

Oral Memoirs

of

Jose Belen

An Interview Conducted by

John Grande

July 18, 2017

Community Veterans History Project

University of Central Florida RICHES of Central Florida

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Interview Histories

Interviewers: John Grande

Transcriber: Karen Kelly

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the RICHES of Central Florida Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

Project Detail

The Community Veterans History Project, a RICHES of Central Florida Project at the University of Central Florida, includes interviews with Central Florida veterans from all branches of the United States military. Beginning in 2010, the UCF Community Veterans History Project is collecting, preserving, and making accessible to the public the experiences of Central Florida's veterans so that future generations will better understand the realities of conflict. It is a collaborative endeavor supported by multiple departments and offices at UCF. The histories, which are collected by students and faculty, are archived and made digitally available through the UCF library. The UCF Community Veterans History Project will also contribute selected veterans' histories to the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress.

John Grande is Project Manager for the Veterans History Project at the University of Central Florida.

Jose Belen served in the United States Army during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was part of the initial invasion of Iraq and served fourteen consecutive months of combat. During his time in the service, Mr. Belen rose to the rank of specialist. Today, Mr. Belen is an outspoken activist, raising awareness for those who suffer from PTSD through his website josebelenspeaks.com

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Jose Belen is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on May 28, 2014.

Abstract

Oral history interview of Jose Belen. Interview conducted by John Grande at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, FL on July 18, 2017. Interview topics include Introduction; Biographical information, parents' occupation, childhood; Education before the military, family in the military; Memories of 9/11; Influences to join the Army and recruitment process; Basic training; Drill sergeants; Graduation from basic training; Advanced Individual Training; Stationed in Germany; Assigned to 2nd Battalion, 3rd field artillery; Lead up to deployment to Iraq; Arrival in Iraq, encounter with Iraqi children; How he and fellow soldiers felt about Iraq; Consecutive combat for 14 months, R & R passed up to other soldiers; 21st and 22nd birthdays in Iraq; Routine day in Iraq; Good memories from Iraq; The death of his best friend; Frequency of combat in Iraq, volunteering for anything; First experience with combat; How his unit dealt with combat casualties; Describing friends and peers; Staying in contact with family; Entertainment and Christmas in Iraq; Decision to turn down SF position and leave the Army; Returning home, feeling nothing; Work with other branches of the military; Promotion to Specialist and discharge from the Army, medals awarded; Plans after leaving the Army, feeling out of place in civilian life; Annual reunion for friend that died in Iraq; Struggles with PTSD and raising awareness; Quitting corporate career to speak and raise awareness for PTSD

Jose Belen

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by John Grande
July 18, 2017
Orlando, FL

0:00:00

Introduction

Grande Today is July 28, 2017. My name is John Grande and I am interviewing Mr. Jose Belen who served in the United States Army during Operation Iraqi Freedom. During his time in the service, Mr. Belen rose to the rank of specialist. I am here interviewing Mr. Belen as part of the University of Central Florida's Community Veterans History Project. This interview is being conducted in Orlando, FL. Mr. Belen, where and where were you born?

0:00:30

Biographical information, parents' occupation, childhood

Belen Um, I was born in Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan, New York, New York.

Grande And when?

Belen Uh, 1982. May 19th.

Grande What did you parents do for a living?

Belen Well, my father... uh, they're from Puerto Rico. My father obtained a bachelor's in education, so he was teaching on the island back in Puerto Rico. And my mom, she was a housewife, she was also going to school, um, but they both decided to come to the United States to give me a better life, essentially. So, my dad. He was a substitute teacher for a little bit. He was also a successful salesman and my mom, worked a labor job. So, um

Grande How big was your family growing up?

Belen Um, just me and my mom and my dad. My parents divorced when I was about 5 or 6, and then I had my step-dad. So, for the most part, I was a single child until I was thirteen and then we had my brother.

Grande How would you describe your childhood?

Belen Oh man, childhood was difficult, man. Uh, you know, my father, my mother really, you know, didn't get along too well. My dad was, the most part, you know, emotionally abusive to us which was kind of difficult, and also my step-dad, kind of the same thing. So, I had a very difficult childhood. My mother and

I, to this day, are very close, due to that, and also my father, and my step-father, rest in peace. I forgive both of them, so. You know, childhood was tough.

Grande Did you stay in the Man, Manhattan area your entire childhood?

Belen No, I, ironically enough, right after I was born, went back to Puerto Rico, uh, for a little bit and then from there segued back to New York, but we went upstate, a small town called Amsterdam.

00:02:20 **Education before the military, family in the military**

Grande Growing up, what kind of education did you receive before entering the service?

Belen Uh, I always kind of tell the funnier version of it. I made it through high school, uh, five years, failed eleventh grade, which was a blessing in disguise, essentially. I went to high school, hung out for another year and graduated in the summer of '01.

Grande Uh, were any other fam, any of your family members also in the military?

Belen Uh, I have an uncle, uh, my mother's brother. He did twenty, twenty-five years, sergeant major and then I have a cousin, a very close cousin of mine, that had 20 years also, um so we have some, some presence in the military.

00:03:10 **Memories of 9/11**

Grande Do you remember where you were when 9/11 occurred?

Belen Yep, I remember. Um, I was upstairs just getting up, and my mother was downstairs and I hear her, kind of, scream, and, you know, yell for me and I immediately ran downstairs and the first tower had just hit, so there was kind of smoke, and kind of the early stages. I remember just thinking, "Oh man, that was a big accident" and then I watched the second plane hit live on TV, you know, with my mom, and that's where I'm like, "This isn't an accident", and I actually called my recruiter and uh, he said, you know, "Get ready for war". Right away, I kind of understood that it was an attack.

Grande Um, how, how did that effect your personally?

Belen Uh, it upset me, having been born there, that's my city I guess you could say. So, um, it really upset me, man. It really set the tone for my outlook in the military, um, I hate suffering. I hate when innocent people are hurt, so understanding the gravity of that day, kind of just set me, you know, locked me in.

00:04:25 **Influences to join the Army and recruitment process**

Grande What influenced you to join the United States Army?

Belen Um, I grew up watching, you know, war movies and kind of playing, and all that stuff. So, when I decided to join, I actually went Marine Corps first, to go force reconnaissance but I had a knee surgery that kind of disqualified me there, so they... My marine recruiter's best friend was an army recruiter, and I pivoted to the army and just said, you know, "Let's rock and roll". That was it, pretty simple.

Grande What was your experience with the recruitment process?

Belen Oh man, it was a pretty, pretty comical, man. Because I had the Marine Corps issue and then he says "Hey, talk to the army guy". You know, Staff Sergeant Brian, I'll never forget him, and they did everything to accommodate my request, which was going Special Forces, that's, there was no compromising that. I was like, "Listen, I need combat and the most severe, you know". And, uh, they did their best to, to push it through but again, MEPS, when they found the surgery they said, "Listen, you can't do SF ranger or anything like that you can do field artillery and that's, you know". But they put a little amendment in the contract saying that if I successfully completed my three-year enlistment with field artillery they would offer me SF in rangers.

Grande Did you have to take any exams upon entering the service?

Belen Just the generic, um, you know, exams [inaudible] and all that. There really wasn't anything special. You know, I was in combat arms, they were just kind of shuffling me along.

00:06:02

Basic Training

Grande Uh, where and when did you go to basic training?

Belen Where and when? Uh, Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Home of the field artillery. And I got to Fort Sill, January '02

Grande Can you tell me about the day you arrived at basic training?

Belen January 16, 2002

Grande And, uh, what was your experience that day?

Belen Oh, man. Uh, again, referencing films and stuff. It was pretty close, you know, the push-ups and the yelling and all that stuff. It went right up to what I expected.

Grande That falls right into my next question. Was the army anything like what you expected it to be?

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Belen Um, you know it's just like anything else, you kind of assume that you know, so it was very eye-opening, once you were on the inside, because you're the GI now. So, all in all, yeah, for the most part.

Grande How long was basic training?

Belen Um, total, um maybe 8 weeks I believe. I got there in January and I was home, I believe, in early May. So, it was maybe two months, with AIT and all that.

00:07:18

Drill sergeants

Grande What were your drill instruct, drill sergeants like?

Belen Oh, man! These guys were, uh, we called them savages. I mean, very, very, very, um... I couldn't have asked for a better set of drill sergeants. They were hard, very hard-nosed, but they were preparing us for battle and that was kind of the theme, through basic training. You know, you're going to war, you know, train like you fight. So, for me, I respected the process. It wasn't, there was just no quitting ever, you know. I said, we're going to battle so let's, let's go. And these drills were... they were incredible and, and graduation day, you kind of see the other side of them, they're soldiers just like you, and they're proud of you.

Grande Do you have any specific memories about basic training that you would like to share?

Belen Oh, man! There was a couple of times, I'll save those for another time. But I have a funny, a funny one that I'd like to tell. Um, halfway through the process they started allowing us to eat on the other side of the mess hall where all the regular soldiers were, because up until that point we weren't even, you know, considered soldiers yet. So, they wouldn't even allow us to sit amongst them yet. But, they allowed us this day and we also weren't allowed to eat any sweets, any ice cream, none of that, and they would purposefully walk us by all the cakes, ice creams, and all that stuff. And, this particular day, uh our drill said, "Hey, you know what. You guys can sit with the regular army, you've trained hard enough. Go ahead and eat all the ice cream you want, cake, you guys deserve it". So, of course, we all eat chow and eating all of these deserts and walking back to the barracks he says, "You guys have the rest of the night off". And, you know, this is like, unheard of, and maybe five minutes later, ten minutes, enough time for us to get our gear off and start getting in the shower and start getting relaxed, he kicks the door open and says, you know, "PT formation downstairs now!" So, you know, and we're all, and he's counting down, you know give us like a minute. And he's like, "I told you guys that you were not allowed to eat any of the cake and ice cream, and you should have enough self-discipline to not to" and this and this and this. He ran us for about an hour and a half in this parking lot. I mean just, I started, I stopped, I started counting laps, but then I just gave up when I realized we're going to be here for a while and dudes falling out,

puking every, throwing up everywhere and that was a pretty fun, pretty fun night, yeah. True story.

00:10:02

Graduation from Basic Training

Grande Uh, what was your graduation from basic training like?

Belen Uh, it was pretty awesome, man. Uh, you know, my, my parents and my little brother drove all the way from upstate New York to Oklahoma and it was a day that I was just really proud of myself. You know, and growing up and having the troubles I did and always being told that I would be a failure and never make it, you know, to anywhere in life. It was a good day for me, man. You know, it was kind of like, you know, you're doing the right thing. So, that, that was a really special day for me, man, because I did it. And, you know, I had a lot of odds against me and yeah. It was a happy day.

Grande Um, after you graduated from basic training, what happened then?

Belen Um, I believe it was two weeks of R & R, or a week to go home and do the high school thing where you tag along with a recruiter, or something. And there was a couple of days of that and then it was out to the duty station to report for active duty.

00:11:13

Advanced Individual Training

Grande Um, did you receive any advanced training after basic training?

Belen Just the AIT, Advanced Individual Training, that just, I guess, prolonged, the process you know from January to May.

Grande What does that training involve?

Belen Um, it's focused on your MOS, Military Occupational Specialty, which for us was, for me was field artillery, so you go through the ins and outs of artillery, the history, and then how to use the ammunition and shoot. I was on the paladin, the M109 paladin self-propelled. So, I was training with that, training with 50. Cals all the fun stuff, blowing stuff up.

Grande And were you treated any differently then you were at basic training at the individual training?

Belen No, it was, it was a little bit more lax because you kind of had earned your rank at that point. You know, we made it, so, at that point it was pretty straight forward.

Grande And how long did that training last for?

Belen A couple weeks, it was like a blur for me so maybe like 4 weeks.

Grande And did any of your friends that you knew from basic training, were they sent to the same school?

Belen Uh, yeah, yeah, the ones that made it. We had like half of the platoon quit or drop out so the ones that made it through, yeah we were all together.

00:12:35 **Stationed in Germany**

Grande Uh, after your training where did the army send you?

Belen Esens, Germany. I chose that place, I chose Germany.

Grande And why did you choose that place?

Belen Huge, uh, history buff. I focused really on World War II, so for me it was just like, "Yay! You know, I can visit all these places".

Grande Do you remember arriving at Esens, Germany and what was it like?

Belen Yeah, I remember getting there, uh, as fate had it, a really good friend of mine from basic training was stationed there and he's who picked me up from the airport. So, as soon as I got to Esens it was just instantly great because he was already there.

Grande What was your impression of the German culture there?

Belen Definitely a culture shock, the fact that they don't like put ice in soft drinks when you ask for water, it's carbonated water, you have to specifically ask for tap water and then they look at you kind of weird. Um, which is cool because it's a shift of culture, but I remember French fries and pizza were served with forks and knives to eat them with that. So, it was a new experience but definitely cool.

Grande Was there a big, uh, language barrier there?

Belen Um, actually, because our, our town that we were stationed in, we were kind of in there since World War II, there was a fluency in English that was there, but there was also spots where you could talk to them in English and they wouldn't respond unless you spoke in German, which was kind of hard. They, they didn't like Americans in certain spots.

00:14:09 **Assigned to 2nd Battalion, 3rd field artillery**

Grande Um, what unit were you assigned to?

Belen 2nd battalion, 3rd field artillery, uh, first armored division. Old ironsides.

Grande What was it like being assigned there?

Belen Uh, it was neat. You know, it's one of the most decorated units, armored units, in the United States Army, received a presidential unit citation for combat, so, um, it was a pretty, um, honorable experience.

Grande Did you feel any kind of pressure, being assigned to that?

Belen Nah, nah, I was, um, I'm a pretty laid back guy, man, so I just kind of take it, you know, as it comes.

Grande And uh, what was your, um, job. Your assignment.

Belen Just, cannonier, man. Red leg, just shoot artillery, you know, soldier first, you know, but, uh, you know, focused on artillery.

00:15:00 **Lead up to deployment to Iraq**

Grande Um, and how long were you there before you were deployed?

Belen I got to Germany June, 2002 and we deployed for Iraq the following spring. So, from, we left Iraq at, I believe, the end of April, beginning of May '03.

Grande And how much time, how much advanced notice were you given that you guys were going to be deployed at that time?

Belen Uh, around... there was a call, the drums of war started around December-ish of '02. January it was really kind of like, "Okay". The words were kind of slipping though and then officially they came out. So, we had... two months, a month and a half to kind of... and this was separate. The, the way we're going to have to fight was, you know, close-quarters combat. So, we had to like, learn how to do raids and all that kind of stuff in a very short period of time.

Grande Um, so before your deployment, did the army require you to undergo more training?

Belen Uh, close-quarters combat, um, training for BBIEDs, checkpoints, things of that nature, yeah. They had us, um... when we actually got to Kuwait, we worked with a Special Forces team out there. You know, the [inaudible], stuff like that.

00:16:25 **Arrival in Iraq, encounter with Iraqi children**

Grande Um, can you describe to me what your first experience in Iraq was like?

Belen Well, you know we staged in Kuwait, so, you know, as soon as you kind of cross over, I call, the berm. There's a berm, literally there's a flag, U.S./Kuwait flag on one side and then on the other side there's just an Iraqi flag. So... and I was on the 50.cal immediately, you know, once we deployed into Iraq. So, my first experience, man, I remember clear as day crossing over that berm and chief giving the order to, you know, lock and load the 50.cal and, no safety on it. And,

uh, just remember immediately, a gang of kids, you know, running at your vehicles and then the order was, you know, take them down if you see any, you know, threat and I looked at them and I was like, "Wow, I might have to kill these kids". 1724

00:17:24 **How he and fellow soldiers felt about Iraq**

Grande How did you and the rest of your fellow soldiers, what did they feel about the situation?

Belen Um, some were, um, you know, overly emotional about it. Some were indifferent. Um, you know, you just get different mixes of people so it just depended on who you were partnered with and working with. Each person had, I think, had their own individual, aside from country and everything, I think we all, kind of, had our own personal view on, on combat.

Grande Was Iraq anything like what you expected it to be?

Belen No, um, it wasn't, man. It was a lot, there's really no way to be able to explain what it is once you're there but once you're there you just know that this is, you know, nothing compared to training.

00:18:28 **Consecutive combat for 14 months, R & R passed up to other soldiers**

Grande How long were you there for?

Belen Um, fourteen consecutive months. So, I got there May, didn't leave until July of 2004, so, May '03/July '04. Um, I was passed up on an R & R for two weeks, because I was single, I had no dependents, so I literally stayed in combat the whole time. Aside... I went to Kuwait once or twice to load some tracks, you know, uh, maybe for a day or two. I went to Doha, Qatar I believe for two days. So, essentially we were just combat for the entire time.

Grande Was this usual, um, for soldiers to be out here for that long?

Belen No, no. Each soldier was given a two week break to go back home, and um, it's kind of one of the sore subjects for me. But, um, you know they offered that to me and then took it away because this guy was going. You know, a month later they'd give me a date, I'd call home, the family gets ready and then two weeks before it's, "sorry, you can't go". They did that total maybe 3 times, um, 4 times and then, on the last time, they said they were letting a sergeant go but if that sergeant would give me the opportunity, like he could give it back to me. You know, they were giving it to him because he was married, had kids, and he said, "sorry" to me. You know, and he obviously didn't give it back and I had to be his gunner, on the way to the airport, and I just told him, "You know what, man? If I die in these two weeks, I want you to be the one that calls my, my parents and tell them that they had a chance to see their kid". You know, and that, that was kind of... that was hard, because after that they said there's no more

opportunities for you to go home until we all go home. Yeah. I turned 21 and 22 in Iraq. I had two birthdays there, yeah.

00:20:30

21st and 22nd birthdays in Iraq

Grande

Did you, um, do anything special for your 21st birthday there?

Belen

[Laughs] Heck yeah, man! Um, I was doing some training with SF guys, on the 21st and then the 22nd we did a massive raid on one of the biggest mosques in Baghdad and I was the lead gunner. I remember looking up at the night sky and seeing the moon and thinking, "This is a pretty awesome birthday present". I mean, because it was a massive, massive operation and we're spearheading the whole thing.

00:21:05

Routine day in Iraq

Grande

Can you describe a routine day in Iraq?

Belen

Uh, man, routine day. Um, it just depended on what was on the dock. Our, our orders were to secure Baghdad which is, obviously, not something that can be done overnight. Though, a typical day, um, you had guard shift. You could have guard shift at 2 in the morning, 6 in the morning. It was rotating so, let's just say we start at 5am, um I was a part of QRF a lot, Quick Reaction Force Team. So, we'd have, um, morning briefings, 5am, layout for the day. You know, we have a reconnaissance, you know, later on in the day, whatever the op orders are for that morning. If you got tasked to, you know, be part of an op, they would let you know there. If not, you kind of just stood by in QRF. So, that was kind of... the morning set the stage for the rest of your day. Um, me being one of the high-level gunners, in, in the firing battery, you know, I was pretty much always on the go because I enjoyed gunning. And so, typical day for me, wake up, get the op orders, if there's a, you know, recon going on, a patrol, you know, I'm on it. 7:30, 8 in the morning, most of the time we're gone, work 6, 7 hours, come back, maybe do another guard shift, hope there's another recon that night. More than likely, there is, hop on the 50.cal again, roll out again for a night of fun. You mostly fought, man. You know, there's ambushes going on from guys in your battery, whatever the case may be. Um, just depended on, on the day.

00:22:50

Good memories from Iraq

Grande

Are there any memories about Iraq that you would like to share?

Belen

Um, there are, uh, a few. Um, there were some good times because we did try to really help the people and reconstruct neighborhoods and things to that nature. So, there would be times when we would get bags of candy from home or care packages and, instead of keeping them for ourselves, we would go and distribute them to the children or, you know, we'd get an influx of toys. Um, I remember we got some soccer balls and took them out to the kids and, you know, those, those were the positive memories. We were... we cared. I cared for those people.

You know, for as many, um, bad guys that were out there, there were some people that were suffering. You know, so, that was one thing, I guess, for me that has my conscious clear, is that we went out there with the greatest intentions. You know, when I fought or when I raided at home, it was thinking about potentially saving, you know, civilians' lives, my brothers or sisters lives. So, um, those were, those were good memories.

00:24:07

The death of his best friend

Um, there was, um, an attack that I speak on because I want to keep, you know, my brothers' and sisters', you know, memories alive especially, um, my best friend. Um, December 22nd, '03, um, we got hit, you know, with an IED and it took the lives of my best friend Stuart Moore, and, um, lieutenant, Lieutenant Salts, a couple of days before Christmas. Um, so that's a memory I speak on because, I just remember when it happened, I kind of made a promise that that name would never die. You know, and, and how, "I'll never forget", that kind of gets commercialized but you truly never want to forget and that's uh, that's the story that, it's taken me years to be able to tell without, you know, getting emotional. But now, maybe I'll too be able to look back on it and say, "As long as we keep the memories, you know, of these guys alive, they didn't die in vain". Um, you know, so, that happened to us, we lost some other guys out there, obviously, and, you know, there's a lot that went on out there, but, yeah.

00:25:20

Frequency of combat in Iraq, volunteering for anything

Grande

How often did you see combat in Iraq?

Belen

Everyday. As much as I could, you know, I was kind of the exception. I volunteered, you know, for anything. Anything that was hot, you now, it was... the more the dangerous, the happier I was about it. You know, so I legitimately saw combat as much as I could. It got to the point where command didn't allow me to go out anymore because my hand was always kind of [puts hand up]... you know, me and two other guys, our hands were always up, up, up. Um, so, I saw combat a lot, man.

Grande

And um, why did you, why were you, why were you always volunteering for it?

Belen

Um, there's something that happens, out in the battlefield. You know, I'm sure it's just primal, warrior spirit just gets awoken and if you're given that, you know, you have no fear of combat. You're actually there to do work and to not shy away from the work that you're given and, again, it's my mentality out there, even to join the military. It's a warrior's mentality. I wanted to, you know, do all those operations that no one wanted to do and I just lived it to fruition.

00:26:44

First experience with combat

Grande

Could you describe your first experience with combat?

Belen Sure. Um, man, as soon as we got to Baghdad, within, like, minutes, our PG gets shot, you know, at the beginning of the convoy, and it was just right there. Boom. It hit one of our, we'll call it a cat, it was an ammo tack vehicle. A buddy of mine got shrapnel to the face and, you know, it was just... I had my .50cal out, obviously, mounted up, but then I had a 249 SAW plus an M16 with a 203. So, I'm, you know, pick of the litter here, which one do I choose? And it was just like, "Let's rock and roll, man. Let's see what happens". So, immediately [snaps fingers], you get to Baghdad and they're waiting for you.

00:27:35

How his unit dealt with combat casualties

Grande Um, how did you and your unit deal with the effects of combat casualties?

Belen Oh, um. That was always um, that was rough, man, because medics, I know... my heart really went out to the medics. Um, we did the best that we could. I mean, we got there during the invasion so, there really wasn't much for us to use, but we had elements in place as soon as we needed them. So, if there was someone that took a sunken chest wound, whatever the case may be, a black hawk would come, essentially, I mean, in a matter of minutes. So, from a casualties' standpoint, um, very, very on point with that, man. And they, they made sure that if any of us were there, witnessed it or was a part of it, that, you know, there were doctors or someone to talk to. Our command was easily available for us, so, they handled it very well.

Grande And, uh, if, and mentally and, uh, the units moral, how did you guys deal with, when you lost a brother or sister?

Belen It was, yeah. Man, going back to, back to that December morning, up until that point we lost, you know, guys from another platoon, another battery, within the 1st armored division which obviously hurt us, you know, equally. But, when it's one of your own, excuse me, one of our own, in my case, prior to my deployment, my roommate and my best friend. You know, and we lose him, it just. When it happened, you could hear a pin drop. I mean this was a massive fob, you know, we took over a police station and all this stuff, and it was just this eerie silence. It hit us all hard, it took us... we never, kind of, recovered from it. You know, you can't just recover from something like that so the morale was, was uh, pretty low for, for a while. Until we all just kind of picked ourselves back up, and, let's go.

00:29:55

Describing friends and peers

Grande How would you describe your friends and peers in the army?

Belen Uh, solid group. Core group. I love them all, regardless of the ones that would kind of... would hide when it was time to shoot, hide under Humvees, that does happen. I love them all, though. I appreciate all of them, I would have died for all of them. You know, so they were a great group of guys and girls.

00:30:25

Staying in contact with family

Grande

Um, while you were in Iraq, how did you stay in contact with your family?

Belen

Oh man, that was, that was like hit or miss. I mean satellite phones would pop up, you know, someone would have a sat phone and you'd have to wait hours, or sometimes, to use it. Sometimes months without hearing from me, and I purposefully at times didn't want to call home because of all the stuff that I was engaged in because I would lie to my mom anytime I talked to her. And that was hard. You know, I'd be just coming back from some crazy op, some ambush, whatever, pick one. You know, call home, I'm sitting there, you know, covered in blood all messed up and she's asking how I'm doing, you know, and, "Oh, I'm fine". "Did you see combat?", she'd ask, "No, no". I'd tell her, you know, I'm in an office and all this stuff, so. I kind of shied away from calling home a lot because the pain of knowing that, you know, where I'm at, they have no idea, just that disconnected from them. So, it was months at a time.

00:31:44

Entertainment and Christmas in Iraq

Grande

In Iraq, how did you guys entertain yourselves?

Belen

Um, they, uh Iraqis, uh, had little like DVD, portable DVD players, you know, buy one of those and these ripped off, you know, movies from someone like, you know, filming it in a movie theater all grainy. So, I mean, we tried to, you know, we did have some time, read a book, play cards, um, watch a bootleg movie. Um, maybe we'd find a bottle of whiskey just hanging around somewhere, so, just whatever we could really do.

Grande

Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual events in Iraq

Belen

[Laughs] Yeah. Christmas, uh, Christmas, we had a Christmas tree out there and they called like a mini formation, but not like a formal one. All of a sudden you see our first sergeant in a full Santa Clause outfit but instead of reindeer it's like, two donkeys you know, pulling him on a sled, a makeshift sled. And this guy is huge, you know, he's like 6'10 and massive, and then in a Santa Claus outfit and he had little presents on the back of it. So, yeah, that was a good time. Christmas.

00:33:10

Decision to turn down SF position and leave the Army

Grande

Um, after you left Iraq, where did the army send you?

Belen

Um, back to Germany, you know, to finish out. By that time, uh, we had like 6 months left and they actually offered me the the Special Forces. It got to the point where I had performed enough and they offered to me while I was in Iraq. They said... they offered me station of choice, and ranger, and MFS. And I said yes, you know, initially, and then, a couple days later, because I had survived so much stuff and I told, you know, the reenlistment NCO. I said, "Listen, I'm just going to get out". He couldn't believe it. You know, they were all kind of like,

pissed off. This is kind of what I worked for this whole time but I said, "I've got to get out".

Grande And why, why did you decide to turn it out, turn it down and get out?

Belen Um, war, you know, everyday it's Russian roulette. You know, and, and given the kind of person I am, I would've died out there. You know I would've been out there as much as I could, and being that I'm not really scared of anything, I kind of realized, "You know what, man? If you come back, you may not, you know, leave alive the next time". Because you really can't argue with two birthdays there and kind of, surviving all of these things. And so, you know, I said a prayer, I prayed to God and I asked, you know, for life. I said, you know, "If you let me live through the rest of this deployment, I'll do good in this world and I'll work as hard as I kind, but just give me life". Because I understood, you know, "Wait a minute, I want to see the world, I want to have a family one day". You know, all of these came to me in combat and it was a pretty gut-wrenching decision but I knew it was the right decision. So, yeah, that's what happened.

00:35:10 **Returning home, feeling nothing**

Grande Um, what was it like coming home after you were deployed to Iraq?

Belen There was nothing left, man. I was a shell of who I was before. It was kind of bizarre, because I remember, um, being told it was time to go home. I didn't care. Everyone else is like excited and all that, and I remember, uh, I believe it was Sergeant Williams, you know, he kind of nudged me, "Aren't you excited?". You know, "Aren't you...". No, I had been there for so long, you know, and then going home for the first time in over two years. There was an element of excitement that I was hoping to have, like personally, but there was just nothing there, man. I had to kind of fake it because I was just kind of bled dry by everything.

Grande Uh, you were given, were you given R&R when you got back?

Belen They gave me, yeah, they gave me, I think it was thirty days, or. It was enough, I didn't get to go home so they gave me as much time as they could and I slept for, like, the first week. So, they gave me a little time and, yeah. I went back to Germany.

00:36:30 **Work with other branches of the military**

Grande During your time in the service, did you work with any other U.S. armed force branches?

Belen We, uh, yeah, out there, marines. You know, I call it the most beautiful thing you can ever see from a military standpoint, if you go to combat and see us all work together. You know, I had some SF guys, Navy SEALs, um called in air strikes. So, you know, I worked with pretty much all the... even the Coast Guard was

out there. Which was pretty awesome, they were guarding the waters and I was like, "What are you guys doing out here?" 3705

Grande Um, going back to, um, Esens, Germany, before you were deployed, where did you guys do out there when you were on, on liberty?

Belen Oh, well, we were a bunch of nineteen-year-olds, you know, just, uh, go out on the town, man. You know, and just, uh, some guys, obviously, got married and stuff like that. But for the most part, we all stuck together. We hang out in the barracks, you know, do as much as we can. Go to the gym, lift, just kind of live as much as we... Travel on the weekends. You know, go to Italy, go to Paris or something like that. We travelled, and partied a little bit.

00:37:45

Promotion to Specialist and discharge from the Army, medals awarded

Grande Uh, when were you promoted to Specialist?

Belen Oh, down range. Uh, down in Iraq. They wouldn't, they wouldn't give me my sergeant until I reenlisted. So, yeah. Didn't give me my stripes, but it's OK.

Grande Uh, when were you discharged from the Army?

Belen January, '05. Exactly three years from enlistment.

Grande What was your last day in the service like?

Belen They gave me what is known as terminal leave. So, I had another thirty days, um, available to take off. If you perform a certain way, they give you terminal leave, and because I had all of my stuff in order, they actually let me go home from Germany in December. So, it was tough. It was, uh, leaving Germany, because I knew that was the end of the run and I said bye to everyone and... I just couldn't believe that it was over. You know, it was just kind of one of those things. I remember joining, and basic, and it was all like yesterday. You know, but, but the last day was the hardest day because I wasn't required to be at formation and I watched formation happen from a window. I took a picture of the, picture of all of them. I actually have it at home, and uh, cried a little bit. Yeah, [shrugs] that's it. I flew back home and I was home in December of '04. You know, and the enlistment ended in January. So, I was already home about a month before, officially, it was over.

Grande Were you awarded any medals or citations, during your service?

Belen Yeah, uh, quite a few. Three Army Commendation medals, Global War on Terrorism, Combat Action Badge, Minute Man lapel pin. I don't know them all, verbatim, but you know, I was pretty decorated for the time I was in.

Grande Uh, what was the highest rank you earned in the Army?

Belen E-4, specialist.

00:40:00 Plans after leaving the Army, feeling out of place in civilian life

Grande And, uh, after leaving the Army, what were your plans?

Belen [Sighs] That was the thing. I didn't have a clue, go home and figure it out. I mean, you know, that, that was really it. Um, I had the urge to go National Guard, to go SF National Guard unit. Maybe, SWAT, you know, kind of... It was hard, understanding that, I wouldn't be in a war zone anymore. So, my mind was kind of think how in a civilian side how I could work within that. It was Blackwater, so I had those kinds of thoughts. But that's when, when I was boots on the ground home again, that's when the PTSD started to hit, because my mind was kind of all over the place

Grande How did your experience in the military affect your life as a civilian?

Belen It altered everything. You know, because you essentially become a war machine. You, you know, you adapt to your element, you adapt to what you're good at, I guess. So, understanding that I couldn't, those attributes didn't fit, you know, and I'm going to work at Kinkos and you know cash people out? Maybe not. So, you know, if affected me immediately when I got home, because I had that displacement feeling. I felt like I didn't belong here, you know. I don't, I look at another civilian and we can't communicate the same way. Stuff like that.

00:41:40 Annual reunion for friend that died in Iraq

Grande Have you kept in touch with any of the people you met in the Army?

Belen All of them. All of them. We have an annual reunion every year at my, my buddy who got killed in Iraq, on his family farm in Texas. He's buried on the family land, so every year we get together in April and we have this huge event out in Livingston, Texas. They built a big wall because he liked mountain climbing, so there's this huge event that we all come together, um, from all across the country and the world and we all get there as many times as we can. And, there's some guys, this past April I hadn't seen in thirteen, fourteen years and it was just like [snaps fingers] picking up from where we left off.

Grande Looking back on your career in the Army, is there anything that you would have done differently?

Belen No, I have zero regrets. For the time, amount of time I was in, my conscious is clear. I worked as hard as my hands would allow me to. Not one regret, no.

00:42:55 Struggles with PTSD and raising awareness

Grande Is there, uh, anything else you would like to talk about?

Belen Well, no. It's just the, what I'm doing now. You know, the PTSD issue that we're facing, you know, as a country. Because, you know, as soon as I came home, you know, that's kind of where the PTSD bells started to ring. And fast-forward, thirteen years later, you know, I battled suicide due to the PTSD, virtually the entire time. And so, having gone through the VA system and having issues with medications, I essentially almost became one of the twenty-two, you know that's that number that's out there, that I believe it's much higher. But, um, PTSD, for me, is what I'm focusing on now, because of the suicide. You know, I don't believe that enough attention is being made to it. Having been there myself, understanding how real it is, understanding that it's not just the vet. It's the family, it's the mother, the father, the silent victims, we call them, the spouses and children. Um, you know, people need to realize that we have that war that we're fighting over there, but we have an eternal fight, a mental one, essentially, when we come home. So, I want to shift the narrative of just focusing on us when we're at war. The media tends to you know, "These guys are, you know, boots on the ground, they're fighting". You see media coverage every day on it and then once that goes away, we go away. But it's, it's like, no, please kind of stick with us and understand that we still struggle every day after leaving the war.

Grande And, um, friends that came back home with you, did a lot of them also suffer from PTSD?

Belen Yeah. We lost more guys to PTSD than we did down range, you know, the suicide. Yeah, we all in our own way we all have it but when we come together... My wife is the one who brought this to my attention, when we're all together in a group and you're kind of sitting back and watching us all interact, there's nothing wrong with any of us, because we're all together again. And there's that tight-knit relationship, that band of brotherhood that you build out there. Um, but we're all affected in our own way.

00:45:38 **Quitting corporate career to speak and raise awareness for PTSD**

Grande Is there, uh, anything else that you would like to share?

Belen Um, honestly, just, um, my mission now. You know, I had an amazing corporate career in corporate America. I was one of the top direct insurance agents in the country for a decade but, again, PTSD was always prevalent. The suicide, you know, was always there. So, I battled these, you know, issues while performing at a high level in corporate America and, fortunately, I was able to withdraw myself, you know, from corporate America and say, "You know what? There's a calling for me". And going back to that promise I made to myself, you know, to God on the battlefield, that I'll do good in this world. I said, "You know what? There's too much suffering within my own ranks". My brothers and sisters, you know, everyday they're ending their lives and lives are being destroyed every day. Because it's not only that we lose the vet, but it's that little girl, you know, who doesn't have daddy anymore to walk her down the aisle and things of that nature. So, I essentially said good-bye to corporate America and have given my

life now to doing speaking to bring awareness to PTSD, to bring, hopefully, that suicide number down to zero one day and because if no one speaks up on a major scale, no one's going to hear us. Since we're crying out every day for help, these twenty-two a day, we're all screaming, "Please, someone listen!" And it's like those screams are falling on deaf ears because the numbers on suicide are still there and so... I just want to make it known that there's a combat vet here that has been there, that understands what we're all going through and is doing everything he can to, hopefully one day, end veteran suicide. You know, to inspire other vets like myself that have PTSD to say, "I have PTSD but PTSD doesn't have me". You know, it's kind of dissecting PTSD from where it's viewed now in society and understanding that it's not just the vet that suffers, you know. It's Susie, it's Mickey, it's the whole family, and if we can create enough, you know, awareness and disruption as to what's happening, hopefully the folks that are the influential ones can make these decisions. The doctors, the lobbyists, the, you know, political figures that can actually implement change and how PTSD is viewed and how it's treated, you know. That's my only goal. You know, my life now... even if I can only save one life speaking, even if it's just one, that's a win for me. You know, I have... I don't do it for me, I say, I do it for the future patriot. I do it for the kids that are coming home from war in twenty years, whenever the next great war is fought. For these kids to come home, so, not to come home to hopelessness. I try to give hope to the hopeless. I was a combat guy, I had all of these things stacked against me when I came home, no college, all this stuff but I kind of defied the odds and went after it and went and got it. And I want to inspire as many people as I can by doing that. That's all, man.

Grande Well, this concludes our interview. Thank you, Mr. Belen, for your time today and your service. The UCF Veterans History Project and I greatly appreciate it. We will be in touch when your copy of the interview is ready.

Belen All right, man.

End of Interview