Route clearance missions
Justin Toole
Interviewer

Itâ€™s February 14, Valentineâ€™s Day, 2013. Weâ€™re here in the studio of the West Point Center for Oral History talking to Captain Justin Toole.

Justin Toole

Captain for two more weeks.

Interviewer

Well, congratulations.

Justin Toole

Thanks.

Interviewer

So Captain, I understand that you come from a sort of a military family. Can you talk to me about your family and where you grew up, in terms of the role models of the military men in your life?

Justin Toole

Sure. Father served, and I donâ€™t have very many memories of him in the service, because he got out.Â He was an Officer as well. He got out after about seven or eight years, and so I was born his last two years in the service, so I donâ€™t have any vivid memories. I was born in Savannah. He was stationed at the time at Hunter Airfield down there, and so after he got out, we moved away from that. But my uncles, both uncles, served for some period of time. I have a cousin now who just retired. But really, probably as far as an impact, other than like I think some of the ways that the Army mightâ€™ve changed my fathers my two grandfathers both served, of course both in World War II. And I had the pleasure of interviewing my grandfather, for an eighth grade kind of an oral history project, talking to someone above the age of 60 or something. And I got to find out really what it was like for him growing up. He grew up in south Georgia, you know, at the time of the Depression, and he talked through the War.Â

Justin Toole

He met my grandmother, who was British, in England at the time he was in the Navy. My other grandfather passed away when I was in high school, but he would periodically tell stories. He was an Infantryman, and he would talk about being in Europe and some things. He didnâ€™t care to talk much detail, but you know, I kind of felt like those were people I respected well. I thought that, you know, whether it was directly the fact that they served or not, there was a very, you know, great sense in my family of patriotism and things like that, and, you know, serving your country and things like that. And thatâ€™s how we were raised, and so even though my brother and sister didnâ€™t go into the service, you can expect at the Toole house to this day a flag being flown. And I think that kind of pushed me towards that direction, and Iâ€™m happy, you know, I pursued the route that I did.

Interviewer

So when did you start thinking about ROTC, I guess? When did you start thinking about the Army as an option?

Justin Toole

I visited the college I went to where I got my commission is North Georgia College. Itâ€™s actually a military college that no oneâ€™s heard of, most people who arenâ€™t from Georgia havenâ€™t heard of. Commission, you know, 75-ish Officers, Second Lieutenants, into the Army only, every year. And so my father and mother both went to this college, and thatâ€™s where my dad got his commission. So we would take trips up there. They would have kind of alumni events every now and then. Itâ€™s a beautiful area of the country. I grew up, really, after my father got out of the military, we moved south of Atlanta, but weâ€™d go up to the north Georgia mountains, see the college. And I kind of fell in love with the area, I think, even as a young child, and you know, when youâ€™re 17-18 years old in high school, and you know, I like playing soccer, I like playing sports. I was pretty good at school and all that. But it seems like most anybody who tries at all kind of can get through high school okay. I didnâ€™t know what I wanted to do, and I felt like that was like an easy answer, almost, because I said to myself, you know, â€œI think I would enjoy it.â€ And I applied for an ROTC scholarship out of high school, and got accepted to several different schools. And I wanted to go to North Georgia because it was a small university probably a lot because my parents went there, of course but it had a great program, great history.

Interviewer

And so what was ROTC like?

Justin Toole

I can tell you that itâ€™s different than a lot of other ROTC experiences, because like West Point, you go through summer training. Their beast, itâ€™s called frog week, for freshmen orientation, and you know youâ€™re a frog instead of a plebe or whatever. Youâ€™re in a Company with, you know, maybe 16 in the Company or something like that I canâ€™t remember at the time. And you know, they do a good job of physically smoking you, of course, and mentally making you feel like you donâ€™t know whatâ€™s going on. And they do that right before youâ€™re ready to start your first classes, and they shave your head, and you kind of go through all that inculcation. And so itâ€™s a lot different than maybe other ROTC, but it was great, because it was the first experience I had really being pushed to my limits, I think, you know, kind of mentally, at that time in my life. You know, I played sports, and you push yourself, but itâ€™s a little different, you know? And so my now-wife actually was she went to that school, not as ROTC, but just as a civilian.

Justin Toole

And so I think she helped me get through that first semester with the shaved head, and no memories, and everything. It is different from West Point, so I look at North Georgia as kind of in between most ROTC experiences, where you put on a uniform once a week on Thursday, you go to some event, or some Lieutenant Colonel or Sergeant First Class gives you a class on map-reading or something. We really lived in a barracks every day, like they do here. We would do PT in the morning as a Company, or as a Squad at least, and you begin to rely on the people around you and everything. You have that same type of atmosphere, maybe more like the Regular Army. But at the same time, on the weekends you werenâ€™t bound to stay there you had more freedoms to go away, and if your grades were good enough, you didnâ€™t have to do the mandatory study time. So itâ€™s kind of in between an environment, I think, in terms of how much they keep their thumb on you, the

regular ROTC and West Point.A And I really appreciated that I think it let me do a lot of things. You know I think youâ€™re at that age when youâ€™re 18 to 21 where you benefit from not being under someoneâ€™s thumb at all times. I donâ€™t know maybe not. I did, I think.

Interviewer

So Iâ€™m also curious as when you called it a military school, a military college.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

Like VMI or something like that?

Justin Toole

Thatâ€™s right.Â Thereâ€™s six senior military.

Interviewer

But your wife, now wife, then friend, girlfriend, whatever.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

Was a civilian there.

Justin Toole

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

So did she were there two tracks there?

Justin Toole

Right. So I donâ€™t know what distinguishes itâ€™s one of the six senior military colleges, VMI, Virginia Tech, Norwich, Texas A&M, The Citadel, and North Georgia College. Those are the six. Youâ€™ve heard of all the others. They required at that time now itâ€™s different. At that time, if you were male, you couldnâ€™t live on campus unless you were in the ROTC program, if you were in the Corps of Cadets there. So that led to a predominate population of women. And if you were female, you could go there like any other state public school, and so she did that, and she lived in a dormitory like any other school.Â But all the males and some females who were female cadets who decided to go to ROTC lived in barracks. And there was a couple barracks, and you were in a Company, and you did everything academically the same way. You were in classrooms with probably more civilians. You just wore a uniform every day, and we wore the Army uniform every day.

Interviewer

Okay. So I also wanted to talk to you about what you majored in there, since youâ€™re now teaching.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

Here at West Point. Was this chemistry always an interest, or was.

Justin Toole

I think the sciences were always an interest for me. I knew I didnâ€™t want to write papers going into my senior year, I can tell you that much, and so Iâ€™d taken chemistry. I had an excellent high school chemistry teacher.Â I get there after orientation week, and they ask, â€œWhat do you want to major in?â€ And everyone thinks they know what to answer, and I just knew that I didnâ€™t want certain things. And so I narrowed it down to physics or chemistry I had never taken a physics course, and so I just said, â€œChemistry,â€ and I stuck with it. Honestly, it stuck, and so I took some AP classes, so I started my freshman year with organic chemistry, did okay in it, well enough, so I stuck with it. Iâ€™m glad I did. Maybe itâ€™s something within me that knew that I should do that or something, but maybe I didnâ€™t know any better. Maybe I could be a physics teacher now, but I teach chemistry now because I applied to come to West Point to teach it. I know thatâ€™s what my passionâ€™s going to be. After I get out of the service, I want to teach college chemistry, absolutely, so Iâ€™m happy I made that decision when I was a young 18 year old. But I was able to get a masterâ€™s degree in chemistry at University of Georgia just last year, and so now I teach basic general chemistry here.

Interviewer

Right. So Iâ€™m interested in when you entered college, which was I think 1999?

Justin Toole

Correct.

Interviewer

The United States was at peace, relatively. And it was while you were in school.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

That 9/11 happened.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

So Iâ€™m wondering, how did you feel, being on this career track when 9/11 happened, and what were you expecting out of your Officer career before 9/11, and then after 9/11?

Justin Toole

I honestly donâ€™t think well, first of all, when it happened, of course, we all remember when it happened.Â It was right before it was roughly 10:00 in the morning or so. I think I had like a 9:30 class, or somewhere around then, and a friend of mine came to me in my dorm and said, â€œHey.â€ He always watched CNN. I never did I didnâ€™t care but he said, â€œCome check this out.â€ We didnâ€™t know what happened, of course. We see a burning building. This is before the second one had collapsed, or even been struck by the plane, so. But then there was visuals and there was things happening, and honestly, through all that, really, it never connected.Â We knew as the facts started coming out kind of what the implications were, but I never really felt it. And I think that kind of carried through to me. I went to CTLT before I commissioned. You get to go kind of shadow a Lieutenant, and I went to Fort Carson, where.

Interviewer

What is CTLT?

Justin Toole

To be honest with you, I donâ€™t know what the acronym stands for some sort of leadership.

Interviewer

Some kind of training, leadership.

Justin Toole

Leadership training, or.

Interviewer

Cadre, or something like that.

Justin Toole

Correct. At Fort Carson, there was Third ACR, the Armored Cavalry Regiment. It was a great unit. Got to go there and go through a spur ride as a cadet, you know, and they just loved picking on me, â€™cause my nameâ€™s Toole and everything, of course yeah. And I remember the Squadron Commander kind of talking to everyone after, and talking about the importance, â€™cause this was the summer after 9/11, and talking about how things were going to change. I think thatâ€™s the first time it really hit me, the impact to the Armed Forces of what this implied. Of course, this was at the time where troops were being geared up to go to Afghanistan. But you know, it was one of those things like I didnâ€™t change anything I did. I didnâ€™t really look at it in a new light. I think my parents were considerably concerned, and other people I know in my life, and I could see that a little bit, maybe. But me, it was like you know, youâ€™re a 22 year old, 21 year old ready to go, and that was it. Like if anything, a lot of people felt like this is what youâ€™re there for, so.

Interviewer

So it wasnâ€™t that you were unaware of it. It was more that it was actually what you were training to do.

Justin Toole

Right, absolutely, absolutely. I donâ€™t think that it you know, I look back at a lot of my experiences in the Army, and sometimes ignorance is bliss, maybe. I donâ€™t know. Like you look back and say, â€œWow,â€ you know how naÃ¯ve you were. But no, I mean I wouldnâ€™t have changed course, knowing what I know now absolutely not.

Interviewer

So when you graduated in May of 2003, I guess, May or June.

Justin Toole

Right, May.

Interviewer

I think the mission was accomplished at that point.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

There was that famous shot of the President on the ship.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

So what were you thinking then in terms of the possibility of being deployed to one of the theaters of war, or not?Â I mean.

Justin Toole

Again, I think it was mostly naivetÃ©. I got married right after I commissioned that fall. I did a quick stint at college, doing recruiting for the school.Â Went to OBC, the Officer Basic, there in October, so war had been accomplished I remember when Saddam had been pulled out of the rat hole for sure that was November-December of 2003, right. I remember that.Â And even through all that training, there were so few people who had gone downrange and come back and that is to Iraq, â€™cause very few of us had gone to Afghanistan that I donâ€™t think it had quite the impact, you know? I think it really becomes more telling when you go to, you enter a place where people are just come back from a combat zone, and you start hearing the stories.Â Then you start putting yourself in that. You start saying, â€œThatâ€™s what Iâ€™m going to do.â€ So but yeah, I donâ€™t think that, looking back, I was at all concerned whatsoever. Again, I think my family members, my new wife, they were the ones who were more concerned, you know? And so I was concerned that they were concerned, you know itâ€™s like the second order effect. I didnâ€™t want to leave her, â€™cause I knew sheâ€™d be upset, but you know, I was ready to go. I thought I was trained well throughout OBC little we knew at that time.

Interviewer

So after school, you did this recruiting?

Justin Toole

Sure.

Interviewer

And then what did you do where were you assigned?

Justin Toole

After I did well, I did recruiting first, then I went to Officer Basic. I was an Engineer Officer, so I went to.

Interviewer

Right. And that was where?

Justin Toole

Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, in the Ozarks, south central Missouri. I say you drive down the old Route 66.Â When you pass the Missouri wine country on the right youâ€™ll see meth country on the left, and then youâ€™re pretty much at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. But itâ€™s not too bad of a place, honestly. I like the outdoors, so the summers were good. The weatherâ€™s not too nice, and thereâ€™s not a whole lot to do during the winters. But I was actually stationed there almost the entirety up in this point, at either training units as an Engineer training, or as a Lieutenant in the Fifth Engineer Battalion. And thatâ€™s the only like unit Iâ€™ve essentially been in, besides training units.

Interviewer

So you were at Fort Leonard Wood, and you were helping train the recruits or what were you doing?

Justin Toole

Right. My first assignment as a Lieutenant, I did a quick stint in a training unit after I got my engineering training. I went to Fifth Engineer Battalion and I was a Platoon Leader, Combat Platoon Leader, and then we deployed. So I got there early 2004, and then stayed in that unit until 2006 or excuse me, 2007. The deployment was in the middle of that, 2005 to 2006, and then after that, I went to Company Commander or Captain Training the Captains Career Course for Engineers, staying there at Leonard Wood. Thatâ€™s where the home of the Engineers are. And then I did my Company Command at a Basic Training unit that trained initial-entry soldiers civilians, that is in the first nine weeks of Basic Training, and did that for two years before I went to graduate school for chemistry.

Interviewer

Mm hmm. So at Fort Leonard Wood, before you deployed, what were you you were getting ready to deploy?

Justin Toole

Right. I think thatâ€™s when the magnitude really started to sink in. When you start seeing, again, the soldiers whoâ€™d already done one deployment were in my unit at this point. Youâ€™re getting told by your chain of command that this is going to happen. You start to

have key training events, FTXs, you go to went out to Fort Irwin National Training Center for a training event. Those types of things, that really is when it starts to hit home, and you get told essentially what your mission is going to be. And they said and you start to have an idea where youâ€™re going to go. A lot of it canâ€™t be told to you. You never want to say exact date, for security reasons, but we knew we were going to go to Iraq. We then found out we were going to go to Baghdad. We knew we were going to do a route clearance mission, and I was going to be a Platoon Leader, one of several Platoon Leaders in the Battalion, and we would support the entire Division in Baghdad, searching and clearing the roads for IEDs, essentially.

Interviewer

So you went in 2005?

Justin Toole

5, correct, late 2005.

Interviewer

And so would you go out every day to clear the roads?

Justin Toole

Sure. The Battalion normally the route clearance equipment was kind of what drove the ability to accomplish the mission, because this time we were just building the mine resistant type vehicles. The Buffalo is a 13-foot, enormous, beastly, has a Mack Truck engine. Itâ€™s a wheeled vehicle, and it has a large arm thatâ€™s attached to it so it can actually manually probe sites, you know. Letâ€™s say you see something it can actually dig in the ground, so it kind of has a claw that can interrogate a site. And then also mine resistant smaller vehicles that were wheeled, that had a better chance of taking a blast from an IED, for example, than a traditional Humvee that were in use. So these were being fielded, and just being purchased by the military, so this was the equipment necessary to really get close enough to determine whether or not something was a threat. And then we would work with Explosive Ordnance Disposal, EOD folks, to blow up the IEDs, either in place or do whatever it is that they wanted to do with it. So, when I got there, there was only one set per Company, so with essentially two Line Companies, two Regular Combat Line Companies.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

Can you tell us about it?

Justin Toole

Platoons in each Company, it was more or less on and off a week or so at a time. If you had missions, you would either have a day set, or a night set, usually, and so youâ€™d have one mission a day. Missions would last and thatâ€™s when youâ€™re outside the wire, so to speak, you know, anywhere from like four to six or seven, eight hours, maybe, at the most, usually. But there was a lot of prep involved before, and getting back. So again, my naivetÃ© you donâ€™t realize the danger when you start doing that. Either at that age, or you know, even after some brushes with death, like you donâ€™t I donâ€™t know what

it is you really donâ€™t think about it, â€™cause you just kind of keep your head down. Youâ€™re like, â€œHey, this is my mission. This is what Iâ€™m doing,â€ kind of look after your guys. When I came back when I left that for R&R, thatâ€™s when it really started to hit me, when I see other people, and you know. But it was a long eight months until I took R&R. During that time, basically every other week, maybe two or three weeks out of the month, I would do route clearance missions. One month, my Platoon got attached to an Infantry unit at Abu Ghraib prison.Â It was kind of an alternate tasking. We just did security there. It was a nice break, to be honest with you, from being out on the roads every day.

Interviewer

So Iâ€™m curious.Â So you would go out with your guys, with these vehicles?

Justin Toole

Yes.

Interviewer

So how many guys were you in your Platoon?

Justin Toole

In my Platoon, so I was Platoon Leader, had a Platoon Sergeant, and there was a total of usually five vehicles that went out, so more or less myself, the Platoon Sergeant, and three other NCOs would be in charge of their respective vehicles, but weâ€™d work together and stay together through the duration of the mission, and have roughly 25 soldiers on the mission at any one time.

Interviewer

And these were mostly guys that you had been at Fort Leonard Wood with?

Justin Toole

Yes, they were.

Interviewer

So you had known them very, very well, then.

Justin Toole

Absolutely.Â Absolutely. These are my soldiers.Â So right. You start to realize that the war being fought was really being fought, or at least from my perspective, at the Platoon level. I mean we were the ones conducting the missions. And this is for route clearance, but also for Infantrymen, even, or anybody out there. If you ran into somebody else on their mission, itâ€™s Coalition Forces, whatever, another unit, the guy in charge was usually a Lieutenant, and youâ€™d have a Platoon Sergeant. Sometimes youâ€™d see Company Commanders, something like that. But generally, especially for our mission, we were supporting the land owners. All the Infantry units that had areas of operation around and including in Baghdad, we would go out to the main supply routes and try to free them of at the times of day generally where there was the highest threat, and the locations where there was the highest threat. Or if they were special missions, then we would go down and support them, you know, if thereâ€™s a larger kind of mission going on and they want us to kind of clear a certain area, we would do that as well.

Interviewer

So I was curious, when you said that you would be out for six to eight hours at a time.

Justin Toole

Sure.

Interviewer

And how much road do you cover in that amount of time? I would imagine this is a very tedious.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

And careful procedure, so I was just wondering.

Justin Toole

You can imagine doing it at night, too. In order to see, we would have lights on, which is like tactically, somebody would tell you youâ€™re insane, and it kind of was. I mean you had to be able to see it, so you would literally drive down the road at night well, it didnâ€™t matter, day or night. And so we would have lights on, like floodlights on vehicles, going several miles per hour, like five miles an hour, Iâ€™d say. No more than probably ten miles an hour, usually, depending on the area youâ€™re in, so that you could see it for you know, it could be detonated, hopefully. Or if it does, youâ€™re at least far enough away that everybody inside is okay. So if you get to an area where you know, historically, there wasnâ€™t much there, then maybe you go faster. If you go to an area, you know thereâ€™s different decisions being made to that regard, but generally youâ€™re always going very slow, so maybe under 100 miles, absolutely. Absolutely, 100 miles, and thatâ€™s full coverage. Maybe you only cover 10 or 15 miles in that time.Â Of course, if you find something, or youâ€™re sitting there and youâ€™re dealing with an IED, then a lot of your time is used in that. But I went on some missions that were up to about a day usually less than a day, always, but that was about the most I actually was outside of the wire, so to speak.

Interviewer

So tell me so you would drive slowly down the road, and then somebody would spot something? I mean.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

Can you give me a specific example, even, of like the first time you saw one?

Justin Toole

The first time so you do a right-seat ride. You go down to the unit whoâ€™s been there

doing that mission before you, and you go out on missions with them, and so one, for example thereâ€™s different ways of detecting them. You can visually detect them, and then thereâ€™s other pieces of equipment that might be able to detect them under the ground. Generally, it was visual detection, and so you drive down a route.Â You tell your soldiers what to look for essentially, maybe you show them historical events. And then at some point, everybody has access to a radio inside the vehicle, and they would broadcast that they see something usually the lead vehicles. And then this vehicle with the arm on it could go and interrogate it, and that would be a chance for it to really get closer maybe than the others would want to, and have enough stand-off with the Buffaloâ€™s interrogating arm so that they could ascertain whether or not they think that it is an IED. And if it was, then weâ€™d call in our units, typically, to either blow it in place, or if they wanted to take it, they could.Â

Justin Toole

So for example, the first IED we found, weâ€™re driving down a main supply route. Itâ€™s a hardball road.Â It looks like an interstate highway, except youâ€™re the only one on it, because the locals arenâ€™t allowed anywhere around you. You have gunners on top of your vehicles and such, but the first or second vehicle, somebody in there says, â€œHey, we think we see something on the side of the road.â€ And then the people in the Buffalo respond, and they slowly approach it. They see what the person sees, and usually itâ€™s not out in the open itâ€™ll be concealed in some way. The arm goes out, they roll it over, they poke it. Itâ€™s like a tire tube, inner tube for a tire, and inside of it is an artillery shell. And so at that point theyâ€™d move out.Â Weâ€™d continue scanning for the area, to see if thereâ€™s any other devices, but generally weâ€™d call Explosive Ordnance Teams to come out. Theyâ€™ll see what we do, usually with something like a robot, place a charge on it, blow it in place, and then you move on.Â So before the mission starts, you generally have a route. Thatâ€™s what your mission is, to cover this route. And then if you can get down and back in time, and itâ€™s only been two and a half hours, you might do it multiple times. But you didnâ€™t want to do the same thing twice. Even if you gotÂ the same mission the next day, you always wanted to change things up to keep yourself unpredictable, â€™cause the last thing you wanted is for someone who wanted to hurt you to know exactly what youâ€™re going to do at a certain time.

IEDs
Interviewer

Right. So the IEDs, they obviously could go off if you ran over it, but could they also go off if there was just a lot of noise, or a lot of rumbling could make them go off?

Justin Toole

No.

Interviewer

How did they work?

Justin Toole

So that would be primarily some way in which you could run over it, connecting a circuit. For example, the pressure of your vehicle may be connecting the circuit. Those tactics depend considerably on whether or not youâ€™re on an interstate highway type of road, or youâ€™re on a dirt road. It also depends a lot on how much, what affect it has on your vehicle, whether or not itâ€™s directly underneath you, or on the side, or the distance you

are from it. And so at that time in Baghdad, our mission being primarily hardball roads, the interstate roads, usually we were looking for things on the side of the road, so. But there was other initiation systems, more sophisticated or whatnot, but generally, you have to remember that the enemy had to know youâ€™re there in order to, in one way or another, to detonate it, usually, unless it was one of these victim operated ones unless it was buried with some sort of like pressure sensitive device. So that was usually you know, to be honest, that was something we obviously knew of, and we knew very well, is how you know, you learn the enemy by these devices, and you see what they do, and their tactics, and you try and this is the cat and mouse game.

Justin Toole

And so everything so far is the areas where they typically place them, to how they place them, to very small details that soldiers start to pick up on. Things that look out of the ordinary, or small wires I mean they become really good. The individual soldier, every soldier was you know, you needed every man, because every set of eyes was valuable to see it. Not even necessarily just for us, but we think our mission was to clear the road for other units, so they wouldnâ€™t, you know. So logistically, we could get the supplies that we needed to the different bases. But yeah, typically, weâ€™re going down the road. To be honest with you, like you werenâ€™t as scared unless you were in an area where you knew the devastating effects of certain types, and thatâ€™s where you really you know, the pucker factor, weâ€™d say, would go up. Once youâ€™re in an area that wasnâ€™t or basically, there was more sophisticated devices, maybe.

Interviewer

So you saw Hurt Locker, I assume.

Justin Toole

Yes.Â Yes.

Interviewer

Which is not you guys, but the Ordnance guys who you would call in.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

You know that movie to me, it was sort of an amazing thing. Here youâ€™ve got this movie that has won best picture and all.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

And almost nothing happened in it, except they would go and meet with these bombs and figure it out.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

It was the most suspenseful movie with so little happening, you know.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

Of a plot nature, so I imagine that this really was a very stressful task that you guys had, this kind of and I understand that some areas might be more dangerous than others.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

As you said. But I mean is it one of these things like at the end of the day, itâ€™s like or how did you was it stressful for you and most of the guys, though?

Justin Toole

Itâ€™s it doesnâ€™t itâ€™s again, I felt so naÃ¯ve when I first started doing the missions, and it really gets stressful when people get hurt. Thatâ€™s what I found out really quickly. And so yes, when you go to an area where you know that thereâ€™s a higher threat, thatâ€™s when you start to get more concerned. And unfortunately, that means that when youâ€™re in an area where thereâ€™s not much threat, then you feel somehow safe, so. But it was nice that we could go back to a FOB. Kind of a secure area, take off your uniform, or your battle armor you know, your helmet and everything and watch an episode of The Family Guy, or some video, or anything. And it really allowed you anÂ opportunity to kind of get reprieve. Comparing that, Iâ€™ve heard stories, and Iâ€™ve seen Band of Brothers 2. You know you get this sense that like they have this stress, and itâ€™s because sometimes, as they show in the movie there, for a week at a time or something theyâ€™re involved in some combat operation.Â Itâ€™s very stressful, and it is. But then in between they had months between another battle. And I felt like it kind of nickels and dimes you throughout, and you get really exhausted. I mean I might be six hours on a mission, but I was working 18-20 hour days. Thereâ€™s so much more involved maintenance to the vehicles, getting intelligence. I mean as a Platoon Leader, so I think not sleeping, and being kind of high strung about that. But all that is very small in comparison to the stress level you feel when someone in your unit gets hurt, whether itâ€™s there while youâ€™re at it, or someone else doing a mission similar to you.

Justin Toole

So thatâ€™s really when it the first missionÂ where we were supporting an Infantry unit in a certain area, and unfortunately, the Lieutenant who we were there with and one other soldier gets killed by an IED on a mission that we were with. It was you see the physical aftereffects, and thatâ€™s hard, but and you know your soldiers are seeing everything you are. And you go back, and youâ€™re able to just say to yourself and this is how I I remember my Battalion Commander coming back, â€™cause this was early on, and I was the first Platoon to kind of really be around any casualties. And he came to me after the mission was over this was a long one and he said, â€œHey, Justin, how are youâ€ I could

tell he now I see what I was doing.A He was really seeing how I was. He was testing me to see how I was coping with it. And I just remember telling him, not in an insubordinate way, but almost blowing him off, saying, â€œHey, sir, Iâ€™ve got to get this mission brief done and get it to the S3 Operations.â€ And it was like I kept blinders on, and that was kind of the way, so that stress didnâ€™t really hit me immediately then. And then a couple days later, a soldier in our Battalion gets killed, and we were going to go out on the mission after him. And I was told, â€œYouâ€™re not going to leave yetâ€ this is at the Battalion level â€œbecause weâ€™re still recovering his remains,â€ or something like that. And that happens, and okay, now this isnâ€™t just an Infantryman in some other unit this is somebody in your unit. But all in all, like until it becomes personal until you have, I found out and this is like kind of what I learned a lot about human nature.Â

Justin Toole

Until the closer you are to that person who gets hurt, thatâ€™s when you really start to hurt, and start to really get stressed. Around May so weâ€™d been doing it several months another unit was doing the same mission we have, and an NCO and two of the other soldiers ended up getting killed in one incident. And thatâ€™s when it really became hard, and I noticed in my soldiers really changing, because I think they finally because early on, you feel like youâ€™re trying to learn the mission. Youâ€™re so focused on just trying to do whatever it is youâ€™re trying to do. Then when you start seeing these things happen, then it starts to become personal. And so then you start to be more concerned, so I could see the morale, even though this was a different Company, it was one of the best NCOs in the Battalion. And he wasnâ€™t invincible. No oneâ€™s invincible. It doesnâ€™t matter how good or bad of a soldier. Sometimes you feel like this could be you, â€™cause it could be, â€™cause youâ€™re doing the same mission. And even through all that, I never really got unusually stressed until at the end, towards the end of deployment, I finally had a chance to go home for R&R. And I actually subsequently, or at that time I got promoted, and so my Platoon was being passed off to another Lieutenant. And when I came back, it really finally hit me. I was becoming stressed for my soldiers. I started to feel all this, because itâ€™s like I had no frame of reference or something when I was down there.

Justin Toole

I had blinders. I was just doing it, and maybe that was a way I cope with it, or maybe thatâ€™s just natural.Â But the stress, you know, when you have people who are close to you get hurt or killed, thatâ€™s really when people start to change. And thatâ€™s when it becomes thatâ€™s what leadership I tell my cadets now, Iâ€™m like, â€œThis is leadership.Â Anybody can lead when everything is going well, right?Â Even a horrible leader can go into a situation where they have great people under him, and they will look like a great leader.â€ I said, â€œWhen everything is the worst possible scenario, thatâ€™s really when you find out.â€Â The Lieutenant who got killed on that mission in December, his Platoon ended up we ended up supporting him some months later. And he obviously wasnâ€™t there he hadnâ€™t been replaced. Every Lieutenant in that Company had been wounded and sent home, or killed, and the First Sergeant had been killed, too. And this was in a very bad area, and we went down to do a mission. We found an IED. And as Iâ€™m calling it up, Iâ€™m talking to like their Company or whatever, â€œHey, we found an IED on this road.â€ And they said, â€œWell, we have soldiers out there at the observation point. We have somebody right there at your location.â€ â€œReally?â€Â Well, we find out that the building right next to where weâ€™re atâ€”a couple raggedy soldiers come out. They look weary. They talk to my Platoon Sergeant, they get in his vehicle. We clear the IED, and then I say, â€œWhoâ€™s in chargeâ€”whoâ€™s running the show?â€ And it was a Platoon Sergeant. At that time I talked to him, and youâ€™d see kind of the fear in his eyes a little bit, and he was uneasy being in charge, because I think

theyâ€™d had several soldiers at this point killed. And he said, â€œHey, sir, hereâ€™s what Iâ€™m trying to do. What do you think?â€ And he really wanted to talk to somebody. And I just remember saying, â€œYou had two soldiers on this, supposedly over watching this point for the past however many hours, and thereâ€™s an IED right here. Granted, it couldâ€™ve been there before they got there.â€ But I was like, â€œWhen they came out, they obviously werenâ€™t watching the road.â€

Justin Toole

I ended up talking to my Platoon Sergeant at the end of the mission, and he said, â€œI think those soldiers had been getting alcohol or something.â€Â He made it he said, â€œThose guys were not they werenâ€™t focused on doing anything. â€œMaybe in self-preservation mode, maybe because some very close people of them, they feel like that it doesnâ€™t matter or something.â€ But I didnâ€™t do anything about it. And then towards the end of the deployment, I find out about an investigation in which an Iraqi family had been burnt alive, and a girl had been raped, and that was the same Platoon that we had gone out with earlier. And it really hit me hard, because I felt like I didnâ€™t do anything about it. And people look at soldiers, and theyâ€™ll look at these war scenarios, and theyâ€™ll say, â€œOh, this is horrible. Was it just this rogue psychopath who did these things?â€ And I learned at the end of that, that this is the way humans are.

Justin Toole

And given certain circumstances, granted, not everyone wouldâ€™ve done something like that. Given certain circumstances, people will do things that seem like the last thing you would ever do. But in these types of moments, when youâ€™re really in a position where youâ€™ve seen very close friends of yours get killed, itâ€™s hard to take on this mission, and take a local Iraqiâ€™s hand, and work with them, when you feel like theyâ€™re the ones who just killed your best friend. Itâ€™s so difficult. And so I wonder what wouldâ€™ve happened had that Lieutenant still been alive, â€™cause he was a great guy. He was a West Pointer. I only knew he was from Texas. He was out there doing everything a great Lieutenant I would expect to do, and after he got killed, I wonder if that evacuation of his leadership, if thatâ€™s really what drove those events. And I think thatâ€™s true it couldâ€™ve.Â And so, if nothing else, I realized how powerful people feel like they donâ€™t a lot of times you underestimate what influence you have, and I did at that time. Now, having, looking back, even at my Company Commander, I realize how much impact every individual has on the unit, the morale good or bad, setting an example. And I think that thereâ€™s different I read the book that was written about that some years later. A friend of mine said, â€œHey, werenâ€™t you down there when this such and such happened on Route Caveman?â€ I said, â€œYeah. Why are you asking me?â€ â€œOh, I just read a book, and it was discussingâ€ so I read the book, and it was great. It was a good the journalist did a very good job recording events in a fair

Interviewer

What book was it?

Justin Toole

It was called Black Hearts. I think it was something like A Platoonâ€™s Descent Into Madness, or something like that, was the subtitle, and to be honest, I canâ€™t remember the author. But it was well-written, and the author absolutely interviewed, and you could tell he was really not showing any sort of bias towards the situation.Â He was just kind of documenting the effects.Â So I think it was fair, and you learn a lot about, again, how much individuals can influence a unit. I just felt like something about just these random events

that kept tying me to this Platoon, you know? After that event, the horrible event happened, two of the soldiers down there ended up getting kidnapped, essentially mutilated and murdered, and it was a huge event. And some people say that was retribution for the events that happened I donâ€™t know. Iâ€™m sure certain groups of people in that area, terrorist types, wouldâ€™ve done that regardless. But I always see this interconnectedness between what all happened down there, those initial days to the end, and I felt like it kind of tracked. It really developed me in my understanding of war, Iâ€™ll say that much. It really showed me a lot about human nature, and I stopped placing blame on anybody in a war time. Itâ€™s really easy to look objectively at events that happened and place blame, but you know.

Interviewer

So you mentioned that you thought you couldâ€™ve done more, but it sounds like you did talk to people about it, and Iâ€™m wondering what you feel you could was there something you couldâ€™ve done?

Justin Toole

Well, I mean.

Interviewer

Even theoretically, even if it wasnâ€™t.

Justin Toole

Sure. I mean when the Lieutenant got killed, like his Company Commander was ordering him to go like we got basically rocketed.Â My vehicle nearly missed this rocket, or the rocket nearly missed us, and we thought it was like somebody with an RPG, and Iâ€™m like, â€œOh, this is not good for them, because we have these weapon systems that are about to kill this guy.â€ And then we realize, â€œOh, itâ€™s notâ€ it was like an IED where they had set up a rocket remotely. So the Commander says, â€œYou need to go and get that rocket,â€ to the Lieutenant, and he was hesitant. It was on the other side of a canal. We couldnâ€™t access it with our vehicles, and so he came in and we discussed it, and I said, â€œI wouldnâ€™t go.â€ I was like, â€œDude, donâ€™t.â€ I said, â€œLetâ€™s clearâ€ and then later one of my vehicles gets damaged and mortared, and so I was like, â€œThis is not a good area to be in right now.

Justin Toole

This is one of those areas where you donâ€™t want to find yourself without key pieces of equipment.â€ So I said, â€œLetâ€™s go back to the start point, and maybe we can clear or do something else.â€ And so we moved back, â€™cause essentially, some of my key vehicles are disabled. And we move back, and then you hear an explosion, and you go down there and you see that heâ€™s been killed. And so I felt like, yes, I couldâ€™veâ€”maybe I shouldâ€™ve said, â€œI donâ€™t care what your Commander says, you need to stay on this side of the river,â€ â€™cause thatâ€”and been explicit-like.Â But I didnâ€™t think about it you know, this is my second week, maybe. And so I feel that amount of guilt. Itâ€™s not like I canâ€™t sleep at night over it or whatever else, but I know that I couldâ€™ve had that change. And then I think of what changes that couldâ€™ve happened, at this interactional relation level you know, this one incident. I think back, and thatâ€™s why I feel bad about it. I canâ€™t imagine how the Company Commander feels, ordering the soldier over there to do that. I think about him, and now heâ€™s got to cope with that.

Interviewer

Right.

Interviewer

Yeah itâ€™s horrible. Have you ever read a book by a guy named Jonathan Shay does that name mean anything to you?

Justin Toole

Doesnâ€™t sound familiar.

Interviewer

He wrote a book called .Achilles in Vietnam, and heâ€™s sort of a visionary on PTSD. But one of the things that heâ€™s very interested in is this policy of replacing soldiers

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

Who are injured or killed, rather than replacing the whole unit, because he gives the example of a tank crew, where you got these four guys who are operating the tank. And if one of them gets hurt, they just put a new guy in.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

And thereâ€™s no developed or evolved communication, trust, and all that stuff.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

So that that tank unit, which maybe have been crackerjack.

Justin Toole

Mm hmm.

Interviewer

Is now compromised to some extent. And thatâ€™s kind of when youâ€™re talking about leadership, the role of leadership, you just canâ€™t.

Justin Toole

When he knows he told the Lieutenant says, â€œI donâ€™t know,â€ heâ€™s pushing back, and he says, â€œNo, you need to go.â€ And then two soldiers get killed.Â I mean

can you imagine?A I mean.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

Itâ€™s not just that they lose their leadership. Itâ€™s almost impossible to replace that leadership.

Justin Toole

Thatâ€™s right

Interviewer

And itâ€™s as you said, itâ€™s sort of about the parts are not interchangeable. Theyâ€™re humans who have these specific skills, and you understand them, and I just itâ€™s hard to imagine.

Justin Toole

Right. So yeah I liked I remember watching a History Channel documentary on World War II, before I deployed.Â And it was some of the initial units I think it mightâ€™ve been a Glider unit, I canâ€™t remember maybe it was a Brit, too. The mission was to maybe paratroop in you know, one of these classic â€œdonâ€™t let the Germans cross this bridgeâ€ type scenario or whatever. And theyâ€™re armed with like these light rockets or something.Â And he talked through â€œhere comes a German tank.â€ Heâ€™s like, â€œI knew that we were going to be taken, but I fired the rocket. We ended up disabling the tank,â€ or whatever, and the whole German whatever, Company or whatever, stops. But then he talked about how he remembered the German soldier who got wounded, who mightâ€™ve lost a leg or his lower half or something.Â And he witnessed him basically bleed and die and cry and those types of things. And then I go to combat, and I end up seeing the same documentary, and when I heard that, it was a completely different effect on me. Now I know, you know. I see what this guy has seen, and I can see in his eyes. I see, you know. And thatâ€™s something that youâ€™ll never get in any sort of you canâ€™t get that at West Point. You canâ€™t get that anywhere.Â And so I donâ€™t know how important it is that we so much as we just warn the leaders about the potentials of what humans can do, or whatever else. But ultimately, you have to experience it.

Justin Toole

And I learned recently how thereâ€™s been more research on post-traumatic growth, and how certain people are able to move out of these trauma. And I look back and I think, â€œMaybe thatâ€™s more like what Iâ€™m able to do, compared to some other people,â€ â€™cause again, I was pretty fortunate. I consider myself like immensely lucky. My unit was lucky. The whole time I was a Platoon Leader, not one of my guys got injured, my guys got injured, and I think how lucky I was.Â But even despite that, they could have been emotionally had a lot of wounds. It affects everybody differently. And yeah, so I think that I look back at it ironically as a very positive experience in life. It made me live my life completely differently, I think, and it made life somehow easier for me, or something itâ€™s unusual when other people could kind of go the other way. I donâ€™t know. Maybe â€™cause I just kind of held it in I donâ€™t know, but.

Interviewer

Well, or maybe you saw that life was easier compared to war.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

Maybe you got perspective.

Justin Toole

Yeah, right, sure, you come to America, and you see. I saw a 12 year old boy get I didnâ€™t see him, but we found an IED on another mission.Â He comes up to us on this little donkey cart. Heâ€™s probably 12, 13 years old.Â He talked to one of my other guys, and they throw him an MRE, one of the packaged meals. They throw him an MRE, â€œHey, thanks, guy,â€ whatever barely speaks English, heâ€™s trying. And I say, â€œWhat was that all about,â€ â€™cause Iâ€™m watching this happen. He said, â€œOh, he says that heâ€™s seen some guys, and they think thereâ€™s an IED at such-and-such location,â€ or whatever. â€œAll right, cool.â€Â He goes around the corner and he gets shot in the back. This is a 12 year old boy who spoke to some American troops, and he gets shot in the back. To this day, I donâ€™t know if he lived or he died, or whatever else, but this is the place where a 12 year old lives, and he grows. And then coming to the States, and I think, â€œMy God, how easy weâ€™ve got it.â€ And he goes, and all these other things just having power and theyâ€™re human just like us, but it makes you appreciate things, for sure, you know, being an American, for sure.

Interviewer

So itâ€™s amazing a lot of what you say really was stuffed into Hurt Locker.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

You know, a lot of these I mean they.

Justin Toole

It was in Baghdad, right.

Interviewer

Kind of well, the kid who gets killed, and so.

Justin Toole

Mm hmm.

Reintegration
Interviewer

So when you stopped, when you left Iraq for good, was it hard to readjust? I mean not necessarily post-traumatic stress, but just the fact of like what youâ€™re saying this kind of

unbelievably intense experience, and now youâ€™re back to what was it like? I mean you came back to you were married.

Justin Toole

Right, I was married, no kids at that time. So I did go to R&R, like I said. I got promoted to Captain towards the end. A new Lieutenant took over. Like one quick story. So Iâ€™m at home, Iâ€™m with my wife. Weâ€™re going to go to the mountains to go on a vacation, just her and I, weâ€™re going to go do the, you know, have my time. And then I get an e-mail that says some of my soldiers have been wounded, and it was like really, really painful. I couldnâ€™t talk to anybody. I was back in the States, so I wasnâ€™t with my unit, and all I could think about was that Lieutenant who took over for me, and how I want to wring his neck, you know? Like, â€œAre you kidding me?â€ Like I made it so far incidentally, the guys were fine. I mean, you know, one of them got shot, but it was fine. The other one lost kind of a piece of his leg, but heâ€™s probably going to be able to recover. And I went back, and I realized how angry I was at the situation. I found out how happy I was because they did everything that weâ€™d been training to do, like in the time when something like that would happen.Â So it really made me, again, understand the influence that you have, even when youâ€™re gone, and also how amazing the things the guys do. Like literally putting their bodies on top of other wounded soldiers in the time when theyâ€™re receiving gunfire heroic acts by any account. Amazing things and it makes you really proud.

Justin Toole

So when I came back, though, after that, I had a few months, and I was in a Battalion Staff position, so I think that helped me decompress a lot, because it was like I was still there, but I wasnâ€™t going out on patrols with them every single day. But Iâ€™d still see my soldiers, but Iâ€™d hang around the other Lieutenants whoâ€™d been promoted like me, who were working staff positions, so it helped me really I think kind of like as an interim. And then when I got back to the States, it wasnâ€™t usual. But I think I held a lot of stress in, but I donâ€™t think that it was that again, it goes back to I think I somehow was able to grow out of that, or something. This was my low point at some times, but I just kind of came out of it. And so it was a good time to be in. I was kind of upset I couldnâ€™t go directly to school or whatever.Â The Battalion Commander made me hang around the Battalion to do maintenance job or whatever you know I wanted to do my own thing. But at that time, too, I was considering getting out of the service, â€™cause my wife wasnâ€™t too keen on me deploying, and that was kind of tough. I realized at that time, though, I wanted to teach. And we discussed the ability to come to West Point, and so thatâ€™s absolutely part of the factor why I stayed in the service, too, because I knew this was something I would want to do, and I had the opportunity to get school paid for. What a great opportunity, you know? Go be a Captain getting your salary, go to school again, and then you get to teach people thatâ€™s what you want to do, right? Well, it is, so go pursue that, so I was pretty fortunate.

Interviewer

So before I â€™cause I do want to talk about that so Iâ€™m just wondering, were you able to talk to your wife about the experience of war? â€™Cause I know even when Iâ€™m well, I like to make documentary films.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

And even talking about that with my wife is not always so easy, â€™cause itâ€™s such a totally different world.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

I mean is that something that you were.

Justin Toole

You know, to be honest with you, I tell her almost nothing. And itâ€™s kind of bizarre, â€™cause Iâ€™m able to tell you, and I donâ€™t even know you, right? Iâ€™m like, â€œOh, hereâ€™s Dan. I met him 15 seconds. Iâ€™m telling him.â€ But itâ€™s not because I donâ€™t itâ€™s like part of and I think about this a lot. I absolutely do, because I realize I would talk to my friends who were there, and even other people in the Army, without similar experiences at all. And I realize it wasnâ€™t because I didnâ€™t want them to know, because I think she always wanted me to tell her so that she would make me feel better about it. I only wanted to tell her you know, tell someone else just to tell someone else. And I knew if I told her, she would be more worrisome, and so I never really even to this day, I donâ€™t understand why I should have to tell her those things. Iâ€™m sure she can get on the internet and watch, and somebody could tell her. And yeah, if she wanted to talk to me about it, I would, and Iâ€™d be candid, Iâ€™d be honest with her, but itâ€™s absolutely because you see these things. She e-mails me and says, â€œOh, so-and-soâ€™s Platoon,â€ you know, one of our friends gets hurt, or whatever, and all she knows is he got hurt, and heâ€™s a good friend of ours, and she knew him. And some of his soldiers get killed, and she says, â€œWell, arenâ€™t you doing the same thing?â€ And Iâ€™m basically lying to her. Iâ€™m like, â€œNo. Yeah, we are, but donâ€™t worry.â€ You know, Iâ€™m like and so like sheâ€™s just different than I am.

Justin Toole

She inherently worries more than I do, so I felt like I was protecting her by not telling her, because I think, honestly, what she wanted most is me to be okay. And I felt like me telling her wasnâ€™t going to make me any better than if I told anyone else. So why not tell someone else and make me feel a little better, and prevent her from the next time I deploy, her thinking nothing other than these horrible stories. But I think weâ€™ll talk about it more, as I think it over. I think back to my grandfather, who was in the Battle of the Bulge. He talked to me so little about it, or even when I ask my mom about it, he never told anybody about it. And he would tell funny stories and things here and there, but I know he had some incredible stories. I donâ€™t think Iâ€™m going to go to my dying grave without having told her anything, but itâ€™ll sure make it easier when I get out of the military to tell her, â€™cause then I can tell her, â€œThis is what Iâ€™ve done, and Iâ€™ll tell you whatever you want to know. I just donâ€™t want you to worry about me being in the military.â€ Because after this job, Iâ€™m going to go to an Engineer Battalion, probably, be an Operations Officer, and Iâ€™ll tell her the truth, that Iâ€™m not going to be on these Platoon missions every day, but you never know. Itâ€™s just I felt like I was protecting her.

Interviewer

So you came back, and then you were back at Fort Leonard Wood.

Justin Toole

Right.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

Training others who were going to do what you had done, presumably.

Justin Toole

The Basic Training, sure. I did Captains Career Course school. That was a time in my life where it was not a really good time in my life. Not because of the coming off of the deployment or anything, but my wife got pregnant, and that was good, and then we found out that our child was going to have a disease called cystic fibrosis. And so that changed everything again. It was like, â€œHmm I thought I knew what I wanted to do.â€ Now Iâ€™m saying, â€œWell, Iâ€™m glad Iâ€™m staying in the Army â€™cause I have medical care for this child.â€ But it was like I wasnâ€™t in a really comfortable spot. I felt like the people I met at the school werenâ€™t really not that they werenâ€™t sincere. I just felt like I couldnâ€™t get as close to them as maybe like other units or something. But so I talked to my Branch Manager, the person whoâ€™s going to assign me, and I said, â€œI want to go home to Georgia. You have anything at Benning?â€ He said, â€œI can get you a command here at one of these training units.â€ I jumped on it. I said, â€œIâ€™ll stay here in Missouri,â€ â€™cause I was comfortable at the time. And so I started she had the baby, right, and a couple weeks after I had my first child, I took command, so it was a really stressful time. And these training units, itâ€™s not as glorious. Like anybody who would tell you if you want to be a Brigade, a Battalion Commander, you want to go off if this is your hope in life, this is the last place youâ€™d want to be. Iâ€™m not saying itâ€™s a career-ender for a Commander, but you want to go to a regular unit. You want to go to Engineer, do these things. And I was like, â€œNo,â€ and I was happy to take this, because at the time in my life, thatâ€™s what I wanted to do.

Justin Toole

So I thought it was going to be kind of easy compared to these other jobs, and then I realized I put it a lot on myself, but you work six days a week, â€™cause you train Monday through Saturday. You donâ€™t get holidays off â€™cause you train through holidays. When I got there, we were like 75% staff of my Drill Sergeants. My First Sergeant wasnâ€™t there yet. I didnâ€™t have a XO. And Iâ€™m doing everything it was insane. I worked more in that first six months probably as much as I did probably almost on a deployment almost. And I had a brand new baby. I canâ€™t imagine I think back on how I didnâ€™t even know my daughter. Even though they donâ€™t do much at that age, I was working incredibly hard. It was really tough, dealing with soldiers doing ridiculously stupid things, like going AWOL, reporting that theyâ€™d been kidnapped. I mean at the hand grenade range youâ€™re like worried that somebody it goes on and on. And not just like the stupid stuff like someone sneaking in a candy bar, but like things that took a lot of my time.

Justin Toole

It was really tough, so I kind of didnâ€™t appreciate that job, to be honest with you. I look back, and I was like, â€œMan, if I was doing myself a favor, it probably wouldâ€™ve been better to go get stationed at Fort Campbell and been deployed the whole time than this.â€

Iâ€™d have probably been happier, I donâ€™t know, but. But yeah, it did put things in perspective in terms of I found out there why I love the Army so much now, and thatâ€™s because you get to meet all these different people from all over the United States, but also all over the world. And I donâ€™t know what it is about that. I just love learning about like human nature, like different people. And so in every class of 200 plus new trainees, you rest assured that 35 of the 50 states have been covered. Youâ€™ve got men and women. Youâ€™ve got guys who want to do all sorts of different jobs in the Army, all sorts of different backgrounds, all sorts of different ages. And I just thought it was really cool. I really enjoyed talking to them when we went out in the field here and there, and learning about them. And yes, and these are the ones who are eventually going to go on to units and be soldiers for that next Platoon Leader, and I knew that. It was kind of cool, I thought, to show them. I always felt like it was my responsibility too, â€™cause I was basically the only officer there, to kind of give them a good impression of an officer, you know what I mean? Not just some figurehead, somebody to be scared of that you have to go talk to, but to actually show them that I was human, too. Set a good example.

Interviewer

So did the guys go AWOL â€™cause they were just clueless, or was it â€™cause they didnâ€™t like it, or was it nothing?

Justin Toole

Youâ€™d have to ask them.

Interviewer

Okay.

Justin Toole

Theyâ€™re the ones who always just have trouble to reach their doorstep. Â Theyâ€™re the same one who bad things always happen to them, and honestly, sometimes you ask yourself, maybe these people put themselves in the situations, on purpose or not, I donâ€™t know. Â But yeah, if they went AWOL and they never came back, that was an easy open and closed case, because you just filled out some forms and said, â€œHey, when a police officer pulls you over, youâ€™re going to be thrown in jail, and I actually donâ€™t ever have to see you again.â€Â

Interviewer

If they went AWOL and they came back, you had to deal with it, so you wanted them to stay gone, you know. But this was the time where the pendulum swings. We need soldiers, and so itâ€™s more important that we have very low attrition rates through these training events. And if the pendulum swings the other way, and we donâ€™t need as many people, then it becomes easier to discharge from the Army. But theyâ€™re discharging a lot of people from the Army, these new soldiers. And of course, any Commander in that position would people who just want to quit. I mean you canâ€™t you try your best sometimes, but I was always of the mentality that if you get there, and you canâ€™t deal with these stresses at this Basic Training and albeit, itâ€™s stressful. If you canâ€™t deal with that, somethingâ€™s telling. And you can talk someone into staying, probably, but I kind of am concerned that that person who you keep in Iâ€™d like to see their career path, and where they go. You know what I mean? All these marginal people who barely get through these training events, letâ€™s track them in a documentary and see what theyâ€™ve done. And Iâ€™ve of course suspected maybe not nearly the things that everyone else, who was just

disciplined enough to suck it up, or be tough, or help their teammate out, and things like that. So yeah, but funny stories by the end of it, it got easier. I never did get an XO. I mean we just didnâ€™t have the personnel. So I did a lot of the administrative work. I worked extremely hard. It took a lot of time out of my life, so.

Interviewer

Sounds very hard, actually.

Justin Toole

Yeah. I didnâ€™t have anybody else to worry about. Itâ€™s different, though. Itâ€™s stress in a different way. You know you talk about stress I probably felt more stress in that position, but maybe I shouldnâ€™t have been as stressed, right? I shouldâ€™ve said like, â€œHey,â€ put it back into perspective, like I said before. I felt like I was a Platoon Leader doing these things I wasnâ€™t even that stressed, you know? And now Iâ€™m having to deal with someone whoâ€™s getting punished or something because theyâ€™ve done these ridiculous things. The list goes on and on, and Iâ€™m worried about that maybe I shouldnâ€™t have been.

Interviewer

You donâ€™t like administrative work, per se.

Justin Toole

I think thatâ€™s it. Yeah, I did like being out in the field, thatâ€™s for sure. That was a good job, as a Commander. As an Officer in general, you donâ€™t get to you move through these gates as a Platoon Leader, Commander, whatever, and then you quickly realize youâ€™re relegated to some sort of administrative job. Â And so this was a way to actually be out there with troops a lot longer, and maybe thatâ€™s why I like this job so much, â€™cause Iâ€™m with cadets all day, you know? Itâ€™s good. Itâ€™s refreshing.

Interviewer

Good. So you reminded me of something else I wanted to ask you, which was did you have women in your Platoon in Iraq?

Justin Toole

No.

Interviewer

You didnâ€™t.

Justin Toole

No. At that time you could there was female Medics in my Battalion. In fact, one of the Platoons that we replaced, I remember them having a female Medic. And of course, other female personnel throughout the Battalion, but on these missions that I was on, it was only male. But there was females out there, occasionally youâ€™d see them, doing the job, so to speak, as anyone else. Absolutely a female couldâ€™ve done some of the things that we were doing. Absolutely.

Interviewer

So I interviewed a woman who was on one of these ordnance decommission, whatever the.

Justin Toole

Right, EOD teams, right.

Interviewer

In Afghanistan, so. So then you went and got two masterâ€™s degrees.

Justin Toole

Right. Â Right. I got a masterâ€™s degree when I was at school at Fort Leonard Wood.

Interviewer

Right.

Interviewer

And then you did this chemistry degree.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

So thatâ€™s just going to school, right?

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

You moved back to Georgia, and.

Justin Toole

Right. That was a great time in my life. That was the last two years I was at Athens, Georgia, not even wearing the uniform every day, going to classes initially, but then doing research in a research lab, working on a thesis. And then getting paid the whole time, living on the economy living it was great.

Interviewer

So what is your thesis what is â€œReducing Uncertainties in Aerosol Optical Properties Using Cavity Ring Down Spectroscopy?â€

Justin Toole

To the layman, spectroscopy is I guess probing using light in this case, it was with a laser to learn about particles in the air. So aerosols affect how sunlight reaches us down here on Earth. Imagine like all the a volcano erupts or something, and thereâ€™s aerosol, these particles, these small things that are really hard to see. Some of them, really, individually

you could never see, but they affect how the sunlight reaches Earth, and that affects things like climate models, the impact. So car soot and things like that, industrial soot goes up in the atmosphere. Some of it actually reduces the amount of warming, actually, because it scatters the light more. And some of it increases the warming, and so thereâ€™s a large uncertainty on these things, so scientists make claims about how well they know certain things. I get fulfillment in searching for these truths and not listening to what other people tell me, and finding out scientifically whatâ€™s happening. So I set up a new instrument to help measure with better certainty a certain type of liquid particles. Thatâ€™s essentially it. So I worked on just kind of improving a system that had been done. It was fun. I enjoyed it. I can see myself being a research scientist or something, if I could have a dream job itâ€™s fun to me.

Interviewer

You could probably have that dream job.

Justin Toole

Yeah.

Interviewer

Are you thinking about getting a PhD at some point?

Justin Toole

Right. I will get a PhD at some point, yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer

Do you know what youâ€™ll study?

Justin Toole

Itâ€™ll be chemistry again. Itâ€™s the specifics Iâ€™m not sure. When I say â€œwill,â€ itâ€™s not like anyoneâ€™s told me I can now. Itâ€™s just I know thatâ€™s what Iâ€™m going to do. Thatâ€™s my goal, and Iâ€™ll get to it, so hopefully Iâ€™ll consider applying to teach here again. A lot of people come back to West Point as a second-time rotator, get a PhD, and then stay for some years. Some of them are indefinitely staying here as Academy Professors. I donâ€™t know, good or bad, if I really prefer that.Â But Iâ€™m definitely going to get a PhD, â€™cause I know after I get out of the service that I want to teach. And so I think to open certain doors, you need to have a PhD to teach at a lot of universities, or even small colleges. So Iâ€™m going to pursue that. Itâ€™ll be chemistry for sure. My old advisor really wants me to come back to work for him because Iâ€™m free. It didnâ€™t cost him a dime, and I got a lot of work done itâ€™s good for him. But he was a great guy, so itâ€™s going to be a hard decision. I chose that school, too, because itâ€™s in a lot of research programs.

Justin Toole

I hope youâ€™ll see this thing, like I really care about people. I care about the human. You go to other big schools like I remember going to Georgia Tech, and they accepted me and said, â€œHey, why donâ€™t you come on down? You can come here and get it.â€ And by all standards in terms of whoever reviews these chemistry rankings, it was a â€œbetter school.â€ But you see the people who go there, and they go there more for other kind of reasons than the fact that they get any sort of fulfillment out of going there. And I went to

the University of Georgia, and I realized really quickly that these advisors will actually talk to you. They care about you. Not all of them, necessarily, but especially the one I worked for. Thatâ€™s where Iâ€™m going to go to get my PhD, wherever I can find something that fits in well with me, where I can work for or with somebody who really cares about me, and is not using me as a tool, right?

Interviewer

So is part of your interest in science at this point animated by climate change, since you mentioned that, or.

Justin Toole

Not particularly.

Interviewer

Itâ€™s not.

Justin Toole

No.

Interviewer

It just happens to be one of the.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

Applications of this.

Justin Toole

I like Iâ€™m kind of argumentative in some regards, so Iâ€™m going to find a problem that people seem to not agree with. And I like to provide clarity scientifically, â€™cause I feel like these observations that scientists often make are hopefully absolute, or at least give some sort of clarity to the situation. So Iâ€™d find fulfillment in just researching anything that we didnâ€™t understand, absolutely. It would probably be a physical chemistry type problem like that, as opposed to like an organic one, â€™cause I donâ€™t really enjoy that aspect of chemistry as much. But weâ€™ll see. It would be easier to go back into that type of a research group, because I have a couple years of experience dealing with the terminology, but Iâ€™d have no hesitation to go somewhere else and do something completely different. Maybe thatâ€™s why I like research if it stays new, then I can do it.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm. So when did you come to West Point?

Justin Toole

This May I arrived. I started teaching in August. So Iâ€™ve taught one semester of general chemistry, and Iâ€™m just starting the second semester.

Interviewer

And you like it?

Justin Toole

Absolutely. Itâ€™s great. Itâ€™s a great opportunity, again, seeing the cadets every day.

Interviewer

So are you seeing mostly plebes, or.

Justin Toole

Yes.

Justin Toole

Yes, the plebes take chemistry. Some are yearlings, the sophomores, you know, and they are the ones who either elected to do it, or theyâ€™re usually often foreign language majors, so they kind of change up their schedule. But by and large, theyâ€™re all plebes, which is interesting. You know 18 year olds sometimes I ask myself, â€œHow can you do that,â€ and Iâ€™m thinking, â€œTheyâ€™re 18,â€ maybe. I try to tell them stories about how I was, how horrible of a student. I was a horrible student in college, too Iâ€™ll tell you that much. As much as I enjoy learning things, and I see myself as kind of a lifelong learner, I didnâ€™t take my grades very seriously at all. That didnâ€™t come to a head till I was applying to graduate school, and somebody asked me about one of my grades, and I took it personally. And they said, â€œHey, well, you have these good test scores.

Justin Toole

But you got this grade back in 1999,â€ and I was like, â€œAre you kidding me? Did I mention that I want to teach chemistry at West Point, and this is what Iâ€™ve done? â€œIâ€™ve been in the Army, Iâ€™ve worked these jobs, and this is what Iâ€ and I realized like I really was selling myself short. So I tell these cadets now, â€œYouâ€™ve got all and some of you have a lot of potential. Youâ€™re selling yourself short. And though you might not see it now, 15 years from now it might come back, so just keep that in mind.â€ But again, you get to meet people from all over the country, right, so thatâ€™s cool. And I know almost none of them are going to be chemistry majors, and thatâ€™s fine with me. I try to set a good example, make them interested, make them understand that even if they donâ€™t get a degree in this, they have to understand, have to get these skills of problem solving. Of reading between the lines when they see these scientific they read the paper, and this doctor of fish tells you how fish are being killed in the Hudson. And to really say, â€œLetâ€™s read into whatâ€™s being said here, and what do they know. Whereâ€™s the data? Where are the facts? Thatâ€™s where the answerâ€™s at. Otherwise youâ€™re just relying on your own supposition youâ€™re just feeling comfortable with whatever you thought in the first place.â€ So I think they hopefully are getting that out of the class, whether they become a chemist or not.

Interviewer

So you mentioned that having an advisor that you could actually have a relationship with was important to you. I donâ€™t really know that much about how things work here. My wife teaches at Columbia, actually sheâ€™s a literature person. Â Do you have those kind of relationships, those kind of mentor mentee relationships with the plebes, or is it not.

Interviewer

Right.

Interviewer

â€™Cause you seem to have that ability to care, and to reach out, and stuff like that. Has that been an aspect of the job here?

Justin Toole

Not particularly. I sponsor you know, you drop your name in the hat and say, â€œI want to be a sponsor for the new plebes,â€ and so I have some that I sponsor. So really, in that regard, Iâ€™m doing that with them. In terms of the class, not so much, because I honestly feel like you know, someone told me the cadet time is one of the most fought-over resources, second only to like oil and diamonds maybe like their schedules are very packed, and so they just honestly donâ€™t have that much time. So I use the classroom as an opportunity to develop them for things outside of the classroom, but I really donâ€™t get to know them too terribly much, unless you spend time with them outside of the classroom. Because I only have this block of time is 80 minutes to cover some complicated things, maybe, and so unless they have a passion for chemistry, which again, very few of them do, I donâ€™t speak to them much outside of the classroom. But I do, the ones I sponsor, I love having them up to my house, and talking to them about things that Iâ€™ve experienced just letting them take a break from Castle Grayskull over here, you know.Â Especially this time of year itâ€™s like all you see is this stone. Itâ€™s gray, itâ€™s foggy. All they see is in. I can see the out they canâ€™t see that yet. They just look in and they keep their head down. They wear their wool pants and they drive on, so maybe just making them laugh every now and then is good enough for me in class.

Interviewer

Right. And you mentioned where youâ€™re going to probably go next, after the West Point. Where will that be?

Justin Toole

I donâ€™t know specifically. Itâ€™ll be in two and a half years, so itâ€™ll be an Engineer Battalion. Iâ€™ll be probably an Operations Officer for an Engineer Battalion. And so six months out, they say, Iâ€™ll find out weâ€™ll see. But Iâ€™ll go back to Mother Army, so she can have her way with me. But as an Engineer, I could be at a Construction unit, or a Route Clearance unit. Now thereâ€™s actually fielded equipment that I was using in Iraq in 2005, updated, modified. But thereâ€™s actually now Army units that have the mission of purely route clearance. Before, we didnâ€™t train on that with that equipment, â€™cause it didnâ€™t exist at that time. I could go to Combat Engineer, like kind of a Light Engineer unit. Thereâ€™s lots of different places I could go. Itâ€™ll mostly be based on the availability, and who needs, what slots need to be filled.

Interviewer

It doesnâ€™t look like weâ€™ll be too active.Â

Justin Toole

Weâ€™ll see.

Interviewer

I mean you never know.

Justin Toole

You never know, right.

Interviewer

Right.

Justin Toole

Right. I havenâ€™t been deployed. See, Iâ€™ve done one deployment. I consider myself fortunate in that regard. Mostly has to do with the fact that I took command of a training unit, so you stay in the United States. But most anybody else whoâ€™s been in the Army as long as I have, eight plus years, is at least on two deployments. Some of the friends I know have been three or more. So Iâ€™m on a list where youâ€™re absolutely looked at based on how long itâ€™s been since you last deployed, so there will be contingencies.Â There will be deployments out there which I will be discussing with my Branch Manager at that time because heâ€™s obviously going to prioritize someone like me who hasnâ€™t been deployed in as many years to go. So that might limit my decision. I just hope I donâ€™t go to a kind of an individual type deployment, tasking. Iâ€™d rather just go back to a Regular unit, where I can be an Engineer in unit. Not like, â€œOh, we need a guy in Saudi Arabia to work on this construction project,â€ or something, or some staff guy to work with oh, man, thatâ€™s not for me. I donâ€™t get much fulfillment out of that. Send me back to a Regular unit again Iâ€™ll be happy looking forward to it.

Interviewer

So I have just one last question, which is just to provide closure a little bit. Were you, when Osama bin Laden was killed, like you were in college when 9/11 happened.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

And then a few years ago.

Interviewer

I was in college.

Interviewer

You were in college?

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

So how did you react to that?

Justin Toole

You knowâ€¦thereâ€™s no closure to me. There is no it had very little impact. There was obviously big impact when 9/11 happened. You couldâ€™ve told me just about anybody had died that day, you know what I mean, outside of my family, and it wouldnâ€™t have very much impact. I know, of course, it was something that this is a man who wishes these things, horrible things, and is orchestrating certain things, and so yes, like thereâ€™s some degree in which Iâ€™m like, â€œOkay, good,â€ like I donâ€™t have to worry about that. But I know thereâ€™s somebody else out there who thinks just like him, and I know that you donâ€™t change things with that person. You could have these missions downrange, and you can take care of all these bad guys, but youâ€™re still going to be fighting the same fight. Itâ€™s much bigger than that. And so you learn that because when you start to realize itâ€™s really troubling when you find out how much someone wants to hurt you and your family, and you donâ€™t even know who they are. That was something I learned about war. These people donâ€™t know who I am, and they want to hurt and kill me. I finally figured that out, and it kind of blew me away. It made it easier to do my mission, in some regards. Like given the opportunity, they would kill you. They would kill your soldiers. They donâ€™t know who you are. They just know youâ€™re something else, and thatâ€™s what they disdain, or whatever. That put things into perspective. So I donâ€™t know Osama bin Laden, but Iâ€™m saying the same thing I know what heâ€™s done, or whatever, so I guess itâ€™s different. But I donâ€™t think those types of actions really make you feel any better at least donâ€™t make me feel any better. But yeah, not that I wouldnâ€™t try, you know what I mean? Not that I would stop searching out for these types of folks.

Interviewer

Well, so what you said now provokes another question.

Justin Toole

Okay, one more last one.

Interviewer

Who did you conceive of in Iraq as the enemy? Â I mean it was obviously a very complicated.

Justin Toole

Right.

Interviewer

Military situation how did you think about it?

Justin Toole

Yeah, thatâ€™s a good question. In the area south of Baghdad there were terrorists. There were absolute terrorists there. Undoubtedly, the guy who killed the Lieutenant and the soldier on that mission I talked to you about terrorist. Other countries in the region, spoke different language, they trained, they practiced, they tried they were planned and calculated in their efforts to kill soldiers, so that was the enemy there. I was on a mission, and I went out, and on the way back, I remember looking around, and looking at the buildings and something didnâ€™t seem right. And as we got closer to the city, I saw a mosque, and it was smoking. This was the day that the Golden Mosque had been attacked. And thatâ€™s

really when it sparked a lot of the sectarian violence, so I realized really quickly, in those circumstances, there in Iraq, at that time â€˜cause thereafter, bodies started showing up everywhere vans full of bodies. Gunshot wounds to the head type of thing all over the place, and the American soldiers felt kind of uneasy about this, because we didnâ€™t feel like we should get involved, â€™cause it was like their thing. But at the same time I realized kind of thatâ€™s the enemy right now. This intolerance, whatever it is, at all these levels, thatâ€™s whatâ€™s causing this country not to get back on its feet, and kick these people who are doing nothing for them out. That was the enemy. So itâ€™s definitely not a person, per se. But at different levels, there were those enemies, like I said those al Qaeda members and those other terrorists they were there. And so I was concerned about them, but you hear about it in the news, but when you see it, you know. And you hear about people getting tortured, and these horrific things, and you say, â€œHow is this helping anything?â€ If we can get there, then I think the enemy has a harder time doing what he wants to do, you know what I mean? Itâ€™s hard to set the conditions to tolerate these types of activities. If Baghdad looked like it did by all measures, up until, I donâ€™t know it used to be a prosperous place, right? The Fertile Crescent used to be a beautiful place, gardens and everything, and it was. And then somehow, something changed, and people just couldnâ€™t get along any more. And that unbelievable willingness just to like, at everyone elseâ€™s expense, push your own belief, or whatever it is. Like that intolerance is whatâ€™s going to prevent us from really you know what I mean in my opinion, kind of get to some closure.

Interviewer

Well, thank you very much.

Justin Toole

Thanks, Dan.

Interviewer
This was really interesting. Â Do you.