

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

**Romero, Jorge**

U.S. Army, 11B/C Rank E-4

*Interviewer:*

Interview conducted by Ms. Caroline Schumacher, Salem State College, on 11/15/2007

*Summary of transcript:*

Jorge Romero was born in Guatemala and raised in Revere, Massachusetts. He joined the Army in 2002 as an infantryman, was trained at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii, and was part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment deployment to Afghanistan in 2004 and 2005. His interview describes the lack of choices he had after high school and how the military opened up new opportunities. Other topics include the difficult task of Afghanistan reconstruction, stereotypes of veterans, and adjustment to civilian life.

Jorge Romero

Narrator

Caroline Schumacher

Salem State College

Interviewer

November 15, 2007

at Salem State College

Salem, Massachusetts

Caroline Schumacher: Hi, it's November 15<sup>th</sup> 2007, and I am interviewing Jorge Romero, and I am Caroline Schumacher. So, first of all, what made you decide to volunteer for this interview?

Jorge Romero: Well, it was about—say about sophomore to junior year in high school, and I really didn't have any plans. Didn't know what I wanted to do, and there was a job fair at my high school. The army was there, so I looked at a couple of jobs—saw what I could be interested in. I wanted to be a linguist. So I looked on there, did a couple of language drills with the guys there, just messing around, then I decided, "Hey, maybe I'll give it a shot." So I went down to the recruiting station and went through some of the linguist stuff. And there was a former ranger who was there, and he told me to watch a video that he had of the U.S. Rangers, and I figured, "Hey, this looks like a good thing to do." So instead of being a linguist, I signed up to be a Ranger.

CS: Do you still think you'd make that decision after serving in the army?

JR: Absolutely, every choice I've made I would do the exact same thing.

CS: That's good. So, you served in Afghanistan, right?

JR: Yes.

CS: Has that affected the way you view American politics at all?

JR: Not really, because when you're over there, nothing else really just—nothing matters, just what you're doing at that time, getting through the day, getting through a couple of weeks, you know, like a countdown of going back home. But most importantly, it's about survival, getting back home, getting, you know, through that day.

CS: So has it affected the way you look at the Iraq war now?

JR: Yeah, a lot of it. When I look at the Iraq war, and some of the stuff that's going on, like CNN and news programs, it definitely has changed how I feel.

CS: In recent news, some war veterans have been arrested because they were protesting in an anti-war demonstration. What's your opinion on this?

JR: Well, my opinion on that is pretty much that if you're going to protest about it and stuff, what you did there and when you went there and stuff were orders given to you, so you really have no choice on that. What you do afterwards is your own accord once you're out of the army.

CS: Do you have an opinion on the anti-war protesters in general?

JR: Not really, they do what they want. It's an opinion, but my opinion on that is—I wouldn't protest. I mean sometimes you need war to get things accomplished, so—

CS: Do you think that the current Iraq war will get things accomplished?

JR: In a way, yes, it will get something accomplished. It will help Iraq develop itself into somewhat of a democracy, and you know, help out the villagers, help out the people that got hurt during the Iraq war, the Operation Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom. Oh yeah, all of that.

CS: So in this upcoming presidential race of 2008, one of the biggest issues is withdrawing the troops. Do you pay a lot of attention to this issue when you decide which candidate you're going to vote for?

JR: Withdrawing the troops—I personally don't think it's a good idea. I think that we need to have a security force there, or quite a number of troops there, in order to maintain control because Iraq can't be by itself.

CS: All right, what was the hardest part to returning to civilian life after serving in the military?

JR: The hardest part would be—sometimes I had nightmares and stuff, and I didn't like loud noises or things like that. I mean, me and a couple friends were joking one time because we were walking through the street and a ladder fell down, and it sounded like a gun shot. So I ducked and rolled, and everybody started laughing, and it's just getting—you're so used to doing one thing, like being over there, being alert, like very alert, not getting much sleep and stuff. That little things like that you don't notice. You just do it out of it—you know, reaction, instinct and stuff from being over there.

CS: So, what advice would you give to someone who's about to be deployed to Afghanistan?

JR: I would tell them to stay focused, be mentally prepared to go to where they're going to go. Physically—be in the best shape you can because that place will eat you up if you're not in good physical shape—because there's a lot of running, a lot of road marching, a lot of large click (*unintelligible*) movements. Things that they're probably not used to. You should be in the best physical shape possible.

CS: Do you think it's important for soldiers to understand the politics of the country they're about to fight in?

JR: Not necessarily because even your own views or however you look at politics or anything like that—it's not what you think as a person; army is a team. So whatever orders they give you is what you're going to carry out. Regardless of what you think, regardless of what the sergeant or any of the captains or anything thinks, an order's an order. You've got to follow orders.

CS: What do you think is the biggest misconception about the army?

JR: That they're all jarheads, and they don't think, they just—they're robots. No, a lot of people have a lot of good views, a lot of good ideas. There's a lot of good people in the military, smart people that their actions change a lot of the stuff that's going on over there. So one person can make a difference over there even though I said everything's a team, but the people leading them can make choices at certain situations that can lead to good things.

CS: A lot of people seem to say that recruiting officers use certain types of propaganda when trying to recruit soldiers. Do you think this is correct?

JR: They use a lot of things like that that I've heard of and stuff. They may or may not. I can't really say about that subject.

CS: All right, do you think the media correctly portrays the current Iraq war?

JR: I think there's too much focus on the Iraq war, not enough focus on the war in Afghanistan. And I think there should be more focus on Afghanistan, too, because if you ask somebody, like when I was coming back they would be like, "Oh, where were you at?" And I was like, "Oh, I was in Afghanistan." And they were like, "Oh, nothing's going on over there." You know, just because CNN doesn't cover it, it doesn't mean that it's not happening. I mean, I lost a lot of friends over there, and I'm pretty sure they think something's going on over there.

CS: Is CNN your main choice of watching the news?

JR: I usually watch CNN or go online.

CS: All right, so how do you think CNN compares to covering the war as opposed to like Fox News or other news stations?

JR: Well, I think that the other news stations just cover some like main points and some little things, you know. CNN covers everything in general, everything that's going on in the world, the war, everything. So that's why I like CNN.

CS: So what did spend most of your time doing in Afghanistan?

JR: We did a lot of missions, a lot of missions with—with the voting, with the presidential election there, a lot of helping the villagers out, and rebuilding Afghanistan and a lot of that stuff.

CS: Did the civilians seem to have a positive attitude towards the U.S. military there?

JR: At first, not really, but after a while they started getting used to us and noticing that we helped them. We give them money, and, you know, help them with their economy, and try to keep everybody, you know, safe—away from the Taliban. So after a while they looked at us and were like, “Hey, these guys are making a difference,” as opposed to “I don't like America” when we first landed over there.

CS: Do you think that the Taliban is as big a threat over there as it is in Iraq or Iran?

JR: No, I think Taliban is an Afghanistan force. I mean they started in Kandahar. They're all over Afghanistan: Kabul, Kandahar, and all those places. I mean they're a large force in Afghanistan, and now that they're branching out. They may become bigger than they actually are.

CS: So why do you think most of the media's attention is on Iraq instead of Afghanistan?

JR: I think it's because that's the subject that most people talk about is Iraq. They want to know what Iraq's doing; what's going on over there. And it was the first one to be attacked, you know, Desert Storm and stuff, and when Saddam had weapons of mass destruction—so we all know how that went.

CS: [Laughs] Do you think the action in Afghanistan would make for a good way for troops to fight in Iraq?

JR: Yeah, I think the things you learn in Afghanistan and in Iraq; they're two different places. So I mean going to either one, going to Iraq, going to Afghanistan, you know, they would give you lessons to use in other places; and you'll see that the culture is changed a little different in each one of the places, and it's a good experience to go to either one of them. And if you're lucky to go two, I mean it is dangerous, but after you get out, you learn so much more than what you thought.

CS: Do you think the current oil crisis plays a big part of the current Iraq war?

JR: Personally I think that is a big thing. I think that's why, you know, some of these orders get carried out to go protect the oil fields and stuff like that. So money— money always plays a big role in everything. So I think, yeah, it is oil driven.

CS: So do you have any future plans regarding the military at all?

JR: As of the moment, not really, but I mean if I get my degree and everything, get out of college and stuff, I maybe might look at being a lieutenant or something. Make a change in the military because I think if you're going to be an officer, you should have at least served as enlisted before they put you in charge of a bunch of enlisted people.

CS: Are there a lot of officers who haven't been enlisted?

JR: Yes, there's a lot that are fresh out of college. Some of the actions they don't do— they don't really think about it too much because they haven't been on the other side. But there's some officers that have been on both sides, and they know how the army functions better. They make better decisions, and they're just better built.

CS: All right, with all this modern weapon technology like nuclear weapons and stuff, how do you think this is going to affect future warfare?

JR: Future warfare—I mean technology changes everyday. I mean there's ways we can all look from around walls without actually going around peeking our heads out. I mean technology, it changes all the time, it changes how wars are fought. You know, maybe someday we're not even going to be there, and it will be like robots or something, you know. But technology plays a big role, it's whoever's got the most money to invest in technology is going to be the person that's in the lead.

CS: Do you think war would benefit from having less soldiers and having more technology in it?

JR: Yes, I think so because it would be putting less American lives at risk, and it would be like just using robots, planes and stuff like that. I think it would be a better choice.

CS: Now when you're going in, when you're about to fight, does civilians— the death of civilians, play a role at all on how you— on how you plan your combats?

JR: When I was over there, personally, I didn't hear about any civilian deaths or anything. But if there's a death within our platoon, or battalion or something like that, that does play a big role. It changes everybody's mental attitude, so not as an aggression move, but think more clearly, be more alert type thing.

CS: What surprised you most when you went to Afghanistan?

JR: What surprised me most was-

CS: If anything. [Laughs]

JR: There's a lot of things surprising over there, but what surprised me most is how the people felt towards us. I didn't expect it to be that negative, and another thing was I didn't expect it to be that hot.

CS: [Laughs]

JR: When I landed there, it was about 115 degrees, and I've never experienced heat like that before. It felt kind of like a hairdryer being put on you, so it was quite an experience.

CS: Uh-huh, so do you think that the army should prepare people for the different changes in climate at all?

JR: I think so. Before I left, I was stationed in Hawaii, so it was just like sunny beaches and stuff. But they did send us to different areas, Louisiana, the Big Island and stuff, but most of them were cold areas, so we weren't really used to the heat and the dirt and the dust that was in Afghanistan. I mean the dirt and the dust gets everywhere, in your weapons, in grenade launchers and everything, and causes weapons to jam, pistols to jam. I mean it plays a big effect, and we were not ready for that, so we had to get into the habit of cleaning our weapons everyday in order for them to be functional. But what I did hear is that the army is preparing people heat-wise and stuff. There's a place in California out in the desert that is almost identical to Afghanistan and Iraq, and a lot of people are rotating in and out of that place.

CS: So, in general, do you think America has the correct view on the military action in the Middle East? Because there's a lot of dissent out there, and Bush's popular ratings are plummeting, like, as we speak. So do you think America has the correct view on the military being in the Middle East?

JR: Not really. I mean there's a lot of mixed views, a lot of different ideas from people, a lot of the people don't really know what's going on over there or aren't quite clear. I guess the only way you know of exactly what point to take is if you were really there. So I think, in order for somebody to make a clear idea, or a clear view from their perspective, is to maybe spend a few weeks over there, see how it kind of works over there. And then say, well my views on that, you know, after spending a few weeks over there—

CS: So the media censors parts of the current war. For instance, they don't show the dead bodies or dead caskets— the caskets of dead soldiers. Do you agree with this?

JR: Sometimes I think they're doing the right thing because over there, I mean, if you hear about dead soldiers and stuff, it's going to bring your morale down, anytime you hear about that stuff, or any ambushes or anything like that. It definitely plays a big part on soldiers' morale, and that's the most important thing over there because you're nowhere near family. You're nowhere near, you know, TV or anything that can put you in a good mood. All it is, I mean, is combat, combat, guard, combat, so anything that'll raise morale I think is a very good thing. Anything that's going to lower it like deaths or anything—I agree with them, they shouldn't show it, but sometimes, you know, they've got to show it.

CS: So is the current level of dissent, and like all the protesting and stuff, is that do you think lowering the morale of soldiers?

JR: Absolutely, I think it is lowering the morale. I mean former soldiers having strikes and stuff; I don't think that's a good idea to be showing the soldiers that are, you know, out in Afghanistan and Iraq.

CS: So a popular slogan with the anti-war protestors is support the troops not the war. What's your view on this?

JR: I mean it's always about supporting the troops; they're the ones who run things over there, you know. They're the ones carrying out the orders. So I mean definitely all the focus has to be put on the soldiers not the general war that's going on, you know.

CS: So what do you think about withdrawing the troops within the next four years? I think is Bush's plan...

JR: I think, personally I think, you know, after four years we can take a look and see what's going on, if there's been any drastic changes in Iraq or anything like that, and then we can make an action from that, but I think that soldiers should stay there for longer than four years—probably over ten and stuff to keep the force there to control.

CS: All right, so you were born in Guatemala. Has this affected the way you—has this affected why you went into the military at all?

JR: No, not at all. When I was in probably elementary school, I pretty much wanted to go to the army. I always wanted to be a soldier. I mean as a child growing up and you see G.I. Joe, you're like, "Hey, I want to be that guy!"

CS: [Laughs]

JR: You know, so that really hasn't changed anything. It's just where I was from. I consider myself American. I am a citizen of the United States, so I would fight for the country.

CS: So did the army live up to your expectations?

JR: Yeah, I could say that, yeah. It's been a hard road, though, I mean the army is not easy. Some people say, "Oh, it'll be easy; basic is easy." Nothing's easy. I mean, if you're not used to it, it's going to be difficult. But, yeah, it was a long difficult road, and I would do it again if somebody asked me to.

CS: What do you think is the biggest challenge about the army?

JR: The biggest challenge, I think, is being mentally used to being in the army, used to taking orders, used to having things set a certain way. I mean everything's laid out for you. You have to follow it. Your rooms have to be clean. Your shirts have to be folded a certain way. So

people telling you what to do, when to eat and stuff, you just got to get used to it, and after a while you kind of just forget about it and you live that way. And it's comfortable, you don't really have to worry about anything, bills, or nothing like that because the army always pays you on time, you know. It's just easy. You've just got to follow orders.

CS: Do you think all that discipline is necessary for the army?

JR: I think so. Without discipline it would be people doing whatever they want, and that's not a good idea cause some people just don't know what they want to do. So I think people being in charge and stuff, laying out certain areas of the army, is a good idea.

CS: So has being in the army affected the way you think about voting in the future?

JR: Not really. I just go for whoever I like better, their ideas, and what's actually going to make a change. So it hasn't changed much from—

CS: So has it changed at all the way you view George Bush?

JR: I can't really comment on that, so—

CS: [Laughs] All right, so—I've seen pictures of those backpacks you have to carry around in the army. Was that hard to get used to?

JR: Yeah, that's probably one of the hardest things to get used to because when you're in basic training, you carry around about thirty pounds. Once you get to your unit you carry about sixty pounds. Then sometimes you might carry eighty, or maybe even ninety, but in wartime you're carrying your bulletproof vest, your helmet, your weapon, magazines full of ammo, radio, batteries and stuff; so they don't take that into effect. So you're carrying about ninety on your back plus whatever water, food, and stuff, so I'd say about one hundred and ten plus your helmet, plus your bulletproof vest. So you're probably weighing in at one hundred fifty-one, hundred sixty, and it is—you're strained, tired, and everything from the first time you take a step. So it takes a while to get used to, and some people develop back problems and stuff, but the army prepares you before you leave to when you're there, preparing you to carry things like that, carry out certain missions.

CS: Did carrying weapons around all the time take time getting used to?

JR: Not really. You actually kind of feel like you lost something when you come back home [Laughs].

CS: [Laughs]

JR: Because you always have a weapon, you always have a pistol, you always have something with you, a weapon. They say it's never supposed to leave an arm's reach, so I mean when you get back you kind of have your hands like this (Reaching for a gun motion), or reaching for your

slung, and you remember, “Hey, you’re wearing civilian clothes,” so it kind of feels like you’re missing something. After a while you get used to it.

CS: So did you develop any interest in weapons after being in the military?

JR: Not really, because you had to do a lot of maintenance on them, so I began to dislike them a bit. So I mean I would like to have an M-4 like the one I had out there, or an M-14 like the one I had out there, but just for display purposes. It would be nice.

CS: So do you—I think that’s it; I’ve asked all my questions. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your army experiences?

JR: I think the army is a great experience; it teaches a lot of discipline. It definitely makes you look at life after the army in a completely different way. It gives you values. It gives you morals. I mean they teach you to do things in a certain manner that later on in life— it helps you a large amount.

CS: So do you think that sending kids to boot camp is a good way to give them good discipline?

JR: Personally, I think everybody should go to boot camp.

CS: [Laughs]

JR: But that’s just my idea because boot camp makes you look at things in a different way. Like when you’re at boot camp, it’s not what you want to do, you know. They teach you discipline. They teach you to be on time. That seems to be a thing that many people who haven’t been in the military are almost never on time.

CS: [Laughs]

JR: But once you’ve been in the military, you know, you’re always on time. You always got to do what you got to do, responsibilities and stuff. So I think everyone should go to boot camp. I mean it’s a great experience. I liked it. I mean it was tough, but it taught me a lot of things, and got me on the right road to being a good soldier.

CS: What was the hardest part of boot camp for you?

JR: The hardest part—I would say what they call smoke sessions. They just wake you up at a random time at night, or just walk into the bay area where everybody is— they just start making you— making you do exercises until you can’t feel your arms and legs [Laughs]. So maybe the lack of sleep.

CS: Do you think that the lack of sleep ever affected the way you fought in Afghanistan at all?

JR: Oh, definitely, definitely, a large part of mental affect on me. When I was in Afghanistan, we were getting attacked like almost every night and mortared and stuff, so, I mean, you woke

up in the morning and you did a mission, you ate maybe, and had guard, and guard again, and then at night you'd probably sleep for one or two hours. But you'd probably get attacked so you were up for an extra couple of hours, then you had to go back and do guard, and start the next day, so you're pretty exhausted. I think I maybe got four hours of sleep each night, maybe, so that, sometimes you get so tired that you don't really want to stand up anymore, and you kind of just sit somewhere for a bit. So I mean lack of sleep is a big thing.

CS: Do you think the style of combat is the same in Iraq as it is in Afghanistan?

JR: Yes, I think so, absolutely, because the Taliban or whoever the terrorists are, they don't wear uniforms, so you never know who they really are, and they attack from far away, or they just mortar from far away. They usually set up a shell with a timer on it, and they just take off, and then we just get bombed from who knows where. Or they put anti-tank mines into the roads and on our convoys and stuff, so you really can't see who the enemy is sometimes. So that makes it difficult, and I think that's the same in Afghanistan and Iraq.

CS: Did you get special training for that at all?

JR: Yes, we did get—for landmines, improvised explosive devices, or Taliban with no uniforms, and how to react to indirect fire. So, yes, we did get a lot of training before we left. I mean they train you a lot in three months to four months prior to you leaving. They make sure you're mentally ready, medically ready, physically ready. They test everything before you leave, so they make sure you're in the best shape to go. If you fail anyone of those, of course, you don't go.

CS: Is there any certain way that you can tell where those attacks might be?

JR: We used to have a system set up where we can track where it's coming from, but sometimes they come from weird directions, so we really can't tell. And when we do get to that point that we do find out where it was shot from, there's no one there. There's just wires and stuff, so—

CS: Do you think their style of fighting is going to start a new trend on how we fight in wars in general?

JR: Not necessarily because it's very sloppy, and they're not trained very well. They're just kind of villagers that were mad at something, and the Taliban recruited them and said, "Hey, fight for us." They said, "Okay", so I think that's what it is.

CS: All right, so this whole thing with Saddam Hussein, do you think that it was great that we took him out of his leadership role even though he didn't really have weapons of mass destruction or Taliban ties or anything?

JR: I think it is a good idea. I mean he killed a lot of innocent people by testing his chemical weapons and stuff, and who knows what else he did. I mean, personally, I think he was a little evil, but I mean he was smart, too. A lot of people don't mention that. They just say, "Oh,

Saddam's evil, blah, blah, blah." But he was a smart guy; he had a lot of weird views on things, but, yeah, it was a smart thing to take him out.

CS: Um-hm, and what do you think about how the media seems to have given up the spotlight on Osama Bin Laden?

JR: I think Osama Bin Laden should have a lot more focus on it, because that guy is very smart, knows how to lead troops, and is very smart at mind manipulation for people over there. So, I mean, he can have pretty much anybody fight for him is what it seems. So I think there should be a large focus on him. He's going to be the next person we should worry about.

CS: Do you think we'll be able to catch him in the near future?

JR: Not at all.

CS: [Laughs].

JR: He's just too quick. I think he will be the one that—that doesn't get caught.

CS: So is it ever hard to fight against the Taliban knowing that you're probably not going to be able to find their leader?

JR: Yeah, I mean, well, it's not really about their leader. It's about the general area that you're at. I mean if you can find them, find their weapons cache and stuff, that's pretty much done. You got rid of a whole section right there. So it's just finding out where and when they're going to attack, and where they keep their weapons. That's the hard part. Not really who's their leader or not. Just having the villagers cooperate would make it easier.

CS: So has your view on the Afghanistan civilians changed after you left Afghanistan?

JR: Yeah, it has. I mean when I first got there, there was so much negative energy that they didn't like me, I didn't like them. But as I was leaving I noticed there was, "Hey, some people are good, you know. Some people actually like us here." For a while I thought, "Hey, we're not helping anybody. They still hate us," but after a while, I started seeing more and more people, the children, there's a lot of children without education, a lot of children living in the streets and stuff, so that kind of made me flip over, you know. "Hey, I got to help these people," so it's all about helping over there.

CS: Do you think they'll look to America when they try to reconstruct their country?

JR: Yeah, I think so. I think America should always help people that are in need. I mean other countries—I don't think they should really invade countries, but I think they should always give a hand. I mean the United States is the strongest country there is out there with the most stable economy so—I mean, I think we have more than enough to give to everybody else.

CS: So do you think the Middle East has a democratic future?

JR: I think so. I think it will eventually develop. People will get used to it. People will, you know, take it in, and it will all work itself out hopefully. That's why we're there.

CS: [Laughs] That's good. Well, thank you for interviewing with us.

JR: It's been my pleasure.