Transcription: Hunter Hayes

Today is August 5, 2009. My name is James Crabtree and I'm interviewing Mr. Hunter Hayes. This interview is being done in person at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, Stephen F. Austin Building, and this interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veteran's Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thanks for taking the time to be with us today. First thing we usually always ask is just tell us and the listeners a little bit about yourself, where you're from, maybe a little bit about your family, that sort of thing.

Hunter Hayes: I'm from Lufkin, Texas. I wasn't born there, but raised pretty much my entire life in and around Lufkin. That's pretty much it.

Did you go to high school in Lufkin?

Hunter Hayes: I went my senior year. I went to a school in Ireland for half of my 10th Grade year and 11th Grade year. My dad and uncle owned some businesses over in Ireland and I was fortunate enough to travel with them and experience school in another country.

When was it that you decided that you wanted to join the military?

Hunter Hayes: I decided to join the military in the summer of 2001. So I was in boot camp when 911 happened. And I always heard, you know, in boot camp they try to mess with you, you know what I mean? And when they came in and told us, I was like oh, they're just messing with us, it's not true. And then about a week later, we have our medical appointments and dental appointments and I saw it on the TV, I was like oh my God, it's real.

It was real, wow.

Hunter Hayes: Yeah. And then the next thing I know, they had people come in there and scared us and telling us we're all gonna die and everything they could do to sharpen us up.

That was at the Great Lakes Naval training facility?

Hunter Hayes: It was.

Tell us a little bit about how you came to pick to join the Navy and how you ultimately became a corpsman.

Hunter Hayes: My ultimate goal was to be a doctor, and the Navy was just, my grandfather was in the Navy during World War II, and it's just an attractive service because there's so many things that you can do in the Navy. You can be on the ground, you can be on a boat, you can be on a sub, you can fly, I mean it's just, it's really the best service.

When you decided to enlist, were you still in high school?

Hunter Hayes: No, I was a year out.

What did your family think? Obviously you had a tradition of service in your family.

Hunter Hayes: Everybody was happy for the most part. There was obviously some, a little bit of pessimism in there. I won't say who.

Tell us how the corpsman part came about. You said you wanted to become a doctor. Did you have to go through any sort of screening ahead of time before you got assigned to that specialty?

Hunter Hayes: Not really. I mean I did so well on the ASBAB. You know, when you do the ASBAB, they kind of lay out some jobs for you, and the ideal thing for me from how I did on the ASBAB was like crypto or new or something like that, but that's not what I wanted to do. The last thing I wanted to do is sit behind some desk, you know what I mean, get me in the dirt.

So you didn't have any issues with patching someone up or dealing with blood and all those things.

Hunter Hayes: Oh, absolutely not, not at all.

I know a lot of folks, that's the last thing they would ever want to do. They would rather be behind the desk than trying to do something like that. So you got to Great Lakes, and how long was your training there?

Hunter Hayes: Boot camp was about 9 weeks, and then my corpsman training was there, the basic corpsman school was at, just right across the street from boot camp, so it's kind of like you never left boot camp. So it was another, I forget how long it was, several months.

At that point you felt like you went through all that training, you think they did a pretty good job of getting you ready for what being a corpsman was going to be like?

Hunter Hayes: I think they did the best they could. I don't think there's anything that can really prepare you for what you have to experience in war, you know, other than firsthand, but I think they did a phenomenal job. And then you know, after corpsman school, you have to go through your FMF training if you're gonna go with the Marines, and that just strengthens you. Not only to have to deal with all the stuff that the Marines have to go through like physically, but you learn how to, the biggest thing in war when you're treating somebody is you got to improvise. You know what I mean, you're not going to have a sterile field. You're not gonna have all this stuff. Duct tape is a lifesaver in a lot of situations.

How did you end up making the decision, and when did you get to make the decision that you wanted to go join the Fleet Marine Force, Greenside?

Hunter Hayes: I took on, when I was in corps school, you have an option of taking sea schools and stuff like that, I chose to do assertive technology and odolaryngology because I wanted to get as much -

What does the second one mean?

Hunter Hayes: Your nose and throat. And the requirement was going through, I wanted to be with the Marines, that was just, what young guy doesn't want to do that? And at the time, they were, most men were going through it there, you kind of had to. And I even think about at two or three years after I became a corps man and stuff like that, they stopped sending women and it was just all men. But that was a stipulation of having a sea school, because when you go to a

hospital, they put you on a platform, because you know, for the most part, corpsmen, there's corpsmen with your units, but they also augment corpsmen in. It's kind of important to have you there.

So you went through the special training to go join up with the Marines. Tell us what it was like. What was the first Marine unit that you were assigned to?

Hunter Hayes: Well, after all my sea school training, I went to Camp Pendleton, and I was at the Naval hospital there, and then while I was there, they sent me to a Naval trauma training center at LA County, and that's really where I got to learn about trauma and LA County Hospital is in East LA. I mean it's like a war zone, gun shot wounds, just significant trauma. I mean if it weren't for that, I mean that really prepared me.

So that's an arrangement that the Navy has with the hospital in Los Angeles?

Hunter Hayes: Mm-hmm.

Would you live there in the hospital, basically?

Hunter Hayes: They have like a little, a barracks outside of it, and it's the USC's medical school, so the Navy, there's Navy physicians that are stationed there and trauma nurses and stuff like that, and they train the Navy doctors as well as civilians. So I mean they're on call, their staff, just like being a civilian doc. Well we go there with, I mean we're in the classroom with the doctors and the nurses as well and we take the same tests, we do everything that they do. We do rounds with 'em, and it's pretty rigorous as far as hours go.

How long did you spend there?

Hunter Hayes: I can't remember how long it was, but it was a pretty good bit.

So you were still in almost like a boot camp type environment there?

Hunter Hayes: Well, it's like an apartment. It's not like barracks, but everybody stays there – the physicians and the nurses, they send us up there and we can obviously, we're free at our will to go home on the weekends or whatever if we're not working.

So that was your first experience then seeing -

Hunter Hayes: The real deal. There's just some things you never forget.

Can you tell us a little bit about the first time you were in ER and they brought in somebody off the street that had been in a wreck or had been shot?

Hunter Hayes: Absolutely. The first time that I ever really got to do anything, it was a Jane Doe. Nobody knew her name, but she was in a car accident. I guess her wallet maybe flew out of the car or something like that, and I wheeled her in, and we got her in the little bay area, and there's doctors everywhere, you know what I mean? They do what's called a clamshell, and they cut her from right up under here, from right under the breast all the way across to rip the chest open, and they shoot adrenaline into it, pump her heart, all that kind of stuff, and I'm bagging her, you know, and they're sitting there doing this.

Basically it helps her breathe?

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, I was breathing for her essentially. I mean she was just, internal injuries were just, I mean she was gonna die, you know what I mean? And then ended up taking her up to the OR. It was exciting, the rush and everything like that. I mean I hate obviously that she passed away, but running through, we're pushing the cart through the halls and blood is going everywhere. It was just insane. And they took her to the OR, but I mean she eventually died. I'll never, 1:52 a.m., you know.

Did you ever find out who she was or anything?

Hunter Hayes: I never did, no. But it was interesting.

I'll bet that's kind of a shocking experience. Even if you think you're ready for it the first time you see something like that, it's got to be surreal.

Hunter Hayes: Absolutely, yeah, you know.

So you were there, and that was LA - ?

Hunter Hayes: LA County.

Ever have anything happen to your car or anything like that?

Hunter Hayes: Surprisingly not, but it was cool because we got to park our cars in like a big gated thing with barbwire around it, because somebody got shot while we were there. There was a Jack In The Box, and they got shot at the Jack In The Box, just right outside the hospital.

That's pretty scary. So you did your time there, then you reported back I guess to Pendleton?

Hunter Hayes: To Pendleton, and then I deployed with, I was with FRSS attached to First Battalion 7 Marines.

And at that point, what did it feel like when you actually joined up with a Marine battalion? Did you feel like you were pretty well prepared?

Hunter Hayes: I did because I got to train with the team that I deployed with at LA County, and that was the key, because you ended up trusting the guys that you were deployed with, and it was an 8-man group, and officers enlisted, but we were so tight. It wasn't like this very strict, because you can't be that way because well, you know, you got to be able to trust your people.

Tell us a little bit about the people that were in that group, kind of where they were from or what their backgrounds were.

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, we had an orthopedic surgeon, he was from Camp Lejeune, he came in, a real good guy, a general trauma surgeon from Pendleton where I was. And then we had a chief, an HM1, and then two nurses because we had to dust off was the one that would fly it from us to wherever they had to go to a hospital or something like that, and they were the flight nurses.

And then another corpsman, and then we had one security guy who was a lance corporal. He's now a cop in Baltimore, a real good guy.

So he was a Marine that was assigned to be with you guys.

Hunter Hayes: He was the driver for the ambulance and yeah, just a stellar dude.

Tell us what it was like. How long were you in the battalion before you deployed. I'm sure you went through all the work-ups and stuff.

Hunter Hayes: Not that long. I mean I'm thinking maybe a month and a half, two months.

What timeframe was this?

Hunter Hayes: This was summer, mid-summer that I got there, maybe around early July.

2002?

Hunter Hayes: No, this was 2004.

July 2004, OK.

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, because I was in training for about two years, maybe a little longer.

So that's a long time in training then.

Hunter Hayes: Oh absolutely.

That's pretty standard though for corpsmen?

Hunter Hayes: No it's not, I mean usually they just go to basic corps school, then they'll go to FMF, and then, but if you do really well you have the opportunity to get more education and stuff like that, so I was fortunate.

That's a long time in training.

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, I mean especially in the military being treated as a trainee. It's kind of like, you know, -

So you went to boot camp in the summer of 2001 before 911 hit, then it hit and you graduate sometime after that, and then you started doing all your training.

Hunter Hayes: Training, mm-hmm.

So tell us a little bit then about the battalion you joined up with and I guess any of your memories you had before you deployed.

Hunter Hayes: The memories before we were in, it sucks because you know, you want to have your free time to go spend with your friends and family and stuff like that, but you can't because you're doing work-ups, like you were saying, you're in the field and at Camp Pendleton, it's

right there off I-5, so you're seeing the cars passing the beach and stuff and you're just like wow, this really sucks, but it's worth it because it was necessary. If we didn't have that training, we probably wouldn't have been as productive as we were.

Did you guys go to 29 Palms at all or Air Base or any of the urban -

Hunter Hayes: We did march, but there was urban train stuff at Pendleton.

We went to the exact same spot there at March in that old housing thing that they had set up, actually pretty good training and then we had also gone up to Old George Air Force Base. I don't know if you guys went up there, but –

Hunter Hayes: I don't even know where that's at.

It's a couple of hours north of Los Angeles and it's just an old, basically abandoned Air Force base with a bunch of mothball big jets out on the runways and stuff, and great training environment, same thing. So you guys did all that urban training. What was your chief and the surgeons, was there any sort of guidance they were giving you guys during that training in addition to what you'd already had?

Hunter Hayes: Absolutely, I mean they were telling us what they expected out of us and teaching us to do things so they wouldn't have to, because in a case where you have 10 guys that are pretty jacked up, you have to be able to do stuff, whether it be gosh, it could be almost anything, chest tubes, innovate, all those things, and those were the key things to teach us to help save somebody's life because that was our job. We were trader pullers, we were lifesavers.

So you finally get on the plane to deploy. I guess you flew out of March.

Hunter Hayes: March.

March Air Base, get over to, did you land in Kuwait first?

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, well we did a little stopover in Germany and we used the phone, and then smoked cigarettes obviously, and then yeah, we went to Kuwait. And that was an interesting deal. We weren't in Kuwait that long. We were on the plane. We got there I want to say like 3:00 in the morning and we left at 5:00. We laid down in our little cots there, I guess was it Victory or something like that? The next thing you know, Ali Al Salem.

Yeah, Ali Al Salem Air Base. It's probably better I think to go quickly over. That's the way our battalion had done it. We got there and didn't spend more than a few hours until we were on the C-130s flying into Iraq at night. I remember on the way home, you probably went through the same, did you go through the same place on the way home?

Hunter Hayes: Mm-hmm.

I remember being there and seeing guys that were there that were going in, and it was just, you almost couldn't look at 'em you're so happy to be finally done and going home, and those guys are kind of in purgatory.

Hunter Hayes: Oh yeah, and you're all salty.

Well that's good then that they didn't have you linger around, because that's dragging it out.

Hunter Hayes: Oh yeah.

So when you guys went into Iraq, where did you land?

Hunter Hayes: We landed in Alisod and we stayed there for about maybe a week before we got to transition over to western El Ambar, but it was an interesting deal because we got out, I remember getting on that tarmac, you know, flying in Kuwait, and it was like 130 degrees. I mean oh my God, and you're in full gear, and I tell you what, there was a couple of women on our C-130 and I needed to use the restroom so bad, and I'm sweating, I'm just dying, and finally there was a lady sitting in front of me, she was an officer, I was like ma'am, I'm really sorry, I'm gonna have to go right here. So I had a water bottle and stood up and I'm ready to go and then one of the Air Force guys was like hey, we got a restroom back here.

Really.

Hunter Hayes: Thank God. I was just dying.

I didn't know they had a head on there either.

Hunter Hayes: I know, I was about to cry, that's how bad it was. But it like a little foot dump thing. It probably just shot out.

So you got to Alisod and you spent a little time there, and then where did the battalion go to once you finally departed Alisod?

Hunter Hayes: Well the battalion hadn't gotten there yet. We were an advanced team. So we hopped on some 52's and flew to Al Khaim, and to meet up with I guess I'm trying to think who, I think it was 37 that were leaving, and that was important for us to get there probably a little sooner because we had to do inventory on all the medical stuff and figure out what kind of casualties because the mechanisms that cause the casualties were pretty important to get your head around because you never know what to look for, especially with these blast injuries. I mean it can rip somebody apart and you never know because it'll be internal and stuff like that. So pretty devastating.

What was it like the first time, did you have a chance to call home to your family and let 'em know you were actually in Iraq? Do you remember that?

Hunter Hayes: I do. It was good. It was in the middle of the night for, that was when most of my calls were in the middle of the night for my parents and stuff like that. And they answered the phone every single time. I mean but the first time I called, everybody was just crying and worried and stuff like that, and it was just a crazy deal.

When did you guys get to Iraq?

Hunter Hayes: I remember it was in August.

August of '04.

Hunter Hayes: Yeah.

You got there right around the same time I did then.

Hunter Hayes: Were you in Alisod that time?

Yeah, we got there in the middle of August of '04 and left in March of '05.

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, that's us, too. We probably crossed paths.

Yeah, might have. So you get to Al Kahn, and I guess the rest of the battalion gets there a couple of weeks later?

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, about a couple of weeks later. But right when we got there, I mean we were taking heavy casualties because I'm sure you know how it works. When everybody first gets there, there's a lot of casualties and then it goes down and at the very end everybody, but it was pretty gnarly.

Would you go out on patrols? Were you assigned to a particular squad or platoon or how did that work?

Hunter Hayes: Not really because there was nobody else that could do my job. There was nobody that had the training that I had in the Naval trauma training center, and my OIC was like, I begged every single time because I wanted to go out with 37 because they had been there and done that stuff and I was like, I was hard charging.

They kept you in the Battalion 8 station then?

Hunter Hayes: Right next to it, yeah, for the most part, and boring, other than having, well we were pretty busy. Because one of my old roommates was at 37 and I didn't know he was there and we didn't run across each other and he was all war hardened and stuff like that and I was just chomping at the bits to go out and pull a trigger, you know.

For the folks that aren't familiar, tell us a little bit about what, there's never really a typical day, but what a normal day would be like in terms of what you and your fellow corpsmen and your OIC would do, how you would organize a day and that sort of thing.

Hunter Hayes: We used to, we still had a PT schedule. Everybody still PT'd pretty rigorously. We'd wake up and muster pretty early, 6:00 or 7:00. Then we'd eat breakfast whether it be A-rats or MRE's until eventually people started sending us packages and stuff like that to where we could have our own food and stuff like that. Because A-rats are pretty terrible. We'd muster and sometimes we'd get a brief, sometime not, and then we would do work. We'd treat patients. If we didn't have anything to do, we'd watch a movie.

And you guys did have a 24/7 watch schedule.

Hunter Hayes: We did.

How would that work? Who would be sleeping in the daytime and that sort of stuff?

Hunter Hayes: We did watch with the officers as well, so and it really wasn't such a bad gig because you kind of had the place to yourself unless during the day it was pretty busy. But we did 24-hour watch, and we could sleep, and we had a radio next to us because the headquarters would call and say hey, we have such and such coming in, or whatever, and it was no big deal. But the watch, I mean everybody kind of, it was right next to the officer's quarters and not that far from ours.

So you were all basically right there anyway.

Hunter Hayes: And it was fine because we really didn't have to wear, I mean it was so hot in the operating room, and especially if you were in there for, you know, just a tent, if you were in there for I don't know, several hours working on somebody, you know, if you can't get a flight in or what not, you know, the Marines don't have any medical for, they don't provide, and if dust off busy. We'd be in our underwear, you know what I mean, like working on people because there was no way that we could -

What was your living conditions like? You said you were at Al-Khaim. Is that pretty much like a FOB that you guys had built?

Hunter Hayes: It was a FOB. We had C-huts, just a wooden box, in between two, it was in a railroad station. It was like in between two cars. I mean it was fine. It wasn't like, the only thing I was ever worried about was if in fact a mortar hit our home, it would be pretty gnarly because all the wood splintering and stuff like that.

You had quite a few rocket mortar attacks?

Hunter Hayes: Oh yeah, we'd have to run into the officer barracks or everything that was considered a bunker.

Sit with some sandbags or something, right?

Hunter Hayes: But that works. It works fine. Just scare the piss out of you.

Did you have much interaction with any of the Iraqi locals where you were?

Hunter Hayes: I did. We had, because we had the Iraq National Guard with us as well, and then we had some Shiite commandos, and plus we treated the Iraqi civilians and we treated the enemy, and plus we had a little detainee area and I would have to go in and treat the detainees. No torture was done at our area.

That's got to be kind of strange because I know Garbitan, I don't think we ever had any detainees that I can remember our corpsmen treating, maybe because they just didn't have 'em, but we had guys that were captured and stuff, but not really in bad shape. Did you ever have any detainees that were really in bad shape?

Hunter Hayes: No, no, nothing that was bad, but you still have to do like health regulation stuff, you know, make sure -

I didn't know if you were trying to patch up a detainee that had been shot.

Hunter Hayes: Oh, we treated those guys, but we'd ship 'em somewhere else.

What was it like dealing with those guys?

Hunter Hayes: You know, we didn't treat 'em any differently as far as they got the same medical care that our soldiers got. A lot of the times it was tough.

How did you guys ensure that they weren't going to attack you?

Hunter Hayes: Oh, they were subdued. So and plus a lot of the times they were so scared, too. I mean they were pretty frightened and there's obviously a language barrier, so we had to have a translator, and a lot of times a lot of things get lost in translation, so they were just freaked out. It was tough to treat those guys knowing that he could've killed one of your friends, you know what I mean? And that was the biggest thing for me is treating people at the hospital and stuff like that was fine during training because you didn't know any of 'em, but getting there and it's your friend, a lot more personal. Imagine having to make the call to cut your friend's legs off or cut his chest open. And he's crying to you or it's just a tough deal.

How did you guys deal with that on an emotional level? Did a lot of guys go to the chaplain, or I'm sure everybody deals with it in their own way, but how did you deal with that? Because it's one thing to be in a combat zone, but it's another to be there and be in a position where you were where you were charged with saving peoples' lives and the stress that comes with that. How did you personally deal with that?

Hunter Hayes: We were such a tight group that we all talked to each other. And there was nothing that I wouldn't say to any of the guys in my group. I remember one day, it was October 17th, and it was like our first suicide bomber, and me and one of the surgeons, Dr. Nelson, we were putting a guy in a cooler because he was killed and he didn't have any legs and it was just, I have never in my life seen a body that was more charred and chewed up than this guy, and here you are holding him, trying to, pulling him off the truck and everything, and it smells like frickin' barbecued chicken. I still today can't eat barbecued chicken because of it, and it was just, I'll never forget that. I remember just walking around going oh my God, what is going on? I mean look at this guy, just freaking out. They just give you a hug and understand that it is tough. And I felt bad for the officers because I mean here they had to be like enforcing rules and being in charge and stuff like that, and they weren't allowed to bitch and moan like we did, and it's tough on you guys. We talked it out and I think we all understand as people in the medical field in the military understand that these are things that we're going to have to live with for the rest of our life. It is something that we accept and we deal with. We suck it up.

Were there any cases that you are particularly proud of in which you guys obviously took the action of saving another Marine's life or that sort of thing?

Hunter Hayes: Oh yeah, we actually, we got accredited for saving 25 Marines, but I mean it's gratifying, you know what I mean, but a lot of the times it's like we saved 'em because we had to amputate something or something like that. It's always tough to say that, to say hey, we had to cut your legs off. And this was in the field, mind you. This wasn't in a hospital. This is in a frickin' tent with a little giggly saw that we would, it's pretty barbaric, but you got to do what you got to do to save life over limb.

How often on average do you think you guys were having a traumatic thing like that where you had to be called in, you had casualties brought in?

Hunter Hayes: All the time.

So it got to a certain point it was every day.

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, we had Operation Phantom Fury right there at the beginning, and I guess it died down a little bit after Ramadan, because it got pretty heated up during, they get all jacked up over there, and it died down for a good bit, you know, when it got cold and you remember it got frickin' cold over there, or after New Years' it started to pick back up again, and it was pretty significant. But it wasn't like, a lot of the times it wasn't like just a gunshot wound. It was multiple IED's and rockets and it was just, you weren't dealing with just a simple cut over the eye. You were dealing with a guy who's pretty bad off.

Did you feel that the longer you guys were there, the more proficient you became?

Hunter Hayes: Oh absolutely.

What were the things you think you became more proficient with? Was it just getting over the initial shock of what you were doing first?

Hunter Hayes: That and at the beginning, nobody, you don't really know how to, I mean you do, I mean the physicians definitely were phenomenal, top notch, but this isn't a hospital setting. It's a little different environment. You've got to understand that you don't have time to do the things that you do in the operating room at home or when they're laying on the stretcher, you don't have time to do certain things because you never know if, I remember one time we were working on a guy and me and the doctor were talking and we had to do something with, I forget if he had an amputation or not, but we were sitting there talking and he was like, Hunter, do you think I should cut him? I was like cut him, because what ended up happening, his kidneys were torn from his arteries, and you never know because you're in the field and he ended up passing away. But I mean it's tough calls because you got to make sure everybody's on board to, that we're ready for it, too, because we're gonna have to have our hands in that stomach, you know what I mean? And it's tough. They're in a tough place. I respect 'em for it.

Where would a lot of times the casualties go to after they had been to you guys? Where you'd medivac 'em out to?

Hunter Hayes: I think it really depended on what kind of injury they had, because I know, I think a lot had like an MRI or something like that.

I remember there seemed to be a place when our guys were wounded, a lot of times they would do everything they could to stabilize them where we were and they send 'em to Bilad, and it always seemed like that was the place they talked about. I never went there or saw it, but I always remember them talking about Bilad. So that was kind of the same for your battalion then, if a guy was stable enough to be moved, then you would transport them to Bilad.

Hunter Hayes: Bilad or Alisod maybe. They had a big hospital there. But yeah, I mean that's where they would, and I'm not sure how that, I know dust off would take 'em somewhere and

maybe they'd cut another flight, something like that, but the dust off was phenomenal. I mean they could get to Alisod from us in 30 minutes. It was tremendous.

What are some of your main memories of your time there, good and/or bad that you'd want to share with anyone that's listening?

Hunter Hayes: You know, the good things were hanging out with the guys. There's not a guy that I served with that I wouldn't die for, you know, and I would do anything for each and every one of them. We laughed a lot, we were there for each other, we fought a lot, which is understandable. You really get to know somebody. The bad things, I try not to think about 'em.

You guys were there I guess then during most of the holidays, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years'?

Hunter Hayes: Yeah.

What was that like for you in particular in your battalion?

Hunter Hayes: We all, we got together, for Thanksgiving we got together with 4th Recon, my unit, and we cooked, you know, food that our families and friends sent us. We had canned peas and stuff like that and it was like a little family deal. It was pretty neat. And then Christmas we all kind of made little gifts for each other and we had like a little white elephant deal, you know, we tried to make the best of it, and it was awesome. And then we had that two days or whatever, or that one day we had two beers and one shot of rum. That was like the best day of my life, sitting, and we didn't have any electricity, but I remember sitting in the dark, like four guys, because we didn't have, we had to do it the day after everybody else got theirs because we had to treat casualties and stuff, and it was just some of the best, like sitting back. You haven't showered in a month, and you're drinking a cold Budweiser. I was just, you know, awesome.

That's good. So tell us a little bit about some of the places you went. You were in Al-Khaim. Were you there for the most - ?

Hunter Hayes: For the most part. We had a pretty big area to cover. There were Susayba, I think Hadetha, which I thought the dam at Hadetha, I thought that was actually beautiful. I was looking over, you were?

We were there for the last half of our deployment was at the dam at Hadetha. Yeah, I mean right on the Euphrates River with the lake behind you. I mean for being in the middle of nowhere, it was strange there would be a dam. How long were you in the dam for?

Hunter Hayes: Not that long. We dropped some people off and stuff like that.

You never got to live there?

Hunter Hayes: I never got to experience the dam life.

That was a strange place. The smell of sulfur coming up out of the, and stuff.

Hunter Hayes: You know, I never understood, I remember flying over we were in the desert one time, and there was like the nomads and stuff like that, and they had like goats and stuff and

we were flying over in the Blackhawk, and what were they feeding their goats? What were they eating? Like how did they live out there? I just never -

Yeah, I've told people about that, too. It's people with the man dresses and the sandals that look like they're out of the bible, and with their goats and their sheep. Yeah, they're great. Living the same way people lived 2,000-3,000 years ago.

Hunter Hayes: Oh yeah.

So you were in Al-Khaim. Were you there pretty much the entire time? Did you ever go to Falusia or any other - ?

Hunter Hayes: I never got to go to Falusia or anything like that. I wanted to.

I thought you would have gone to Falusia. I don't know why.

Hunter Hayes: I know, everybody thinks that.

People that don't know anything about Iraq just think everyone is in Falusia.

Hunter Hayes: Or Bagdad. You were in Bagdad, weren't you?

Yeah.

Hunter Hayes: You were in the green zone.

When did you guys finally head home?

Hunter Hayes: We got, our relief came around the end of February and then we, I can't remember the exact date, but it was like the end of February, March, something like that, that we left and it was sad, because you didn't want to leave and you wanted to teach everybody to do everything, but at the same time, it was, you know, having that responsibility of saving somebody's life is a pretty big deal, and sometimes you get to the point where you don't think anybody else can do it but you. So you sacrifice so much, you know what I mean? And it's hard to turn that over.

When the battalion that was gonna relieve you got there and you started doing the left seat/right seat and all that sort of stuff, did you ever feel a heightened sense of anxiety that now you're this close to finally going home type of thing, that you were worried something would happen right at the end? Did you ever experience that?

Hunter Hayes: The only thing I was worried about was the plane going down whenever we left Kuwait, but I never really was scared like that. I was never, I was only scared one time over there and like mortars were hitting and my stomach was like jiggling, like my insides, and that kind of shook me up a little bit.

Yeah, that's got to be a weird feeling the first time you got rockets, mortars fired at you and you hear 'em and you realize they're trying to hit you.

Hunter Hayes: Yeah.

It's not just a fireworks show. It's a little different.

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, that's funny.

Tell us a little bit more I guess about Al-Khaim, because I never made it out to Al-Khaim, what your battalion's role was while you were there, what they were trying to do and that sort of thing.

Hunter Hayes: You know, really just police up Al-Ambar. I mean that place was, I don't even think Saddam had any control out there. I mean these people were just ruthless little mongerers, you know? They were just, the black market was running rampant. I remember we got a bunch of DVD's that were black market and stuff like that, which was good because we got to see movies that we weren't gonna go to see. But these guys were just criminals, and I remember one time we, they went in there and it was a raid in the middle of the night, and a lot of times they'd put women at the front door so they could bust in. The women were right there and what that does to a Marine is just, you know, and anyway, so one of the girls got wounded, and we went in and we got her, and we were taking care of her, and she was pretty banged up, like shrapnel from the door ended up taking out her brachial artery so she was gonna lose her arm, so we had to do something. And the mother was just anti-American, you name it, wasn't even gonna let us work on her, and we were trying to save her life, you know what I mean? Or save her arm at least. We ended up having to like bribe her and the mayor and all this kind of stuff. Granted I didn't have to deal with all that stuff, but everybody came back and was just frustrated. But I don't know, we worked on her for a long, long time. We took a vein from her leg and put it in her brachial artery, which doing it in a tent, that's kind of a big deal. And I'm not sure what happened to her. She probably ended up losing her arm. But we could've done something quicker if these people weren't so dad-gum combative.

I imagine you had some of the reconstruction teams with you and stuff like that?

Hunter Hayes: Rebuilding schools and all that kind of stuff, the CB's and the ___.

Did you get a chance to get out and see much of that or were you always kind of kept at the aid station?

Hunter Hayes: Pretty much, yeah.

Kind of locked down unfortunately in some ways.

Hunter Hayes: One of the one times I did get to go out, we were outside the wire, me and our driver, and I wasn't supposed to go but I went anyway, and we come back and we come to the gate and we're like where is everybody? And as it happened there was mortars and stuff like that. I don't know why we didn't hear 'em. Maybe we had our ear plugs in because I always like to wear hearing protection. And we get back and we open up the big metal door in the bunker and everybody is like in their underwear with their flag jackets on. Where have you guys been? It was so funny. I have this picture in my mind, it was just so funny.

Any time you go out somewhere, that's always kind of in the back of your mind, something could happen, it's almost like you become fatalistic I guess. I remember going out with my battalion CO a couple of different times, and one time we had to go across this bridge and we had to get

out and walk along, and make sure there wasn't anything planted on that bridge and in the back of your mind you're kind of at a certain point it's almost like you can't even worry about it. You just got to go do it and if I get blown up then it happens. It's kind of strange but I remember thinking that going across that bridge one time. It was out in the middle of nowhere, too. You're like oh, you're looking for stuff as you go across.

Hunter Hayes: I don't think I dealt with any Marines that, you guys are a different breed. I mean you guys deliver a lot of hate and discontent so I mean you're happy with going out like somebody please do this so I can, you know – and that's what I love about the Marines. I mean just a different breed and willing to do anything. Fear wasn't, I don't think I, especially with ___, those guys were just, I mean they bring it.

So tell us what it was like when you got back to Kuwait. Did you spend any time, a day or so in Kuwait before you went home?

Hunter Hayes: We spent like two weeks in Kuwait.

Two weeks?

Hunter Hayes: It was a nightmare. And the bad thing is they took all of our stuff because it had to go through customs, so we were wearing the same stuff -

How did you spend two weeks in Kuwait?

Hunter Hayes: Maybe it was a week, but logistically -

Boy, they screwed you guys.

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, it didn't work in our favor.

We spent maybe two nights.

Hunter Hayes: I was so mad because I didn't have any clean underwear or anything like that.

I think we spent one night, yeah.

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, just rub it in.

That had to have been a change, too, though after being in Iraq for quite a while there, 7-1/2 to 8 months or more, and you get to Kuwait and it's just a different environment. Did you go to the hamburger stand they had there, all that stuff?

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, they had a Subway -

The Hardy's -

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, like Carl, Jr., or whatever.

That had to have been strange though, right? First time you eat a hamburger and French fries after -

Hunter Hayes: Oh, it was amazing but the lines were long. I was kind of irritated just to come out of the combat zone.

I think it was at Carl's Jr. that people working there from like Bangladesh and knew no English and you give 'em the number of what you want to order because they had like four options on the wall and you just gave 'em the number, that was it.

Hunter Hayes: And I'll tell you, being there in Kuwait for that long is just, that's all there is to do is eat. Especially coming out that where you have a routine and stuff like that, so the boredom just frickin' killed me. But that's kind of the whole experience with me for war was it was boredom and death.

I think a lot of people probably have the exact same experience. People I've interviewed even from World War II and Korea, a lot of it's the same thing. People who never have been there probably would never understand, but yeah, a lot of boredom, but also a lot of good camaraderie and then moments of just sheer action, and then it all settles down again.

Hunter Hayes: And you go back to playing spades.

Yeah, it's different. So what are some things that you'd want future generations to know if they listen to this? We've got archives here that go back to Spanish Land Grant days. Downstairs we've got a rehistro, a big register book that Stephen F. Austin kept in his own hand and the original settlers and stuff, so the hope is that this will be there down there for 200 plus years as well. What's something that you would want people to know about your time and your service or just anything you'd want to impart?

Hunter Hayes: Well, as far as service goes, there's nothing, there's not a greater honor than serving your country especially in a time of war. But our service was in a time that was, any, I guess it's Vietnam, the wars that we fought in have been so political, you know what I mean? Here in our homeland, you know what I mean? And it's really divided our country and then everything is so polarized, and never send your country to war, or send your troops to war if you're not willing to win it. And I hope that a lot of people realize that the people that served for the most part, we want to go over there and win that war, because other than, why would we go die for, you know what I mean? I heard something on the news the other day. Maybe our goal isn't to win this war. Then pull us out of there. I mean why? These elected officials who use us, you know. Most of us are willing to die for this country. I mean, but give us something to die for. So that's that.

Some good advice. It kind of leads me to another question. When you were over there, did you feel though like most Americans supported you guys, like did you get care packages and things?

Hunter Hayes: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, from schools and -

Random folks?

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, and obviously my family helped us out a lot, you know. I mean my mom fed 9 people. I bet she spent $1,000 a week just sending Ding-Dong's, ravioli, and everything, good stuff.

It seemed like a lot of the loved ones got really good at using the flat rate postage because it was the same no matter what the wait was, and it wasn't like you were shipping it to the United States even though it was going to Iraq, and we would get tons and tons of just those bags full of, they're flat rate boxes, you know, that's all it was was flat rate boxes. You can put so much in there.

Hunter Hayes: And I remember one time we hadn't gotten mail in a long time, and you know, because I was the mail guy, so I was distributing mail and that was kind of my day to give everybody stuff, and I remember one time we hadn't gotten mail in like a week or so because it was hard to get it out to us, and they had told us like the mail truck got blown up. I was ready to go kick, I was about ready to go start a war on my own. Like you don't mess with my – yeah, you want to blow up the mail truck? We got a problem.

That's no joke. Mail was the huge morale booster.

Hunter Hayes: Oh, absolutely. That's the key. You got to keep that morale up or you'll lose a war real quick.

That's right. Did you guys have any access to Armed Forces television or radio when you were there at all?

Hunter Hayes: No.

So you didn't have any, so really your only contact to the outside world was phone calls and –

Hunter Hayes: And even half the time they were shut down because somebody got killed.

So you guys were shut down a lot and then it would just be like -

Hunter Hayes: Or even injured. Even it got to the point if they were injured, no phone calls. So during Operation Phantom Fury, we didn't have -

Yeah, we were the same way, yeah. Tell us what it was like when you finally got back to the U.S. Where'd you fly from out of Kuwait?

Hunter Hayes: We went to Ireland, then Bangor, Maine, and then gosh, right after we got to Bangor and it was obviously freezing outside, we had our first beer. Everybody, it was cool because it was like the VFW and American Legion met us there -

Maine greeters, yeah.

Hunter Hayes: They were all there and I was hugging 'em and I felt bad for 'em.

Awesome though, yeah.

Hunter Hayes: I probably stunk because I hadn't had new clothes in a couple of weeks, but I didn't care.

I think they greet almost every flight that comes through there, the same thing, and even if it's the middle of the night, they've got someone there. I remember landing in Bangor, too. That was pretty cool.

Hunter Hayes: Oh yeah. It's exciting.

And so then from Bangor, did you fly back to March?

Hunter Hayes: We flew back to March and then we drove back to Camp Pendleton, got on the parade deck, and everybody was there. First we had to go turn in our weapons, and that was pretty incredible. I mean I remember turning in my weapon and I was sitting outside smoking a cigarette, like everybody, smoking, and I didn't have any name tags on my uniform because I had gotten a new uniform because I'd messed one up, and one of the officers that was sitting there, she looked at me and she goes, is your name Hayes? Who's Hayes? I was like, that's me. And she was like your dad is throwing a fit over there. He's ready to see you. It was just typical of my dad to be like dramatic, you know. It was so funny. And then my mom had a big sign made, it was probably as long as this table. It was just neat.

That's got to have been a moment you'll never forget though when you finally got back.

Hunter Hayes: Oh yeah.

Did they give you some time off at that point?

Hunter Hayes: We got a 96. And about a week later I took leave and stayed home for about a month. So it was a pretty good deal. But it was definitely an adjustment to get back, you know. I mean here you know, a week ago you were in a combat zone, and the next thing you know you're having champagne with your friends, you know?

Yeah, it's a little surreal. Wow. How much longer did you end up staying in the Navy before you decided to get out and go to college?

Hunter Hayes: I stayed I guess another year.

At that point did you get deployed again? Was there a chance you'd be deployed again?

Hunter Hayes: I mean there was a chance, but Pendleton had taken such a brunt of deployments, I mean the whole West Coast really.

Yeah, initially at first.

Hunter Hayes: So I mean they kind of switched over to, I think now they're sending people from Okinawa, the 3rd Marines.

Yeah, let them get over there a bit, too.

Hunter Hayes: Yeah, and go fight.

That's right. I think everyone's pretty much been now at least once. Five times, six times.

Hunter Hayes: And I would've been happy to go as many times as they wanted me to go, but I think my training schedule was just, since I went for training for so long. If I would've got out and did the basic corpsman stuff, I would've been over there pretty much my entire career.

I think 34 might've been the first battalion that have done like three deployments, and it seemed like they were there for 7-1/2 months and then they were back maybe 5 or 6, and then they were back over again. It was just like a real high tempo. I remember that being one of the stories everyone, I think all of them had basically done that now, but they were I think the first ones to do that.

Hunter Hayes: That's rough.

Yeah, get back and you're almost immediately gearing up to go again.

Hunter Hayes: That's got to be tough on a marriage.

Yeah. Well, we're almost up with our hour, but I really appreciate you taking the time to come in and share with us some of your thoughts and your experiences. It's something that hopefully future generations can listen to this and everybody here at the General Land Office is very thankful for your service. Commissioner Patterson was a Marine and a lot of other people here are veterans, and so everybody here definitely thanks you for your service, and that's what this whole program is about, is honoring service and preserving some of those memories so people don't forget 'em or people that have never served have a chance to kind of hear first hand what the service was like.

Hunter Hayes: Well thank you for having me.

Any closing thoughts?

Hunter Hayes: I think I've said my piece here.

Great. Well thank you very much. That concludes our interview with Hunter Hayes.

[End of recording]