

Does he know the war's over? I don't know, so, you know, some guy tried to shoot me one day, which was very unpleasant, and, you know, so I crawled away back to safety, and said, you know, because through training, I know what a bullet going over your head sounds like, and it's a distinctive sound, so I hear a bullet snap overhead, and I'm like, that's odd. That sounds kind of close, so I took cover, and then I do my training, take cover, don't pop up where you pop down, because then they'll shoot you, so go down and under cover, move, and then pop back up, and I pop back up, and then there was another shot that was much closer, and I was like, okay, well, I know that, and so I got back down and covered, crawled, crawled to safety, and I was like, some, some idiots out there trying to shoot us, so some, and then we had other guys come under automatic weapons fire, and we had, you know, small arms hits on some of the vehicles.

I was like, I think there's a few guys wandering around here who don't know the war's over. Fortunately, we came in through there without too much trouble, and then people couldn't get the, couldn't get out of there fast enough, so we stayed behind our one company, because we were the smallest company, and so we were a little bit smaller, because we had detached one platoon to be security for the division commander, which was great, because it allowed us to raid his mess, so we could get some food that we, you know, so we kind of pulled up, so we all got spam, which, you know, it's not the best food ever, but if you've been living off MREs for the last several months, that was great. You know, I was out on, in the living out of the vehicle on a reconnaissance screen line, and, you know, I went like 56 days without a shower.

It was gross. Made a lot of MREs until you just don't like MREs anymore, and, you know, so that was, you know, life on the line, and you're basically at watch, right, so we would dig it, and if we moved, we dug in the vehicles, so there's a technique, so you don't have to dig a giant hole. You just have to dig a hole where the tires go, and so you can get down low.

That way, if you do come under indirect fire, your tires aren't shredded right off the bat. Now, they have run flats. They can run, but you can't drive as fast, so, but we, because those vehicles will go 70 miles an hour across the desert, you know, so that we could move fast if we wanted to.

I bet that spam tasted good. Oh, yeah, that was the best spam I had in a long time, you know, and so I do have a salt spark in the heart for spam every once in a while. I don't go out and buy it because it's like way too much salt for an older dude, but, you know, it does, like, you know, that was right good, and so...

How long were you in Kuwait City? So, we spent the next couple of months, so we didn't get home until June, right, so the war was in, I think it was in January and February, and then March, April, you know, we were like a couple months.

[Speaker 2]

Were you finally able to write home, Ben?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, so we were able to write, because mail started getting better. They did set up a phone place where you could call, but it was, like, you said that I could get a card, and, you know, and those are the bad old days when you had to pay for long distance, and so I did get to call home, which was great, because I hadn't spoken to the wife in a couple months, right, and so... Let her know you're alive.

Yep, I'm alive and well. We're uninjured, and so, yeah, and then when we got home, and then that was kind of badly handled, you know, so, you know, I had been stopped, so I was due to basically get out when I got home, so I got home, and they didn't know what to do, because this is not normal, so the adjutant who was handling it was like, let me figure this out, and say, well, how about this? I go turn in my gear.

I'd like to take some leave, and, you know, and then I'll come back and sign whatever you want to sign, so I go on leave, so I turn in my gear, and I, at this time, I'm living at, in government housing on base, right, so I take leave, and I go to see my wife's parents in Kingsport with Natalie, my daughter, and, you know, and I get a letter in the mail, and it's my DD-214. I'm like, what the heck? I'm not supposed to be there to sign this, and if you see, I think I included there that the early one, because I got 3D over my service, that first one, it says, you know, Marine not present for signature.

I was like, I was coming back. I lived there on base, so I literally had to get a visitor pass to go to my house, and I had 30 days to get the heck out of my house, so I was like, wow, that's, you know, thank you for your service, you know, so, but fortunately, I had a job line, and so, you know, shout out to Schneider National, so they didn't hold the job in Houston, so, I guess, you know, they had to fill it. That was months and months ago, but they said, you know, we like you.

They sent me a letter before I deployed. They said, we like you. You're great.

We will find a spot. Just come home safe, and I was like, that was a huge weight off. I didn't have this weight of like, I'm going to get back, and now I'm back to square one.

I'm finding a job. I knew I had a job. Shout out to Schneider.

Yes, you know, the Al Schneider Award. It was named after the founder of the company, and it's one of the number one supporters of Guard and Reserve members, so that was awesome, and I can't say enough good about that, and they were a great, great company to work with. And this is 1991?

Yeah, 91, so I'm home in June of 91, and, you know, so I'm out. I'm like, oh, okay, so we rapidly get our stuff moved, and so where they actually had a spot is in West Memphis, Arkansas, is a big operating center. I was like, well, that's even closer.

That's better than Houston. I think my mom lives in Nashville. My dad lives in Dallas.

I mean, heck, this is perfect, so that worked out really well, so it's a tri-state area, so I lived in a little house in DeSoto County, Mississippi, and then you just get on I-55, and you hop over to Arkansas, and then you're at work, and then we had family in Memphis from my wife's side, and so I was like, oh, well, here we are, and so we lived there, and I was in frontline management dispatch for Schneider, and then I got selected for an advanced leadership program in Green Bay, so this would have been like three years in, so like 94, we moved to Green Bay, so let me get my timing right.

[Speaker 2]

That's a big difference from Arkansas and Tennessee.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, it sure is. Now, I have to say, Green Bay, you know, so you were saying, it's a neat little town, nice folks, but what is it called? Cheese curds, Ben.

Yeah, well, I mean, I've eaten them. You can't go there and not eat them. I'm like, well, why don't we just wait till it's cheese?

I just don't understand. I mean, it's almost cheese. Can we just finish?

Because it squeaks, Ben. Yeah, they're kind of squishy cheese. I was like, well, you know, they make squishy cheeses, right?

So, it's all very abstract to me, and you know, I'm a good sport. They're good, super nice people, and I had some great opportunities there. We did spend a month where we did not get above five below zero, and so that is just super cold.

A little bit different than the desert. Yes. Now, in that time, you know, while I was in West Memphis, Arkansas, and before I went to Green Bay, I started as a drilling reservist, right?

So, I'm doing the, you know, the weekend warrior thing, once a month, and two weeks in the summer. So, I started drilling that in Memphis for many, many years.

[Speaker 2]

And that was the Marine Reserves, Ben?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, the Marine Reserves. So, that was with Company K, 3rd Battalion, 23rd Marines, or Kilo 323, as we say in shorthand, and so I drove with those guys, and then when I went to Green Bay, I joined up with the unit Madison, Wisconsin, which was Golf Company, 24th Marines. Great guys.

We did a great AT at Fort Carson. That was a great experience.

[Speaker 2]

Now, Ben, why? Why you got this great job with the trucking?

[Speaker 1]

Oh, yeah. Well, I loved being a Marine. Yeah.

Being a Marine was great. Yeah, the Marines are great. Having an opportunity to lead even young Marines, you know, I love being an infantryman.

I liked, there's much about, no, there's some parts, you know, I'm a little old. I don't like sleeping on the ground anymore. My kids go, Dad, why do you never take us camping?

I've camped enough. I'm done. You are more than welcome to go camping.

You know, I'll buy you stuff. I'll get you stuff, but I'm not sleeping on the ground. Now, I love being outdoors and hiking, and I like shooting and stuff.

I just don't like sleeping on the ground. It's bad for my back. And so, but I did love being infantryman.

I love infantry work, you know, the tactics, the camaraderie, the physical challenge, all of those things I really enjoyed. And so, I was doing that thing, and at the end, you get a little bit of money, and they're like, and then they dangle this career. You do this time, and you get, well, I come to find out that's really hard to get there, that 20 years, because it's like, hey, wait, you're rigging the system against me, because how the reserves work, it's a pyramid, and you get promoted, and you're like, there's less and less jobs, and then the Marine Corps Reserve is not as big as like the National Guard or whatever, which is everywhere.

The Marine Reserves is 39,000, and that peanut butter is fairly thin across the country, and it's grouped in weird places like New Orleans, which is not easy to get to, but I would end up going there. So, I'm doing this reserve thing, and I'm working in the transportation business. I was with Schneider National.

I was at Green Bay. Great opportunity, got into sales and marketing. That's where I really got started doing big data analytics.

I was there, and I had the dubious honor of being the first guy in the room with a bunch of MBAs. So, they said, hey, how about this cost coefficient function, and it was dim, and I was like, no, you know that's not going to work, because that is a nonlinear function, and you're looking for the derivative of this curve. So, I even had to troop out calculus at that time, and I was the English major in the room, and so I took some pride in that.

My mother was happy. I'm redeemed. I knew that the calculus would save you, and so that was fun.

Then we moved back to DeSoto County, Mississippi. So, technically, I worked out of my home, but I moved into sales and marketing, and so I was a traveling salesman for the next 30 years, and it was a great learning experience, but I could have learned a lot of those things without being away from home as much. So, that was tough.

My sales territory was pretty darn big, and then, so it went from Wichita, Kansas to Nashville to New Orleans, on that giant territory. So, I was driving all over there doing sales calls, the whole shebang, and so that was just challenging. My kids were, by this time, I had three, and they were doing a reorg with Schneider, so I left Schneider and went to a transportation company that was based in Memphis.

So, I knew I'm not going to have to move because they're based here, and then I worked in their sales. It was a smaller company. The owner had founded the company like 20 years before, so you had a kind of close-knit, small company thing, and they were looking for sophisticated sales and marketing, and I was like, well, I went through the big sales training.

I knew all this big data analytics, and so from there, I did sales for them for a while, and they're like, hey, you're really good at this IT system stuff. So, I built their first website, got them on the interwebs. I said, I think this internet thing might take off, and so I built their website.

I built this sales inventory management and stuff, and sales calls, and they're like, hey, why don't you come back in the IT shop because we're going to recapitalize our IT. So, I ended up being a programmer, database developer, and being a speaker at IBM conferences, all this stuff because apparently I was good at it, and so I kind of ran with that. Now, right at the end of 2000, the reserve thing kind of ran out of steam because the Marine Corps was out of balance, and they had too many majors because by that time, I'd been promoted to a major, and they're like, we're just going to park ways, no harm, no foul, but you're not going to get 20 years, 20 good years with the number of people we have, so thank you for your service, and I was all right. Being a drilling reservist is a huge time sink, and so I had spent several of my two weeks a year vacation were spent at the annual training because my work couldn't spare me being gone a month or more every year, and so that's not uncommon with reservists and guardsmen is we end up taking a lot of our PTO and using it for our duty because our companies need us, and so that was a big sacrifice, frankly, but again, I loved a lot of the Marine work, so it was like, so when they said, oh, let's park ways, I'm like, okay, trust me, this is not the end of the world, but then you fast forward to 9-11.

All right, so some days where we're going to war, and it became clear about 2003 that, okay, this war might last longer, right, and so I became interested and said, well, you know, I've got a lot of experience and skills, what can I do, so I had put in a whole package with the Mississippi National Guard, which is a, the Mississippi National Guard is an armored brigade, well, I did a bunch of armored warfare, they were very interested, oh, you've got combat experience in armored warfare, that's great, we'll take you, you'll come in as a major, you'll be in our ops shop, blah, blah, blah, it's like, oh, yeah, great, so a lot of paperwork, a lot of stuff. Now, Ben, you're 38?

Yeah, I'm not a spring chicken.

[Speaker 2]

And you've got a wife and three kids?

[Speaker 1]

Yes, but keep in mind, this is post-9-11.

[Speaker 2]

I know.

[Speaker 1]

This really is a tough one, I mean, there's a generation now that wasn't there when it happened, and you can't explain what that meant.

[Speaker 2]

They're in my classroom, Ben.

[Speaker 1]

It was just devastating, yes. Yes, it was devastating, I mean, we were just heartbroken and so called to service, I mean, and so, you know, I wasn't alone, right, so I was really within days of taking a commission with the Mississippi National Guard, when I get a telephone call out of the blue at work, like, how did you get this number? And it was the local Marine Reserve Center saying, hey, would you be interested in coming?

We, right now, we have a shortage of majors in the Marine Reserves, we will bring you back right where you left off. Was that Memphis, Ben? Yeah, that was right, yeah, in Memphis, I was working in Memphis, and so I was like, oh, that's, I would much rather be with Marines than, and it's nothing against the National Guard, but I'd spent so much time with the Marine, I was gonna have to go through a weird learning, not just Army, but National Guard Army, right, and so that was gonna be a weird learning curve.

I was like, oh, well, I'll go back to Marines, I know the Marines. Well, it turns out, you know, a few things had happened in a couple years, and so I had a pretty big, you know, readjustment, you know, now I had to get back in the tip-top physical shape, that was hard, because the Marine Corps is hard, right, and then a lot of things had changed in five years, and so I'd be like, oh, okay, let me get caught up to what's changed, and so I was, again, with 3rd Battalion, 23rd Marines, so as I'm trying to figure out which way is up, I, you know, I join in, and then I'm mobilized, right, and so they're mobilizing the battalion, I'm not quite ready, and they really needed somebody to run the drill center, so this is kind of weird, with the Marine Reserves at a drill center, they have an active component guy and a reserve guy, and the active component guy does the day-to-day stuff, so when they mobilize the battalion, the commander wanted to take all his active component guys, because all of them had combat experience from Iraq, and so they left the reserve guys there behind to run the place. It's like, well, okay, that's not the nicest thing, all right, but all right, and so I ran the drill center during that mobilization, so I had to do, so that included an administrative shop, gave me time to work on my physical bit so I could get in tip-top shape, but I also had, I had a platoon of Marines that were not deployable, you know, for various reasons, mostly injuries, etc., so I had some of those guys, and then I got new Marines would come, and so I had a platoon of new Marines that we had to keep drilling and training and all that stuff, and then I had staff of active component people that ran the drill center, and almost all of them had done at least one combat tour, and most of them had been wounded, so that's why they rotated them in there to give them kind of an easier tour to physically and mentally recover, but also meant that I had Marines that were physically and mentally damaged by combat, and that was a really challenging assignment, but it also, the drill center also does our

casualty assistance, and so we had to deal with the families of Marines that were being killed in the war in Iraq, as well as any accidents or mishaps, and we did funeral honors for 150-mile radius, and so we had quite a range. We had to deal with, we had three officers, Memphis, that were killed in action. We did a posthumous award ceremony, all the press and everything for that.

Captain Morrell, when he was killed, his wife ran a store there in town. He received a Navy cross. Captain Cheshire, when he was killed, I knew the family.

This is one of the weird parts of reservists. You know, I went to college with his sister. It was a good friend of mine in college, and so when the paperwork came across there, I saw the family, and I said, you know, Cheshire, that's an unusual name.

I'm like, well, that's an unusual name. I know somebody with that name, and then I see that the father's name is Pierre. I'm like, well, I know Pierre Cheshire.

His daughter was a good friend of mine. I did not know her younger brother had even joined the Marines, and he was a captain when he was killed, and so, you know, that was a hard demotion, and so after we brought those Marines back, and we did the demobilization for them, you know, I stayed on active duty, and I took orders to the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force Camp Pendleton to go on to a transition team, so we were sending teams of advisors to work with the Iraqis, so I went out there to Camp Pendleton and went to the advisor training course, and it was like a five-month course. We learned a bunch of Arabic.

We were a border team, so we learned border police enforcement type things.

[Speaker 2]

What year was this?

[Speaker 1]

This would be 2008 at Camp Pendleton, so I'm a geographic bachelor, and now in typical Marine Reserve problems, and some of the other Guard and Reserve has similar problems, is they, of course, messed up your paperwork, so I have orders. I go to Camp Pendleton. I'm training there, and they're not reimbursing me for my housing, and I find myself \$7,000 in the hole.

My wife's on the phone crying. We've got no money. She's literally having people from the church help her, and I'm like, she's like, what the heck?

You know, I was like, there is a corporal somewhere who is not approving my, you know, I, so, you know, I had to go to the, you know, the personnel officer for the base. He's a crusty old warrant officer. I'm like, please, Chief Gunnard, you got to fix this for me, and he figured it out finally after several months, and so that kind of rebalanced the books, but that just put enormous strain.

When I went out there, we were unsure how long the deployment was, so you had to Skype home and let the family know that, you know, this is going to be 12 months in Iraq, and there's a lot of tears, so that was a rough one, and so it's a small team. We deployed to Iraq, and we were at Awaleed, which if you look at maps now, we have a base at Al-Tanf, which is

in Syria, right across the border, but Awaleed is the port of entry in that section of the Anbar province, and there was a, that's also the headquarters of the the 5th Brigade, you know, so the 5th Brigade of the Border Force, and so I had to learn a ton of Arabic, and I got fairly good at Arabic for, I could arrest somebody in Arabic and search them, and other useful things if you ever are in an Arabic-speaking country, and so that was a 12-month tour. We had a huge section of the border, and we had three ports of entry, one into Jordan, and then two into Syria, and we had forts all along the border, and so I had, we had three subordinate Border Force battalions, three port of entry teams, and a police transition team for our region that were subordinate to our headquarters, and then we reported to the Expeditionary Force-level headquarters up at, I can't remember where it was, there was a, our colonel was at Camp Korean Village, so if you know where Rutbah is, Anbar province, there's this long road from Al-Assad to the hinterlands, it goes through a little town called Rutbah, so it's a decent-sized little town, but near there, we had a couple there, there was a Brazilian village and a Korean village. These were kind of towns built for foreign workers years ago, and they were just there, and then we turned them into camps, so Korean village had housed a bunch of Korean workers who came in there and built something in that area.

The same with Brazilian village, a bunch of Brazilian workers came in and built something, and they went away, but there was this little town that was built for them while they were working on, I think they were building the roads or something.

[Speaker 2]

Were you still a major in 2008?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, I was a major in 2008. A 42-year-old major. Yes, yeah, old dude, working hard, you know, doing infantry work, so we did, we ended up going home a little early, so it wasn't 12 full months, but from going to Pendleton and getting home, I was gone for 16 months from home, and so, you know, that was a good tour.

We had great Marines. You know, our counterparts were, you know, most of them were pretty committed to the job, more than I could ask, and when they had to fight, they did fight. They showed plenty of pluck and bravery under fire, like, all right, you know, that's not that bad.

They tended to bring in Southerners as the policemen, so the Shurta, or policemen, they would bring them from Southern Iraq, because that way they wouldn't desert, because it's a long way home, and there was just some weirdness, you know, there's no banks, so everything was in cash, right, so you had this giant brick of cash. We didn't pay, and we just oversaw and made sure that they got paid so that they didn't get stolen, and so, yeah, you know, it's just, and then there was a lot of, you know, the IED war you really had to be careful of, but then as you get into it, much of the insurgency was very, you know, very different from Vietnam. It was a cellular thing, so it's very much like organized crime, so it's like, how do I take down an organized crime family while I get another organized crime family that hates them to do the dirty work, because that they're good at, and then we started to figure out a lot of the IEDs were targeted, and, you know, it, so they weren't just random.

They're like, oh, I know this guy, and I don't like that guy, and I'm gonna blow him up when he runs for this IED, so there's a lot more going on. There's a very detailed subtext, so a lot of rivalries, etc., and some extrajudicial killings and stuff that we had to kind of work through, and so, you know, kind of really nitty-gritty counterinsurgency stuff, and so I completed that tour and successfully came back, and then at this time, the classic, there's a trans, now, unlike the first time I got out of active duty, they came back and like, oh, well, don't let the door hit you in the rear, you know, now they go, oh, well, there's law that we have to do transition, so there's this whole transition process, so, you know, I don't want to create homeless veterans.

I'm like, I have a job. I have a family. I'm not gonna be homeless veteran, but they're like, nope, you gotta go through the process.

Well, the process, by law, is, well, I have a process for Marines who are getting out, and I have a process for Marines who are retiring. Nobody invented a process for reservists who are being demobilized, so they're like, oh, what do we do, and they're like, well, you're old. Go through the retirement thing, so, okay, so I spend, you know, I go through the whole transition as if I'm retiring, which I'm not, because I'm old.

All right, well, the peer group was similar, so I was like, that was socially interesting, but didn't help me finish that, and I go home. My job is right where I left it. Company was great, you know, but I've been gone for like two and a half years, and I literally walk in, I'm doing the exact same thing I was doing when I left.

I'm like, wow, nothing has really changed. I'm getting paid what I got two years ago, which is a good bit less than what I made as a major, which is, you know, not that it's lucrative, but it was, you know, Memphis, the cost of living is low. You don't make big salaries there.

It's, you know, it's fine if that's, you know, like, oh, well, I made a good bit more as a field grade officer in the Marine Corps. Yeah, so I was like, you know, getting back in the swing of things, and so then I saw an opportunity. I'm looking for, you know, well, what other opportunities, because the war's still going on, there's still things going on, so I see an opportunity for a active duty orders at Quantico with certain IT systems.

I was like, oh, wait, I think I can work, I can get, and then also my kids are getting a little bit older. I'm looking down the pathway, I'm like, you know, now my oldest daughter is, she had a full ride at University of Memphis, like, sweet, you know, music. She was, still is, she teaches violin, cello, she's a musician, and so, you know, I was like, well, I got these other kids, and DeSoto County, Mississippi, like much of Mississippi, is a lot of lack of ambition, right, so it's a, it's kind of a small town and small town thing, and so, like, it was a big deal when the kid graduated and went to community college.

I'm like, I want more for my kids now. I want more opportunities, so I really want to take an opportunity, say, hey, professionally, this is a good opportunity. It's also my two kids that are still in high school, a chance to move them into a place where there's more opportunity, and so, now the kids wanted to kill me because they're like, we won't want to leave.

Okay, I'm going to have to be the bad guy, but I think this is going to be better for us when we're, when it's said and done, and so, I take these orders, and I go to Marine Corps Systems

Command. I was like, what's that? Well, that's the command of the Marine Corps that buys stuff.

Well, there's a bunch of different shops there. I was in the shop that buys IT systems for the 20 years of IT systems professional knowledge, and the Marine Corps is like, sweet, you actually know what, you know, you get a lot of this challenge with acquisition is, I'm a good Marine. I want to do good things.

I don't really know anything about software, though, and I was like, well, I've worked with software for decades, and I've done Marine stuff, so I know, so I really got involved in the readiness reporting system. I had done readiness reporting in uniform as a major, and I had exposure to it earlier, and so, I was like, okay, I know how to do it, and what we're doing now. This is the IT system behind it.

Where are you, Ben, and when are you? This is, so this is up at Quantico, so that's why I took orders from, you know, from Memphis, essentially, to here in Quantico, Virginia, to work at the Systems Command in Quantico to come on to active duty, so it was a PCS orders, or permanent change of stations, so they paid to move me here. Now, selling our house was a challenge, you know, that was, that part didn't go easily, so.

What year was this, Ben? So, this was 2010, so I'd done 2007, 8, and 9 on active duty. I didn't stay at my job for very long.

I got back to my job for like three, four months, and then I took the orders. I just, I didn't see any future there, because I'd been gone for too long. Now, they're good people, and they held the job for me, and I was very grateful, but I just didn't see much of a future.

Took this, the orders to Quantico. I come up here, and I'm doing readiness reporting systems, you know, so the hardcore IT infrastructure, you know, this is the servers, and these servers, and the connections, all the IT stuff that I know well, and so, you know, started working that. Now, as a reservist on active duty, you don't, you're not, you're always kind of on a short, short spigot of money, right, so, because they pay as they go, and so, you know, you can stay on orders for several years, but it's kind of, they have to renew them.

Now, ideally, it'd be once a year, but it's like, oh, we'll do nine months, and then we'll do six months, and we'll do, I was like, oh no, my battery, I might, I might need to go get my things. Taking longer than I thought. The, so I had to move the family, get that going, and then in the middle, while they're like, there's a sponsor who takes care of those orders, and pay for this stuff, and so, I get him on the phone, hey, is my next set of orders coming through, am I gonna stay on active duty, and they're like, he's like, oh, hey, he's like him in and all, and I'm like, dude, I'm a grown man, if you need something, just spit it out. He's like, well, I have to cover deployments. I was like, I got it, I got it, we're in the Marine Corps, I got it, yep, but I want to get ahead of it, say, well, what deployments do you need to cover, so at least I get some sort of choice, right, so he said, well, I got, and then one of those with the Joint Program Office for Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles, or JPO-MRAP, and so in joint program offices, there's always a lead service, so one service is kind of the main service, and then other services, you know, glob on, so the MRAP program was the lead service of the Marine Corps, and it was one of the largest acquisition programs that the Department of Defense had done since World War II, and we ended up about 24,000 vehicles in a very short

time, and so I got on board with that, went through some training, and deployed to Afghanistan in 2011, and it was right after I got promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, so I go over there as Lieutenant Colonel, I get there, and there's a GS-15 that's running the country, and they fired him, and I've leaded up to be the country lead for all of Afghanistan, which is 13,600 MRAPs, 11 facilities, and 2,500 people, and so it was a immensely rewarding deployment, you know, yes, we got shot at, and yes, I had guys get hit, you know, it was a war zone, you know, and I spent most of my time at Bagram, you know, we didn't have a lot of Marines at Bagram, and I was one of the few, so I was in Army land for a long time, which was interesting to see the way Army does business, which is in giant scale, you know, but, you know, 13,600 vehicles is a lot of vehicles, and they went across all the services, a lot of big logistics, depot maintenance type stuff, while all the while, while getting shot at, you know, so at that time, that was during the surge period in Afghanistan, so during, so it's weather related, so there's fighting season, and then the Taliban, you know, go hide in the winter, and stay warm, and so during fighting season, I'd have eight trucks a week get blown up, and, you know, across that whole fleet, and so we did battle damage repair, I got there, they hadn't been doing that, so I had a mountain of blown up trucks, I had to work down that mountain of blown up trucks, and then we had a bunch of technology inserts we were doing, the biggest single one was the the all-terrain vehicle, or MAT, the MRAP all-terrain vehicle, MATV, we had about 6,500 of them, it's the single most common one we had in Afghanistan, and we wanted to do a significant upgrade to its protective capability, and that was about 150 man-hours per truck, it was a pretty intensive upgrade, so we set up production lines, and we set up multiple production lines across all our facilities to do that, and so when I got there, we hadn't done a single one, we did one that was a bay build, we build it out in the bay, we're like, yeah, this we'll never be able to do at scale, this production line's the way to go, by the time I left, we'd done over 2,500 of them, six months, you know, the single biggest, well, it's funny, because the general came down, and I was doing some estimating and forecasting, which is kind of my bailiwick, and I was like, I think we're going to be about here, and he's like, ah, I don't think you're going to make it there, colonel, and I was like, hang with me, sir, it was October, and we, I was saying, ah, I think we could beat 600 this month, and he's like, ah, I don't know if you're going to make it, and we got 666 on, you know, on Halloween, which was hilarious, and so it's, again, we blew it out of the water, and so we got those trucks fixed, and they, they, I got a big plaque on the wall, one of the pictures I sent you is the, the, the commanding general of the 1st Cavalry Division giving us an award for upgrading the truck, there's a picture on the big blue plaque of one of the trucks, it hit an IED, and all the, all the soldiers were unharmed, and, and the, and it, the photo shows that the additional, Was there a plating underneath of it, Ben? Ah, yeah, it's a complex series, there was some, there's a series of, so it's not just a big hunk of metal, it's two plates and a, a special material between there to help absorb and distribute the blast wave, plus there's some special padding that we put in the, the cab of the vehicles that, again, disperses blast wave, because the blast wave will transmit through metal, so if you put your feet on the floor, and there's a bomb underneath it, and without that protection, the blast wave will travel through the metal and liquefy your bone, and you'll have to amputate your legs, because you can't fix that, and so, you know, we, we had a lot of neat technology, we had these double stroking seats, so we adapted a seat from helicopters, which were made to take a hard landing, it will destroy itself in a single stroke, we tried that, but with trucks, they blow up and fall down, so they had to re-engineer it, so it stroked twice while it destroyed itself to save the backs of the soldiers and sailors, airmen and marines that were

in the trucks, so we were pretty successful with the technology of reducing the injuries significantly, you know, so while I was there, we only had a, just a handful of fatalities, you know, one was a, a kid didn't have a seat belt on, I'm like, well, I, you got to wear your dark seat belt, and then we had a truck that took, it was an overmatch, and that was a catastrophic kill, so that was, that was four soldiers lost to that truck, but we didn't lose a lot of guys out of the trucks regularly, and they would take monster blasts, you know, I'd had guys walk away from an 800 pound shot, that was a huge explosion, and they just shear the front end off, but it's meant to be modular, so that the, the, the soldiers are inside an armored box, as long as they're strapped in, they're going to make it, and so we were very successful at saving a lot of lives with those trucks, and then we sent a bunch of them over to Ukraine, where they're doing the same thing, so, and, and actually the Taliban stole a few at the end of the war there, and we get to see the Pakistanis and Taliban using our stuff to fight each other, which is kind of grimly satisfying, because like, wow, you know, couldn't happen to nicer guys, the, but yeah, so that was, that was a rewarding thing, that was, I was awarded a second bronze star, I was awarded a bronze star for my service in Iraq, you know, I planned and executed over 100 patrols, it was roughly, I'm probably more like 120 when it's all said and done, and it was roughly half and half between foot patrols and mounted patrols, and some of them would be a few hours, and some of them would be a few days, just sort of depending what the patrol was trying to do, but you know, I got pretty good at finding my way across the desert, we covered a whole of western Iraq, I patrolled all the way, we covered the Saudi border for, for a particular part of time, because there's smuggling, so apparently Iraq makes the best sheep, and so they want to smuggle the sheep, but the government of Iraq didn't want the sheep to leave Iraq, because they need to feed the people that live there, but there was a lot of money elsewhere, so a lot of the farmers were like, you know, I can make some money if I sell my sheep, and especially Dinghaj, Dinghaj, the price of the sheep would just double or triple, and you're like, well, that's, that's part of me, it's like, we don't really care too much, but if you're using that money to buy bombs and stuff, yeah, I got a big problem with that, a lot of it was not that, right.

[Speaker 2]

Now Ben, I hate to ask you when you got out of the military, because I hate to ask you when you got out of the military, because I have a sneaking suspicion you're never going to get out of the military.

[Speaker 1]

You never really get out, so I got out, so I, I left active duty 2014, September 2014, and then went to, I was a defense contractor for a couple years, three years, and then I, I got a job as a civil servant with headquarters Marine Corps, and doing readiness, because I've worked with readiness for, for a long time, I did readiness for headquarters Marine Corps for five years, and then now I'm at the office of the secretary of war readiness, I'm the readiness analytics, I'm the principal director of readiness analytics, so I do a bunch of big data analytics, we have safety data, we have unit readiness data, we do a lot of, you know, and of course, the last few, I was working this weekend, got called into work, because you know, you're up on current events, we've been pretty busy, yeah, you know, and a lot of the types of questions I look at, I was like, okay, yes, we're doing XYZ, well, what does that mean for the next five, six years from now, so you know, we're looking, my shop specializes in looking a little bit farther down the road, if you pardon the pun, to see where, where our, I'm sorry, what's going on, so as we look down the road, we see what, you know, what, hey, undersecretary or

secretary, what do we need to do to change that trajectory, if it's good or bad, and so that's, so I'm still connected to the military, you know, I work with the colonel every day, and marines, and soldiers, and airmen, so there's a lot of camaraderie that we just love working with each other, and there's a lot of, you know, we're doing something bigger than, than kind of something that lasts beyond your, your lifetime, right, we're contributing to something bigger, you know, for our country, and for, you know, my grannies, they're not so trite for my grandkids, you know, I would like to live, them to live in a world where I don't have to fight, and, you know, so if we can lay a ground where I can't guarantee that war would go away, that's just not the world we live in, but at least set the conditions so that, you know, they might not have to worry about it in the same way.

[Speaker 2]

And, and you spent most of your life in the military, you had a 27-year career, looking back, and when your kids and your grandkids watch this video, what's one thing you want them to take away from, from your service?

[Speaker 1]

Oh, I should have prepped for that question right ahead of time. I think the value of service is so important, and it's so easy to be selfish in this modern world we live in. Everything can be so easy, you know, I can DoorDash it, I can Amazon, and I don't, we, we live in a very consumerized, so very easy to be selfish, and there's something about service, and it doesn't have to be military service, but for me, it was military because I enjoyed it, and I had some, I was good at it, I guess, so I felt like that's where I could contribute, but I think that, that willingness to sacrifice for somebody else is the best way to find out who you really are, you know, because, yeah, this life isn't just for me to be comfy, and what can I contribute to somebody else, and that's the real, true enrichment in life is to be able to, you know, serve, serve a greater purpose, and because it gives your life bigger, more meaning, and yeah, I hope that it kind of hits the, hits the mark, I think, you know, just, you know, it, it's just, you know, I, I'm a huge historian, you know, so I spent a lot of time in 17th century, right, people go, why did they do that? I'm like, well, it worked, right, that was the world they lived in, you know, that was, you know, you know, and so I spent a lot of time saying, you know, that type of concept, and you're a historian, you know, that concept of, you know, we can't, somebody said the other day, presentism, right, we can't impose on them our present sensibilities, but there's plenty to learn from, they're same as us, like, they have the same ambitions and desires and wants that we do in, in essence, how we realize those are very different, but, you know, there's so much to contributing to the bigger story, that there's, now, you know, I do want, there was a lot of sacrifices, and it doesn't mean I didn't love my kids, or my wife, there were sacrifices that, that we made to do that, and, but I, in the big picture, I really feel like it was worth it for our country, you know, and, you know, it's, you know, you're, you're, you're investing in this, this larger thing that you hope will move on, you know, warts and all, right, it's not going to be perfect, if you think it's perfect, you're going to be sadly mistaken, but you're making your contribution, so you say, you know, you know, I have done all I can do to make it the best for the next person behind me.

[Speaker 2]

Ben, thank you for your service, and thank you for being part of the Center, and I hope we get coffee one day, and get to talk about history in the 1600s and 1700s, I'd love to, to talk about the American Revolutionary War.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, I was, I'm a 30 years war, English Civil War buff, and that's a story for a different time, how did you get into that? Well, that's a long story, but yeah, yes, I would love the chance to get coffee and, and compare notes on that, so I look forward to it. Thank you, Ben.

Well, thank you so much, you have a great one. All right, you too. All right, good night.