

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

**Tilkens, Alexander**

U.S. Army, E4

*Interviewer:*

Interview conducted by Jenny Roper, Salem State University, on 4/9/2018

*Summary of transcript:*

Alexander was born on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1991 in Oxnard, California and constantly moved throughout his childhood, eventually ending up in Marblehead, Massachusetts. He joined the military to the surprise of his family who expected him to pursue an academic path. He was an E4 in the U.S. Army and his Military Occupational Specialty was as an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician. Alexander's MOS required him to know how to diffuse bombs, landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), etc. One of his missions included a security detail for President Barack Obama in South Korea which required him to inspect rooms for any possible explosives before the President would enter. Alexander was deployed to Seoul, South Korea in 2015 and describes his experience there as both fun but also tense as relations with North Korea remained strained. Having suffered lung damage during his time in the military, his interview gives insights into the complications experienced by veterans on medical leave and their transition into civilian life. Alexander studies geology and hopes to eventually begin a career in explosives engineering.

Alexander Tilkens

Narrator

Jenny Roper

Salem State University

Interviewer

April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018

at Salem State University

Salem, Massachusetts

Jenny Roper: Hello. Today's date is April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018. My name is Jenny Roper and I will be interviewing US Army veteran Alex Tilkens as part of Salem State University's Veteran Oral History project. So, Alex I am going to start off by asking you about your early life and your family and community and what that was like. So, I saw on the bio form that you filled out that you were born in California so where did you live and attend school?

Alexander Tilkens: I was born in Oxnard, California but my family was living in Ventura which is adjacent to the hospital there. I moved a lot as a child. So born in Oxnard, went to Ventura, moved down to Newport beach, then lived in Costa Mesa which is in Orange County where I went to elementary school, so I think it was like Irvine there was a school around there I went to. For some reason I have a bad memory of that part of my life but in third grade we ended up moving to Malibu, so I went to Malibu High School from third to tenth grade.

JR: So what was the reason for all of your moves?

AT: It was my dad and mom divorced when I was two, so that caused some moves. So we moved back in with my grandparents in Orange County and then, when my mom met her partner Elizabeth, we ended up moving to Malibu eventually because she had a better job and they kind of brought us up into the nicer part of town.

JR: Okay so where does your immediate family live now like your mothers and also your-?

AT: So, my mothers both live in Massachusetts so one of my moms is in Salem like right down the street and my other mom lives in Marblehead right nearby and that's actually where I enlisted out of. And my dad lives back in California, still in Ventura where I was growing up.

JR: Okay so what was the reason for the move to Massachusetts?

AT: Oh. That was someone got a new job, Betsy, or Elizabeth got a new job so we ended up moving to Massachusetts. And it was either Georgia or Massachusetts and at the time I was from California and the south was a scary place and lo and behold I ended up living there for like six years [laughs]. So we moved here moved to Marblehead and went to Marblehead High. But then I ended up moving back to California to finish high school at Buena High School in Ventura. There was a lot of movement because of family issues and divorces, and my mom split up with her partner so we ended up moving back to California, or I did.

JR: That sounds tough. It probably put a lot of stress on you. So, what was your home life like having such a big family I saw from your bio form?

AT: So, those are- I have nine siblings. They're all from marriages. So my mom ended up marrying a guy again who had four kids, and my other mother had two kids with my mom via in vitro, and then my dad married a woman who had three kids so there's just family everywhere and it doesn't make sense. I'm the only blood child of my parents. The other ones are all step siblings. So like none of them are half.

JR: Are you close with any of them?

AT: I'm close with most of them. It is harder to be close to the ones in California, because it is a 3000-mile plane ride but I am still friendly with everyone.

JR: So you have all this family and your parents as well are they what is their impact on your decision in joining the military?

AT: Nobody wanted me to join the army. Like zero. No one in my family was in the military, or has been. I think I have a grandfather who served but I never met him. So I was supposed to go to, like, Harvard or Yale or Stanford to be a doctor or a lawyer because that's what I was kind of raised into. You have to go on community service trips to Costa Rica to build schools to get into college, and you have to do nonprofit work to get into college, and I've thrown all of that away and just joined the military one day and none of the family was happy with it but they understood after the fact like why I did it and what's going on.

JR: Ah, so you made your decision to join on your own. That's good. So, what made you choose the army and what was your thought process going into that?

AT: So when I went to the recruiters it was a pretty bad place I was at, so I was looking to get away and start something new. So I went to the Air Force and they had this "chair force" stigma, so I didn't want to do that because I was trying to get into something adventurous. The Marines have their clichés, like "crayon-eaters", and all that. So I was like, I don't know about the Marines or the Air Force. The Navy swims and I don't like swimming that much, so the Army was the last one there and they have like the Green Berets, they have like- it's the army. Everyone hears about the Army first usually. So I ended up joining the Army and the recruiter at first in California where I was trying to join would get drunk and hammered and call me at like two in the morning and I was like, "Okay this is really bad, you're unprofessional," so he almost pushed me away from joining. But I ended up moving back here to spend some time with my

mom before I left and the recruiters here were awesome, out of Peabody, so I ended up leaving with a good recruiter.

JR: So, are you happy with your decision to join the army or would you have done anything differently?

AT: I would have stayed in school, honestly, and gone to college right after high school, because- the Army was great. I have all the great- I own a house because the Army, but I have a lung injury from the Army. So with chemical exposures and my lungs don't work as well as they should. That's regrettable, but it's happened now so I can't really dwell on that. But I would have gone to school and stayed and I tell all my siblings just finish college and then join as an officer if you're going to join.

JR: Yeah. So I did have a question about that. So you said you experienced lung damage from chemical exposure. Can you tell us a little more about that?

AT: So they can't pinpoint an exact event, but one day I was on a run and I collapsed and I couldn't breathe. So I go to the hospital and they ended up doing a bunch of tests on me and my lung capacity was at 55-60 percent of what it's supposed to be, out of nowhere. I never had asthma. I've never had COPD.

JR: So you had no prior knowledge of the lung damage until you came back?

AT: Yeah. So I used to run like two miles at 11 minutes and 18 seconds. I was, like, quick I could run. One day on the run though, I mean I was getting a little out of shape too, but not to the point where I was going to, like, die. So I collapsed, go to the hospital and they were saying your lungs just aren't absorbing oxygen like they should, and I guess it was just repeated exposure to certain things and they came down to it. They were going to do a biopsy and test it but that would have created more complications so now I am just on a lot of medication to keep me br-[both talking, inaudible]

JR: Still, so it still affects your breathing?

AT: I am on probably ten or so drugs at a time for breathing like every asthma medication, COPD drug you can be on, I'm on.

JR: How would you say that affects your life?

AT: Getting fatter [laughs]. I don't run any more. Hiking and stuff is harder. I get winded easy. Get made fun of, by all the other veterans. [laughs]

JR: Aw, that sounds tough. So has the army intervened in covering any of your medical expenses or are you-

AT: I was actually retired out of the army due to my injury, so they forced me out because I couldn't do my job anymore. So it was like, couldn't wear gas masks or a bomb suit because of the lung issues and the threat it posed. They wouldn't want me to, like fail. They wouldn't want me to fail, but they also wouldn't want me to get other people killed because I couldn't do my job. So, I was put out but it took like a year and a half though. So there was a lot of testing that

they did, and they finally deemed that I was unfit for service and retired me out. But they do cover my health. I paid \$350 a year for health insurance to get covered under Tricare and then I pay my copays. So that worked out.

JR: So, it sounds like it's working out for you. That's good. I am going to back track a little bit and go back to your indoctrination into the military and boot camp. So what was boot camp or basic training like and was it how you expected it to be?

AT: I was terrified of boot camp because I went from being like a privileged kid being brought up with no issues to in the military- and it sucked, to be completely honest. Like you find people that do events, they always look back on, like a marathon, "Oh that was the best thing I ever done" but it actually sucked when you're doing it.

JR: Do you still look back on it- [inaudible]

AT: I look back on it and my brain is trying to tell me, "This was great. That was so much fun" and I was like sprayed with chemicals and woke up every day at four. This is awful. But I lost a lot of weight, I joined the army, I met a lot of great friends. Like people you're in basic with, you'll know them generally for the rest of your life, even if you don't communicate with them closely you'll still keep in touch with like Facebook now. But it was awful. A lot of early mornings and waking up, and crappy food. [laughs]

JR: Sounds like it. So I wanted to ask about what your boot camp experience was like at Fort Jackson in South Carolina and what kind of skills did you acquire in your training there?

AT: Basic training is less about the skills you're learning and it's more to change your mindset. So when you get to basic you're an individual. They shave your head, they give you the same clothes, they put you in a bed that everyone else has, and it's more to break down your individual personality and to rebuild you into someone who follows orders. So it's a lot of they yell at you, they dehumanize you, they- you're part of a unit. Everything is team building and if you disappoint the team, then you get punished for it. So, they try to indoctrinate you into this form of blind following, but it's what you need.

JR: Would you say you prefer to be trained that way in the unit and as a team or would you prefer your individuality?

AT: I am more of an individual so that stuff is kind of hard at times because you can't talk back to people you can't- oh ,if you know a better way of doing something you have to do it how they said so they are kind of stifling out the creativity. But you learn to just adapt to it. You have enough leeway in certain areas and that's where you let your individuality kind of come out. But I'd wear socks that were not to reg [regulation].. Like I'd wear American flag socks or something in my boots in uniform as like my silent rebellion against conformity.

JR: [laughs] That's funny. So, you're critical of the way that they trained you, and you would like to be more of an individual?

AT: I think its necessary. I just- like it's necessary and it's needed, it's just not what I'm into. Like if they did school like that I probably wouldn't do so well. [laughs) But the military, you need everyone to be the same and just listen to their superiors.

JR: Yeah so going into the school aspect of things that you mentioned-

AT: I'm sorry I didn't tell you anything about skills.

JR: Oh, that's okay.

AT: I'm sorry.

JR: Well I'm going to ask; what was your job title like in the military?

AT: I was an explosive ordnance disposal [EOD] technician, so I was in the bomb squad. So basic teaches you basic soldiering like dig a hole, shoot a gun. This is how you do basic soldier stuff. Then you have AIT, which is your Advanced Individual Training. So our first phase was at Fort Lee, Virginia. And that was about three months, and that's just filtering out people who couldn't make it in EOD. Just, it's like a year and a half long school. So you send those people there, probably 80 percent of them fail out. So it's like to get people out who don't listen and people who don't learn quickly. Then we get sent to Eglin, which is our second phase of EOD school, which is a Navy-run school, and that's where like it gets real and you actually learn your skills you need.

JR: So what were your experiences like and your duties in Eglin?

AT: So at Eglin, it was just going to the school house. But we went over everything from, it starts off with ground ordnance, so like grenades, landmines. And then it moves up to bombs and every sort of aircraft weapon you could imagine, and then you go into biological and chemical agents and weapons, nuclear. Like it ends at nuclear and then you're trained in everything that can kill you and it's how to make it not kill you. So they aren't really teaching you the real world applications, they're actually just finding out if you can learn or not. So they give you really hard tasks, they teach you like this is how you diffuse a nuclear bomb if ever needed. It probably won't ever happen, but you'll know how to do it, and you could learn from the instructions they give you next time. But it's like when I was going through it was 92 percent of people were failing out. So like, you go in with like a group of one hundred and like eight of you would finish.

JR: Oh, so you're in the top percentile.

AT: And it's like the number two school behind nuclear submarines or like the linguistic school, so maybe number three.

JR: Do you apply any of those skills to your regular life now?

AT: I do, not as much as I like to because I am not in that world anymore. But it's just like, the general, what is it, being aware. You are constantly scanning and looking at stuff. It did help your decision making, it helps in leadership because it's a life or death situation really, so you have to make decisions that matter quick.

JR: That makes sense. So you were deployed to South Korea in 2015. What was your initial emotion when you found out that you were being deployed?

AT: It was fun. I'm sorry, Korea was actually fun when I went yeah.

JR: Really?

AT: Because it wasn't, say Afghanistan or Iraq, which is where I had hoped to go. It was more of a vacation for a year, while still doing fun stuff. Like we got to go to the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone], and actually go through a landmine field. We got to like a tractor that hit a landmine so we had to go like sweep up to that and get the guy out. And we did D mining. We did, like the rice fields are constantly kicking up land mines from the Korean War. We did a couple VIP missions, like I met Obama there, in Korea.

JR: That's so cool!

AT: Yeah I got to do a security detail for him. But Korea was great, but you never really thought about it as there is another potential war sitting right across the border. Because we would do drills where it would be South Koreans fired off shots and North Koreans fired back, so we'd have to go sit in a, what would you call it, they call it a motor pool, but it is just like a place full of cars. So we'd get in our gear, we'd get our bags, and we get our ammo and we would just wait for a war to start and then it wouldn't so we would go back to drinking and having fun. So like we're in the first world city, best things you can ever imagine and there is a war potentially going to start so you're like enjoying your life while also having to be skeptical.

JR: Yeah you mentioned how a war could start there at any time. Do you think that the American public loses sight of other military ventures outside of the publicized expeditions that we see in the American news?

AT: I think it's coming more to light recently, because if you look at what's happening in Africa, we have group- sorry "groups" [laughs]- we have troops on the ground and they are fighting a war that's, nobody even knows about, and that's been going on for probably ten years or so that we've been there. You have these people all over the world fighting wars that we don't hear about because they're not publicized. So I think people just lose track of it and realize that when you're enlisting and you think you're not in war there is still conflict going on. And I think we're, the whole country is kind of based off conflict though, and it just keeps going, because we've been in a war since, what, 1940s we have had some form of armed conflict.

JR: Seems never ending?

AT: Yeah. It's not bad, it's just part of our military now. They are constantly advising or helping out other countries.

JR: Yeah, the capitalist mind-frame. So, how do you think the South Koreans feel about having US bases on their soil and do you think it is good for the United States to have military bases in other countries such as South Korea?

AT: I think it's good to have, I mean if you are looking at it from a tactical standpoint, it's a foothold in another country that allows us to protect our influence. But when I was in Korea I met people that either loved us or they hated us. The older generations who were there during the Korean War are very thankful and they realize that, "Hey, we would probably not be here right now. We would be probably taken over." They would have been there, they just would have been a different government. Then you have the younger generation that hates us. The first place I was ever told I couldn't eat at a restaurant was in South Korea, and they said because I'm white. Because they knew I was a soldier so I wasn't allowed there. So it's a hit or miss. Most of them are tolerant or like you and then there's the few that don't, because they see us as an occupying force that doesn't need to be there.

JR: Wow, so there is a drastic difference in the generations.

AT: A lot of racism there too from the Koreans. It's a very- it's all Koreans there. So when you're an outsider, you're not Korean.

JR: Right. It's not like the melting pot like America. Would you ever go back there?

AT: I'd go there in a heartbeat. I loved Korea. [laughs]

JR: You did?

AT: Yeah. A lot of great food, people are nice. It's a really pretty city and it's way cleaner than like New York or some similar areas to Seoul. It's like the same place just cleaner and nicer than New York. So I'd go back there in a heartbeat.

JR: Wow, you're convincing me to travel.

AT: You should go.

JR: So, I want to ask you a little bit about your transition back into civilian life once you got out of the military. What was your first day like?

AT: My first day? I was, like, kicking my heels like I won the lottery. I was like super excited to get out. We lived in Columbus, Georgia. That's where I was stationed for my last duty station. And I was going through all the medical stuff so the military really puts you through the ringer when you're getting medically discharged. So I was at the doctors probably seven or eight times a week. And it just gets old. Because they're constantly- like they have to check to make sure the medicines aren't counteracting, I was getting shots constantly for my lung issues, and it turned into this, like, getting paraded around and guinea-pigged on. Because it was different doctors that weren't talking with each other putting me on different medicines. I think the most I was on was like sixteen drugs in a day. I was like, I just feel awful. Like, you guys are killing me. So, I finally got out and I got a real doctor here in Massachusetts I was going to come meet. And it was like I won the lottery and I was ready to get out of there. We actually left the day I got my papers. We already had the car packed and we drove right back up to Massachusetts. So I was like done. Despite loving my time in the service, I was done and I was ready to get out.

JR: Yeah, so you wouldn't go back to serve but you'd go back just to visit?

AT: I would go back to create a- I have a friend there who owns bars and restaurants, so.

JR: Oh, there you go. That's awesome. That's something to look forward to doing. So what kind of support have you received since coming home? I know you just spoke about the medical support. You were happy to have a Massachusetts-

AT: [laughs] I get to breathe! And I have a doctor who's a real doctor. I'd say the support medically has helped, but-

JR: What about your family?

AT: The family is awesome. Like when we first moved back, family let us live with them for a bit before we bought our house and that allowed us to buy a house. So I know some people don't have that luxury because they come, they don't have a strong family support group. So I'm really lucky to have a family that actually helped as much as they did. But it wasn't just that, like the Bedford VA has really tried to up their game. I had someone who I could call whenever to ask questions. His name's Berat and he would- any questions I had, he would answer them. He was the one like reconnecting me to people and the school. I started school like right after I got out. School's been great with services, like Ted over at the Veteran's Center really gets the stuff going and gets your paperwork through quick.

JR: So you applied at Salem State. You've been here for how many years?

AT: 2016? 2017, I started. Beginning of 2017. So it's like the end of my third semester coming up.

JR: Okay.

AT: So I guess a year and a half.

JR: Wow. Well congrats on- [inaudible, both speaking]

AT: Thank you.

JR: So are there any other personal challenges you'd like to share within your transition from military to civilian life?

AT: I'd say the hardest part is finding a community. Because you go from being around people constantly, you have your unit, you have your company, you have your platoon. Any sort of increment of size you have in a group setting. Then you get out and you're just alone. So all your decisions are made and you have people helping you the whole way and all of a sudden you're just dropped off and you're alone trying to figure out the world that you've been disconnected from for the past however many years.

JR: How many years was it for you?

AT: A little over six.

JR: Wow.

AT: So you go from this everything is regimented and mandated to I could just not pay bills and I could just not go to the doctor but you have to, like, become an adult almost a second time when you get out. And I realized that what a lot of people at school struggle with is this newfound freedom, because you actually do whatever you want and they decide to do things that aren't helpful, but it's great, so far. [laughs]

JR: So, your transition was-

AT: The transition has helped because there's so many, what do you call them, support structures for you as a veteran now compared to generations prior.

JR: Yeah. Would you say Salem State has-

AT: Salem State helped. And I'd say just like the SVO[Student Veteran Organization], the VFW[Veterans of Foreign Wars] around here, they all want to help veterans, and like there's a lot of key players in the area too that are helping the transition. Like Rick Bettencourt did my mortgage and he really helped out me getting a home which gave me stability. So it's just finding the right people to support you when you're leaving. It makes it easier.

JR: Yeah so do you find that same connection with any civilian students on campus or more with other veterans on campus?

AT: I'd say it's mostly other veterans and then faculty. Because the veterans obviously you have a similar background so, you know, we all have the same jokes, we all have the stupid comments, and they all wear the stupid backpacks. [laughs] Not this one in particular, [gestures toward backpack], but they stick together more-so and the first-year seminar kind of helps that. But I haven't really clicked with many other students, other than students who want to join the military. So there's a lot of guys in class that will notice you're a veteran and they'll be like, "Oh, I was looking at joining the Army" and you have to tell them what they- you just have to give them an honest opinion of your service. Like you don't want to lie to them and get them to join and then they hate it. You also don't want to say it was awful because then no one would join the military. But the faculty has been great here because there is a lot of veteran friendly faculty members that want you to succeed and, like, they help out.

JR: That's good to hear. Yes, definitely. So I wanted to ask a little bit about your future goals and your expectations in life and so what do you do now for work?

AT: I'm a full-time student. I'd say that's my main job, but I work at Brooks Brothers one or two nights a week because they have an awesome discount. I get to wear suits for 60 percent off so-

JR: Wow fancy.

AT: But other than that it's the school is leading up to my future goals and career, like, aspirations.

JR: So what's your major right now?

AT: My major is now geology. I switched it two weeks ago from criminal justice, and I'm going to get my master's in explosives engineering because that kind of ties back into my last job. So

it's geology, and then I have to move to Missouri to get my master's degree, which I am not excited about, but-

JR: Well you have been hopping around your whole life.

AT: I know. [laughs] Why not, then?

JR: Yeah. So you would want to do something in that career field. So how do you hope the skills that you learned in the military, like how are you going to apply them and how could your MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] apply to your interest in civilian explosives?

AT: The basic skills would be waiting. Because in the military it's- you're constantly having to adapt, and "adapt and overcome" is what they call it. So you're having to be patient, having to just do your tasks on time. It's like, any good adult does these, but the military really hammers those into you. And then career-wise, being in the bomb squad and having prior explosive knowledge will really help me because it all depends on experience already. So I know how explosives work, I know their effects, and that's what they're going to be going over in class, so I am hoping that will help me succeed.

JR: Put that on your resume. [laughs)

AT: I will. [laughs)

JR: There you go. So, I just want to wrap up and ask you one more question. What do you want people to take away most from this interview?

AT: One of the things is veterans, like you were saying, get lumped together and they realize that, like, they think that everyone has the same political mindset, value system, and they realize that veterans, once they get out, I think a lot of people feel lost and that contributes unfortunately to suicide epidemic and just kind of, you took someone who had a life goal and everything was planned and then you throw them out like into the wild essentially, and they don't know what to do with it. And I am just hoping that if veterans can hear this and see that they're not alone. If they need help they can reach out to their old buddies, they can talk to their families, if they don't have a family they can find a new one, and that's what I have been trying to tackle a lot in school is finding people that are kind of straying from the path and like bring them back. And be like, hey if you need a friend we're here for you, just don't take it into your own hands, and I guess that's what I have really been propositioning for lately is. I have been speaking at events about suicide, so I don't want people to just off themselves. It's just a really hard transition for a lot of people.

JR: Yeah you sound like a really supportive person and you are going through it yourself. Definitely.

AT: I know that was kind of jumbled my- what I want from this interview.

JR: No, it makes sense. Definitely. You're letting future veterans know that they're not alone.

AT: Yeah.

JR: Good. Well Alex I wanted to thank you very much for your time today and letting us learn more about the life of a student veteran.

AT: Thank you.

JR: So Alex and I were talking a little bit off-camera and we thought it would be good to continue recording because we had some more information, interesting information, if you wanted me to- if you want to tell me a little bit more about your experience in meeting President Obama.

AT: So, when I first learned that we, the Army is the actual bomb squad for the Secret Service. I didn't know that and it was kind of, like, just an interesting surprise to me. So the mission list goes around and they go to every unit and whoever can fill the positions does. So we got a call and it was like, "Hey we need someone to go on a VIPSA," a Very Important Person Security Activity, or something like that, and it was for President Obama, at the time. And I was, I thought it was a joke at first because I never heard of that and nobody ever talks about it in the career field until you're actually in it. So, I got to go on- my first VIP mission was with President Obama and we were the security detail that checks for ordnance wherever he is going or IEDs. So you're the one actually- you clear a room and he's the last person allowed in it is you and the Secret Service guards that room and I was kind of thinking that's like, I know some of the guys I got through school with and seen some of their antics and stories they have and how they are, and it's almost amazing that they're the ones that are checking the President's rooms for bombs. But they were all really dedicated to the job. I just don't think anyone knows going into EOD that's what happens. That you have these, like, really important missions, like you're driving around in the President's motorcade and scanning for IEDs and stuff you would never have imagined, like, almost like a movie. Like oh he actually has people that search his bed before he lays in it. And I always that was kind of cool.

JR: Yeah you don't think about those details. Are there any other details?

AT: I mean, we've met, I've met President Obama, and Jimmy Carter, and like Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, and other dignitaries, like a bunch, like four-star generals from other countries.

JR: And are these all different VIP missions?

AT: All different VIP missions, and they all get like a similar level of protection. So when you have us doing this we're not thinking about who it's for really, we're just doing our job to the best we can. I would do the same thing even if it was a low-level person versus the President because it's my job to protect someone's life not someone else's. I'm there, I'm the last line of defense before they go into a room and I would want to do that to the best of my ability.

JR: And would you say all your comrades have the same mindset?

AT: Yeah, all of them. Like no one would not do their job on purpose because of a different viewpoint. So even if you hated the person you were protecting, you would still protect them with your life which is, I don't know if that's hard for some people to understand, but we are not

getting into our career field for the safety of it. We are doing it because we have like a desire to protect others.

JR: What sort of training did you have on that? Like putting your life in front of someone else's?

AT: So they call it "finder function". So you're either going to find the hazardous device or you're going to die (laughs), and set it off. So that's a morbid look at it. But you'll have like, say they put it in a cupboard and we pull the cupboard out. If there was something in there and you pulled it out it would go off. So you're effectively putting your life on the line for someone considered important. And if you look at it that way it's really depressing, but we would never focus on that aspect of it. We would never focus on the negativity. It would be like, imagine if I found an IED and saved the President, I'd probably be a hero, and I don't know if that's what the military has put into you or just our personalities, but everyone is looking to, like, prove themselves and do their best job possible. So that would be awful finding a bomb with the President there, but none of the people I know have ever found anything that was like super dangerous. It's still an important job though, just in case that one time they miss something.

JR: A very important job. Like you said, it's the kind of stuff you see in the movies.

AT: Yeah, they're all really nice people though too. Like you know how presidents kind of have this mythic, like they're almost like a god among men because they're the leader of the free world? It's weird meeting them because they're just people. You shake their hand, you say hello, they ask how your day was, you ask how their day was, and then it's over. And it's not this like life-changing experience but it's cool to meet someone who has that much power over the world. And then we're just behind the scenes and no one ever, no one will ever hear about this, but you will see the President daily. You just don't see all the people that go into protecting them, which is like thousands of them.

JR: Yeah I wouldn't have known that unless you mentioned all of that.

AT: They always have good food too, in their hotel suites.

JR: [laughs] Good treatment, yeah.

AT: But other than that, they are just people that are trying to do their best job as well. Like Jimmy Carter still, he has a Sunday service, so when we would do his work, it was just- he has his own dedicated Secret Service team and then we would shuffle through. But he is just trying to do a good job and help people however he can even though he is like 90-something now. He is still out there, serving the public, so-

JR: Are there any other notable stories you would like to share in general or about the VIP missions?

AT: Probably nothing else. It would get me in trouble if I told some of the good stories, but they're always out there (laughs).

JR: (laughs) Okay. I just wanted to thank you again for taking the time to come here today and telling us more about your experience as a veteran and your transition back into civilian life.

