

Summary of Oral History Transcript
Student, Citizen, Soldier: Oral History and Student Veterans

Kenney, Matthew

U.S. Army, Sergeant

Interview Conducted by Mr. Thomas William-Henry Landers, Salem State University, on 07 April 2016.

Summary of transcript:

Matthew Kenney, a lifetime resident of Lowell with a long family tradition of service, enlisted as an Army Infantryman in 2005 and served until 2013. Kenney received his training at Fort Campbell, KY, was sent as part of AFRICOM to Kenya, and later joined the 101st Airborne Division in the Paktika province of Afghanistan. His interview details his service in Afghanistan, and his personal opinions on issues facing the nation building process there. Kenney also covers topics such as the impact his service has had on him both personally and professionally, his transition to civilian and student life, and his experience with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Kenney's short story "Bumblin'" was published in the Spring 2016 issue of *Solstice Magazine*.

Matthew Kenney

Narrator

Thomas William-Henry Landers

Salem State University

Interviewer

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At Salem State University

Salem, Massachusetts

Thomas Landers: Hello, I'm Tom Landers. Today is 7 April 2016. I'm here with Matthew Kenney, a student veteran here at Salem State who served in the Army with a deployment Afghanistan. Thanks for coming today.

Matthew Kenney: You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

TL: So you're from Westford, what was it like growing up there.

MK: I actually grew up in Lowell, I graduated from Westford Academy in Westford. I had to transfer schools my senior year but, growing up in Lowell was a little, a little rough. We weren't very economically well off. So, it was, it was fun. But there was a lot of like craziness growing up as well. Just, local hooliganism and what not.

TL: So what made you decide to join?

MK: It was a combination of a few things. First and foremost was just tradition for my family. All the males, if not serving had at least made an effort to serve. We've had a couple turned away, but, starting with my grandfathers on down we've all at least made the effort to join the military and all but one was Army. One was Navy, but we don't hold it against him too much.

TL: Black sheep?

MK: Yeah.

TL: So, were they Infantry also or was that kind of your own decision?

MK: My brother and I were both infantry. One of my grandfathers was and then the other was Navy.

TL: So, it was kind of just assumed you would go infantry, or did you intend —

MK: My brother and I talked about it growing up, and we both were just dead set on infantry no matter how well our ASVABs¹ went or anything like that. We were just dead set on it. Like, we both scored very high on the ASVABs, high GTs², and didn't matter we were going Infantry. I actually, my recruiter was upset with me because I, I wouldn't listen to anything else. I was like, I'm going Infantry so.

TL: So I saw the date you joined was 2005, correct?

MK: Uhuh

TL: So you're kinda right before the beginning of the surge, so was there anything, did you think you were going to Iraq or Afghanistan. Was there anything specific you were hoping for duty station wise?

MK: To start out with I actually had a guaranteed duty station.

TL: Okay.

MK: Which would have been Ft. Bragg³, in the 82nd, which my older brother that's what he was a part of. He was in 504th⁴ down there, the devils in baggy pants. But I ended up, so I was pretty certain I would be going overseas. My, the day I shipped out to basic training actually, he ended up flying into Boston on his mid-tour leave from Afghanistan. So we actually crossed paths at the airport, and like gave each other a hug, wished each other luck, and then I went to basic and he was going home to hang out with family.

But, I ended up injured in airborne school right after basic, ended up the whole "needs of the Army" thing. Didn't end up getting to Bragg, but I feel like I upgraded. I went in the 101st⁵ instead, eventually.

TL: So how did you like [Fort] Campbell and the area?

MK: I loved Ft. Campbell, and Nashville is an awesome city. It's like a 40-minute drive from Campbell so it was definitely a great time.

TL: Okay, so Afghanistan, you have one or two deployments?

MK: One to Afghanistan, and one to Africa. Not then, Africa first and then Afghanistan.

TL: How was Africa then?

MK: It was neat. I was on a PSD⁶ for the most part. So I wore, like cargo khakis, hiking boots, and a polo shirt with a concealed 9 millimeter⁷. And then we had our M4s in gun bags. It was pretty cool, and, we got a lot of per-diem while we were there.

¹ Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. Test required for enlistment.

² General Technical Score. Used to determine eligibility for certain occupations and schools by the military.

³ North Carolina. Home of the 82nd Airborne Division

⁴ Infantry Regiment within the 82nd.

⁵ 101st Airborne Division

TL: What was your mission there?

MK: It was when they were standing up AFRICOM⁸. It was before they actually started AFRICOM, they actually started it a couple months after we got home. So the mission there was, we were escorting around a bunch of different people. Civil affairs guys, higher ups that needed to meet with local authorities and stuff like that.

TL: Did you have a lot of interaction with the locals while you were there?

MK: Yeah, tons. We had a bunch that were contracted to work for us. Which, you know, anyone who has ever been overseas that's, that's kinda the thing. But there it was even more so. There was only about 20 of us on the little COP⁹ that we had built inside of a Kenyan naval base. And we had a bunch of workers, like almost the same amount of workers as troops there, so we got to know a lot of them real well.

TL: Was that the battalion PSD, or were you with the Division command?

MK: It wasn't either, this was before I was in the 101st, this was actually when I was in the Old Guard¹⁰. When I went needs of the Army; high GT, tall guy, I ended up working in Arlington for a little while. And they deployed us, it was like the first deployment in ages for them. And we ended up going over there but it was, it was more like we were assigned to like military district Washington to go over there. It wasn't like, we didn't even have enough guys, it was a Regiment stateside. So it wouldn't have been like Battalion or Division or anything.

TL: And they're out of Myer?

MK: Yup, Fort Myer.

TL: So Arlington. Were you wandering around, what was, what were you doing there?

MK: My job at Arlington? I was a casket bearer. I ended up before, by the time I left I was a casket team leader there. Carrying caskets and conducting funerals.

TL: So how, did that have any sort of impact on you career wise?

MK: I'm sure it helped set me up for good things, I mean the amount of discipline required there is pretty intense, and I mean you're doing one of the most honorable things you can in the United States military, bar none, so we took it very seriously. And I think a huge part of that rubbed off on me, and for the rest of my time in just, making sure I did the right thing all the time and getting stuff done when I needed to.

TL: So the transition from D.C. to Kentucky, how was it for you? Relatively easy, or did you have any issues when you got there?

⁶ Personal Security Detail

⁷ M9 service pistol

⁸ Africa Command. Army command group tasked with supporting operations in Africa

⁹ Combat Out Post

¹⁰ 3rd United States Infantry Regiment. Largely ceremonial unit tasked with supporting Arlington National Cemetery, and ceremonial tasking within Military District Washington.

MK: The transition was like, location wise was super easy. I really enjoyed it, I was sick of D.C., the traffic alone was terrible. But um, my time there to start was a little, it was a little contentious, just because I was moving from a unit that was, you know. We were an infantry unit, but we, we trained once a month and the rest of the month we were doing ceremonial stuff. So there was a bit of a learning curve when I first got there, but I made sure to latch onto the right people and get everything I needed, and I pick up stuff pretty quickly so it went well after the first couple months.

TL: So coming up on deployment, did you do JRTC¹¹ or NTC¹²?

MK: I missed out on both, I got there in October and we deployed in February, so they were already done with everything by the time I had in-processed to Fort Campbell, so.

TL: Do you feel like the unit prepared you, even though you missed a big chunk of thee training?

MK: Yeah. My initial job when I first got there, they assigned me to, I ended up being the battalion ForcePRO¹³ NCOIC¹⁴ right when I got to Campbell they assigned me to that. My job pre-deployment was training up a lot of support troops on, you know, security measures and how to properly search someone coming into the FOB¹⁵s and stuff like that. Helping them with their basic shooting skills and stuff like BRM¹⁶ and what not. So, um, it was a pretty easy, like the tasks for me there were easy but uh, I feel like I was pretty well prepared. I mean, the job I ended up assigned to was something that like any, anyone who has been in for even a year or two should be able to cover if they're an Infantrymen.

TL: And what unit was it at Campbell that you were in?

MK: I was in the Rakassans, third brigade.

TL: So I'm assuming you guys went through Kuwait on the way there?

MK: No, we flew through Kirgizstan. Kuwait, this was 2010 and there was some volcanic eruption somewhere.¹⁷

TL: The Iceland one?

MK: Yeah. And so we couldn't fly over certain areas so we ended up going to Kyrgastan and then over to Afghanistan.

TL: How was your first month, as you're doing your left seat/right seats¹⁸, how did everything go when you first got there.

¹¹ Joint Readiness Training Center, Louisiana.

¹² National Training Center, California.

¹³ Force Protection

¹⁴ Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge

¹⁵ Forward Operating Base

¹⁶ Basic Rifle Marksmanship

¹⁷ Eruption of Eyjafjallajökull, which hampered air travel in the North Atlantic for a short period.

¹⁸ Method of relieving a unit, in which incoming and outgoing personnel go on mission together in order to learn the area and local population.

MK: It went pretty well. I was on the ADVON¹⁹ team that went over just so I could get ForcePRO transition taken care of well. And, well, you know the left seat/right seat thing didn't really happen very well. My counterpart from the unit we were replacing, I met up with him for like a day. Went through his routine for the day, and then that was pretty much it. His unit basically pulled him, like "all right you're good".

So, it was, I kind of got thrust into it pretty quickly. But like I said, it's basic stuff like you know; ECP²⁰ security, and it was just — pretty standard stuff. I did have to redesign the entire ECP for the FOB we were on because they had it pretty much in a straight line coming in. Which was just garbage, so we ended up making it an S[erpentine] curve adding in automatic barriers and what not. So, it ended up a lot better pretty quickly.

TL: And where were you at in Afghanistan.

MK: This was in east Paktika Province, it was in Orgun-E We were at FOB Orgun-E.

TL: Tell me about the deployment itself. How, what was like a typical day, how did everything work out for the unit?

MK: I mean, to start out with we were — where we were at Orgun wasn't very, we had a lot of — each company or even platoons sometimes were broken up into different COPs around the area, and FOBs around the area. They were running missions back and forth from Orgun-E and, so you know, there was a lot of interaction in there. Every chance I had a chance to jump out on a mission I did because I was, sick of sitting on the FOB pretty quickly. That was pretty much for about the first half of the deployment, like, you know, I'd be on the FOB making sure the guys I had scheduled to be places were at them. And that was pretty much it to start with. I'd jump on any convoy that I could get on for at least a day as soon as I had a chance and then when

I went on mid-tour leave, when I came back, right before I left I used my CSM²¹'s open door policy and was like "Look, this isn't helping my development as an NCO²² right now. I really need to get to a line unit, at least take over as a team leader somewhere so I can get that experience." You know, so he set that up as soon as I came back from mid-tour I linked up with a line company and actually got to be a part of going out on missions like legitimately so. Yeah.

TL: Did you intend on making a career of it, was this just a short term "see what happens"?

MK: That was, my intentions after my initial enlistment I did re-enlist and I did plan on being a lifer. But, other things happen. Fate had other plans, I got injured a little bit and ended up not being able to remain in the Infantry. And once that was taken off the table there was no way I was going to re-class²³. I didn't, that wasn't what I foresaw when I joined. I wanted to be an Infantryman, so you know. As soon as that all came up I basically was like "All right I'm just going to finish out this tour and then go home".

¹⁹ Advanced Echelon. Small part of unit which deploys early to initiate transition.

²⁰ Entry Control Point

²¹ Command Sergeant Major

²² Non-Commissioned Officer

²³ Forced reassignment to a different Military Occupational Specialty

TL: When you came home from mid-tour, were you married at the time?

MK: Yes, I was married when I returned from the deployment overall and for about another couple years after that. Ended up separating early 2012 about a year after I got back from Afghanistan so.

TL: You're remarried now, or?

MK: No, Taking my time with that.

TL: How, for mid-tour at least, how was everything with that relationship wise, family wise?

MK: Mid-tour was great. I had a great time. Just got home, got to spend time with a ton of different people that I hadn't seen in a while. I didn't, while, even while I was stateside I didn't make it up to Massachusetts all that often. So it was really great. I got to see all my siblings, my son, and my wife at the time. All her family, my family, it was a good time.

TL: During leave, did you feel a bit of anxiety knowing you had to go back?

MK: Yeah, a little bit. I tried to ignore it for the most part and then just the, pretty much the night before I was heading back I didn't sleep. My ex-wife and I, we got a hotel room and she passed out at like ten or eleven at night and I was just up all night. I ended up going for a walk for a while. And ended up actually running into my former brother in law at, it was a like a Chile's half a mile from the hotel. And I walked in there, and he came in with a bunch of his friends. I walked in, I was just gonna have a beer and just hang out for a little while, watch some TV or something. But he came in so I ended up chatting with him for a bit, but, yeah just stayed up the whole night before. Just thinking about stuff, you know?

TL: While you deployed, how was communications with back home? Did you have regular opportunities? Internet?

MK: Yeah, it was pretty good. Initially, I was at battalion level FOBs, so it was pretty good to start with. The second half of the deployment it ended up getting a little more spotty. We actually had, we went from east Paktika, RC-East²⁴ to RC-South²⁵. It's the longest GAC²⁶ in the history of the war in Afghanistan. We drove from FOB Salerno down to Kandahar Airfield, and then stopped there for a few days, got a little more training, then pushed out from there to FOB Ramrod actually. Great name.

We were part of the crew that had, the "Horn of Panjwayi"²⁷ hadn't been occupied since a year into the Afghan war because people there just got slaughtered. We were the guys who ended up taking it back over, so they literally, we had that, my battalion drove from RCE to RCS and then went into the Horn of Panjwayi and spent about 60 days outside the wire, straight. On the Horn of Panjwayi, just occupying these towns basically.

²⁴ Regional Command East

²⁵ Regional Command South

²⁶ Ground Assault Convoy

²⁷ Considered to be the birthplace of the Taliban

It was pretty cool, so we didn't have a lot of communication while we were out there. For the most part it was good, while we were on the larger FOBs it was pretty easy to get ahold of people but otherwise, obviously outside the wire you don't ever like. But, we had like two months straight where we were out of contact with everyone.

TL: As far as your unit's mission in Afghanistan, how keyed into it were you? Were you aware at battalion and brigade level what was going on, or was it more of a focus just at platoon level?

MK: When I was at Orgun, and I was at the battalion level, I was pretty well tuned into everything. But once I split out it was platoon. While I was there I knew what was going on, I knew about missions before a lot of people did, just because I was part of the briefings every day that put out a lot of that info.

But once I moved out it was pretty much down to platoon level, and we were given broad mission parameters and it was up to us to figure out how exactly we were going to do them a lot of the time. So we were a major part of it that way, but as far as the overall picture of everything we weren't really hugely keyed in once I was split off to a line unit.

TL: In Afghanistan did you have a lot of issues with the Afghani police turning, being infiltrated? Did you see any of that?

MK: No.

TL: How was your working relationship with the Afghanis?

MK: We worked with the ANA²⁸ a lot, when we actually went down to RC-South one of the things we did while we were at KAF²⁹ was train up a bunch of them. They ended up coming out with us when we took over Panjwai. But, the biggest issue we had with them was a lot of them were just idiots. They were not well trained, they were not disciplined, and there was a lot of times we had to worry more about them shooting you, accidentally, like friendly fire, not them turning.

But for instance there was one point where guys in my platoon, there was an attack really quick. It was just maybe a lone shooter, maybe two, that they never ended up seeing. But, so they were on high alert later that night and we would run patrols out at night through the grape fields and stuff. We had a couple just taking shots at us for a minute before they realized that we were the good guys. It was like, "usually the Taliban doesn't have the type of gear we're wearing guys, come on." But that's just how undisciplined they were. They even got radio contact prior to us, to my guys moving out saying "hey we're on our way, shift fire"

TL: Why do you think they were so undisciplined.

MK: They're military is like, fledgling still. You know what I mean? They're babies. They haven't had a chance to instill the type of discipline that our military has over the last couple of hundred years. So, you got to take that with a grain of salt. Yeah they're kind of screw-ups, in a

²⁸ Afghan National Army

²⁹ Kandahar Air Field

lot of ways, but they also haven't had a chance to build up the tradition of excellence that we have. I do think that's probably part, a huge part of it.

TL: Makes sense. Now, as far as the civilian populace, how much interaction did you have on a regular basis? What was your take on them? How did you interact with them?

MK: We had a lot of LNs³⁰ working on the FOB with us so we had a little interaction with that. And then when we were on Panjwai, a lot of it was deserted but they rolled out once we were coming in. They were pretty much gone. But, there was a few little enclaves of people where they were still around and the ones we did interact with were awesome.

There was one, a local leader, that he invited, my squad was doing a patrol and later in the day he invited us all to come in and have lunch with him and his guys. Just, this big thing of rice, with all kinds of fixins in it. It was pretty cool, just sitting there chatting with them through our 'terps³¹. It was just, they're good people for the most part, just society has not developed that far.

TL: Fair enough. So why do you think the Taliban has been able to resurge there over and over again?

MK: I think a lot of it is just the, a lot of the people are just disenfranchised. Just, their government has been traditionally super corrupt when there is a government. And it, so it's either they have these corrupt assholes running things and just screwing everyone over or they have the Taliban coming in and, don't get me wrong I am not a Taliban sympathizer, but they actually ran that country better than when there was solid government in place.

Well, you can't really call it solid, but traditional type of government in place, just because they actually had the means and resources to keep stuff the way they wanted it. And while I don't agree with the way they actually were running things, it was done in a better manner than what the government that they have built up, has been able to do.

TL: So in your eyes, what do you think we did right in Afghanistan, and what do you think we did wrong, if anything?

MK: I think a lot of the aid we've given them while over there like digging wells, building schools, stuff like that, that's been good. Giving them jobs, giving them, trying to kick start an economy for them. That's been done well. I don't think, like I said, their government. The government that we helped put in place — no. It's just crap.

I don't really know that there was a really good way to go about it though. Because I don't think they're really ready for, like, a fully democratic government there. So, I think, I don't really know. I don't know what could have been done to stabilize that place. It's not a very, it's not a place that really lends itself to being stabilized that well. There would have to be years and years and years more of work done there before I feel like it could be a real stable place.

³⁰ Local Nationals

³¹ Interpreters

TL: Transitioning, when you came back did you notice anything, I guess different about yourself?

MK: Oh yeah. I know it's hard to tell now, but I was just super angry about a lot of things for a lot of time. Never used to really be a drinker, but that started up pretty hard when I got back. And I used to be a real patient dude, and that's gone. I have no patience for stupid anymore. I used to be real nurturing and bring people along, get them up to speed, and now I'm just like "I hate you." So, working on it though. Trying to better myself a little bit.

TL: What was your family's feedback?

MK: They all think I'm way different since, and I mean I have to agree with them because I can recognize it, so. I'm divorced now so obviously something went different.

TL: Did you feel like there's anything that could have been done differently while you were in that may have made it a little bit different?

MK: I think, towards the end of my time in they were working towards it, they were moving more towards it, just checking into the mental welfare of everyone coming home or anyone even still stateside. They've been making great strides towards it, I mean I've been out for a few years now so I don't know for sure what it's been like since I've been out, but I noticed towards the end of my time in that they were making great strides towards just checking into the mental welfare of everybody and you know making sure that the transition back was going better than say, the Vietnam War when people were coming back without any help that way. So I know they've been doing great things towards that.

At the same time though, I've been, I feel like some of that has been a little too much in some areas. Like handholding and stuff with dudes that have no right to be. I mean, you can't judge people based on their mental issues or emotional issues, but there are guys that have no real reason to be mentally or emotionally shattered when they get back. Like, someone trips and falls at JRTC and is just like "I have the PTSD³² now." There's way too much of that, and I feel like there is a lot of handholding there.

But, obviously that whole number that you see a lot, 22 a day³³, clearly there is some something wrong and something broken that needs to be addressed. And I feel like they are making great strides towards it but, definitely could be more and needs to be more. And, I know the, one of the organizations I belong to, the IAVA³⁴, they're working on new legislation that'll help take care of veterans coming home with mental issues or emotional issues. A lot more than the current policies that are in place. So hopefully that gets better.

TL: Now, as far as your transition into school, how did that go for you?

³² Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

³³ U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, Mental Health Services Suicide Prevention Program. *Suicide Date Report, 2012*. By Janet Kemp and Robert Bossarte. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2013. [<http://www.va.gov/opa/docs/suicide-data-report-2012-final.pdf>]

³⁴ Iraq Afghanistan Veterans of America

MK: It's a work in progress. Definitely not used to it, not used to doing it. Been out of high-school for 13 years, so 14 years when I came to Salem State, and that first semester was definitely a little rough for me. This semester has been a little better, but rough in other, for other reasons. I just had a baby, so. Well I didn't, clearly I'm still pregnant, but no. The six week old now, which right in the middle of the semester, so that's caused a little bit of backlog in work and stuff like that.

But, I feel like I'm getting there. I know it's been definitely there's been a lot of great programs and professors in place here that are doing great things, helping us transition and there's been a lot of really good help basically. Available to me to help me get what I need to get done, done.

(laughter as Dr. Darien, off camera, reminds MK that he owes a paper.)

So yeah, that first semester was pretty bad. I'm still working on catching up with everything and hopefully as I move forward I can get everything done on time and to the best of my abilities but, yeah it's much like the programs in the military for mental health that too is a work in progress.

TL: So you had mention how you had been injured, so I'm assuming you have to deal with the VA³⁵? How has that experience been?

MK: Honestly? I feel like I've just been blessed or something. I've had such a good experience with the VA and I feel awful talking to people about it because, like my brother for instance he's had a hell of a time with them and I got my paperwork processed, I turned it all in at Ft. Campbell before I even got out, like two and a half months before my ETS³⁶ and they just start processing it the day I ETS. Yeah, I turned it in and it got processed, it took about 14 months to get fully processed but, I got 100% [disability] right off the bat.

So that's been going great, and I haven't really had issues with my GI Bill, with that everything has gone pretty well. I go to the VA Hospital in Bedford, and they've been awesome. I have a great time, not a great time, but a great experience every time I've gone. They take really good care of me and definitely have no real complaints about it. And I know that sucks for everyone else pretty much, that it's been so easy for me. But, you know, take what you can get. So yeah, I've had a great experience with the VA, pretty much.

TL: So the Army, DOD³⁷ in general, they've been making a lot of changes lately. Have you been keeping up with that?

MK: A little bit, yeah.

TL: So for example, women in combat arms³⁸, what's your take?

MK: My take one that — so basically it's my belief that anyone can do that job as long as they're physically qualified for it, and mentally and emotionally. So if they can handle it, then more power to 'em. I think there's a huge risk though of lowering the standards to enable people to be

³⁵ Department of Veteran's Affairs

³⁶ End Term of Service

³⁷ Department of Defense

³⁸ DOD restriction on women in combat arms rolls was lifted in January of 2016

able to do it. So, for instance, in the Army there's always been different standards to pass the physical fitness test, and people want women in combat arms for equality's sake and everything. My big contention with that, and I welcome them to it, I've served with people from all walks, I would not, if I was still in I would not mind serving with women in combat roles as long as they were up to the same standards that the males had. So, the biggest risk there obviously is, like I said, lowering those standards and I feel like anyone arguing for equality's sake to have women in combat roles there needs to be a couple of things done first to be able to make that legit.

If you feel like women need full equality in the military, then they need to be a part of the Selective Service Registration just like males are. I know when I turned 18 I had to register with the Selective Service. I think women need to be a part of that because if there needs to be another draft eventually, then if they want to be in combat roles as well then that's what the draft is for: to build up the combat roles. So I feel like that should happen. And, just standards need to be equal across the board, and not lower than they were before. I feel like they need to be the same if not more stringent than they were. Because I noticed a lot of stuff slacking off before I even got out when this wasn't even an issue.

So, I think the standards need to be the exact same, and I feel like they need to be kept stringent, and the biggest thing you need to do for a combat role is to weed out the people who aren't physically or mentally able to do it. So as long as the standards re the same and that Selective Service Registration happens, then I'm all for it. If not, then there still wouldn't be equality. So, if you say you're fighting for equality, then you need to be accountable for the same things that men are accountable for in those roles. And that's really the only way to make it truly equal.

TL: So, going back a little bit. You had mentioned when you got back you used alcohol a lot to deal with it. Big thing you saw with a lot of guys?

MK: Yeah.

TL: Why do you think it was?

MK: It's a good form of escapism, and it's a legal form of escapism when you're still in the military. So anyone who's responsible enough not to piss hot³⁹ on a urinalysis, that's what you turn to. Although some guys just end up going the entire other way and running 20 miles a day, and lifting weights all day, but that just wasn't me. It happens a lot, obviously, traditionally, throughout history of the military has been known as drinkers. It's like, even back of the Vikings, the Viking hall celebrations, you've got your mead and you've got your feast. It's traditionally a thing that gets associated with the military and it's pretty accurate.

TL: I'm assuming that you've kinda weaned off to a point? Is there anything that drove you to that, or did you recognize it as a problem on your own?

MK: I knew it was getting to be an issue, and I've got kids. I wanna make sure that I'm there for them and not dead of cirrhosis or something prior to them being adults.

³⁹ Test positive for illegal substances

TL: So in your experience, with the guys that you served with, since getting out do you stay in contact a lot?

MK: I do. Actually last month, or two months ago now I was best man in a friend of mine's wedding. I had to go down to El Paso because he's stationed down there⁴⁰ and he's still in. I was in his wedding, and I'm actually driving to Pennsylvania to visit another buddy of mine from another unit for his birthday. It's a surprise though, so he has no idea. His wife hit me up and was like "You need to come up for his birthday" so yeah, I stay in touch with a lot of them.

Some of the best friendships I've made in my life are those guys. I know that they would do more for me, and I would do more for them than 99% of the people that I've come into contact with in my life. It's just, it's like the complete opposite of most relationships these days. Relationships you make in the military are, it's almost more intense than family. Just because of the crap you have to go through together. It's like forged metal basically, you need that fire to forge an even stronger steel. Well, that's what those relationships in the military are. They're forged through trials, tribulations, and adversity and so they're some of the best relationships I've had in my life.

TL: Do you, with everything going on right now with Iraq, Syria, ISIL⁴¹ what's your take? Do you think we should be involved? Do you think that it's a regional issue?

MK: To be honest, it's probably a combination of the two. A lot of it is regional issues, but I do feel like there's a certain point where you've got to draw the line. Back to Germany and Hitler, and all that stuff. The appeasement and just looking the other way, that happened for way too long. So depending on what goes on there, I can't remember the town but the town just got retaken in Syria and they found a mass grave with women and children all in it. And that was like a week and a half ago maybe.

So stuff like that needs to be prevented, and I feel like that's something that a nation with the power that we have needs to step in for. But, as far as infighting and one faction against another, if it's just regular old fighting and war, and not killing of innocents, then I feel like they need to just work their shit out. But, if stuff like genocide and mass killings and stuff like that is going on then yeah I'm totally okay with being the watchdog.

TL: Do you think our role in the region is going to continue? Or that it should continue if that ends up being taken care of?

MK: I really don't see a way out at this point. Honestly, I feel like our initial foray into the Middle-East, this time around, not Desert Storm but the War on Terror. It did a lot of good, but at the same time it did a lot of destabilization and I really don't see a way out of there and keeping the peace and keeping stuff from spilling over elsewhere with us pulling out. If we pulled out of there completely and didn't have a hand in anything over there I'd just, I feel like everything would just fall apart way too quickly than now just because of how destabilized the region is.

⁴⁰ Fort Bliss, Texas

⁴¹ Islamic State in the Levant

TL: If you children, down the road, decided they wanted to join?

MK: Slap the shit out of them.

TL: Mind explaining why?

MK: I just, I mean honestly I will support whatever my kids want to do. I'd probably be a little upset and I'd push them more towards the Air Force so they get some good skills out of it. Because pretty much I'm set up to be a cop or a security guard after what I did. So, I would definitely push them more towards something that would give them a lot more technical skill that's translatable to the real world afterwards.

But I would definitely sit down with them and have a talk about what they're getting themselves into and try to help them see the light. But yeah, no I clearly I have nothing against the military but I want, like every parent wants, better for their children than they got. So, I would hope that my children are geniuses and have scholarships to top tier colleges instead.

TL: Do you feel like the military prepared enough for life outside of it, or?

MK: Yeah. I mean, I'm really good at once I set my mind to something, getting it done. Because of a lot of what we had to do. Good at that, good under pressure which is huge. And yeah, I feel like a lot of the things you go through like from basic training through being deployed clearly they're not fully translatable to civilian life in the United States, but I feel like once again that's like the trials and tribulations that set you up for things. So, like if you can make it through that stuff you can do whatever, you can deal with the first world problems over here if you make it through a deployment.

Yeah, I think it did an okay job of it. I mean, obviously like we were talking about earlier with the mental and emotional health, like there is issues there. Clearly, like I said before, the 22 a day thing, that's a big deal. But me, as an individual, yeah I think I'm pretty good for civilian life. But I'm totally all about helping out, helping push that growth in the mental healthcare for veterans because that's a big thing.

TL: Do you feel like college has helped you much in personal growth?

MK: Yeah, I mean, a big part of that's just me making myself buckle down and finally start doing a good job here. But, in a lot of ways, last semester I had a professor, Julie Batten, she recognized a talent in me that I had never seen, that I had never noticed before or known it, brought it up with me before for writing and she actually helped basically by some of her actions get me published. So, it's a huge, huge personal growth thing there. And now, I realize I have a lot more things that I can look into for stuff I can do. Just, so there's writing, and I've been exploring other creative venues for me as well, like photography and stuff like that.

There's been a lot of personal growth in that area, and, but it has caused a couple of problems because now I have no idea what I want to do when I grow up. So, I've got like four different things pulling me in different directions now so I really have to make a decision some time. But luckily, I'm still young and can make those decisions as I need to.

TL: So what are you looking at, career wise?

MK: My major here is business administration, I'm planning on concentrating on marketing and entrepreneurship. I definitely want to run my own business someday, but I feel like I should probably get a job in the corporate world for a little while just so I get the inner workings of a business a little better and then who knows from there. I'll probably get my Master's before I do any of that too. I'd like to write, like I enjoy that so, but I mean it's not always going to pay the bills unless I become a best-selling author so I'm gonna work in the business world for a while, maybe start my own consulting company, and go from there. Write on my free time.

TL: So besides writing, is there anything else that you've found relaxing, enjoyable?

MK: Cooking. Just started cooking and I'm really good at it I guess.

TL: Does everyone agree with you, or is that your own opinion?

MK: No, everyone. Yeah, I get rave reviews. I cooked a dinner the other day lamb chops, first time ever trying them, and cooked them for 6 people and they were all like freaked out about it. That's right ladies, I'm a catch. Anyways.

TL: Words out of his mouth. Do you, like local food, do you find yourself wanting any of it or wanting to cook it? Like Afghani dishes?

MK: Not really.

TL: I know with Iraq that's a big thing with a lot of people, with kebabs and falafels.

MK: No, I love that type of food I just, I don't know. It's just not, I like the food I just haven't thought about cooking any of it. Maybe just the bread, that's about it. That flat bread is pretty bomb. But other than that, not really. I mean, if I want good kebabs I'll go get them from the food truck that's around the corner from my place. They do awesome kebabs.

TL: So anything in particular, any stories, any thoughts about your service that you want to talk about?

MK: Not really, I mean, I'm just, I'm definitely glad I did it. I know it's done some great things for me, both maturity wise and helping me out. I mean, school is covered, which is a huge deal. And because I'm disabled, my children get free school now, so that's huge to me. That's something I didn't have so, like it was when I first found that out I almost lost it. It's such a big deal to me, so one of the happiest moments of my life was finding that out. Seriously, my parents couldn't help with school at all so finding out that my kids were covered was like, one of the biggest moments of my life. I lost it for a little while, I wept openly, whatever. Don't judge me, it's fine. Anyone who can't get emotional once in a while is not a human being. But yeah, no it's just yeah. I've been set up really well, so I'm just excited to see what I do with all of it someday.

TL: No pressure?

MK: No. I always have my VA [disability] check to fall back on if I end up homeless.

TL: Fair enough. I can't think of much else at this point, I'm sure there is, I'm sure it will come to me the moment we turn the camera off, but —

MK: Think we're good?

TL: One final question, what do you think of Dr. Darien's class. Be completely honest.

MK: Is the camera off?

TL: This won't affect you, as far as your final.

MK: No, I'm actually enjoying it. I like history, and the fact that we're doing pretty much all of its covering, not military history but history having to do with the military is a huge thing for me. It's keeping me interested which is cool.

TL: Have you learned anything else about yourself through history, or about your service, kind of put things into context, or no?

MK: Not a lot. I mean—no. Mostly just—I don't know. I did learn that I really enjoy listening to the anecdotes that Robert McNamara comes up with. That documentary is awesome.

TL: *Fog of War*?

MK: Yeah. But yeah.

TL: All right. I think we'll call it at that. Thank you very much for coming. It's been a pleasure.