

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

Babstock, John

U.S. Navy, Hydraulic Mechanic

Interviewer:

Interview conducted by Mary Raker, Salem State University, on 11/25/2019

Summary of transcript:

John Babstock of Waltham, MA joined the Navy in 1984 as a Hydraulic Mechanic on Aircraft Carriers and Small Gun Boats. He attended bootcamp in Great Lakes Illinois where he trained to the psychedelic music of Prince. He attended A school in Millington, Tennessee to learn how to be a Hydraulic Mechanic. After he left A school he was stationed in Jacksonville Florida, where he became a father, and a leader. He had several deployments including ones on the USS America in 1989, to the Persian Gulf 2001, and Kuwait 2007-08, to name a few. Over his 25-year enlistment he had numerous adventures, and lessons to teach as an administrator, and a father. In the following transcript John Bostock tells us all about his life as a boot, all the way up till he was a Senior Chief E-8 upon his retirement in 2009. He also discusses being a father, as well as a full-time college student alongside his youngest daughter.

John Babstock

Narrator

Mary Raker

Salem State University

Interviewer

November 25th, 2019

at Salem State University

Salem, Massachusetts

Mary Raker: Hello, today's date is November 25th, 2019. My name is Mary Raker and I'm joined today by Navy veteran John Babstock. As part of the Salem State Veteran's Oral History Project. How are you today?

John Babstock: Good, yourself?

MR: I'm good. Thank you for asking. I'm happy that you could make it.

JB: Glad to be here.

MR: So, I see that you were born and raised in Waltham. Can you tell me a little bit about what your childhood was like there?

JB: Em..., well, I'm a third generation of firefighters so I was part of the firefighter clan, if you want to call it, in Waltham. My grandfather, my two uncles, my father. Em..., typical middle-class upbringing in Waltham, nothing special about it. I grew up listening to my grandfather's World War II stories of when he was in the Navy and traveled the world. So, that's what got me hooked into the Navy.

MR: How would your parents have described you as a child?

JB: Ha! That's a good one. I don't know. That's a good question. Average, I guess?

MR: How so?

JB: I tried to do what I was told. Em...Started working when I was 11. Played sports...just average I guess, nothing special about it.

MR: What was your first job? You started at 11, that's kind of young.

JB: I was landscaper. Cutting grass, picking up leaves, working with dirt, stuff like that.

MR: Yeah?

JB: Working with landscaping companies.

MR: So did you hold a lot of odd jobs going up through like high school?

JB: Well, once I became “legally” eligible to work, I got a job with the Garden Crest apartment complex, where my dad worked. And I did that all the way up until I left for the Navy, when I graduated high school.

MR: So, you went, you went, you left right after high school. But what made you decide to join the military? And what specifically with the Navy?

JB: My grandfather, listening to him. He was proud of his service during the war and stuff like that. He brought me to the USS Massachusetts, the Fall River Museum. It's a good take if you like ships and stuff. So yeah, he brought me there. The first time he brought me there, I was eight years old. And walking up to that big battleship was just like awe inspiring. Listening to him, he was a gunner's mate, so he would show me how to operate the guns. How to maintain them and how to lead a target with planes and the ships going down the river, planes flying over you. He would show me how to shoot down a target or a shoot a...basically, what he did in the war. So, then he would bring me there at least once a year. I just got hooked, I wanted to do some of the things that he did. Go to some of the places that he did. I ended up doing that. Kind of a weird story but he died when I was ... in 1981. So, before I left for the Navy. And when we got my ship, I was on the aircraft carrier.

JB: My ship pulled into Le Havre France. And I found a postcard of a village square, back in World War II. Em... It was black and white and the cars in it were color. I thought that was cool, so I sent it to my grandmother. And this was way back before the internet and being able to talk to people through satellite stuff. And so, you would snail mail, you would write a letter, put it in the ship's mail. And about a month and a half later, you'd get a reply, hopefully. So, about a month and a half later, I get a letter from my grandmother and she told me that my grandfather sent her the exact same postcard but nothing was in color, it was all black and white, from when he was in Le Havre, back in World War II.

MR: That's amazing.

JB: It was the exact same postcard and I'm like, "You've got to be kidding me?"

MR: It runs in the family, right? You have the same taste.

JB: Yeah. I want to just say wow. So that was kind of interesting and kind of spooky at the same time. What are the chances. So, what was the other part of the question?

MR: Um, just when and why you decided to join.

JB: Oh, so since I was eight years old, I was going to join the military. My parents knew that and they were ... my dad wanted me to go to college but I was not a good student. And so, the military was the way I was going to go. So, when I was 17 years old, I enlisted in the Navy. And back then, they had programs called the Delayed Entry Program. And you would sign up the year before you were 18 and you'd get points, credit, whatever you want to call it. The only thing was, I was 17 years old, so I couldn't legally sign the papers. So, they had to get my mother and father to sign the papers. And that was interesting, to say the least. Because my father didn't want me to go to the Navy, but my mother was okay with it. So that was interesting. The only stipulation was that with my mother was that I could not leave for boot camp until she saw me walk down the aisle to get my diploma. So, two days after I got my diploma, I left for boot camp.

MR: Where did you attend boot camp?

JB: Great Lakes.

MR: Great Lakes. That's in Minnesota?

JB: Ah, Michigan.

MR: Michigan, sorry. I knew that, right?

JB: Ah sorry. Illinois. Chicago.

MR: It's one of them, right?

JB: Yeah.

MR: That's good. Did you enjoy bootcamp? Was it difficult?

JB: It wasn't difficult. At that point I was in pretty good shape. I was running, I would do laps around the city every day with a buddy of mine. I actually ... my high school back then had an ROTC program in high school for three years. It was a Marine Corp ROTC program. So, I did that when I went to high school. And boot camp, for me it was a piece of cake. For a few of the people that were in my company, it wasn't. But for me it was a piece of cake. I didn't have a problem. I was in good shape. I knew the drill. It's all mental. It's trying to, you know, boot camp is all about taking the individual out of you and making you a part of the team. Because that's what makes the military succeed, is the teamwork. So, they take the individual, knock it down, build it back up as a team. So, I do the drill. For some people it was tough, but for me it wasn't.

MR: Do you have one memory from boot camp that's stayed with you throughout your career up until now?

JB: Every once in a while I get to ... I stay in touch with some of the guys from boot camp and I don't remember if these couple of things that stand out... huh, well... I'm going to keep it clean... The one thing that stuck with me was the first day I reported, we got assigned to our company. We got our drill instructors. The drill instructors went through everybody's portfolio, service record, to see what the backgrounds were. And my drill instructor saw that I had three years ROTC and that I knew the drill. He knew that I was just going through the motions. So, he brought me into his office and he goes; "All right. You're going to be my go-to person." I was like, "What do you mean by that?" He goes, "If I have an issue, I'm coming to you. And you better handle it." I said, "Oh, all right. Okay, I wasn't expecting that." So, we had three people that tried to commit suicide. Two of them were... not true suicides. One of them was. And so, they have a drill, or they have a program where you don't just automatically get taken away. So, I had to babysit them.

JB: So that was one of my tasks was if we had a problem child in our company, I would get assigned to them, to keep them in line or to babysit them, to make sure they wouldn't ... For these three guys there was only out of the ... like I said, out of the three, only one was a true suicide attempt. The other two were just, I'm done with this, I want to get out of here and they made up stories. So, I'd have to make sure they didn't have their shoelaces on. And I'd have to ... I had to feed them their lunch. Breakfast and lunch and dinner. I had to escort them wherever they needed to go. If they had to go to the bathroom, I had to escort them to the bathroom. And it was just humiliating for them. And I felt sorry for the one guy that actually did have issues. But the other two, yeah, I knew they were just trying to get the hell out of there. One of them got a dear John letter and that's the killer of everybody... It was fun. Our drill instructor, one of our drill instructors, he was a big Prince fan.

JB: And it was 1984, so his big purple came out and he loved that album. And it was the 1980s, so the boombox was the big thing back then. I don't know if you know what those are? So, we knew if we screwed up, when we screwed up. Because he would come out with that boombox and he'd sit it right in front of the bay. And we had an open squad bay, just like in the movies. And as soon as we saw that coming out, we were like, "Aww shit, we're in trouble." And one of the times, we called him Mashed, Dean Mashed. We had just finished waxing, stripping and waxing the floor. And it looked pretty good, at least I thought it did. There was at that time, there was I think 78 of us in the company. We started with 90 something. By that time, we were down to 78, somewhere around there. He brought that thing up, put it on the deck and I was like... "oh no." Lined us all up in front of our racks and mashed us for about two to three hours. And so, there were 78 stains on the floor. And he's looking at where he'd mashed us and we're all sweating, and you could see the wax just bubbling off wherever we were laying down on the deck.

JB: So, they're, "All right. You know the drill. This place looks like crap." Putting it a nice ways. "Do it again." Strip and wax. That was on a Sunday. So yeah, that was fun. It was funny. But at the time it wasn't.

MR: I worked for a janitorial group for two summers doing stripping and waxing. I know exactly what you're talking about. It's the worst.

JB: Yeah. So that was ... There's some other stories but they're not too clean. So, I'll leave it at that.

MR: Where'd you head after boot camp?

JB: After boot camp, I was ... When you enlist, you have to take an ASVAB test. And basically, it's like an SAT. And what it's for is to figure out for the military ... All right, this person's good in science. Or this person's good with their hands and mechanical. And based on your scores, they give you a whole slew of jobs that you're qualified for. So, I aced my science stuff, part of the test. So, they wanted me to be a corpsman. And I want to work on the flight deck. Be working on airplanes. I want to work on the flight deck, that's where I want to go. So, I became an aircraft mechanic. So, after boot camp, you go to your A school, to learn your job. So, I went to Millington, Tennessee, for A school. That's where I learned how to be a hydraulic mechanic.

MR: Mm hmm. You enjoyed that?

JB: Hmm?

MR: Do you still enjoy that? Throughout your career?

JB: Yeah, I did that for 20 years. I worked on A-7s, F-18s and C-130s. I did that from '84 until 2004, when did I transfer? 2003, sorry. 2003. That was a good job. I loved working the flight deck. The flight deck was exciting, dangerous, if you think about it. But it was probably, besides working on my gun crew, on my gun boat, that was probably the best time of my career, was working the flight deck. A lot of good memories.

MR: How long were you there before you had your first deployment?

JB: So, after you finish A school, you go to your specialty school. And so, since I was going to F-18s, I was sent to Lemoore, California. Don't ever go there, there's nothing there to see. So, I spent six months there, learning how to work on F-18s. And then once you finish that school. That's when you get assigned to your squadron. And my squadron was in Jacksonville, Florida. VFA-106. And so that was a RAG outfit. I wanted to work on F-18s on the flight deck, but I wanted to go to sea right away. But they sent me to a RAG outfit, which is a readiness act group. They train pilots and people to work on F-18s, on the ship. So, for three years, that's what I did. I worked on F-18s. I worked at Fillmore Calif, I mean, ah, I worked at Jacksonville, Florida and we trained pilots and people who work on the F-18s. So, there was rotation for the pilots then, that learned how to fly off of the ship. So, we'd go to the ship for like a week. And then they'd go on a bombing exercise. We'd have to go to Fallon, Nevada for three weeks. I didn't actually get to my first ship until I re-enlisted back in 1987. That's when I got assigned to the USS America.

MR: Where did that go?

JB: We were an East Coast sailor, not like your Dad. So, our area of the world was the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. So, have a lot of time in the Med. Up in the North Atlantic, where my grandfather used to sail. They used to do the Murmansk Run. Of convoys, he worked on the freighters and tankers as the armed forces, he was an armed guard. He's protecting the ships. So, did a lot of time with that, where he did. And then, we're in the Med. Went through the Suez Canal, which was interesting. And then into the Indian Ocean. Back then, carriers weren't supposed to patrol inside the Persian Gulf. They didn't think it was feasible enough for a carrier to be up in there. So, we just went up in the mouth, say off the coast of Iran. In 1989, they hung Lieutenant Colonel Higgins. It was with a marine who was stationed in Lebanon. And so, we were in Singapore on a five-day port call in Singapore. And our third day there, it was my first time off the ship in two months. And so of course, the third day there, my first time off the ship in two months, they got emergency called back to the ship and had to come to the coast of Iran.

JB: we stayed there for two months, waiting to bomb Iran when the orders came. But it didn't come. So, we didn't have to bomb Iran.

MR: Before you headed out, did previous sailors tell you what to expect? Or did you have a really good grasp on this is what I'm going to expect, once I get out onto the sea?

JB: Well, back then, I don't know if they still do it but back then, the Navy had a program where every new sailor coming to a new command had to watch this video. And it was titled, The First 72 Hours. And the Navy was trying to curb bad influences on these sailors coming to the commands. And so, they started this what they call, what the call now is the Mentor Program. So, every new guy or new sailor coming to a command gets teamed with somebody and they show them around, and they show them what to expect and stuff like that. So, when I transferred to the VFA-106 in '85, my first ship was the USS America. And I remember the first time walking up on that thing and that was just huge. It wasn't the biggest carrier but it was big; the biggest ship I ever saw. And so, they had a ... If you're going to work the flight deck, you have to go through a flight deck tour before you're allowed to work on it. So, the flight deck tour is basically you walk around, somebody shows you where all the fire stations are, fire extinguishers; where the foul line is; here to stand, where not to stand; where the flight ops; what happens when this happens; what do you got to do and stuff like that.

JB: So, it was pretty low key. It does get you ready for when there's actually planes turning on the flight deck. And you've got an airport and you're running around in the middle of the airport. Where to stand, where not to stand. It's kind of, it's very loud. You definitely have to pay attention to what you're doing. You cannot ... you have to respect the flight deck. That's what I always, when I became the instructor, I had to teach people how to ... The first thing I always told them was, you have to respect the flight deck. Because if you don't, it's going to kill you. So, you have to keep your head on a swivel. You have to look around. You have to have eyes in the back of your head. And you have to pay attention to what you're doing. You have to know where you are. And so, when I would bring the new guys up on the flight deck for the first chance they had on the flight deck, with a running flight deck. I always told them, I said, "All right, follow me. If I duck, you duck. If I stand up, you stand up. If I run, you run. If you get lost, stay where you are, I will come find you."

JB: And I said, "If you're scared, you've got to let me- " Because working on the flight deck's a volunteer thing. They can't make you work on the flight deck. So, if you don't want to work on the flight deck anymore, you just tell your supervisor. You say, "I'm done." And they put you down in the anchor bay. So, I would tell

people, "Grab my back loop. Wherever I go, you follow me." And the first 10 hours, the first shift we would get on, whatever the shift was. Second time I'm, "All right, you ready?" They'd say, "Yeah." I'd say, "All right. Go have fun." If they weren't then they'd stay with me until they were comfortable. Some people got comfortable, some people didn't. So.

MR: Did you ever get tired of looking at the ocean?

JB: No. No. I still...I miss the ocean.

MR: Yeah.

JB: I miss it. I'm not a beach person, at least around here. I like the Caribbean. I like the beaches down there. Yeah, I miss the smell of the ocean, watching the ocean. Or at a beach, my girls love going to the beach. I'll stand there and just look at the ocean all day. I don't have a problem doing that. I miss the smell of it. Every once in a while, in Waltham, if the wind's blowing right you can smell the ocean and it's just nice. I miss it.

MR: So, in your whole career, being on boats and stuff, you visited a lot of different countries. Did you learn any new customs from different cultures? Did you develop any language skills, just by visiting these places?

JB: When I was on the ships and with C-130s, we weren't in the countries long enough. Especially the ships were only in port for maybe two or five days at a time. They do have ... One thing I thought was kind of ... What the heck was the name of the movie? Back in the 80s, I don't know if they still show this movie. We were pulling into Turkey. And Turkey is very... culturally rich. And they believe, they have a lot of pride. And they're very strict and they don't put up with a lot of stuff. And so, Americans, we have freedoms that 90% of the world doesn't have. And we expect everybody to ... not bow to us but deal with us. Some countries don't deal with us. So, whenever a ship pulled into Turkey, we had to watch this video, this movie. And it was a movie about a kid back in the 70s. I forget the name of the movie. Anyways, it was a kid, he was running drugs and he got caught in Turkey. And it was his story about being in prison in Turkey. And what they did to Americans in prison in Turkey wasn't pleasant.

JB: So, the whole thing was to scare you not to screw up in Turkey because that's what's going to happen to you, if you end up in a Turkish jail. Because the Navy, the uh, military is not going to help you if you get in trouble in a foreign country. You're stuck. Not like civilians, where you have the government coming to your aid, or trying to come to your aid, to get you out. The military, if you get in trouble overseas, you're done. They write you off. So, it's a different set of rules for us. For the most part, you have Turkey, or Arabic or Muslim countries where

we got classes to learn how to act. Learn a little bit of their culture, to keep you out of trouble. That's about it. When I was with the gunboats and stationed in Kuwait and Iraq, you learned a little bit about how to say, "Hi." How to deal with the women over there. How men are supposed to treat their women. And respect... That was pretty much it. We had our rules and we weren't expected to break them. And if you did, then ...

MR: Was there anywhere specific that you liked, that you docked?

JB: Singapore. Singapore and Chile. Valparaiso, Chile. Beautiful country. Loved it. Singapore again, beautiful. It was a great port visit. They're a country that are very strict. But as long as you stay within the law, it's very clean. Singapore was clean. Just like Japan. Aw, Japan was awesome. I'd love to bring my wife and kids to Japan. Their subway systems are a lot easier to use over there, than they are here. It's just, I don't know why, it's just they're, Japan is, it's just like being in America, except cleaner. Mostly. There are some bad parts of Japan. But for the most part, it's a beautiful country.

MR: So, tell me about your wife Cindy. Did you meet while you were in the service?

JB: I was in the Reserves when we met. She was a ... I actually met her through the fire department because she was a nanny and I was reporting for my first day with the Weston Fire Department. Down in Weston, that's where she grew up and lived. And she took out a telephone pole. And that's how I met my wife. The rest was history, if you want to call it that. But I yelled at her three times because she kept on trying to get something out of the car, which was ... the telephone pole was over and the wires are only about seven feet off the ground. And she kept on trying to get something because she was nannying and she had the kids and she needed stuff out of the car. And three times she tried to go to the car and I was yelling at her. "Stay the ..."

MR: Yeah.

JB: And I should have known then that she wasn't going to listen to me for the rest of my life. But it was kind of funny. And six months later, she nannied for one of the guys on my crew. And he had a Christmas party. I wasn't planning on going. And she asked if I was going to be there. So, his wife told me I was going. And that's how we met... "officially" met. The rest is history.

MR: So, you were in the Reserves when you met her? So, you have a few children. Were they born while you were in the Reserves? Or were they born while you were out at sea?

JB: I had four girls. Samantha my oldest, she's 32. She was with my first wife. And she was born in 1987. When I was with F-18s. She was born in Jacksonville, Florida. And then my three other girls were all born here in Massachusetts when I was with the reserves.

MR: So, them growing up, you were in the Navy. Were there any funny things that ever happened. I know that you were telling me before we started our interview that they kind of stick with?

JB: Well yeah, I'm very ... I don't know if you want to call it a patriarch but I am proud of my service. Proud of the country. And I'm proud of the military and whenever I can expose the public to the military, I do. So, one of the things with my 19 and my 16 and my 13 year old, when they were growing up, if a military airplane flew over, whether it be a jet, prop, helicopter, they make a particular sound and working with aviation for 20 years, you know those sounds. And so, if we were walking in a zoo, Disney World, beaches, wherever. Wherever we are, if I hear a jet or a military aircraft, I say to my girls, "Girls, what's that sound?" And they said, "That's the sound of freedom, Dad." And I'm like, "Yup. Damn right it is. Don't forget it." We still do it. My 19-year-old, she still does it, so she still says it.

MR: What was that like, working as a sailor and then also as a father? Was it difficult to balance?

JB: Well, yeah and no. I have a job to do. They know the job. The hardest part is going away and coming back. My 19-year-old, she was born in 2000. And so, when 9/11 happened, I was in the Reserves. I was with C-130s. And my command up in front of me, my command, it was a Reserve unit but it was active duty. So, we had missions 365 days a year. We had four airplanes and they were all over the world. So, we had missions all around the world. We were the logistics along with other C-130 commands. So, we would send an airplane to ... We always had a plane either in Japan, the Mediterranean, or Bahrain, the Persian Gulf. And so we would send out DETS... and in South America. So, we would send out DETS for a month at a time. And so, they got used to me being away. And then 9/11 happened and my oldest, my 19-year-old, she was just still a baby. So, she didn't grasp that that well, that much. The first time I left her was not easy. It's not easy leaving your kids and your wife. But the hardest part is coming back.

JB: Going through it, it's not so bad. People are like, "Oh you were gone for a year." Three times. Yeah but it's a year. Time does fly by. Not when you're going through it, but it does fly by. The hardest part is always coming back. Because then they lived without you for a year. For whatever, six months to a year. But for me, I was activated three times for a year each. So, for me and for them, coming

back was the hardest part. Because like I said, they lived without me for that long. And the military found out that it caused a lot of stress for a lot of families. And so, they started coming up with a program. The Navy was big on this anyways because when a ship goes out, it goes out for six to nine months out of the year. So, the Navy was already ahead of the curve. So, it wasn't really big of a transition. But for the Army units, Air Force, Coast Guard and Marines...not even...just the Army, Air Force, they weren't usually gone for six to nine months a year. So, for them it was a big transition. Coming back was always the hardest. It was always the hardest. But it, you know, needs to happen.

MR: Were there any traditions you had coming back home? Would you guys go out to dinner the night you came back? Or ...

JB: Well the biggest tradition we had was we always went to Disney World. So, we ... I would come home. And since I was a firefighter too, when the Reservist goes away, they have a certain amount of time period to go back to their employer and say, "This is when I'm coming back." So, with the fire department...when you're activated, when a reservist is activated, the military gets 30 days of leave a year. And you accrue it through the 12 months. So, you have to ... the military at first, the military would buy back that 30 days. They would give you a check. They realized well that's going to cost us too much money. So, they would make us spend that 30 days. You couldn't legally go back to work. But then them finding out, the employer's like, "You're home for a month, why aren't you coming back to work?" They couldn't grasp the idea that we were still on active duty. We weren't released. So, I would go back to my employer and say, "I'm going to Disney World for two weeks." Or a week. We usually went for a week. And so, every year I came back, we'd go to Disney World.

JB: First time, we just had ... And yeah, this is the other thing too. This was it's not exactly fun for my wife. When I got activated the first time, she was pregnant with my middle one...and I was scheduled to go to Bahrain in April of that year, for a month. And then we had a Christmas party and my wife came to the Christmas party and was up in Brunswick, Maine. So, she came up for the weekend. Because she never traveled with me. She always stayed in Waltham, just because we didn't want to dislodge the kids and get them out of their routine. Try to keep the kids in their routine. So, I shipped off to Brunswick, Maine for my first activation. And then so we're at the Christmas party and my CO was talking to her and my CO says, "I didn't know you were pregnant." And she's like yeah. He goes, "All right. Your husband never told me that." She left Sunday to go back home. Brought the kids home. Brought McKenzie home. And Monday morning, my skipper calls me into his office. And he goes, "Chief Babstock." "Yes sir. Reporting as ordered. What do you need?" He goes, "We need to have a talk."

JB: "Well I kind of figured that. So that's why I'm here." And he starts laughing. He goes, "How come you didn't tell me your wife was pregnant?" I said, "I didn't know I had to tell you my wife was pregnant. It's not in the regulations." "Well you're scheduled to leave." "Well yeah, I am." "Well you're not leaving now. You're going to stay home. And you're going to be there when your wife is pregnant, if you're going to have a delivery." I'm like, "Okay, that's in April. And that's when I'm scheduled to leave." "Oh yeah, you're already off the list. Don't worry about it. You're not going anywhere. You'll leave when your child is born, and your wife is settled." "Roger that, sir." He goes, "Why didn't you tell me? What's so different about me and everybody else that has a pregnant wife right now?" "Well you know, that's ... we try to take care of the family." I said, "I appreciate that sir but I'm not special. This is my job. She knows the job. She knows the drill." I didn't leave. And then ah, so, Cindy is very independent, which is one thing I love about her. She can handle her own. And she doesn't ask for help. That's an aggravating point but ...

JB: So, she's driving, she starts having contractions. So instead of calling somebody to, ya know. She just drives herself to the hospital. I'm like, "Okay." And it just so happens we had a chief's meeting. And my cellphone died. So, it was charging in my barracks room. So, I didn't have my cellphone. So, she calls the command, the duty office. Every command has a duty office, which is basically the operator. They take care of anything that comes up. So, she calls the duty office and she explains to them what's happening and stuff like that. So she needs for me to come home. On a good day, it's a three-hour drive. On a good day. This is Brunswick, Maine, in April. It's not a good day. So of course, I didn't have my phone that day. The one and only frickin time I didn't have my phone. So, the duty office calls down to the chief's mess, where I usually work, and I'm not there. And they're like, "Well, where is he?" He's in a chief's meeting, which is out of town, at a bar. So, they call the bar, because everybody from the command goes there usually. So, they call the bar. The bartender answers the phone and he goes;

JB: "Chief Babstock." And we're in a back corner and he starts yelling, "Chief Babstock." And I didn't hear him. One of the guys heard him and they says, "Yeah, he's right over here." He goes, "You need to go back home." "Like what?" "You need to go back home." "Why the hell do I need to go back home?" "Because your wife's in the hospital having contractions right now." "OH. All right. Okay." So, I go back to the barracks, get my phone. Didn't even pack a bag. I made it home in an hour and 45 minutes. Just so happens, being a reservist, I know a lot of state troopers and one of the state troopers' friends that I have was in the command and he was at the meeting. So, he goes, "I'll take care of the state troopers. Just go." So, he called the state trooper, his buddy at the state troopers and said, "There's going to be a red Dodge bombing down the highway. Call New

Hampshire, call Massachusetts, he's on the way to Newton Wellesley hospital."
So, I made it in an hour and 45 minutes.

MR: That's got to be a record, right?

JB: I don't know if it's a record but she ... I get to the hospital and I'm still in uniform. And they're like, "You must be Babstock?" I'm like, "Yup." "She's over here. She wouldn't let us take her out of the room until you got here." Oh yeah that's my fricken wife. So yeah. I didn't miss any of the births of my kids. So, I missed a lot of their first things....but... First steps, ...first laughs. Missed a lot of birthdays but ... yeah.

MR: So, upon your retirement, you were a senior chief?

JB: Yeah.

MR: Can you tell me a little bit about what's that like, kind of rising in ranks throughout your career?

JB: Em... Not everybody has a goal of reaching a certain rank. The highest rank I wanted to go to was E7. Just to be a chief, that's all I wanted to do. There's a roadmap, every service has it. If you want to achieve this, you need to do this. Every rank has it. So, officers, enlisted, so, I knew I had to have each check of the box before I could go to the next rank. It's something I wanted to do and not everybody does it. I did it. And it can be tough. The higher up you get in the rank structure, just like in the corporate world, the more you become an admin type than a worker bee. I always ... I missed turning wrenches. But it's rewarding, for me anyways, it's rewarding to take care of ... As a chief in the military, or as an E7 and above, like I said you become an admin type and you take care of ... depending on what command you're in, your main goal is to make sure your sailors, or your charges, whatever you want to call them, are taken care of. Make sure their family's all set. Make sure they get all their checks done, to get them ready for the next rank.

JB: To get them ready for civilian life because not everybody wants to stay in the military. So, your job is to make sure their transition through their military career runs smooth, to keep them on the straight and narrow. It doesn't always work but that's my main goal. And I enjoyed it. My biggest ... I'm not one for medals. I'm not one for being acknowledged for anything. But it's nice to have, and I still have, some of my old sailors calling me and asking for advice. Or they ask me to be their guest speaker at their retirement, or stuff like that. So, it's nice to know that I had a positive impact. I didn't always have a positive impact with some people. But they knew where I stood, and they knew that I run things a certain way and it's the Navy way and if you don't like it then we will have issues and I

will win. But for the most part, it was rewarding. Even my kids, every time I went away, how do I say this...every time I went away, I never came back the same guy. My wife tells me that a lot... It's just I expected certain things from them. I try not to run my household like the military. I try not to treat my kids as a sailor that I'm trying to... But yeah, they know that I expect things done a certain way and if it's not then we will have issues.

JB: And yeah, it's changed. I've changed evidently. I don't see it for the most part. I do see it sometimes. But I try not to let it affect my family life.

MR: You retired in 2009.

JB: Yes.

MR: What made your decision to separate?

JB: I always had a thing of ... I don't remember where I heard this from but very early on in my career, I had a gunnery sergeant. My F-18, the VFA-106 squadron was a Navy and Marine Corp squadron, combined. So, I worked with a lot of Marines. And one of my Marine supervisors, a gunnery sergeant, he was a GREAT gunnery sergeant. He always told us, "If it's not fun anymore, get the hell out." And so, I kept that going. About 2009, I'm not very politically correct. And when you become a senior chief, or a manager, in the military, it's all about politics. To get what's best for your people, you've got to play politics. And if you don't like playing politics, then it's not a job for you. And that's what I used to try to tell my E6s, trying to be E7s. "Yeah, everybody can be a chief, but you've got to learn how to play the game." And it's a game and it's a political game. And in 2009, my last deployment with the gunboats, I had an IG put on me ... I got people upset with the way I ran things because there's a thing in the Navy, in the military, when you get to a certain rank, E7 in the enlisted ranks. When you get to E7 and E8 and E9, a lot of people expect special treatment.

JB: And I didn't give special treatment. I didn't care what rank you were. E7, E8 or E9, you were expected, if we had to offload 100 pallets of ammunition to get ready for a mission, I expect everybody. And I did it. I cleaned toilets. I cleaned. I set up tents. I offloaded, I cleaned weapons just like everybody else. Because that's how I feel everybody should operate. And we had a rule, . . . when I was with the gunboats, I E22 (?). . . Our last deployment, we had detachments all over the Gulf (PERSIAN GULF). I had them in Iraq, I had guys in the UAE. I had guys in Bahrain. I had guys on a ship. And so, one of them ... The UAE was a great place to go because they didn't have barracks. So, you would spend ... Ever see pictures of the UAE?

MR: No.

- JB: It's very extravagant. The royalty of the UAE is building all these skyscrapers. Huge skyscrapers and they're trying to make it like Bahrain. Bahrain is trying to get tourism to come to the Middle East. Because they know their oil's running out. So, they have to come up with another way of making money. And so, one of the things they're doing is they're trying to make an LA atmosphere, or Monte Carlo, to bring in all this tourism money, to make up for when the oil runs out.
- JB: So, one of the perks of being in the Persian Gulf for nine months is, I would send guys, or people or sailors, to the UAE for three weeks or a month, whatever it was. To give them a break from living in the desert. Because we didn't live on ships, we lived in the desert. And so, to give them a break, I would send them down there for whatever. And one of the things was, if you had a pay issue with your family or your government credit card, if you had an issue, you couldn't go anywhere, until you got that straightened out. And so, a couple of E7s had pay issues but they were expecting to go. They were on the list. And my clerk came to me and said, "Senior chief, we have a couple of pay issues." I said, "alright Who are they?" They said chief so and so and chief so and so. I said, "oh, they're scheduled to go to Bahrain ... the UAE." She goes, "Yup." I says, "All right. Take them off the list." She goes, "What?" I said, "Take them off the list. They have a pay issue. They know the drill. They can't go. I'm not sending them to the UAE if they have pay issues. If they get it done before they leave, great. If they don't, they're not going."
- JB: And she goes, "do I have to tell them that?" I said, "No. You get ahold of them and tell them to report to me." And one of the chiefs, he was married. And he was having issues. And one of my stipulations was, in my number one priority ... Because at that time, I was the enlisted leader of the command. And I had 160 people that I was in charge of...and one of the things I was in charge of was the families back home. And my wife Cindy was the ombudsman ... so she was the go-to person back here and then I was the go-to person over there. So, if a family back here had an issue, my job was to make sure the sailor took care of it. Or if God forbid, something happened here, my job was to bring that sailor in to tell them, there was an issue. So, he wasn't paying his bills and his wife didn't know where the money was or what was happening to the money, so I brought him in and I says, "WTF? Explain." And I didn't like his story. I says, "You're supposed to leave for the UAE in two weeks. If it's not taken care of in two weeks, you're not going."
- JB: "What do you mean, I'm an E7." I said, "I don't give a flying ...you're not going"- You're no better than anybody else in this command. "And well we'll see about this." I says, "Yeah, we will. You'll be sitting here with me in the desert in two weeks and we'll let everybody else leave. Just don't worry about it, that will happen." He never took care of it. So, the other guy, it's the same thing. He forgot

to pay his credit card bill. But he figured he was an E7, "why should I pay it?" I says, "yeah no, that's not going to happen" he didn't go either. So, I ended up firing one of them. I fired both of them actually. They were both shop supervisors. I says, "Yeah, you're done. You're not going to be supervisors anymore." And so, I was stern that way. I expected everybody to do their job and do it right and take care of their sailors. And if you didn't, then I got rid of you. They called the IG office, made a complaint. I got home and I was told I was under investigation for...what was that charge? There was a couple of charges. The biggest thing was being an unfit supervisor.

JB: And so, the investigating officer comes up from DC, to hold the investigation. And she, this was kind of funny. She brings me into the office. She interviews a bunch of other people and stuff like that. She interviews the office, brings me in, sort of like this camera, recorder and stuff like this. And puts me under oath and everything like that. And I says, "I'll know exactly who this is, in two questions." She hits the pause button, "Senior Chief, you can't be doing this." I says, "I have a good idea what's going on." I says, "In two questions, I'll know exactly who you're talking about." So, first question, I knew exactly who she was talking about and I said, "[inaudible]" person's name. And she goes, "You've got to stop doing this." And I says, "this is... All right, you want to know why." I went through the whole process. She goes, "So in other words, you did your job?" I says, "Yeah, pretty much." "Okay, we're done. Thank you for your time." I'm like, "yeah, I'm done...I'm done" That's when I retired because it wasn't fun anymore. I got out. I still had some time to do but... it's not fun anymore, get out.

MR: It's kind of carries all the way back down to boot camp, with the saying, if it's not fun, don't do it anymore. Transitioning back into civilian life, what was that like for you?

JB: Em.. I'll even... em...I'm still in the military, obviously.

MR: Yeah, yeah.

JB: I don't expect the general population to be in the military, but I am still, as far as I'm concerned. I still act like the military. As a matter of fact, I was with a buddy of mine who'd never served and I wear a ball cap because in the military, you have a cover on. So, I still wear a ball cap. And whenever I walk into an establishment, anything with a roof, I always take it off. And as soon as I walk out, I put it back on. I still do it and a buddy of mine Saturday we were going to the Bruins game. We were walking into the Garden, I take my ball cap off. He goes, "You know, you can still wear that in there." "Yeah, I know. I'm not doing it." It's little stuff like that. I walk into stores and you know how Walmart has the greeters? Well Home Depot has the same thing. I walk into the local Home Depot

and I always take my cover off. And every once in a while, one of them will say, "Thank you for your service." Because I took my ball cap off... The hardest part of transitioning to civilian life is getting your mind set for civilian life. And realizing it is a civilian world and you just have to, I don't know, relax, I guess?

JB: It's not hard, it's just ... The hardest part is getting your mental state back to relaxing. And try not to get upset or worked up over little things. Like you said, the military's structured. The civilian world is not structured. Tell you what it is.

MR: So, you started here for your Fire Science degree last January, you were telling me.

JB: Actually, I'm a transfer student from Middlesex.

MR: Okay.

JB: So yeah, I'm going for my bachelor's.

MR: Yeah, going for your bachelor's, what is the degree exactly? Sorry.

JB: Fire and science administration.

MR: Administration? What made you decide to choose that as your path?

JB: In the fire service, it's just like the military is now. Education is key. And if you want to advance, just like in the military, the fire service or police, civil service, something like that, the more education you have, it sets you up for bigger things. Also, depending on the city you work for, in education ... Remember the Quinn Bill? Did you ever hear about that?

MR: No.

JB: State troopers had the ... or the police ... law enforcement part in Massachusetts had this quote, they call it Quinn Bill. So, if you had an associate degree or a bachelor's or a master's, you would get a certain percentage of your base pay at the end of the year, based on your education. So, it's like a pay hike. So, if you get an associate degree in Waltham, you get a 7% pay increase and you get that check at the end of the year. But with the bachelors, and I stopped, I finished Middlesex in 1999. And I had no, because like again ... I'm not a very good student...I don't like school. But the reason why I'm here now is my 19-year-old, that's why I was telling you earlier, is in college and somehow my wife found out about the GI Bill and realized that if you become a full-time college student ... And it's the good thing about the GI Bill is you get BAH, basic housing allowance for the area you're in.

JB: And for Massachusetts, it's 3,075 dollars a month. Because they figure you can't really do a lot if you're a full-time college student, so you're going to need help to pay for ... to live. So, once you've realized, this will help pay for her college... and that's why I'm here.

MR: Do you find, when you come home at the end of the night, do you sit down and do homework with her? Do you kind of bond over the fact that you both are going through that college life?

JB: Yeah, sometimes I'll think ... One of her friends goes here, from high school. And when I first started back in January, it's, "Oh, I saw Francesca, she invited me to a dorm party. I'm going to a dorm party tonight." Or whatever, right after school or whatever like that. And she's like, "yeah, no. You know, that's disgusting." I used to like the fun about that. That was fun. I still do it every once in a while. But I'm like I went to school back in the 80s. Middlesex was in the 90s. I'm sitting here trying to knock out two 10-page papers and I'm working all the time, doing homework. She's going out, and I'm like "what the!". What am I doing wrong? She's, "Ah, you're old." But you're a full-time student, I'm a full-time student. I'm trying to do all this homework and get it done and you're just like, "Yeah, I'll get it done whenever." And I'm like, "That's just not happened." So, she's like, "I don't even know what your grades are." I went, "They're better than yours." Up until this semester.

MR: We all have those semesters.

JB: So, yeah, we can have a little bonding. She'll give me a paper that she wrote, she'll ask me to read it. So yeah, we try to ... When she was going to Westfield, Westfield had the fire science program. I said, "I'm going to transfer to Westfield and go to school with you." And she's, "No you're not." But I'm trying to get her to finish her teaching degree here, but she wants to go back to Westfield. So, I'm not going to school where you go to school. Not happening. It's fun.

MR: So, once you finish your degree here, do you plan to do a master's? Or are you just kind of do like, "I got that bachelor's, that's it."

JB: Yeah, I'm done! I'm retiring from the fire department in August of 2021, I'll be done. And then I go back to working on airplanes. I'm going to go back to school. The one thing about the government and civilian life is, I worked on aircraft for 20 years. But that doesn't mean anything out in the civilian world. I have to get my license, so I have to go back to school. So, I want to get my MP license and start working on airplanes again. I miss working on airplanes.

MR: Yeah.

JB: So, I go back to...it's not east coast Aerotech anymore. There's an aviation school over in Bedford. I'm going to apply for there. It's a 14-month program.

MR: Oh, that's good.

JB: So, I'll get my license. Do that and I'll go hang out at airports and work on airplanes. Actually, it's what I like to do.

MR: So, you got a fast-paced life still ahead of you, even though you've now retired twice.

JB: Yeah, exactly. I also have my captain's license. So, I drive ... up until my parents got sick, I was driving a small ferry in Boston Harbor. So, I'll keep that license. See what happens. It's all about getting the calls.

MR: Well thank you for speaking with me today. I enjoyed our conversation; I've learned a lot.

JB: Thank you.

MR: I hope you got a lot out of it.

JB: Yup. It was fun.

MR: All right, cool.