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Veteran**

**Orchard Park, H.S. Orchard Park, NY
Interviewer**

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Interviewers: **Q**
Laurie DePasquale: **LD**

Q: So, what actual part of the military are you in?

LD: I was in the Army.

Q: When did you begin serving?

LD: In June of 2001.

Q: When did it end?

LD: It ended in November of 2004.

Q: So you were part of the recent war (War in Afghanistan)?

LD: Yes

Q: Did you sign up to be part of the Army?

LD: Yes, I did.

Q: What was it like there?

LD: Hot, Smelly. I learned a lot, they actually have a lot of nice architecture structures over there.

Q: What job were you assigned in Iraq?

LD: I actually joined the military as a cook but when I went to Iraq I ended up being my commanders' driver and I worked in operations.

Q: What made you think about joining the military?

LD: Well, I come from a family of military servicemen, I always wanted to. When I had my oldest son I thought that would be a great way to go, I would have money and healthcare and not have to worry about anything like that.

Q: Were there a lot of casualties in your unit?

LD: Not in my unit, but in others there were. The first war, well the first OIF (Operation Iraqi Freedom) there wasn't as many casualties as far as military but the second time that my unit went there was more, there is more now after the war has [hand gestures quotation marks] officially ended.

Q: How did you feel about being a driver, I mean, you hear about all those bombs and cars blowing up?

LD: Actually, it's kind of hard, you're nervous. You want to come home but it's an exciting thing at the same time. I got to see a lot of things.

Q: You were nervous about what type of things?

LD: Nervous I was going to get killed type of things. You know, I just wanted to make sure I got home safely but did my job at the same time.

Q: What did you guys do during your off time?

LD: Wash our clothes, just try to hand out, play dominos, cards [laughs]. There's not much. Every now and then we would have a fun day and have organized sports, we would have basketball tournaments, some football game, tournaments for dominos and cards and stuff like that just to give us something to do.

Q: How's the food? Is it easy to eat?

LD: Actually, well, military food's military food. You can garnish it up and put, you know, your own little touch to it but other than that it's just military food. We did get to eat, it's called cantinas or the Iraqis would come to where we were and they would set up a little shop where they would have fried chicken and stuff like that so we would go eat their food too.

Q: When you got back was it hard to adapt to the atmosphere?

LD: It was very hard because when I left I was married at the time, I had two kids and my youngest son was only four months old. So when I came home he was going on twelve months old and it was kind of hard for me to adjust from being a soldier to a mom again, it took a little while.

Q: What did you actually think of your officers and the soldiers around you?

LD: Well, you're like a big family. So far away from home, that's all you have, is each other. A lot of us stuck together and made sure everyone was doing alright. We would hang out and talk or whatever.

Q: So you made good friends?

LD: I have very good friends from the military. Some of which are still there, some whom have recently got out but we all still keep in touch.

Q: Do you remember your first feeling or your first thought when you got off the plane over there?

LD: I was actually fine once we got there but we had stopped in Germany or maybe it was Ireland to switch stewardesses and when they were sitting at the front of the plane, they were giving a demonstration to the stewardesses on how to wear gas masks and that really hit me, I was like wow, I'm really, you know... I really have to be careful. So that's when it really hit me so I was pretty scared after that until we landed.

Q: Did you sign up for the military knowing you would go to war?

LD: No, actually, I was in basic training when September 11th happened and that was really scary because we didn't know what was going on and we didn't know if we were going to be shipped off right away or not but they were like "No, no, you're not fully trained yet, you're not going anywhere." We were ok and then shortly after I got into my unit they were like, "We are going" and I was like "oh, alright."

Q: Do you think it was mostly people that wanted to be there or people that needed to be there like financially?

LD: Everyone has their own reasons for joining the military, a lot of people do it for school, some do it for money but you don't really do it intending to go to war. There are some that really want to go to war, you know, to have that experience, others don't.

Q: How was the morale there was there times when everyone was depressed?

LD: Many times, yeah, we got told we were coming home quite a bit and then a couple of times just a couple of days before, we were getting ready to pack up and they would tell us "No, we got to go on another mission" so that was really hard to deal with. So that's when the morale was really low and you would just have to try and fight it, just be like ok, we can deal with this for a little bit longer.

Q: Did you keep in touch with your family? I know personally one of the people who was in the army for six months and it took a big toll on him only because he was away from his family for so long.

LD: Yes, well, they have satellite phones while we were in Baghdad and Fallujah so we were able to keep in touch. They also had internet access so we could go on yahoo or Hotmail or something and just do messenger and then we also had At&t phones as well but it went off of your unit, it went off of units and sections, there were only certain times you could use the phone, only a couple of times a week, like ten minutes at a time. It was kind of hard because you would get them on the phone and you would talk to them really quick and you would want to talk to everybody and sometimes you could, sometimes you couldn't. Sometimes you couldn't get a hold of anybody because of the time difference, you know, the time change was 8 hours so it was kind of hard to talk to them.

Q: Did anyone famous talk to you?

LD: We actually had Kid Rock come and a bunch of other people come to the USO (United Service Organizations) and they would perform a concert, I can't remember everyone that came but we actually got to go and watch that so that was kind of cool. It actually helped out a lot to kind of give us a day off and just kind of relax, you know. It was nice to see some people that actually cared and put their own life at risk coming over there to perform for us, that was really cool.

Q: Did President Bush ever come?

LD: No

Q: If he had, would you have saw him?

LD: No

Q: Was that the general consensus?

LD: Pretty much, yes. A lot of times, like if you see the people at the military bases when the president comes they are like "Oh it's the President" most of the time you have to go because your unit makes you go it's not really so much do you want to go. Some people support him and want to see him and meet him and stuff like that and to each his own.

Q: Are you done? Are you thinking about going back in the service at all?

LD: I am actually thinking about the National Guard now because I actually got out for family reasons but I love the military, it's just kind of embedded in me.

Q: Why the National Guard?

LD: Well because you get a really big bonus [laughs] which will help out and I'll get to continue going to school and not have to pay for anything, that will be really nice too.

Q: What are you going to school for?

LD: I am waiting to go into radiological Technology, it's X-rays, sonograms and that kind of stuff.

Q: Did you keep a personal diary?

LD: Actually, someday I did but it wasn't anything, just some experiences I kept or if I was arguing [laughs] with my commander or something and I wanted to jot it down, it gets your frustrations out.

Q: For entertainment did you pull pranks on people, just messing around?

LD: I didn't so much but there were a lot of people that did sometimes people would sit out late at night behind what was actually a bathroom originally and people would get ice cubes and climb on top of the building and chuck them at us and we would be like wondering what was going on like it was snowing or something, so it was kind of humorous.

Q: Did you have any close death experiences?

LD: I didn't, not really, I mean we got shot at but nothing like IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) or explosives or anything like that. There were bombs that were going off, we had a really good radio, I can't even think of the name of it right now, people that listen to the radio to monitor them, they would call us on our radio and be like "hey you can't go this way because they are firing missiles or there's IED's down here, there's other vehicles that have gotten hit, make a different route and come back."

Q: What's the feeling like knowing that you're getting shot at?

LD: It's scary, you just want to kind of get out of there. Keep an eye on your surroundings. Being a driver, I couldn't really shoot anything, I had a gunner and he was awesome, he gunned my 50 cal. (50 caliber rifle) for me so I left my life up to him [laughs].

Q: What did you do when you got home, what was the first thing you did?

LD: When I got home, I just cried because it was so nice to be back home. To see trees, and grass, and my family. You're nervous too because you haven't seen these people in so long and you're not sure how everyone's going to react to you, it was a really nice feeling.

Q: What did you want to eat when you first got home?

LD: Everything [laughs], I wanted to eat everything, I think I probably gained like ten pounds when I got home because I just went to every restaurant I could. They do have Burger King over there (Iraq) so we got to have that every once in a while and that was kind of nice, a little American meal.

Q: Were you always in your suit or whatever it's called?

LD: Your BDUs (Battle Dress Uniform)? Yeah, or DCUs (Desert Camouflage Uniform) while you are over in the desert.

Q: Can you change at all?

LD: You are always in that or PTs (Physical Training Uniforms). We got to go swimming a couple of times so the guys would wear their PT shorts and the girls would either wear their PT shorts and their shirts or sports bras as long as they were dark, they had to be black and you could go swimming like that so it was kind of nice because it kind of felt like you were a girl again, like for the girls, you know. Can lay out and tan or whatever.

Q: Did your unit always have supplied or was there ever a shortage.

LD: We always had MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) which is food in like a bag that gives you all types of things that you can warm it up or it can be cold but as far as water, we didn't have a lot of water, we had shortages. We would have like limits of one 1 liter bottle a day which is Ok but when you are in 110 degree weather that bottle isn't going to last you that long with as much as you sweat.

Q: Where were you exactly, like in Iraq?

LD: Well we were in Baghdad and then we went to Fallujah and we actually left from Fallujah.

Q: How were the people in Baghdad?

LD: Some did not want us there, others would cheer come out in to the middle of the street giving us thumbs up saying "we love you" and "thank you." Sometimes when we would be out on missions they would come out from their house and give us glasses of water and they were very thankful for the most part. I didn't see very many that were not, there wasn't many telling us to go home.

Q: Were you there when we caught Hussein?

LD: No I was already home; I wish I was there. I was there when his sons were killed.

Q: Did people's attitudes change when his sons were killed?

LD: People were cheering and partying in the street, his sons were nasty, they did a lot of bad things to a lot of people, especially the women and children, a lot of bad things.

Q: How did they tell you about their death, did they call you all in to tell you they had been killed?

LD: Actually, I don't even remember how, it came over our radio that we had got them or whatever. I was out on a mission and I actually went down into the city of Baghdad and I got the Iraqis paper with their faces on it.

Q: What are your most memorable experiences?

LD: Meeting a lot of Iraqis people and actually getting to talk to them. My unit actually became very close with one particular family, they helped us out with a lot of things like getting us generators, food, and just taking care of our vehicles, they would help wash them and keep them maintained and stuff like that. Getting to know other soldiers, my comrades. You know, you become much closer in that type of setting then you do when you are here in the states because here you just go to work, do your job, and then you go home but there you are actually forced to eat, sleep, and live with them every day. I had a lot of fun times over there as well.

Q: Was the city just like in poverty?

LD: Well Baghdad is beautiful, like I said, they have the most beautiful architecture buildings I've ever seen. That's where Saddam put most of his money into so there was grass and stuff like trees. When we got up to Fallujah there was mud huts, a lot of the desolate areas, they really didn't have anything. It's really dry in that area, it's just desert everywhere. You don't see grass, you don't see trees, very desolate.

Q: Did you stay in touch with the family that helped you out?

LD: I do, I e-mail with them, they have a satellite phone. I haven't actually heard from them in quite a while but my old first sergeant, he's in touch with them. They actually came to the states not to long after we had come back and stayed with him and his family so it's kind of cool. We actually contracted their family through the military so they got paid to help us out and stuff like that.

Q: Do they pay for your school, the military?

LD: Yes, I did six months, after re-enlisting. They give you what is called the Montgomery GI Bill so even after you get out of the military and you want to go to school you get so much money per month and they help pay for it but if you join the national guard it's completely free, you don't have to pay for anything so that's nice.

Q: How much longer do you think it is going to take over there, from what you saw?

LD: Well from when I went, until now, I don't personally feel that we should be there anymore. I think we have done our job, we have trained them as best as we can. It's the Iraqis turn to stand up and take their country back and just kind of have us in the back shadows. I don't think they need as many soldiers over there now but they rely too much on us and right now they are going through their own civil war so I don't really know how long the military will actually have to stay there. I see different reports on the news all the time like oh they will be home in a year or no, they will be there until 2010. Its just whoever takes over office next, we will find out.

Q: How do you feel about all this stuff you see on the news, is that really what it's like there?

LD: The news only shows the bad things that happen over there, you never hear about the good that the soldiers do. What really aggravates me is that you will only see them, the newscasters interview the officers or higher enlisted like sergeants and above, you don't ever really see them interview the lower enlisted and that bothers me because you're never going to get a real feel for what they think if you're not interviewing them. They do a lot of good out there, we were able to re-build schools, we made soccer fields, we've done so much. We are re-building their town for them after we bombed them but they just don't show enough good over there.

Q: Are you guys aloud to speak out over there or you don't make a sound?

LD: Well, when you are in the military you can talk but there is only so much that you can actually say. You can't really say your full feelings because you have to respect the commander in chief and your chain of command. You can get in trouble for certain things that you say, so you kind of have to watch what you say, but being out of the military, you get freedom of expression [laughs], so that's one good thing after words.

Q: Did you have to watch what you said when you call your family too?

LD: Yes, because satellite phones you can pick up, so they could find out where we were, what was going on, so you had to be careful. You couldn't say "Oh, well I am coming home tomorrow" because they could be monitoring and finding out when we are getting on a plane and flying home or when we are going back to Kuwait to get on the planes, so you really had to be careful. It was hard because you really wanted to say that you would be home this date but you couldn't say it, you had to let the family readiness groups call your family to let them know when you were on your way home.

Q: What was boot camp like for you, was it really, really hard?

LD: Yes, it was, but I have to say that was one of my greatest experiences. I had never felt so fulfilled, going through that and having my kids was almost like the same thing. It was very hard, they pushed you definitely but in the end I loved it because I knew that I did it all on my own and I made it. Where a lot of people you will see are not there the day after and you ask about them and they dropped out or they couldn't take it anymore.

Q: I went to Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri basic training now is much easier from what I've heard. They have stress cards and stuff like that so if you feel like you are being pushed too hard you give them a card and they are supposed to kind of calm down on you a little bit which I think is BS. It's just in all basic trainings now, it doesn't matter what branch of service, except I don't know about the marine core because they are one of the tougher boot camps.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience over there?

LD: Just that I am very proud that we got to go over there and do what we had to do to help them out. I don't think that soldiers are recognized enough, they don't have enough support while they are there. Nobody really understands how hard it is for them. Yes, we volunteered to join the military and serve our country but we didn't ask for the people back home to constantly be negative about it, you know, because we see that stuff on TV. Especially our family members, they are frustrated because they want us home but they end up doing it in a negative way by protesting and stuff. They think they are helping but they are really not. It's just really hard, hopefully everyone will come home soon.

Q: Does your experience over there and seeing what the Iraqis view is make you even more happy to be an American?

LD: Yes, it's so funny how much stuff you take for granted. Like half of them don't have sneakers or shoes, they walk around bare foot, if you have ever gone to the beach and put your feet on the hot sand it burns, and all from adults to kids that's how they walk around and it just amazes me but if you ever look at their feet they are really thick and calloused up and stuff like that so it's pretty crazy. You definitely are amazed at how much you take for granted, water, clean water at that, you know, it's hard. It's definitely different, especially because when we first started bombing over there they had blown up a lot of things and their water and everything. We controlled when they could gas. I don't know if you've ever seen but you know when we had that blizzard there was no gas anywhere, that's how it is there all the time. There is so many cars and we actually had to regulate who could come because over there they can say it's \$1.20 and then it's \$5.00 they can flip it constantly and there is lines forever to get gas. It's pretty crazy, it was definitely interesting, something that I will definitely never forget.

Q: I think that's it, thank you very much.

LD: No, thank you.