

Interviewer:

Good afternoon. Today is April 9, 2019, and I am here in the West Point Center for Oral History with Francis "France" Hoang, U.S.M.A. ~95. Welcome back; I'm so glad you're here with us today.

Francis "France" Hoang:

It's great to be here today.

Interviewer:

Thank you. Could you please spell your last name for the transcriber?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Hoang, H-O-A-N-G.

Interviewer:

Alright, excellent. Tell me a little bit about your childhood. When were you born?

Francis "France" Hoang:

I was born September 26, 1973, in Saigon, Vietnam.

Interviewer:

In Saigon, huh?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

What did your parents do?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So my father was a South Vietnamese Army officer. My mother was a civilian who worked for the U.S. Naval Attache.

Interviewer:

Okay. And your father, what unit was he in, do you know?

Francis "France" Hoang:

I don't know. My understanding - I don't know exactly. My understanding was a Basic Training unit.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Interviewer:

And you said earlier that your folks came down from the North, probably when they were little, in ~54?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah, so my family's originally from North Vietnam.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

My mother more from the central part of Vietnam, my father from the northern part, but they were both part of the immigration of Catholics from the North to the South in 1954, after Dien Bien Phu.

Interviewer:

Okay. And so you left in April of ~75, correct?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yes.

Interviewer:

And you were two years old, so you probably don't even -

Francis "France" Hoang:

Don't remember a thing.

Interviewer:

Less than, less than a -

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay, but what have you found out about becoming a refugee and leaving South Vietnam when the country fell?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah. I mean, you know, I grew up in small-town America, little town called Tumwater, Washington. Very kind of "Friday Night Lights," lots of football with rain kind of childhood. But growing up, you know, one of the things as far as learning about it was more about my family's history in the context, right, the historical -

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

context for it. And I, I still remember making a visit in 1987, when I was in middle school, to Washington, D.C., as part of an eighth-grade field trip, and visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, and it made really a strong impact on me. And I saw, I started researching and learning more, and then talking to my family more about it. And what I learned and was able to piece together was that we were part of the evacuation of over 130,000 Vietnamese in the closing days of the Vietnam war, in the spring of 1975. Something called Operation Frequent Wind. The United States government decided that it did not want to leave its Vietnamese allies together, and so there's a concerted effort to airlift a number of them. To set out Navy vessels to meet those that were leaving by aircraft under their own accord, going out to sea, and also to, you know, send out a flotilla of Navy vessels to round up, collect up, all the Vietnamese that were leaving by boat as well. And my family was one of those fortunate ones that got to leave by aircraft.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

On April 23, 1975, my mother was contacted by her superiors at the U.S. Naval Attache, and said, "Look, we think you should leave, and we think you should leave now." And so she gathered my father, my younger sister, and my father's mother, and we made our way to Saigon International Airport.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And from what my family told me, it's kind of harrowing. My father was not supposed to leave the country. He was, you know, a Vietnamese military officer, and there was a moment when there was a gate guard there, and some American soldier - my father had lost his, you know, gotten rid of his uniform, but still only had a I.D. card that clearly showed that he was a member of -

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis "France" Hoang:

the enemy's armed forces. And so the gate guard, there was a moment when the gate guard takes my father's I.D., looks at my father, looks at the I.D., looks at his family - us, looks at the I.D., looks at my father, and waves us through.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

So, you know, a decision by probably some E4, right, who I'll never know, changed the course of my family's history.

Interviewer:

Wow. And so your father, you know, is torn between duty and family, and in a very difficult situation.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah. He had to make an impossible choice.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Right? I mean, I can't even imagine having to, you know, you swear an oath, right?

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

To serve, and you also obviously have a obligation to your family, and, you know, he had to choose.

Interviewer:

Right. And your sister must've just been an infant at the time.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah, she was a newborn.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis "France" Hoang:

I know. She was born in January, and this -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And this is April.

Interviewer:

So you're two months old, and your mom is having to get her moving. Wow. Okay, and so then you were on a plane, and where'd you fly to?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah, so actually, there's one more kind of a little interesting story. Apparently, my parents told me that - so we were put on a bus to get onto a Air Force C-141 Starlifter, and so there's this bus with a bunch of Vietnamese soon-to-be refugees. But there was a line of Vietnamese M.P.s that were guarding the airport and trying to make sure that no Vietnamese Army officers, military officers, left. And so there's a C-141 Starlifter with engines running, there's us in a bus, and there's Vietnamese in between, and it's a stand-off. And according to my parents, what happened next is pretty interesting. The bus actually accelerates and makes a hard turn and drives to the other end of the runway, where there's another C-141 Starlifter with its engines running, and before the Vietnamese M.P.s can react, they've offloaded all of us. We jump onto the U.S. Air Force aircraft and fly off.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis "France" Hoang:

So that's how we actually exited the country.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And from there we flew to Guam, so there was - the beginnings of a operation to kind of process all these what are called refugees.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

We were actually under a different status, parolee status, but I'll use the term refugees. They started setting up these camps in Guam for all these refugees that were leaving, and the island of Guam isn't that big, you know, only a few tens of thousands of folks, and within days, there's tens of thousands of Vietnamese arriving. So my family arrived, we were part of the early kind of group that came there, settled in. We were there for just a few

weeks before we jumped on another aircraft and flew to Camp Pendleton, California, which was the first of one of four resettlement camps that the United States would - opened up as part of what's called Operation New Life, which was the operation set up to help all of the Vietnamese leaving get resettled into the United States. I actually have a immunization card that dates all the way back to Guam - like it's signed by a doctor in Guam, it has Guam on it -

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis "France" Hoang:

So it's one of the oldest documents I have.

Interviewer:

Okay. Is there anything in your memory - now, keeping in mind you're less than two years old.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Is there any image in your memory of any of this?

Francis "France" Hoang:

No. The only thing I remember is not an image, it's a feeling, of being - of going from being really hot to being really cold.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

I don't know why, you know, but that's what I remember.

Interviewer:

All right. And I've heard Camp Pendleton in the, you know, in the early days was very cold for -

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah, maybe it was.

Interviewer:

Some of the Vietnamese that were there.

Francis "France" Hoang:

That may be what I remember.

Interviewer:

Okay. So - but your memories start when you're up in Washington, right?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yes.

Interviewer:

And what was the town in Washington?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So Tumwater, Washington. This is another kind of interesting twist to the tale I've learned since then. When we arrived in California, it was not without controversy. Governor Brown of - the then-Governor of California - actually famously was opposed to the resettlement of Vietnamese in his state. He sent out aides to actually try to stop aircraft from landing.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And he wasn't alone. There was a significant public sentiment against the Vietnamese coming. I found a Gallup poll referenced in a paper article from around this time, like literally May of '75, that said only 36% of Americans were in favor of the Vietnamese coming here - 64% actually opposed the Vietnamese resettling in the United States. Governor Brown, when he made that proclamation, at that same time, the Governor of

Washington State, Governor Dan Evans, heard this, and was like, "Hmm, what's this about?" So he sent his aide, a man, a young assistant - he was named Ralph Monroe, future Secretary of State of Washington State - down to Camp Pendleton to report on what he saw. And so Ralph Monroe comes down while I'm there, takes pictures, takes video, shows back up to the Governor to make a report, but in the meantime, he delivered a message to the refugees, which is, "Washington State wants you."

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

You know, "Come one, come all, Washington State will have you." And that act of generosity and political courage by Dan Evans and members of his staff - including Ralph Monroe, and Skip Li, and Bruce Chapman - resulted in more Vietnamese coming to Washington State, you know, per capita, than I think just about any other state. And so even to this day, you know, Washington State has a disproportionate Vietnamese population because of it. And so one of - my family was actually one of those that went to Washington State. My father - it actually worked out well. My father wanted to grow fruit trees for a reason, and somebody told him that fruit trees grow well in Washington State, so we ended up in the rainy state.

Interviewer:

Okay. All right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

By the way, the fruit trees are on the other side of the state, but we didn't know that.

Interviewer:

So where is Tumwater?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Tumwater is in the South Puget Sound. It's just south of the state capital of Olympia.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

It's a town of - back then, it was a town of about 9,000 people. Its major local industry at the time was brewing beer - the Olympia Brewery, if you've ever had Olympia Beer?

Interviewer:

Yes. Yeah.

Francis "France" Hoang:

That's where it was brewed. It's the water. We had these Artesian wells and an old brewery, and so I grew up listening to the sound of the brewery blowing its whistle, and then smelling the vats of fermentation every time I drove past the brewery.

Interviewer:

Okay. When your folks got to Tumwater, what did they do for a living?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So my - we were very fortunate. We had a sponsor family take us in. One of the things the government did was they brought on twelve different non-government organizations to help resettle the Vietnamese, and so there were four camps opened up across the United States -

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And these 12 N.G.O.s came and each refugee was basically taken under its wing by one of these organizations, and in most cases, lashed, lashed up with a sponsor family. So in our case, we went from Camp Pendleton to Camp Murray, Washington, a National Guard base in Washington State, and we met our sponsor family, the Petersons, who lived just north of Olympia. And we lived with them for a while until they helped us get on our feet, and my father's first job was as a short order cook at a hotel, the Tyee Motor Inn, and my mother started as the lowest-paid clerical worker in the Department of Wildlife.

basically Finance Department. Now, years later, my father would retired after long service as a public servant of Washington State, and my mother actually held basically every job in the Department of Wildlife - later the Department of Fish and Wildlife's Finance Division, up to and including being appointed the Comptroller of the entire Division by the Governor of Washington State.

Interviewer:

Wow. So she really rose through the ranks, huh?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

That's wonderful. So what were your interests as a boy?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah. I was - so I was more of a mathlete than an athlete. You know, I definitely skewed towards kind of like using my brain. I was - you know, I went to - we were a one-town high school. You know, I was involved in student leadership, I practiced martial arts, I was a Boy Scout and then a Police Explorer, was a voracious reader, and from an early age, was really drawn towards this idea of service, of giving back. You know, once I found more out about my family's history and the context, and the military and what it did for my family and I, I knew I wanted to repay that debt in some way. I really did feel that's the word. I mean, I choose that word on purpose, you know. I grew up really feeling like I had a debt to the military in particular, and to the United States in general, that I wanted to repay.

Interviewer:

Okay. Did you keep in contact with your sponsor family throughout the years?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yes. The Petersons - and we're still in contact.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

There's actually a wonderful picture we have of my family and theirs. They actually happened to have two children, a boy and a girl, that are basically the same age as me and my sister, and so there's some great pictures of kind of me and my sister and the sponsor's family son and daughter all playing together and sitting next to each other.

Interviewer:

Okay. Did you feel welcomed into Washington State?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Oh, Washington State was, it was wonderful.

Interviewer:

Okay, no issues with being like the only Vietnamese kid in the school or anything like that, or?

Francis "France" Hoang:

You know -

Interviewer:

Or were there other Vietnamese families that settled in that city?

Francis "France" Hoang:

There were a few, not many. I mean, I guess it depends on what you mean by "many."

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis "France" Hoang:

There was enough, but it wasn't so much that there was like a - you know, some immigrant population centers, where there's so many, you can kind of have an identity just within that population? That was not Tumwater. There was other Vietnamese, but you know, my family was definitely on the side of assimilation, right? So you know, I grew up being assimilated into American society, and that's one of the things we do better than

any other country -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

in the world, right? I'm going to, I'm going to mangle the quote, right, but basically the quote from President Reagan is, you know, "You can go to Japan, but you can't be Japanese. You can go to France, but you can't be French. But anybody can become an American." And so one of the things that I've come to appreciate is anybody can come from anywhere, come here, and even as an immigrant, become an American. And certainly the children of immigrants, or those who grow up from a young age, right, we do a better job of imbuing American values into the people that come all around the world to here.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And I'm a case in point.

Interviewer:

Excellent. So throughout your desire for service and your interest in the military, somehow you heard about West Point. How?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So I planned to join the military when I was a senior, and a very fortunate thing happened. Lieutenant General Howard Francis Stone, West Point Class of '55 - retired three-star General, used to be the Base Commander of Fort Lewis, was in charge of I Corps - he has retired in Olympia. And he was involved with the different schools in the area and he came by my high school, and we had created these scholarship and counseling packets of our history. And for whatever reason, he keyed in on mine. And so I get this phone call one day from a retired three-star General, and I don't know anything about the military, so I don't understand like it's not normal for three-star Generals, retired or otherwise, to call people.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Right? And like that. And he says, "Hey, Francis, I got your copy here," you know. "I'd like for you to consider going to West Point." And so that, that was the beginning of a, of a mentorship and friendship that, you know, helped change the course of my life. He took me under his wing. We had many long conversations about, about service, about West Point. And along the process, he helped me out in innumerable ways, so a couple of stories. He told me, "Look, Francis, if you have anything you're worried about, any concerns, any doubts, just give me a call." So one day I called him and said, "Hey sir, France Hoang here. I'm really worried about passing the physical aptitude examination, the P.A.E."

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Like, "I'm not - I'm a mathlete, I'm not an athlete." He goes, "No worries. Meet me at Fort Lewis on this Saturday at this location." So I drive up to Fort Lewis, and it's the gym at Fort Lewis, and I realize like this is the gym where the following week I will take the P.A.E., and the gym is set up for the P.A.E. And there's a Colonel running around, and the Colonel runs me through the P.A.E. with General Stone providing helpful comments and commentary all along the way. I didn't realize until many years later how abnormal it is, right, to have a three-star General commandeer a base gym for an afternoon, and I think that was the Garrison Commander, actually.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Right? And have - run a potential candidate through a test P.A.E. at the location. Like, that's how much General Stone cared.

Interviewer:

And if I remember correctly from all these -

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

years ago, it was the kneeling basketball throw -

Francis "France" Hoang:

That's right.

Interviewer:

A shuttle run, and pull-ups?

Francis "France" Hoang:

The shuttle run, kneeling basketball throw - I can't remember what the third event is.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

But it is, it's definitely showing my age, yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Francis "France" Hoang:

So maybe I'm repressing the memory, because it was so scarring.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis "France" Hoang:

The - I remember going through the entire application process, getting my nomination from Representative Jolene Unsoeld, actually getting accepted conditionally to West Point, and then waiting for my medical to come back. And then getting this letter that says, "We're sorry, you're medically disqualified because of your eyesight," because I was blind as a bat. Like, I think I was so blind I actually qualified for a state seeing-eye dog under the laws of the State of Washington - I was so blind.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And I was so blind that not only was I not acceptable to West Point, I wasn't commissionable as an Army officer, apparently -

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis "France" Hoang:

was what the letter said. And so I tried to work this through the system as best I can, 'cause I didn't want to just call up the General for every problem.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And what I discovered at the end of the day was that this was - there's only really one route, which was to get a Superintendent's Waiver. Apparently, the Superintendent can waive basically anything, is what I was told. So I call up General Stone, I said, "Hey sir," I described to him the situation, you know - "I've got this medical issue. My appointment's been revoked." And he goes, "Well, who do we need to call?" I said, "Well, apparently, the only person that can give a waiver is the Superintendent." He goes, "No problem, let me give Dave a call." And so two weeks later, I get this

letter, "You've received a Superintendent's Waiver, you're on your way to become a member of the Class of '95." A little asterisk, years later - that was General Dave Palmer.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And years later, I was at a Founder's Day giving the youngest grad speech, and he was the keynote speaker.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

So I had a chance to tell this story in front of General Palmer, and actually close the, close the loop on it.

Interviewer:

That's fascinating.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah, and I actually have - I actually have my Cadet medical records -

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Francis "France" Hoang:

and there is - I've seen it in the file where my medical evaluation, there's a big "disqualified," and then there's a big old stamp, "Superintendent's Waiver," signed by Dave Palmer, you know, "Grant admission."

Interviewer:

Now, I might get this wrong, but I think General Palmer is Class of '56, so there's a chance that the two of them knew each other from way back.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Oh, I'm sure they did. I'm sure they did.

Interviewer:

I mean, from even before the -

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer:

General officer thing, but wow, that's fascinating.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

So you got to come to West Point, and what is your most vivid memory of R-Day?

Francis "France" Hoang:

My most vivid memory of R-Day was there's a stage on R-Day where you're trying on gray trousers.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so you show up, of course, and you've got your back then really ugly shorts, right? The shorts have gotten much better. Then you have your R-Day tags on one side.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And you take your shorts off, you put them in your laundry bag that you're carrying around, and you put on gray trousers. So when that happened, I put on the gray trousers, and I whipped back to go to grab my Cadet laundry bag, and it was gone. Somebody had grabbed my laundry bag with my shorts in it and my R-Day tags. So I went through all of R-Day wearing long gray trousers.

Interviewer:

Oh no.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Which, as you know, the first rule of R-Day is, "Don't stand out."

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

What - does - it doesn't stand - it would be hard to stand out more than wearing gray trousers. Being the only Cadet in your entire Beast Barracks Regiment wearing gray trousers on R-Day. So basically, everywhere I walked, I got stopped - and because they didn't have my R-Day tags, they didn't know where to send me, because the R-Day tag is how they keep track of where you go. So I couldn't - I reported to Cadet in the red sash twice - I mean, I - yeah. I don't think I - yeah. I just pinged around R-Day. It was a terrible, horrifying, scaring experience, and then years later, I realized that actually I skipped a very important step. When I came back from Buckner I went to sign in to my Company again, and the way you sign in is they take your - actually the book where you signed in originally from R-Day, and you sign in again. Well, I had not ever signed in to my Cadet Company, so now the Upperclassmen were giving me, you know, this rash that I technically had not attended West Point for the last two, last two years - but I never signed in to West Point on R-Day.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

All right, and the other thing is, it was probably very hot on R-Day, and, and so instead of wearing shorts like everybody else, you're in wool trousers.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yes. Yeah. Those things were not designed for comfort. You know, they're not exactly a sport fabric.

Interviewer:

No.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

So at West Point, how did you do academically, militarily, and physically?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So I was - academically, I was - that was probably my strong suit. After my first semester at West Point, I was actually number two academically in my class. I think I was tied number one militarily. Physically, not so strong, but more than offset the other two categories. The nearest I came to flunking out of West Point was definitely rock swimming.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah. I was, you know - when they tested you during Beast Barracks for swimming ability, I told them, "I can swim." They threw me in the pool anyways, and I proceeded to just float down to the bottom and sit until they dragged me out. They go, "Okay, well, we're going to put in you some remedial swimming during Beast Barracks," and so I did that, and I still remember distinctly that there was this one day where - and you could do any sort of stroke, right? They would let you kind of - they're trying to decide whether you can do remedial swimming during the academic year or not.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so they pulled me out of the pool and says, "You're bad, but you're not that bad. Everybody else in the pool that remains, you're getting remedial swimming." So I was the worst of the not-remedial swimming group.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Which actually meant that when I began rock swimming, I was probably the worst of all of West Point, right? Because every worse-than-me had actually been doing remedial swimming for the entire first semester. Which results in me showing up to rock swimming, and being just utterly terrified every day that not only was I going to flunk out of West Point, but I was going to drown. And in fact, on one of my classes - I remember distinctly we were doing the bob-and-travel, right? So for those who aren't familiar, the bob is where you go down to the base of the pool, and then you push up, right, at an angle, get a breath of air, and you float back down again, and that's how you cross the pool. So we were doing this, and I do one successful bob and travel, and I do a second one, and the third one, I don't quite get up to the top of the pool, so I don't get my breath. No problem, I'll sink back down. I jump back up, and I miss it a second time, so I start doing what you don't supposed to do, which is panic.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Francis "France" Hoang:

So the other rock swimmer nearest me decides to be helpful, and he decides to be helpful by getting underneath of me and trying to push me up from underneath. Now, granted, this is a swimming pool full of rock swimmers, right, so this isn't like "Baywatch." And so two other rock swimmers come close to me to try to help out, and I do what drowning people do, which is they grab onto the nearest thing, so I grab onto two of my fellow rock swimmers at the same time, so there's a Cadet underneath me pushing up, and I've got a stranglehold on two other ones. And all this thrashing in the pool disturbs the bobbing and traveling of half the other Cadets in the pool, and so they start flailing, so at this point, I am functionally drowning like a half of my rock swimming class. The Cadet Instructor, Swimming Instructor, just kind of looks at me, and all of a sudden I feel this gigantic hook wrap around my waist, and he pulls me out. And he gives me this talking-through, and he - he manages to fish out everyone else from the swimming pool as well. And he gives me this talking-to about, you know, keeping my, keeping my calm, and not giving up, and getting back in the pool, and he actually forced me to go right back in - which was probably the best thing ever, 'cause I didn't have enough time to process that, you know, I really should be scared to death of dying. And anyways, survived that day, and then ended up surviving rock swimming, and getting a D-plus, which was "I will take it."

Interviewer:

Yes.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

But that's fabulous. What did you major in?

Francis "France" Hoang:

I was a management major.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

In the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership.

Interviewer:

And how did that go for you?

Francis "France" Hoang:

It was great. I loved the B.S. and L. The best part about the management major is it allowed me to take courses from a variety of disciplines. This has been kind of a theme in, I think, in my professional life. I like doing multiple things, so the idea of being able to take management courses, and law courses, and systems courses, and, you know, social science courses, was terrific, exhilarating.

Interviewer:

Excellent. When it came time to pick a Branch, what did you choose?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So I've always had this longstanding interest in law enforcement, one, and second, when I served, I wanted to go out and do a mission, right? Like I wanted to go deploy. I wanted to put on a uniform and go for it, right? I wanted to pay back by actually serving in an active, active theater of some type, or some kind of active operation. And so in the mid-90s, what we were, what the Army was doing back then, right, was peacekeeping, and I knew Bosnia was just kicking up.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so I figured my best chance of deploying would be to go M.P.s and choose Europe.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so that's what I did.

Interviewer:

Where did you go?

Francis "France" Hoang:

I ended up being assigned to the 95th M.P. Battalion, based out of Mannheim, Germany, and as a Platoon Leader there, I deployed with the 272nd M.P. Company into the second wave into Operation Joint Endeavor, which was the peacekeeping operation in the former Yugoslavia.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Parts of Croatia and Bosnia.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now, did you have to cross the Sava River and do all that?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So interestingly, there was three crossing points for the Sava River, and the middle one was a town called Slavonski Brod. So my Platoon's responsibility is we actually ran security on the bridge and to the north and south of the bridge, and so the Croatian side of Slavonski Brod was our checkpoint, and then the south side, a town called Srpski Brod, which was under Soviet control, was also one of our checkpoints.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

So that was our main mission, as well as M.S.R. - main supply route - security, so the roads leading to and from the Slavonski Brod bridge.

Interviewer:

Okay. And you were there from '96 to '97 -

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yes -

Interviewer:

right?

Francis "France" Hoang:
Nine months' deployment.

Interviewer:

Okay. When did your deployment end in '97?

Francis "France" Hoang:
That's a good question.

Interviewer:

'Cause you may have been at Slav Brod when I crossed it.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Oh, really?

Interviewer:

At some point - yeah. That's how we came in, through - from Taszár, Hungary, down into -

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yep.

Interviewer:

into Bosnia.

Francis "France" Hoang:

That exact route, yeah, Taszár, and then - so we were what's called a re-staging base. There's a good chance during that time frame we would've crossed. In fact, one of the things my Platoon did was we put M.P. vehicles at the front and back, and then we escorted all these convoys across the bridge. So it was wonderful to see classmates come through, or former instructors, or folks I knew from the Academy, and you know, be - you know, I'd make it a point to jump on those convoys and escort my, my colleagues and comrades across the Sava River.

Interviewer:

Wow, that's fascinating. So what did you think of your deployment in Bosnia?

Francis "France" Hoang:

It was a great experience. I mean, there's nothing better than leading a Platoon as a Platoon Leader, particularly on a real-world mission, right?

Interviewer:

Right, where you're doing it every single day.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yes.

Interviewer:

And so what sort of things did you do as a Platoon Leader?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So I worked very closely with my Platoon Sergeant, a great N.C.O. called Sergeant First Class PAT FINDLAY. Interestingly, Pat was an M.P. who'd left and joined the Ranger Battalion, and then came back to be an M.P. And so he had a Ranger tab, and one of the things that I did before - so let's rewind the story. A month before I was graduating from West Point, my Branch rep, Major Denise Goodrow, Class of '82, comes to me and says, "Hey France, I've got a graduation present for you." I said, "Oh ma'am, you didn't have to." She goes, "Oh, wait, wait, wait - wait till I tell you what it is." I was like, "Okay, ma'am." She goes, "I've got you a slot to Rangers School." I go, "Ma'am." She goes, "Uh, wait - there's some conditions." And this is May -

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Of '95. She goes, "So Rangers School is shutting down to non-Combat Arms, okay? So Class 995 is the last class to allow non-Combat Arms, and I got you a slot in that class. It starts seven days after you graduate from West Point. You have to give up all your graduation leave, and because it's the only class that - it's the last class for non-

Combat Arms, if you fail any phase, youâ€™re not going to be allowed to recycle, and youâ€™re going to get kicked out of the school. So you got to make it straight through.â€ And so in mid-May of â€™95, I start preparing for Rangers School, and then show up in mid-June, seven days after graduation.

Interviewer:

Wow. That mustâ€™ve been a challenge.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

It was - it was an interesting experience. I remember, I remember showing up, and of course, everybody talks about what units theyâ€™re from.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

And so, you know, Iâ€™m wearing a set of B.D.U.s that I bought probably at Ranger Joeâ€™s on Victory Drive, and so the Rangers Instructor goes, â€œRanger Hoang, what unit are you in?â€ And of course, I have to answer honestly. â€œSergeant, I donâ€™t have a unit.â€ â€œWhat do you mean you donâ€™t have a unit? How long have you been in the Army?â€ And then I have to give the crazy answer of, â€œSergeant, Iâ€™ve been in the Army ten days,â€ right? And then they would just lose it, like -

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

â€œWhat are you doing here at Rangers School?â€ So I was not a stellar Ranger. I think, had Ranger School had any slightly higher standards back then, I would not have my tab. I was whatâ€™s called a blade runner - I was always on the edge of getting kicked out, you know. Pretty much, if you could fail it once and you get a second chance, I failed it the first time and made it on my second chance. I passed the bare minimum patrols, but I got my tab. And so when I showed up in Germany to get my Platoon, had a Ranger tab, and theyâ€™re instantly - Sergeant Findlay had a Ranger tab, too, which made us the only M.P. Platoon Leader/Platoon Sergeant combination together I think in Europe -

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

that were both Ranger-tapped. And so you asked me what I did as a Platoon Leader - you know, that N.C.O./Officer relationship is really, you know, really special, and obviously critical. And with me and Sergeant Findlay, I feel very blessed, â€™cause I think I got it in its kind of full blossoming form. I mean, we were a perfect team together. And so, you know, we prepared the unit for deployment. It was actually, actually deployed with a different Platoon Sergeant, because Sergeant Findlay ended up being the Company First Sergeant for a while, and then he ended up coming back to the Platoon.

Interviewer:

Okay. Excellent. How were your interactions with the Bosnians, or with any civilians?

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

So we dealt with them quite a bit. Itâ€™s interesting, you know. In contrast to like, you know, later in my time in Afghanistan, I didnâ€™t appreciate actually how much freedom we had in the Bosnia operations. Like it was - if I wanted to go out, I just went out. Very different than my Afghan experience, where it took a, you know, 54-slide PowerPoint deck to leave the wire, so I shouldâ€™ve appreciated it more when I was in Bosnia. But we got lots of interactions with the Bosnians, particularly in my role, â€™cause I was coordinating with the Bosnian border police, right, the Serbians on the south side, and then with the Croatians on the north side of the checkpoint. So I distinctly remember one time being asked to attend an opening at the police station, which was right next to the southern checkpoint. Now, we were in the demilitarized zone, essentially, the zone of separation called, that was created by the Dayton Peace Accords, and what that called for was for

both sides to remove their military forces from the area.

Well, what the Serbians did was the police forces left - or excuse me, the military forces left, and the next day the police forces arrived, which were the exact same people, the exact same units, with the exact same equipment, except for they were wearing - and I kid you not - purple camouflage.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

So that they'd look like very mean characters inspired by Barney.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

So purple camouflage head to toe -

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

What was not funny is that during my time there, we found the results of clearly some kind of genocide, right, some kind of mass incident. Before the war, there was a large number of Croats that lived in Srpski Brod, the Serbian town just south of the Slavonski Brod bridge, and pretty much, you know, in this - overnight, they disappeared, and nobody really knows what happened to them.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And during my time there, other forces found the mass graves.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And I think there's a high likelihood that the police forces that I was interacting with were probably involved, at least some of them were involved, with this.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so one day I was invited to the opening of the police station by the purple-suited, you know, police forces, and so I did go there, and it was like everything you've seen on a movie, right? Like these military folks. There was, you know, there was toasts, and there was these speeches, and had to work through the translator, and, you know, just I'm a 22-year-old Second Lieutenant, you know. I'm not like trained in diplomacy, but this is what Junior Officers do, right? We are the representatives of our governments in these kind of situations.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so thank God for West Point and the training the Army gave me beforehand.

Interviewer:

Did you notice any difference dealing with Serbs on one side of the bridge and Croats on the other side?

Francis "France" Hoang:

They're - you know, they're different. It's kind of hard to describe how.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis "France" Hoang:

I think we were more aligned with the Croats, right, just kind of generally as a people and as a nation. But I met, look, I met wonderful people, you know, throughout my deployment.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And, you know, did the best I could with whoever I met, right, to represent our country well, and to make good decisions, and to foster good relationships, 'cause at the end of the day, right, that's - relationships matter the most.

Interviewer:

That's it.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

That's it exactly. All right. So you returned from Germany, and from '98 to 2000, you served at Fort Leavenworth, where you were the Deputy Provost Marshal. What was your job there?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah, so when I was leaving, I was leaving Germany, Branch gave me two choices. I could either go to a Major's position and basically be the Deputy Chief of Police at Fort Leavenworth, or I could be a Basic Training XO at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. So obviously, I chose going to Fort Leavenworth rather than going to a Basic Training unit, so I was basically the number two kind of law enforcement executive, right, for Fort Leavenworth, which was an interesting experience. Fort Leavenworth is very much like West Point. It's a, it's a, it's an installation kind of around professional education, but instead of Cadets, it's Majors.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so as a First Lieutenant on a post that's predominately Majors, right, that's kind of an interesting dynamic. It also resulted in me giving a Founder's Day speech every year that I was there.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

As the youngest grad. I'm pretty sure at the time I was a First Lieutenant, promotable.

Interviewer:

Fabulous.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Now, were you a, were you a Garrison M.P., or were you - did you have any relationship with the Disciplinary Barracks, or did your job cover both of them?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah, so I was on the Garrison Law Enforcement side.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

The Disciplinary Barracks were a different unit, though of course, we talked and coordinated with them, you know, fairly frequently. They were literally, at that time, literally next door to the Provost Marshal's Office. They've since moved and constructed new barracks, it's the castle one, as they call it, right? It's not where we house our prisoners anymore.

Interviewer:

Okay. And so you had to do, I imagine, stuff like base security, and gate guards, and in charge of the M.P. patrols, and stuff like that?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah. Traffic accident investigators, detectives, the front desk - everything a police, a normal civilian police department had, we provided all the same things, up to and including a S.W.A.T. Team.

Interviewer:

Really.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Which was in the military - Military Police S.W.A.T. Teams are called S.R.T.s, Special Response Teams, and so I was also dual-hatted as the Commander of the base's S.R.T., which it was very fortunate, when I was a Cadet, I got to attend S.R.T. School, and so I was trained and ready to take over that responsibility when I showed up at Fort Leavenworth. And that was a fantastic experience. I got to select and train my own unit of basically S.W.A.T. responders.

Interviewer:

Excellent.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

All right, in 2000, you left the Army and entered the civilian sector, and first you earned a master's in criminal justice from Washburn University in 2000, and you served as a law clerk to the Honorable Jamie Baker, U.S. Court of Appeals Armed Forces Circuit from 2000 to 2001, correct?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Tell me a little bit about that experience.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah, so I actually got my master's while I was in the service still -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

so I did that in my last year at West Point. Washburn got a fantastic program back then, very early adopters of distance education.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so I was able to make that happen, and it was great, because I was learning about running a police department while I was running a police department. That's, you know, applied education at its finest.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Francis "France" Hoang:

When I decided to leave the Army, I actually wanted to be an F.B.I. agent. That was my plan. But they weren't hiring at the time, so I knew the F.B.I. liked lawyers, so I said, "You know, why don't I go ahead and get a law degree?" And so with no intention of ever practicing law - so I went to law school not to become a lawyer. I had - well, at West Point - done two Academic Individual Advanced Developments Programs, both in D.C., once at the Pentagon and the other one at the F.B.I., and had fallen in love with D.C. So I applied to all three George schools - George Washington, Georgetown, and George Mason. Got into Georgetown, and so went there and had a, again, a terrific, fantastic experience, particularly because I think, you know, if the military stereotype is like, you know, having a disciplined way of thinking, you know, having, you know, efficiency process, you know - I mean obviously, military officers are critical thinkers. But I think law school does a great job of teaching people the ability to issue-spot, and then to be able to make arguments on both

sides.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so, you know, there's that, there's that saying that a good lawyer can take a gray sheet of paper, argue that it's white, and then flip it around and argue that it's black, and do both well, right? So I think, you know, law school was an excellent kind of compliment to my West Point education in many ways. And during my time in law school, I - you have to figure out what you're going to do during the summer, and so my first summer, I was very fortunate to be able to serve as a summer law clerk in the chambers of Judge Jamie Baker. Judge Baker is a Yale graduate. His grandfather was actually the President of Yale in the '60s. He himself had served as a Marine Corps Officer and then served as a lawyer in the National Security Staff, and he was on his first year on the bench as a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces and so I was his first law clerk hire as a summer law clerk. And so -

Interviewer:

Excellent.

Francis "France" Hoang:

He has become a friend and a mentor, and it was a wonderful experience to, to, you know, apprentice at the, at the knee of a lawyer who, first, is a fantastic lawyer, but second, really believes in service, right? In the value that a lawyer can provide in, in the pursuit of our Constitution. And, you know, I remember him, one of the things he told me was he didn't believe in buildings or places being named after people. They should be named after concepts, like the Constitution or Liberty, and that just struck me for, for some reason. Like that's the kind of the way he thought.

Interviewer:

All right. Excellent.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Very principled man.

Interviewer:

And so after that, you, from 2002 to 2003, you were a law clerk on the Senate Judiciary Committee?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah. I was - you know, I really struggled with whether or not after 9/11 I should come back in.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And one of the things that happened is I went back to Judge Baker and I said, "Gosh, you know, should I go back in or not?" And he told me something interesting, which is there's a lot of folks that can serve in uniform. "Right now," he said, "there's not enough folks who have served in a uniform that can work at the policy level, and so strongly consider whether you want to consider serving in that fashion. It's not better or worse service, it's just different." And so after 9/11, I had the opportunity to serve as a law clerk in the Senate Judiciary Committee, at the time when it was wrestling with lots of interesting and critical issues, right? The authorization to use force against Iraq, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security - this is the U.S.A. patriot era.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so I got to work in Senator Arlen Specter's office as a law clerk, working for his General Counsel, in the midst of all this, while in law school.

Interviewer:

Wow. What sort of things did you learn while you were doing that?

Francis "France" Hoang:

I learned that government moves fast - except for when it doesn't. You know, a lot of my assignments were - we were just - as a country and as a people, we were just trying to get our arms around how we're going to respond after 9/11.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so, you know, what are, what are military commissions? What are these authorities? What - what - you know, we haven't done this in 40-50 years, so a lot of what I would do is, you know, I would get a call and say, "You've got thirty minutes to produce a one-pager on X issue," right? Like, summarize everything there is about, you know, the law on conflict in connection with this issue. And so I had to become very good at producing very concise work product very quickly, which is actually a very valuable skill, regardless of whatever you choose to do in life, right?

Interviewer:

I DIDN'T GO THERE.

Francis "France" Hoang:

To consume lots of information, pick out the really important issues, pro, con, summarize it, and produce that in a digestible fashion, quickly.

Interviewer:

Wow. Now, you mentioned 9/11. What was your experience with that, on that day?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So I was a student at Georgetown Law School. While at law school, I - the other thing I knew the F.B.I. liked was accountants, so I decided to pursue a C.P.A. exam test while I was in law school. And so I took 22-24 extra credits of accounting on top of my law school classes, and so I'd go to the main campus for those classes. And so on 9/11, I remember being at the Georgetown main campus, and all of a sudden, my cell phone stopped working, which I thought was odd, and then looking out a second floor window and seeing the Pentagon burning. So I saw on 9/11 firsthand, I could see from that window that the Pentagon had been hit.

Interviewer:

Okay. So you were in class when the first planes hit the towers too, then.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Wow. Okay. And how did things change in D.C. for the rest of that day?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah. You know, having served in the military, you know, and been in, in Bosnia as a peacekeeper, it was, it was strange to all of a sudden like walk the streets of D.C. and see Humvees, see soldiers, hear fast attack aircraft doing combat air patrols. Like, it was - it was kind of surreal, right? Like I did not expect this, you know, after the military, and in D.C.

Interviewer:

Wow. So in 2003, you graduated from Georgetown Law, and you began to work as an attorney for the firm of Williams & Connolly. What were you doing there?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So I was a litigator, so a trial attorney. Williams & Connolly is a fantastic law firm located in Washington, D.C., started by, you know, probably the foremost litigator of the 20th century, Edward Bennett Williams. He created this, this behemoth, this titan of a white collar law firm, and I was fortunate to work there as a summer associate in my second year of law school, and then get offered an opportunity to become an associate there. And so I spent two years working as a litigation associate, working for some incredible lawyers: Brendan Sullivan, Oliver North's attorney, the one who famously said, "I'm not a potted

plant,â€ David Kendall, you know, President Clintonâ€™s attorney, and Emmet Flood, who later on I would work for in the White House, and currently works in the White House as the lawyer in charge of the Russia response.

Interviewer:

Okay. Wow. Fascinating. So youâ€™re, youâ€™re getting to meet all these, all these fascinating people. From 2005 to 2006, you were the clerk for the Honorable Thomas B. Griffith of the U.S. Court of Appeals on the D.C. Circuit. How did that experience go for you?

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

It was fantastic. Again, he was another judge in his first year on the bench, so the joke for a while was what I like to do was, you know, break in new Federal Appellate judges.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

Not true, but it was a good joke. Heâ€™s, heâ€™s another fantastic lawyer, and has become a friend and a mentor, and I still remember during my interview with him, he opened up every single door we came across. And I thought that was a little odd, right - this is a new Appellate judge - and I realized, thatâ€™s just the way he is, and in fact, thatâ€™s what he does in life - he opens doors for other people.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

And working for him and seeing how the law is made, and watching him struggle with hard issues and being a part of that process, was a terrific education in the law, and actually, you know, gave me a lot of faith in the way our system of government works. Yeah, so I spent a year with him in chambers as one of his first four law clerks.

Interviewer:

Okay. Any big issues that you remember coming across his desk that, that you really recall?

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

We worked on a number of really interesting cases. We had a R.F.R.A. case involving whether or not the Chicago airports could build over a cemetery that the believers thought that if you disturbed the bodies, that the deceased would not go to heaven, so whatâ€™s the religious right IN BALANCE there, and the F.A.A., did they follow the procedures? We worked on any number of sentencing cases.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

We were, you know, we heard a couple of different national security related cases - this is, again, kind of post-9/11, these cases starting to percolate up, you know.

Interviewer:

Okay. From 2007 to 2009, you were the Associate Counsel to the President. What was that like?

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

So it was a terrifying and wonderful experience. I, I remember one day - so after I clerked, I went back to my law firm, and I remember opening up the Washington Post one day, and looking and seeing a picture of Fred Fielding and Emmet Flood, and they were going to the Senate that day, because the Democrats had taken over both the Senate and the House in the most recent election, and that meant that they had subpoena power again. So all these investigations of the President Bush 43 White House were beginning, and I thought to myself, â€œBoy, the worst place to be a lawyer in D.C. right now is the White House Counselâ€™s Office.â€ And that afternoon my phone rings. I look down, and the caller I.D. says 202, and the rest of the number is blank, and I go, â€œWell, thatâ€™s odd,â€ so I let

it go to voicemail. Well, it turns out 202 and the rest of them are blank is the caller I.D. that shows up when the White House calls your phone.

And so it was a voicemail from Mary Beth Bakke, Fred Fielding's secretary, asking if I'd be available that afternoon or as soon as possible for an interview with, with Mr. Fielding. And so long story short, I meet with Fred, he offers me a job as an Associate White House Counsel and Special Assistant to the President, and within two or three weeks, you know, I go from being an associate in a law firm to sitting in an office in the Old Executive Office Building, working for Emmet Flood as one of approximately fourteen associate White House Counsels now -

Interviewer:

Francis "France" Hoang:
being a lawyer for the President.

Interviewer:

Wow. That must've been an exciting, exciting time for you.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah. I remember the very first day I showed up at work, we were given instructions to just drive up to the gate and the Secret Service would have your name. So, you know, for those who've lived in D.C., we've driven past the White House any number of times, and we've seen those big, scary Secret Service gates, right, there. Gates, and armed guards, and big weaponry, and so it was frankly a little unnerving to like drive up, right?

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And I still remember driving up, and the Secret Service agent asked for my I.D., and I, and I give it to him, and I go, "I should be on a list." And he looks down a list, and he looks at me and he goes, "First day at the White House, sir?" And I go, "Yes." He goes, "Well, welcome to the White House." And that feeling I had when I drove through those gates for the first time never went away. I had that feeling every single day I drove through those checkpoints, the Secret Service checkpoints, and parked my car and walked into the Old Executive Office Building, because I knew whatever I did, even if it was making copies, right, I was doing it for the President, you know?

Interviewer:

How old were you at the time?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So it was 2007, April of 2007, so I was 34?

Interviewer:

So -

Francis "France" Hoang:

No, 33?

Interviewer:

Thirty-three. Thirty-one years before, you were a Vietnamese refugee.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Thirty-three years later, you're working at the White House.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Holy cow. What sort of things did you do as a, as the Associate Counsel?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So a fair bit of my work - and the main reason I was brought on - was to be part of the team of lawyers that were responding to Congressional subpoenas and other investigations. And so I spent a fair bit of my time working as part of the Investigations Response Team, and that's, you know, basically representing the White House in negotiations with

Congress over the production of documents, or the interview of witnesses, in responding to these investigations. Also spent a chunk of my time doing policy-related work, so I was one of two lawyers that supported the National - then it was called the Homeland Security Council. And I also had a portfolio of issues that I worked, and so the way it works in the White House is thereâ€™s any number of Associate White House Counsels, and basically everything the White House does is divided into portfolios, and that portfolio is assigned to an Associate White House Counsel. So thereâ€™s one who focuses on Treasury, thereâ€™s one who focuses on the Department of the Interior, right, thereâ€™s one who focuses on military issues - actually, thereâ€™s several.

And so in my case, I had Investigations, I had Homeland Security, and I also had a couple of interesting ones. I had W.H.M.O., which is the White House Military Office, which included Air Force One, and I had the Continuity of Government portfolio, which is the portfolio about what do you do, basically, in the worst-case scenario?

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

And so a lot of it was kind of planning for emergencies. You know, what do you do, how does the line of succession works, that sort of thing.

Interviewer:

Okay, thatâ€™s fascinating. So in 2009, you became the Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia?

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

Yes. So I left the White House, and was very fortunate to get a position to be a Federal Prosecutor for the Eastern District of Virginia, which is a, you know, one of the premiere U.S. Attorney Offices. Worked for just some fantastic lawyers, and worked with some very dedicated professionals.

Interviewer:

All right. And then you moved on, and you became a Partner in your own firm in 2010, and as well as the President of the MAG Defense Services?

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

Yes, so that was after my deployment.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

So letâ€™s jump down and talk to that, because you transitioned to the National Guard, and you were the XO for Bravo Company, Second Battalion, Twentieth Special Forces Group, and you went to Afghanistan, right?

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

Yeah. So, you know, my first period of service, you know, I did my five years in active duty. During my, during my kind of closing days in the White House, I - you know, during my White House time, Iâ€™ve become good friends with Michael Waltz, whoâ€™s now a Congressman from Florida, but back then, he was Vice President Cheneyâ€™s Advisor in Afghanistan-Pakistan Policy. And he - in December of 2008, Iâ€™m at a ceremony where he gets his second Bronze Star for Valor pinned on him by Vice President Cheney, and weâ€™re talking afterwards. And he goes, â€œFrance, I donâ€™t know what youâ€™re doing after you leave the White House, but what about, what about mobilizing you to come back on to active duty? I, my Special Forces Companyâ€ - heâ€™s the Commander of Bravo Company, Second Battalion, Twentieth Special Forces Group. He says, â€œMy Special Forces Company in the National Guard is mobilizing to go to Afghanistan in 90 days, and I donâ€™t have an XO, and Iâ€™d love you to, Iâ€™d love you to be that XO.â€ So I look at Mike, I go, â€œMike, I - I have not put on a uniform in nine years, and Iâ€™m

not Special Forces. And he says, you know, Details - we figure it out. And so we did. Originally, we originally thought that I was still in the I.R.R., and so his plan was just to mobilize me straight from the I.R.R. In fact, that's what I thought was going to happen. It turns out that actually I was no longer commissioned at all, and so I had to go back and get my commission.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis Hoang:

And so that's what I did. I got recommissioned into the Guard, recognized, brought in to Active Duty, and in March of 2009, was an Army Captain again, at the age of 34, after serving in the White House. And so, you know, shortly after leaving the White House, took a leave of absence from the U.S. Attorney's Office and mobilized to go train up for five months with the Special Forces unit, and of course, I was not Special Forces, and so there's a lot to, lot to learn, and a lot to prove, but I had a fantastic experience. We spent time training at Guernsey, Wyoming, in Mississippi, and then finally at Fort Bragg, and five months later, deployed to Afghanistan at F.O.B. Salerno, which was right there in the Khost province, right at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

So six Operational Attachment Alphas, A-Teams, and one Operation Detachment Bravo, the B-Team. Each of those teams was partnered with an Afghan unit from a couple of dozen to a couple hundred, spread all across, you know, eastern Afghanistan, and then turned out to be a somewhat kind of well-known deployment. We spent six weeks initially searching for Private Bergdahl after he walked off-base, and Mike Waltz was interviewed about it extensively for a podcast. And then towards the end of our deployment, one of our former bases that we had turned over to another government agency was attacked by a suicide bomber, which became the subject of the movie, Zero Dark Thirty. So Mike Waltz actually ended up writing a book about it called Warrior Diplomat, and so, you know, all the details of our deployments, and the good and the bad, and they're kind of in there.

Interviewer:

Okay. So how was your experience overseas?

Francis Hoang:

I - I loved it. I know that's a funny thing to say about war, right?

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis Hoang:

I found, I found that after the White House, I was a little burnt out. Life was very complex, it was complicated.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis Hoang:

I relished being, being in the Army again, putting on a uniform, and having a clear mission -

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis Hoang:

right? And being with soldiers, and knowing that I had two things to do, right: accomplish a mission, take care of my soldiers. Like that's it. That's life, right? And so - and I think a lot of soldiers have talked about this and, you know, described this, right? When you, when you go off to, when you go off to war, there's a focus in life, right?

There's a, there's a clarity of purpose that makes you feel like everything's in sharp relief.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis Hoang:

Right? It's clear what you have to do. And so leaving D.C., going from a world where I

picked out neckties for work to Afghanistan, a world where I was picking out hand grenades to take out on patrol, I, I welcomed it. I thought it was fantastic.

Interviewer:

Yeah. I like how you say that it, it was a clear sense of purpose and a clear mission. Thatâ€™s, thatâ€™s a neat way of looking at it.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay. And so when you came back, thatâ€™s when you became a Partner at your own firm?

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

Yeah. So the plan was actually to return to the U.S. Attorneyâ€™s Office, which had so wonderfully given me a leave of absence while I was -

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

mobilized. But when I was in Afghanistan, I received an e-mail from one of my former colleagues at Williams & Connolly by the name, from Joe Fluet. Joe is a former 160th pilot. Heâ€™d actually deployed to Afghanistan in 2005 as a, as a green-suiter and helped stand up the Afghan Air Force. He really is the, the father of -

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

the Afghan Air Force from the U.S. side. And in my time in Afghanistan, he had decided to leave our old law firm Williams Connolly, and had started not one, but two businesses: his own law firm, which at the time was Fluet & Huber, and a company called MAG Defense Services. And I get an e-mail, and he says, â€œLook, France, youâ€™re currently off fighting the Taliban. Keep doing that. But if you were here, Iâ€™d be twisting your arm to join my two start-ups, but just be prepared when you come back. Iâ€™m going to twist your arm. I want you to join the founding teams of these companies.â€ And so when I came back, thatâ€™s what happened. He did arm-twisting, I initially told him, â€œNo,â€ because I had a whole path. But then I applied what I call â€œthe rocking chair test,â€ which is where I said, â€œWell gosh, when Iâ€™m 98 years old and Iâ€™m looking back at my life, am I going to regret not having done this?â€

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

And I put this in the bucket of those things that I would regret not having done, you know. I just spent the last year putting myself in physical harmâ€™s way, right? I mean, during my deployment, I was, I was almost killed by a 107-millimeter Chinese rocket, hand grenades, and an I.E.D.-filled wheelbarrow. Whatâ€™s taking a little bit of professional and financial risk to be an entrepreneur? And so I called him back and said, â€œDo you know what? Actually, yes. Letâ€™s talk about this.â€ And so end up leaving the U.S. Attorneyâ€™s Office and becoming an entrepreneur.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

And starting both a - starting as both a Partner in a law firm, and as an executive and a member of the founding team of a company that eventually became known as MAG Aerospace.

Interviewer:

Okay. So itâ€™s an aerospace company?

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

Yeah. So MAG ended up growing to become a company that primarily provides I.S.R., aerial I.S.R. - aerial intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, so aero-surveillance operations. So basically, what MAG does is it operationalizes technology. And what do I mean by that? It takes these really high-end sensors, right, integrates them onto aircraft, combines that with people, right - very technically proficient people and know-how - and it provides that to customers as a capability.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

So just because you buy an F-15 doesn't mean you have an Air Force, right? Just because you own a very high-end, you know, very capable aircraft with sensors doesn't mean you have any capability to actually get usable information.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so what MAG does is it provides that as a service, mostly to our own government, but also to friendly foreign governments and to other entities. So for example, MAG was the very first contractor that provided drones for peacekeeping for the United Nations. We were the - we helped the United Nations stand up its original program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Interviewer:

Wow. Fabulous. You mentioned you were almost killed by a Chinese rocket, hand grenades, and a I.E.D.?

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Tell me a little bit about that experience, if you can.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Yeah. So - so look, I - these are small - these are war stories with a small W, right?

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis "France" Hoang:

There are many, many better tales out there, but -

Interviewer:

But this one is yours.

Francis "France" Hoang:

This one is mine, I guess. So my three semi-close brushes - one is I was - went out to the range, had a great time at the range, came back, it's a nice, sunny day. I'm in my Motor Pool looking around. Normally I like to hang out, said, "You know, I should get back and go back to work." So I walk into the door and I sit down in the OPS Center, the Operations Center, and it's not more than ten seconds from the time I go to the front door and I sit down where there's this massive explosion, like the whole building rocks. And everyone's looking at each other, like, "Whoa, what was that?" Well, what it was, was a Chinese rocket had hit - a Chinese-made rocket, excuse me, had not been fired by the Chinese actually, but -

Interviewer:

Sure, yeah.

Francis "France" Hoang:

but fired by the Afghans - had hit the building next to us, where the Asymmetric Warfare Group was, and had sprayed the Motor Pool with shrapnel.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Like I mean you could see like holes everywhere, where I'd been standing not more

than ten seconds earlier.

Interviewer:

Holy cow.

Francis "France" Hoang:

So had I decided to linger and enjoy the lovely weather ten seconds longer, right, I might be, you know, a little bit more holey than I am now. Second, we were doing a patrol with MRAPs up this valley, and on our way back down - because unfortunately there's only one way in and one way out, which is not, you know, the greatest tactical situation, but we took that risk. And on the way back, somebody started dropping hand grenades on our convoy from up above, so we were literally like in a valley, there's cliffs up above, and somebody starts dropping hand grenades on our patrol. So - and I was like, "Seriously? In today's day and age, being ambushed with hand grenades from a cliff? Like, is this a Road Runner movie?" Right? Like, I can't believe this. Like, there's no small arms fire. It's just hand grenades. And so, you know, luckily, you know, we have Afghan forces with us. They dismount, they disperse.

I'm treated to the sight of Afghan - one of the Afghans had gotten wounded, and basically had gotten rid of his pants, and he was fighting in his boxer shorts with a bleeding - and so, it was -

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Anyways, it was a sight to behold. So that was the, that was the grenade incident.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And, you know, we tried to chase down the folks. They were, of course, long gone.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Couple of injuries, but nothing major, thank goodness. The third semi-near miss is myself and Mike Waltz would often go into the nearby town of Khost and, you know, meet with leaders, and try to do a show of force. So one of the things we did was we'd go to this local market, and we decided to get some traditional Afghan garb made, and went a couple of times. Tried to mix up our routes, tried to mix up the times, but one time we're leaving, and I remember looking at a very, at like a wheelbarrow, just kind of sitting out there, and it was kind of covered with a tarp, and I was just thinking to myself, "That's just weird, right? Like it's kind of like out of place." But we were leaving, so I didn't pay any attention to it. And like ten minutes later, we get a call that there'd been an I.E.D. explosion in the marketplace, literally right where we were at.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Francis "France" Hoang:

And so, you know, strongly suspect it was an attempt to get me and, me and Mike, right -

Interviewer:

Sure.

Francis "France" Hoang:

when we were leaving.

Interviewer:

Whoo.

Francis "France" Hoang:

So.

Interviewer:

Okay. As you look back on your career and all the things you've done, how did your

West Point and Army experiences help you become successful in other aspects of your life?

Francis "France" Hoang:

So the Duty, Honor, Country values of West Point, right? There's a, there's a speech - I think several speeches, right - where graduates have talked about how those words aren't just words, they have deep meaning for them, and I'm in that category. Like, those, those values spoke to me, and they continue to speak to me. So first, you know, West Point is an institution. I think there are many institutions - there are many great educational institutions, but I think there is no better institutions than the Service Academies in general, and West Point in particular, in terms of developing leadership, and in particular, imbuing character.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

In terms of teaching leadership based on values. And so I feel very blessed to have been in an institution that put those two things as a priority: leadership and values. Second, looking back on my Cadet career, if I could change any one thing, I was too intense as a Cadet. Like I was kind of too focused on being a good Cadet, or what I defined as a good Cadet.

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

If I could do it all over again, I'd spend more time with my classmates.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Francis "France" Hoang:

Who I've come to appreciate now, right? No one cares what grade I got on econ, right? But everyone cares who you are, right, are you a good person, right, and the relationship you have with your classmates, that's frankly, you know, as great of a gift - it may be even a greater gift, right - than what you learned at West Point. It's the friendships and that connection you take away, and to be part of, truly part of like the Long Gray Line, right?

Interviewer:

Right.

Francis "France" Hoang:

To know that - well, let me just tell a quick story that kind of puts this - I remember as a Cadet, as a Firstie, during the Homecoming Parade, you know, there's the statues affair, and one of the traditions is the oldest Grad President lays a wreath. And what a lot of people don't know is there's a parade where all the old grads that are having their reunions come and march, and so if you're a Cadet and you're standing there, what you see is like the oldest grad come past you, and like the most old grads, right, right after them. And as you're watching the Long Gray Line, these graduates going past you, they get younger, right, so it goes from retired to like now you got a couple Generals, and then you see Colonels, and you see Majors, and then you see Captains, right? And what you're seeing in front of you is your future, right? Like you're on that same journey. You're part of this Long Gray Line and this tradition, and it just struck me as a Cadet like, "This is what I'm a part of now."

And so, you know, the relationships that you take with you - you're on a journey with your classmates, and those relationships are truly STELLARLY important. And then the third thing that I think West Point has really given me is, you know, being part of that larger whole. Besides a relationship, just knowing that you're part of an institution that's been around so long, and has such a special place in America. I still remember as a Plebe going into the library, and going up to the ring case - so there's this case, right, with all - West Point was the first institution to have class rings, and there's a case in the library - this is the old library, but it's been moved in the new library - that has rings from almost every class. But if you look at the ring case like I was doing as a Plebe, as a freshman, a

lot of the rings are in bad shape. Theyâ€™re missing stones, theyâ€™re banged up, and itâ€™s like, â€œThis is kind of odd.â€

And while Iâ€™m looking in the case, and looking at the names, and the date of birth and the date of death, and what I realize then was that many of the rings in that case were donated by the families of the graduates after theyâ€™d been killed in action, and the reason the rings were in bad shape was because they were worn at the time their wearers had served and made the ultimate sacrifice. And I remember as a freshman thinking, â€œWow. This is the institution that Iâ€™ve joined, and this is the tradition that Iâ€™m a part of,â€ right? That men and women have gone before me, made this kind of sacrifice, right, and been devoted leaders of character for our nation. And even to this day, it gives me a shiver up my spine that Iâ€™ve been so blessed to be part of this, right, and continue to be part of this, and now in a place in a my life where I can help give back, in some small measure, right, and look forward to hopefully helping the next generation, you know, of West Pointers join the Long Gray Line and continue to serve.

Interviewer:

Well, France, I am so glad you came in today. I know weâ€™ve been trying to get this interview for a while, so.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

So thank you for sharing your story with us. This has been absolutely fabulous. Thank you.

Francis â€œFranceâ€ Hoang:

Thank you.