

Rafael Davis

Our Neighbors, Our Heroes: Forest Park Veteran's Oral History Project

INT: Today is August 7, 2017 and I am Nancy Cavaretta interviewing Rafael Davis for the Forest Park Historical Society oral history project. Hi Rafael.

VET: Hello.

INT: Before we get started with the more in-depth questions, I just need to ask you some information questions.

VET: Okay.

INT: First of all, what is your date of birth?

VET: 3/6/1980.

INT: Thank you and your current address.

VET: [REDACTED], Forest Park, IL.

INT: Sounds familiar. (Laughs) And what branch of the military did you serve?

VET: Army.

INT: And in what war did you serve in?

VET: OIF one and OIF two.

INT: Which is?

VET: Operation Iraqis Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

INT: Thank you, both phases. And what was your rank?

VET: Specialist at the time.

INT: And where did you serve?

VET: Specifically Camp Arifjan about 50 miles across the Kuwaiti boarder into Iraq.

INT: Was that in both phases?

VET: Yes.

INT: Thank you.

VET: No.

INT: No?

VET: No, it was – started out in Airfjan, then moved forward to [Scania] then back to [Beuring?] then to Kuwait and back to Iraq again.

INT: Okay. What was the length of your military service?

VET: Eighteen months for the war.

INT: For the war.

VET: Eighteen years thus far.

INT: Wow.

VET: Nineteen.

INT: Nineteen. And in terms of the present, right now, how are you still involved in the military?

VET: Currently in the National Guard, Illinois National Guard.

INT: Illinois National Guard. Very good. I want to ask you a few questions about your early military training. Were you drafted? Or did you enlist? Or did you serve after completing a college ROTC program?

VET: I volunteered right out of high school.

INT: So you were living at home at the time?

VET: I was living at home.

INT: Why did you join?

VET: For a couple of reasons. I had two scholarships for Art to college, but at that time I was pretty much so done with learning and had no real clue of what I really wanted to do in life. So my natural conclusion was I joined the military, get a chance to travel a little bit, see the world

and hopefully after three years I would figure out what exactly it is I want to do with my life. I put down a number of locations that I would have liked to go - they give you a little questionnaire sheet – “where would you like to go?” So I’m like “I’m taking Germany, I’ll take Korea. I’ll take anything.” They put me in Fort Stewart, Georgia.

INT: Was there any special reason why you chose the Army?

VET: Well, my older brother is in the Army and I’d heard pretty good things about it. My uncle was in the Army. I was initially recruited by the Air Force for the basketball team. They wanted me to play basketball for the Air Force. In hindsight, that would have been really great, but I felt they were a little bit too lax for what I need at that time in life and thought I needed a little bit more of a challenge. Thought about the Marines, thought that was a little bit too much of a challenge (laughter). So I settled in right there on the Army. That seemed to be the good one for me.

INT: Very good. What were your first days in service like and how did you feel about it?

VET: First days in service, I would have to say they were pretty funny. I found it all to be very amusing and entertaining, in all honesty. All the yelling and all of that stuff, I was pretty used to it. My father was the same way, so basic training was more so – it was a little bit of comfort food for me. Others were really freaking out and they were traumatized by the whole experience, but I found it to be very comical.

INT: With your – it was kind of an extension of the military aspects of family members in a lot of ways.

VET: Right.

INT: The boot camp experience, did you receive specialized training and if you did, what type of training was that?

VET: I don’t really know if it’s specialized training. I think it was basically just – the introductory basic training that all soldiers get going through. I did basic training at Fort Jackson and I did AIT at Fort Lee. I was a Quarter Master Brigade, support battalion.

INT: Support battalions.

VET: Hmm hmm (yes).

INT: Did you find that the boot camp training was really physically or mentally taxing?

VET: Not at all. Physically? Yes, it was physically demanding, but I thrive in those types of situations and as far as any other aspect of it, I thought it was the most fun you could have with your clothes on.

INT: Wow.

VET: Just to be personally honest. I just thought it was great. It was really fun.

INT: It's kind of a little different response that I'm getting here about boot camp training.

VET: Well different people take to things a little bit differently. I mean, growing up in Chicago and on the Southside, you're raised a little harder and a little bit tougher. So things that would normally rock someone else don't typically even sway the boat for...

INT: (Overlapping) Sway the boat.

VET: I thought it was very nice. I thought it was good.

INT: Good points, good points. Okay, Rafael, I want to ask you some questions about day-to-day military life. How did you stay in touch with your family?

VET: In the early days, these were still the telephone days, in basic training they gave you one phone call, I believe, maybe once every two or three weeks or so, they'd let you line up in lines and make one phone call on the regular rotary phones. Nowadays they have cellphones, but contact wasn't that hard of a thing, though I didn't feel the need to contact family. I kind of felt when I left that it was kind of my signaling of manhood beginning, so therefore I really didn't have much of a need to check in or get that affirmation from family, "Hey, we love you." All of that was rock solid. I was good to go.

INT: Yeah, good to go.

VET: Yeah.

INT: And in terms of just your day-to-day experiences, how was the food? Did you have enough supplies? Things of that nature.

VET: Army equipped you with pretty much everything that you would actually need. Food was great. Three meals a day. That's all throughout my military career. It's been a – there's never really been a want or a need for things in the military besides things to do. I mean, it's a very hurry up and wait type of structure. So, I'm not sure that there's anything that you could even add to the military at its core from what it was, because it's changed now, but initially it was pretty self-sufficient. You had everything that you need.

INT: Good. You know, sometimes people have like good luck charms or they bring comfort objects or they find different ways to entertain themselves or entertain each other. Did you have any experiences along those lines?

VET: No comfort things or anything like that. Mine's just plain old camaraderie and humor. That seems to be what's gotten me through 99% of tough times in my life.

INT: And you said you were able to find a lot of humor in the whole operation from the training in the beginning.

VET: I think, personally, for the military and for any other high-stress position in life, humor tends to ease those tensions. Whether it's humor about the situation itself or find that connection with another person and sharing in the humor even when you're in a really, really sucky situation. So I mean, humor – if there was one thing that I held to, it was pretty much my sense of humor.

INT: And I'm jumping ahead a little bit here, but since you've had such a long deployment during wartime, 18 months, did that humor kind of hold fast for you (overlapping) during that time?

VET: (Overlapping) It held for the most part. For the most part it held really good up until we were involuntarily extended. So, prior to that, we were good.

INT: Good. Did you get a chance to travel at all? Have any good leaves? Or “see the world” as they say while you were in service?

VET: Well, I've got to see some great parts of the United States that I can guarantee you I never would have ever ventured off to do on my own. Some great training post. As far as traveling outside of the military, I've only on active duty been to Amsterdam, and where else [...] Amsterdam and Iraq and Kuwait. So that's the extent of my foreign travel with the service. Everything else has been stateside, but not bad, not bad.

INT: Did you – what did you think of your officers?

VET: That's a mixed bag. It truly depends on the officer not so much the rank. Officers do carry around a bit of a stigma with them for enlisted personnel like myself that they're college kids that truly know nothing about real world applications. They look at it through the eyes of a textbook whereas everyone else has been looking at it through reality. I can honestly say that I've seen both of those types of people over my 20 year career. But typically officers come in with a sense of who they are, but are brought down to level quite fast and typically they mellow out. They find their niche, they understand how the system works and they are able to lead without really – it's almost leading without leading, I would say. That would be the best way I could put it. They don't truly lead from the – well, they do lead from the front, but they more so the NCO corps drives that home. Officers are sometimes better seen and not heard type of thing.

INT: The reason I ask that question is because kind of the two-caste system in the military.

VET: Hmm-mmm (yes).

INT: Did you ever have any feelings about that?

VET: I have plenty of feelings about the caste system. I would – that’s a good way of classifying it. I think there would be a lot more minorities in the that system had they known that that system was available, but typically to the 18 year-old coming into the military, and the fact that the military – they specialize in having young 18 to 21 year-olds that you kind of fall into a system that’s already created in the niche that you are already in. So, unless you actually knew that these other opportunities exist, similar to the civilian life, you’re probably not going to see it. And by that time, you’re locked into a contract and doing whatever it is that you’re doing, so you don’t really have time to focus on the larger picture.

INT: Good, thank you. I think that’s really an important question and I think that a lot of people who have not served in the military and who do not have family in the military don’t understand that that exists. Now that we don’t have compulsory draft any more, there’s less and less of general knowledge, I think, in America about those types of issues.

VET: Sure.

INT: And many more. The next set of questions are going to address your experiences during wartime. You told me that you were in the Persian Gulf. Were they two separate deployments, like back-to-back deployments?

VET: They were two different names for the same length of time. One campaign ended and another campaign started. Operation Iraqi Freedom was basically about the liberation of Iraq and then Operation Endure (sic) Freedom was basically the building up and the infrastructure and the teaching and the, you know, teaching the police there and the military to learn how to hold their own and how to basically orchestrate democracy, as a whole.

INT: And in both of those phases, what was your job, or your assignment?

VET: My initial job, I’d have to go back for this one. Initially I joined in the military as a cook. There’s a story behind that also, that I have to go into. But when I initially joined the military I wanted to have nothing to do with war at all, period. I wanted to go to travel; I’m not wanted to go to war. So, I scored pretty high on the ASVAB test and they brought a bunch of jobs to me, but for every job that they presented to me, the only thing that my brain heard was “war.” So they said, “Scout,” war, “Tanker,” war. Everyone that they named off, they named off about 10 or 15 or 20 of them. I’m like, “No. No. No. No. No. No. No.” And then they said, “You could be a cook.” I’m like, “Hold on, now.” I had an older brother in the military and one of the things he had brought back from basic training was the MREs, called Mil. Ready to Eat. It’s a meal in a bag and it lasts for 30-40 years on a shelf somewhere. So it was of my juvenile instinct that I’m thinking, “Hey, when the war happens, cooks stay here, they eat those little pellet bags over there and I’m good, man, this is going to be great. This is going to be aces, man. You can go to college as a cook; you have time and all of that.” None of that turned out to be true. They do have a

mobile kitchen that they take with them to wartime, which I found out about two months later and annual in my AIT training. So that was my initial spurt of military. My first three years was a cook in Fort Stewart. I got out. Joined in 1998. I got out in 2001, September, right after September 11th. Actually it was September 12th, I remember because I was laying down on the sofa in my parents' house and my father came in and said, "Don't take your boots off yet, you're going to war." (Laughs) So I came home on September 12th. Came home on September 10th, woke up to September 11th – that's what it was. But there was such an initial delay behind September 11th. It happened, but there wasn't an immediate military response. So the – I guess that rally for the troops and everything, it wasn't really there it was more of a policy thing at that point. The war didn't officially start until, I want to say, maybe two years later is when we actually went in after going through all of congress and the house and everything else and doing a formal declaration and all of that. So, six months after being home, realized that I kind of missed the military. I was like, "It was really kind of great having all those great guys and all those great experiences", because these guys regular life just are no fun. They're no fun. I mean, they can't take a joke; you can't even talk to them without them getting upset. And I'm like, I need a place that was very structured. Military was [ill] seven and you can jive with something like that. So I rejoined the military as a legal clerk. I rejoined in 2002. Got out in 2001, joined 2002. And this kind of leads to how I ended up in the war in the first place. I joined as a legal clerk and I was doing all my drills, assisting people with their legal problems and stuff like that and then they start to activate troops to go to war and they called us in on the weekend and said we need you guys to go down to Marseilles, IL and do the legal paperwork for the units coming through getting ready to deploy. Me, being a guy who relies on humor in all situations, made a joke to my staff sergeant saying, "Hey, next time they have one of these wars going on, send me." I'm like, "I saw the last and it was three months of quick money, I will take that any day of the week. Ha, ha, ha." What became of that is while we were down there processing one of the units through, a sergeant major and a colonel and a [quaranter] ranks instructor – I'm a specialist. I am at the very bottom, this is like the CEO of a company, and they walk up to me. I'm not wearing a top, I have no name on. And they are "Davis knows what's going on, Davis knows." And they are laughing and they are elbowing each other and high-fiving, "Yeah, Davis knows what's up." And I'm like, first question in my head is, why are they talking to me? Because I'm down here and they are up here. Second thing that goes in my head, is I'm not wearing a shirt and how do they know my name? So the next thing out of their mouth is, "Well, yeah, we talked to sergeant Williams and she said you wanted to go and we put your name on the list. You're going to war. Congratulations!" And at that moment, all of the blood came from my body and it drained out and I sat there and I almost died right there on the floor. That was that. So, I called Sergeant Williams and I politely gave her a piece of mind, maybe not using the best words. And the situation was remedied and they came back and they said, "Well, you don't have to go if you don't want to." So I took that time to think about a couple of things. So I stepped out onto the back area of Marseilles, there's nothing but windmills out there and wide air. So I'm like, okay let's think this through. For me, it always a thing of pros and cons. Let's look at the pros and cons. Cons is you could die. I mean, that's pretty obvious right there (laughs.) My "but," off of the knowledge I had at the time, I'm like three month war, I could go over here, I can make some quick money, I can pay off my bills. I can do all of these things. I'll have Veteran status and all of these other things that come along with being a war Veteran. I'm like, still not decided. So I

call my best friend and I ran it down. I'm like, "Okay, I need you to play Devil's Advocate right here." And I ran it off to him and he was like, "I don't know, Bro, it's kind of your call." So I was like, you know what, I'm going to do it. I went back in there and told them, "All right, just leave my name on the list. I'm going." And that is how I ended up in Iraq. But the only way that I could have mobilized with that unit is under a cook's slot, they didn't have a legal clerk's spot at that unit. So I went as a cook. So that is a job that I did in the war for the first, I would say, six to seven months. Which was a very high stressful, hot, and tiring job. Then I stopped being a cook and they moved me to logistics and I became basically the other person on the end of the phone when they're doing the [nine line] medivacs. So they would, something would happen, they'd call it in, first line, second line, eighth line, all the way down. They basically reading off what the scenario is, where it's at, the location, what do they need and everything else and we send the bird in that direction to pick them up. That lasted for about three to four months, I would say. And then after that, when our mission changed and we got extended, then I went to convoys. So they just threw me in and me getting thrown on convoys was something that a lot of those guys, they truly enjoyed it because when they were going out on convoys, I was the guys just chillin' inside with the AC with all of the big-wigs answering the phone and they were like, "Ah yeah, we finally got them." For me it was directly into [dirt] – like, "Oh no, don't get in the car, you're going to the top, don't worry about it, man, we've got a special seat for you." And that's what I did for another four or five months.

INT: So, of those three different jobs, you said the kitchen was stressful.

VET: Hmm-mm (yes).

INT: And obviously, the second job was extremely stressful.

VET: True.

INT: And the convoy was – what would you say, marginally stressful?

VET: I would say everything after the initial month in a combat zone kind of loses its luster when it comes to being stressful.

INT: How is that?

VET: When you first get to Iraq, everything is new. The sound is different, the smell is different. Everything is different than your norm. And there's the added bonus that the only information you have is everybody in this country wants to kill you. So, you get there and initially everything scares you. Somebody drops a kettle, you're scared. They set off an alarm saying that gas – you're clumsy getting your mask on trying to cover up and everything else. A car drives too close to you; you're ready to kill them. After about – I would have to say – two weeks it's starts to lessen, by two months you truly are – you enter this stage where, pardon my language, where you just flat out don't give a fuck. And it's like, well, if I die today, I did, but I'm not wearing this helmet because it's hot. It kind of turns into that mentality where – I personally believe that a

person can only be scared for so long before that reflex kind of just – it doesn't work. Like if someone was to jump behind a wall and say, "Boo!" they might get you the first time. The second time, you might jump a little bit, but the tenth or eleventh time, it's just like – "This is getting old." Like, "Really not scaring me now if we're going to do it, let's get on with it." That's kind of how it is for most people in that combat zone for that amount of time. It's just more of a "Let's just get it on," mentality – I would say it was. It was good though.

INT: That's really interesting. So, did you really see any casualties?

VET: Yeah. We saw a lot of casualties. Well, I won't say a lot, but saw a number of them, I guess would be the best way to say it. We saw the remnants of war when we first got there, because we were first boots on the ground, so I want to say we got alerted in January. From January we went to Fort McCoy for a two-month move-up and then we flew out – I want to say mid-March and landed in Iraq. The war started maybe about a month earlier and the story goes that we weren't really supposed to go to Iraq, we were supposed to have a mission in Germany, but our commander was – he was metal hungry and wanted to get those badges of honor for himself so he persisted, persisted, persisted and we ended up in Kuwait. And then before they even told him that he had a job or gave him a mission, he pulled forward into Iraq. And then once we showed up into Iraq, they were like, "Well, you're here so I guess we'll find something for you to do." That one's always been a salty thing for a lot of people because people died because of this and everything else and it was for his own career ambitions or on the civilian-side ambitions of having what comes along with the treasures of being a commander in wartime. So, yeah.

INT: I know that's very disheartening for people under their command.

VET: Well, he knew exactly where he stood. He knew where he stood with the unit. He didn't sleep on the ground-level; he slept on top of a building in fear that he would be killed by his own troops.

INT: In terms of like citations and the medals and everything, did you receive any types of citations?

VET: Yeah, I got a handful of them, what are they called? AARs, Army Achievement Medals and Global War on Terrorism Medal and there's like eight or nine of them. They are like candy. (Laughs) I truly never have been one for the medals. For anybody who's listening to it, who's ever been to my house, you're not going to see any military memorabilia. I'm just truly not that guy. That's not really my thing. Some people, it is a part of their identity. If they're not military, they are nothing. That's what – it is a part of the facade that makes up that person. I'm not that guy though. I understand it is what it is and life is short and then you are on life-support. I mean, it's just how it is sometimes.

INT: Where were you when the war actually ended? Or where were you stationed?

VET: It depends on at what point did the war end? Because I do remember watching George Bush on a Navy ship declaring that the war was over and I remember that five soldiers got shot and blown up that very same day and we were watching it in a chow hall at another camp that I can't remember and I was like "Maybe they didn't get the memo here, but I don't think that the war is over because guys are still dying out here." So I don't really know what to say right now. And then it continued on a lot past that, so I'm not really sure at what point we're saying. Because actually, currently, the war is actually still going on, so we can't say that it even concluded. It's still going on.

INT: Is there any other experience that stands out in your mind in wartime?

VET: You'd have to be more specific. I'm not really sure. I mean, the whole war is a highlight reel, the entire thing. It was the best of times and the worst of times at the same time. The worst experience you've ever been with the best group of guys you've ever known. Some of your happiest memories date back to that time, but also some of your saddest memories too. Can't really say.

INT: Just to kind of move into the next phase of your return to civilian life, did you keep in contact with any of those guys afterwards?

VET: Yeah. That's the beauty of the National Guard versus active duty. Active duty, the way that you would keep up with a person back then, is you would give them your mother's number. The thought behind is that your mother is never moving, your parents stay stationary. You, as an 18 year-old, you can get deployed here, you're over here, you got transferred here. You're all over the place. But I can always call your mom and figure out exactly where you are. So that's typically what we did. And the beauty with the National Guard is everybody is generally from the same place. So, National Guard's just basically the Army for the state. So everybody who goes to war with you is typically from that state or from that area and usually wherever that unit is geographically located it's basically the surrounding communities around it that build up that unit. So all of the guys that we deployed with are all from Chicago and we all keep in contact. Actually we have a memorial tomorrow for the one that we actually lost in the war that we meet up at the gravesite every year.

INT: Is that what that wrist band is for?

VET: That is what the wrist band is for.

INT: What does that say?

VET: It says, "Brandon Ramsey, 8/8/03, Iraq, killed in action."

INT: So you have a memorial for him every year?

VET: We do. I wouldn't call it a memorial. It's more of a celebration of life. We don't really go there to mourn or anything like that. It's just more so keeping that camaraderie together through the years. And it's been kind of nice to see how everybody has grown and now that they've moved into civilian life and families and everything else. We can be apart for ten year and it just takes (snaps fingers) five seconds to reconnect. It's right back on again.

INT: Just out of curiosity, where is he buried?

VET: He's buried on the Southside; I forget the name of the cemetery. I know exactly where it's at, it's on 147th right off the expressway, but there's a cemetery there. We're going to meet up there tomorrow, probably about 13-14 guys. We'll clean off the gravesite; sit around, BS a little bit. Maybe go to a bar and throw back a couple.

INT: That's great. That's really great. When you returned to civilian life – I know you're still in the National Guard, but after your combat duty and everything – how were you received by friends and family in your community?

VET: It depends. On the Southside I was 24 year-old guy who had saved up about \$60,000 from the time that I was over there and came back and blew off a little steam and enjoyed a little bit of those funds before I became the fiscally conservative guy that I am now. So guys from the Southside tended to frown on that type of behavior. And they would look at me with a shade of green envy, so I figured out that it's about time for me to move on. But I didn't move far. It happens to the best of them. As far as people in the civilian life, I mean, they were well receiving. It wasn't like anything coming back, from what I hear, what it was like coming back from Vietnam for some guys. People were very much supportive of the military at that time. It was – I won't say it was a honeymoon phase or anything like that, but for us guys who were returning, we kind of came back with our own glow. We just had a glow and an aura around us like, "I just made it through a war, so you're truly not telling me anything right now." We had wind in our sails so we were pretty good. We were pretty good.

INV: That's great. I think the American public learned a hard lesson with the way the returning service people from Vietnam were received and there was such a confusion of hating the war and also hating the people who served in it rather than honoring them for what they had sacrificed even though ideologically they may not have agreed. And I think we were kind of past that with the Persian Gulf.

VET: But there were some moments in the war where ugly shades of the war spilled over. So, within the soldiers who served in the war, there are fringe elements that just – they don't feel like nation-building is truly the purpose of the military. [It's our] purpose should be one thing and that is to kill. So, we shouldn't be going to another country to do [stopping] guards and helping rebuild, our job is to be tyrants and just tear things up. It's somebody else's job to fix it. And they don't like being put on handcuffs, basically, and saying what they can and can't do when they are in a war zone. I am a 50/50 type individual where I can see both sides of it, but unnecessary loss of life is just ridiculous in itself. Whether it's, you know, for what the reasons

that you think are right, or the reason that you think are wrong. It's one of those – it's a personal soldier by soldier thing. And there's a lot of young and testosterone-filled guys out there, but a lot of time cool minds prevail.

INT: That's probably one of your reflections or lessons on the time that you served in combat.

VET: I don't know, I think it – I couldn't say that it was a lesson because that would imply that it started and it ended and I learned something from it. I truly see it as – and this is all part of the journey – it is all part of the journey. There's certain things that happen in my life and I can always related back to things that happened in the war or situations that I found myself in and it does affect the way that I carry myself now, but it's just – it's a part of everything.

INT: Are you happy that you served?

VET: Very. Very. Very happy that I served. I was just telling a guy the other day, smartest decision that I ever made was – first decision was joining the military, second one when I was standing on that back dock saying “Yeah, I'll go.” Made some friends that, I mean, never would have found these guys in my life, but lifelong friends, so much so that I will meet them up tomorrow. We'll toast up a nice little drink.

INT: That's great. Well, you've answered so many of these questions that I have written down. If you had to leave one message to the future generations about your military service, what would you like for them to hear from this interview?

VET: [...] That's a pretty tough question. That is a pretty tough question. [...] I don't know. I would say, grab life by the pants. I mean, if it wasn't for, I guess either blind ignorance or me just going for it, I would never have had any of the experiences that I've had or done any of the things that I have done and the things that came on the back of the military. So I like to call it dumb blind luck, but there probably was a little bit of strategy to it, but you gotta take chances in life. I mean, that's the honest to God truth. Some times you have to take chances. Might end up bad, but nine times out of ten it will end up good. That would be my lasting impression that I would pass on to someone else, when it deals with the military at least, yeah. Yeah, I could live with that one.

INT: Take a chance; nothing's ever a sure thing anyway.

VET: Nah, take a chance. You gotta take a chance. Leap of faith – take a chance. Pros and cons? If there's anything you gotta do, you have to make a decision. That is what the military teaches you. Indecisiveness gets you nothing. It doesn't matter if you make a good decision or a bad decision, make a decision.

INT: Very good. Thank you so much, Rafael, you've really shed so much life on your experiences and what you've learned from them and what you actually sacrificed to go and serve

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Raphael Davis Interviewed by Nancy Caveretta

for our country. And it's good for American to know about this and all angles, so I thank you for that.