

Interviewer:

All right, sir. Before we begin, can you please state your name, your title, and then spell it for the transcriber.

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, sure thing. It's Captain Paul N. Belmont III. It's P-A-U-L, middle initial N, B-E-L-M-O-N-T, and suffix III.

Interviewer:

The third.

Paul Belmont III:

That is correct.

Interviewer:

Wow. Do you have a son?

Paul Belmont III:

My son is the fourth.

Interviewer:

The fourth. You guys are going strong. Well, where are you from?

Paul Belmont III:

I grew up in Richmond, Virginia.

Interviewer:

Richmond, Virginia. And were you from a military family?

Paul Belmont III:

No. I'm the first guy -- I mean, my grandfathers were. They served in World War II, the both of 'em, but they did their tours and got out and went on to other things. My father never served in the military. The only guy that was in the military was my mother's brother, my Uncle Tom. He was in the Navy.

Interviewer: * {:.text} Where'd you go to high school?

Paul Belmont III:

I went to high school at Benedictine High School in Richmond, Virginia. It's a Catholic military school.

Interviewer:

Yeah, for the viewers, can you explain a little bit about it? It's a JRTC program?

Paul Belmont III:

They do have JRTC there. Basically, it's -- let's see, I think it was founded in 1911 as a preparatory college. It used to be called Benedictine College, but it eventually -- it's a high school now. It's run by the Benedictine monks. They run that, so it's priests and monks that own and run the school, part of the Benedictine order. And so it's a Catholic school, and they've, since its inception, basically had this military tradition there where you all dress in ____ and a guys' school 100 percent, and it's a day school, which is interesting.

Interviewer:

What was it like?

Paul Belmont III:

I don't know. It was just like a bunch of teenage guys that -- I mean, we were the -- when I went there, it was really cheap, so it was like the blue-collar school. I mean, I think it was only, like, 1,000 bucks or something like that to go there for the year, and so there was a lot of basically kids of working dads that wanted 'em to do whatever. And we competed independently, so we would play the public schools and the private schools in sports, especially in football because the Catholic league didn't really have a football league. Most of the other Catholic schools didn't have football teams.

Interviewer: * {:.text} Did you play football?

Paul Belmont III:

I played -- left out -- when I was in my freshman year, but then I switched over to track

after that.

Interviewer:

You know, I've actually heard that you have a couple pretty crazy football stories from when you were deployed, something about the Super Bowl. Then there was another one about pretty much the Fiestaval, those

Paul Belmont III:

I think it was "was it the Fiestaval? I think it was Boise State and " boy, I'm not remembering now who Boise State played that year.

Interviewer:

Maybe Oklahoma.

Paul Belmont III:

It might've been Oklahoma. We had a " you can look up. There's an interview with the Times-Dispatch where I get this more correct. But essentially, we had a TAC helicopter unit, Apaches, that was made up of half the guys from one state and half the guys from the other. And so they were all either

yeah, they were all either from Idaho or Oklahoma, one or the other. And then these two guys played each other in this ballgame, and that was probably the craziest " that was one of the most fun sports experiences I ever watched. I thought they were " they're all packed in their little talk, and they had this thing on a feed, and we thought the building was gonna come down there for a little while. It was fun.

Interviewer:

Were you in Iraq or Afghanistan?

Paul Belmont III:

That was in Afghanistan. That was the OEF 7, I think.

Interviewer:

Okay, so you went to Benedictine High School.

Paul Belmont III:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

And then where did you end up going to school? Where did you enlist? What exactly happened?

Paul Belmont III: * {:.text} Sure. I left " after finishing up at Benedictine, I decided discipline was a good thing for me. And so after fiddling around with the academies and a couple different things there, I ended up settling, for one reason or another, on the Virginia Military Institute.

Interviewer: * {:.text} VMI?

Paul Belmont III:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Could you tell us about some of the traditions at VMI? From what I understand, it's a very unique place.

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, I suppose so. I mean, it's comparable, I guess, to only a few other schools. You got the other senior military academies. I think there's seven. What, Citadel, Texas A&M, Virginia Tech Corps, Norwich in Vermont. There's the North Georgia military college. VMI itself. I think that's six. There's one more floating out there somewhere. I can't remember. Oh, NMML, New Mexico " no, there's are junior military colleges. And so then you got the service academies, so it's all kinda I guess at some point all coming out of the systems. And VMI, of course, is kinda a bit rooted in a little more Civil War tradition than perhaps anything else. But yeah, it was an interesting place to go to school. It's a unique place. I don't know. I could go on a long time, you know what I mean? You had something specific you wanted to ask me about it.

Interviewer: Well, how about you run us through your first day there, what that was like?

Paul Belmont III:

Golly. Matriculation â€“ sorry, I had to think for a second.

Interviewer:

Yeah, thatâ€™s fine.

Paul Belmont III:

You decide to go to VMI. Your first day, you basically walk around the campus. Thereâ€™s some guys that, like, gave you some tours, I think. That mighta been the first day. The first thing you did was go to the big gym and register for all your classes, and you sign the rolls, and you get your idiot tag with your name on it and who you belong to, even though you havenâ€™t met this guy yet. And then you saw your parents. They took you in and they gave you, like, one last thing, and then I think we all marched around. I think that day ended with meeting the cadre, and thatâ€™s kind of a pretty draconian process, I suppose. I guess the way that works â€“ at some point you ended up â€“ at some point we all ended up with haircuts, so they shaved all our heads. They gave us some red shorts, and we were still wearing white T-shirts. The only piece of uniform we had was red shorts and white T-shirts and our idiot tags that said where we belonged. We ended up with our companies by the end of the day at some point. And they brought us all into the courtyard, and they sort of rile you on to â€“ itâ€™s the first get-together moment. They get us all clapping, and then they got us chanting â€œWe want Cadre, we want Cadre.â€ And so everybody gets going, and then the next thing you know, a snare drum starts hitting off, and a bass drum, and in come a bunch of dudes in white pants and gray shirts, with tight haircuts and real mean looks on their face, and you get quiet really fast. And thereâ€™s some speech about â€œThey will teach, and you will learn,â€ and then â€œThese are your cadre. Theyâ€™re the best, and theyâ€™re the people that are basically involved with you for your first year at VMI.â€ And after they said, â€œRats, meet your cadre,â€ and then basically, the best way to describe it is all hell breaks loose. These guys just come rushing at you, knocking you on the ground or jumping in your face. Thereâ€™s spit flying everywhere. I can remember a couple guys just quit right there. They just walked right out. Theyâ€™re just like, thatâ€™s it.

Interviewer:

Really?

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah.

It was an interesting experience. Itâ€™s basically like, â€œOkay, this is it.â€ Theyâ€™re still operating on this model of â€œbreak you down, then build you up.â€ So the whole process: â€œWeâ€™ll break you down to nothing, and then weâ€™ll build you back up and who we want you to be.â€ So yeah, so then the first day gets pretty intense, and then that starts the Cadre Week, and things sorta build from there.

Interviewer:

Now, at VMI you have almost a mentor your first year, correct?

Paul Belmont III:

The dyke. Yeah, youâ€™re looking at me like â€œI got a dyke.â€ And this is one of those confusing things. At VMI the term â€œdykeâ€ comes from a bastardization of the pronunciation of decked out, getting decked out, getting dressed. And so at some point in the accent, in the Old English or whatever, â€œdecked outâ€ sounded kinda like getting â€œdyked out.â€ And so every rat has a dyke, and every rat is a dyke to a dyke, and you have your co-dykes and your uncle dykes. And so basically, youâ€™re assigned a senior mentor whoâ€™s your dyke because youâ€™re responsible for dressing him for parades and getting him

dyked out. All the uniforms are called dykes, and then thatâ€™s your one place of safe haven, kind of. You can go to his room and relax. You gotta make his bed and shine his shoes and do some things, but he takes care of you, kinda keeps you on track the whole time youâ€™re there. And so then you have your cousins, cousin dykes, and you have

your uncle, so your dyke, and your uncle dykes, and then your cousin dykes. And so thatâ€™s kinda the way that mentorship process works, and thatâ€™s kinda the only place during your rat year that you can kinda go to be safe.

Interviewer:

Who was your â€œ

Paul Belmont III:

It was a guy named Brad Asuijo. And donâ€™t ask me to spell Bradâ€™s name. I feel bad about that, but I couldnâ€™t spell his name if you asked me. Itâ€™s a tough one. And after the Marines, I really â€œ I havenâ€™t actually talked to him in years and years.

Interviewer:

Really?

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah. And thereâ€™s â€œ Chad Brown was one of my uncle dykes, and I remember he was on the Rat Disciplinary Committee, so that was interesting.

Interviewer:

What was that like?

Paul Belmont III:

The Rat Disciplinary Committee

is basically some of the meanest juniors and seniors that they had out there, and if you stepped too far outta line, you would be sent to the RDC. You would be summoned with a formal invitation, literally, like a nice little printed thing: â€œYour presence has cordially been requested.â€ Basicly, that was for stepping outta line, and you would go down and get sentenced to workouts, so thatâ€™s the way that worked. So the sentencing process, and then youâ€™d have a period of physical working-out activity that you would have to do.

Interviewer:

A few other questions on VMI. Were you not sleeping on beds?

Paul Belmont III:

At VMI you have what you called your rack. They call it your rack and your hay. Your rack is the wood â€œ literally a wooden rack that you fold up against the wall in the day and stack it up. At the end of the day you just flop it down, you put it on the floor, and then you have your hay, which is a â€œ used to be made from hay, but now itâ€™s just a foam mattress. And you had to roll it up every day and strap it off with a pair of straps, fold your stuff up, and put it up, and then in a certain hour of the night, I donâ€™t remember when, you were allowed to put it down. So yeah.

Interviewer:

When did you go to VMI, and then when did you graduate?

Paul Belmont III:

I started VMI in 1996. I graduated high school in â€™96, so August â€™96, started VMI. Graduated in May of 2000.

Interviewer:

So you mustâ€™ve been a sophomore when the first women â€œ

Paul Belmont III:

Yes. I was the last all-male class at the Virginia Military Institute. Thatâ€™s correct.

Interviewer:

What was that like?

Paul Belmont III:

That was an interesting process. Citadel had just gone through two years of women. Theyâ€™d had Shannon Faulkner, and that had been pretty much a disaster. I mean, many people remember that. I always â€œ â€œOh, yeah, I remember that girl who went to VMI the first time.â€ No, that was actually Shannon Faulkner. Everybody always remembers Shannon Faulkner, and I guess she didnâ€™t do so well. I mean, thatâ€™s the long and short. And then the next year they brought in four girls, and they sort of had another

embarrassing â€“ I guess the first round with Shannon Faulkner was an embarrassment, and so then the next round was the Citadel really embarrassed themselves. I remember there was a couple things that happened, some weird traditions, and I think the long and short of it was they had four women; two of â€™em quit, which isnâ€™t unheard of. I mean, for two people to quit is not a big deal, but when thatâ€™s half of the people that just showed up, I think that magnified things in the media, and there were some inappropriate things done. I remember there was a video of the Citadel guys sorta celebrating when these girls quit, on the way outta school, and that didnâ€™t really â€“ it didnâ€™t look good. And so it really became a conscious decision at VMI to â€“ itâ€™s kinda like, â€œWell, I donâ€™t wanna go that route.â€ Like, got difficult for people at the Citadel for a while. And so the attitude at VMI, a lot of what it was about was we could run things ourselves. That was really instilled in us, and so I think the goal became to conduct assimilation, as it was called, in a manner which we would control it and which the â€“ as much as possible, we the students wanna be controlling assimilation, how it worked. The administration had a desire to not have external influences coming into VMI. Nobody wanted the FBI running around or anything like that. And so it became about â€œhow right can we do this,â€ but thereâ€™s no easy way to do that. And so I remember I was working off penalty tours, and I was getting penalty tour credit for filling up the water and coffee at some meeting, and next thing I know, â€œWhy you filling up that water and coffee, Cadet?â€ â€œWell, Iâ€™m working off a tour.â€ â€œWe need a cadet at this table,â€ and I ended up on the assimilation committee, which was interesting. So it was a very â€“ it was a weird process. You had to, I mean, literally talk about language, like the term â€œdyke.â€ We had a discussion: â€œCan we still use the term â€™dykeâ€™?â€ Yes, thatâ€™s an Old English term. It means to dress. So weâ€™re not actually â€“ so we can own that term, and it means nothing offensive here. And it still exists today, and it isnâ€™t offensive to anybody, which was kinda funny. But then there were other things, like these â€“ â€œrolling your hay.â€ One of the expressions used to be â€œroll your hay as tight as a tampon.â€ And they said, â€œWell, thatâ€™s out. We really canâ€™t use that language anymore.â€ They used to line you up and say, â€œGet nuts to butts,â€ and it was like, â€œOh, no, thatâ€™s out. Weâ€™re not gonna have lining up nuts to butts anymore, and weâ€™re not gonna say that.â€ And so, literally, there had to be discussions about things like this, and it would be kinda silly. And those were the easy things, really. That was the easy stuff. I think the hard piece of it was that â€“ institutionally and culturally is â€“ perhaps as ready as anybody was as a cadet to handle the assimilation of women of the corps, I think the difficult parts became â€“ if the whole argument was â€œeverybodyâ€™s the same, same, same, same, everybodyâ€™s the same,â€ that became difficult to reconcile in reality, because men and women donâ€™t look the same, they donâ€™t act the same, they arenâ€™t physically the same. And so thereâ€™s that distinction, and so you went from tipping your hat to a woman â€“ this is a big thing. And you still had to walk out the gate, and if you saw a woman, you would tip your hat. You know, â€œMaâ€™am,â€ and it didnâ€™t matter if she was 17 years old. â€œMaâ€™am. How are you, maâ€™am?â€ And suddenly youâ€™re tipping your hat to a woman at one moment, and the next minute youâ€™re straining and yelling and berating a female cadet on the other hand, and so that was a bit of a culture shock. But then the bigger part was when things became distinct because they were women, not because â€“ itâ€™s like, okay, yeah, a woman doesnâ€™t run as fast as a man. Thatâ€™s fine. But things like the haircuts. You know, â€œOkay, weâ€™re all gonna shave heads, right?â€ And, of course, everybody had seen G.I. Jane, and â€œOh, Demi Moore shaved her head, no big deal. Women are gonna come here. Theyâ€™re gonna shave heads.â€ But then they didnâ€™t. Why arenâ€™t they shaving their head? â€œWell, we donâ€™t wanna do that to a woman.â€ And so then there was kinda societal â€œcanâ€™t treat a woman like a manâ€ thing, and so then that became confusing. And then it went a step further. I remember a girl â€“ oh, what was her name? I donâ€™t know. The whole room full

of â€˜em, they shaved their heads

to be like their brother rats. â€œHey, we donâ€™t wanna be different; we wanna be the same.â€ And so here are these girls that came â€˜ then they got punished for shaving their heads.

Interviewer:

Really?

Paul Belmont III:

Because that was not the standard, and so that became difficult for people to reconcile. And then, institutionally, sometimes there would be these â€˜ so then that created a divide that didnâ€™t exist. And then nobody likes the way theyâ€™re treated, and so it seems silly, but itâ€™s like, hey, I didnâ€™t like having my head shaved, â€˜cause they told me it was dumb, even though â€˜ hey, thanks to Michael Jordan, we can all shave our heads now. Itâ€™s cool. You know, Kojak and things like that. But they tell you itâ€™s dumb. You donâ€™t wanna go home looking dumb. â€œOh, can we just grow our hair out before Thanksgiving?â€ No. Thatâ€™s not the way it is. And then someone asked the question, â€œWell, should the girls have their heads shaved before they go home for Thanksgiving? Well, we wouldnâ€™t want them to look like that when they go back into society.â€ And so then they let the girls grow their hair out a little bit more before Thanksgiving, and then even more before Christmas. And then we all said, â€œWell, wait, why are they getting different treatment?â€ And so then, sadly, those institutional things I think caused rifts that didnâ€™t have to exist, and I think thatâ€™s just part of the whole thing. I mean, probably â€˜ I mean, to a certain extent, I mean, what the Armyâ€™s been at men and women since the â€™70s, and even before that if you went to the Womenâ€™s Army Corps, and thereâ€™s still those tightnesses. And in the study, we kinda learned, too, you can look at civilian schools like DBA. Itâ€™s like, anytime youâ€™re gonna mix men and women together, youâ€™re going to deal with a certain problem set, and I think that it becomes the challenge of dealing with that problem set. And itâ€™ll really take â€˜ I mean, what are we, two generations removed from â€˜ I mean, really, weâ€™re a generation removed from coeducation. My mother was the first coed dorm at the University of Kentucky in the â€™70s.

Interviewer:

Oh, wow.

Paul Belmont III:

And so thatâ€™s a generation away, and so I donâ€™t even think society in general â€˜ I mean, weâ€™re just getting to the point where people know how to deal with this. And to go to a place like VMI, it was very different. But then it really breaks down the same way. Once you get some maturity and you can look at it, youâ€™re kinda like, okay, hereâ€™s a person â€˜ you know, you have to look at â€˜ hereâ€™s a person thatâ€™s giving everything theyâ€™ve got; hereâ€™s a person that isnâ€™t.

And when is it looking at a person versus â€œOh, well, itâ€™s a woman, so sheâ€™s not giving everything sheâ€™s got.â€ Well, I can find you ten guys that arenâ€™t giving everything theyâ€™ve got either. And so that becomes a hard distinction. But it went well, I think, from the standpoint of â€˜ the school was able to basically â€˜ the court case actually continued for several years. I donâ€™t remember when it actually ended, but technically, when VMI started assimilation, it was still up for debate in the court case, and part of it was the VMI initiation. We wonâ€™t be mandated to assimilate, and so then there had to be some proof over the years that, yes, youâ€™re doing this correctly. And so the case wasnâ€™t dropped until â€˜ I donâ€™t remember when it was dropped. It wasnâ€™t till years later when they actually dropped the court case to say, â€œYeah, youâ€™re doing what youâ€™re supposed to do.â€ But it just becomes â€˜ it was a big change. It was a tremendous change and caused little things, and there mightâ€™ve been probably some extra stuff going on our year. â€œOh, this is the last one,â€ and so we had a very different sort of â€˜ I wonâ€™t say a different sorta rat line. We had a very intense

rat line, I think, because it was like, "We'll never get away with this again," whatever that's supposed to be. So yeah, so I had an interesting time there, and I still " actually, I think one of the first women to attend the Virginia Military Institute is here at West Point now. I haven't had a chance to look her up. I think Angelica Martinez is her name, and I think she's "

Interviewer:

Oh, really?

Paul Belmont III:

I think she's in one of the departments over here. I don't know if she was in the first or second class of women, but I'm pretty sure " I heard through the grapevine that she's here. I've been meaning to look her up. I've only been here a month or so. I'm in history; she's some kinda engineer or something like that, so I haven't had a chance to cross paths. But I'm sure " we're playing football against West Point on the 30th of October, and so I'm working real hard to gather all of the VMI people together for a tailgate, so yeah.

Interviewer:

What is your " okay, so VMI.

Paul Belmont III:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

You're nearing graduation, and you're gonna have to choose what service to enlist to.

Paul Belmont III:

You actually do that your rat year.

Interviewer:

Oh, really?

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, your rat year you pick a branch, 'cause you can go all four. So RTC is your source of commission at the end of the day, some extra privileges 'cause it's one of those senior military academies. But yeah, so I mean, there's like a day where they showed you a bunch of dumb videos. I had not gone to Annapolis. I was well on my way to go to Annapolis, but then I took a tuna-fishing trip, which I'd done before, but I got really sick this time. Never been sick in the ocean before. My dad grew up on the Jersey shore, and I got really sick, and so I was like, "I'll never " I'm not gonna risk that." So Navy was out. And then when I got to VMI, I was like, "Oh, I kinda wanna fly planes." I looked at Air Force, and they showed a bunch of " I just remember, for whatever reason, I was like, "I wanna keep my feet on the ground. Marines, might have to be on a boat. Navy's on a boat. Flying an airplane sounds pretty cool." But then all the other presentations were really cheesy, and I was kinda leaning towards Army anyway, and they didn't show me a dumb video. They just " the guy for the Army actually just came out and talked to us, as opposed to showing me

a video with rock music, which " must've just been him, 'cause Lord knows I've seen enough rock music videos with the Army in it. So I thought, "Oh, these guys aren't trying to BS me," and so I signed up for the Army. And you have to do " whether you're going to commission or not, you have to take RTC. And I actually turned down a three-year scholarship my second year 'cause I was fed " after my rat line, I thought, "Oh, geez, forget this Army stuff. I did a Catholic military high school. I was in Catholic school before that. I'm gonna be four more years in uniforms here. I'm sick of it, blah, blah, blah." So I turned down a full ride which would've covered room and board. And then I remember coming back in my junior year and saying, "Hey, is that scholarship still available?" and they said, "Yes, it is, but it doesn't cover your room and board, so it only covers your tuition." So that was like, "I'm an idiot," but life is life, and that's how it works out. So yeah, so I contracted then in my junior year to take a commission, and took a scholarship, and then

ended up commissioning after my graduation. I had to go back to Advanced Camp, so up in Washington, so I actually commissioned in July of 2000.

Interviewer:

July of 2000?

Paul Belmont III:

As opposed to most people, who were commissioned in May. I had what they called a camp commissionee, so I had to go out and commission after the fact, and I got my commission at the end of â€“ usually you go junior year to Advanced Camp, and then you go back, and then you commission in May. Well, I just got commissioned. I was part of, like, the ten guys that went out; we all got commissioned at Advanced Camp. And suddenly I was the first â€“ I was the second lieutenant in charge of everybody that two minutes ago was my peer. And I remember I had to â€“ of course, so quickly I was in charge for everything that went wrong. I remember one of my first duties was, on the plane ride home, some guy from â€“ weâ€™re all flying back to Virginia, so whoever was going back to Virginia was _____ this guy. I think he â€“ I forget what school he went to. Virginia Union, I think. And he got massively drunk and locked himself in the plane bathroom, and somebody wanted to get him outta there. And so theyâ€™re like, â€œOh, Paulâ€™s a lieutenant. He has to deal with it.â€ So I remember I had to get this guy outta the bathroom and escort him off the plane.

I never knew â€“ I have no idea what happened to him or how he explained that to somebody, that he destroyed this bathroom on a plane and got completely drunk at the end of Advanced Camp. I would have to assume that he wasnâ€™t dumb enough to call somebody and ask for a new ticket. He probably paid his own way home, and nobody wouldâ€™ve known, as opposed to asking the Army for a new ticket. â€œWhy did you lose your ticket?â€

Interviewer:

Wow. So itâ€™s July of 2000.

Interviewer:

Where do you go from there?

Paul Belmont III:

Oddly, because I was commissioned July of 2000, I had to wait to get branched with the â€“01-year group. So I did not have a Army branch yet, and I wasnâ€™t going to receive an Army branch yet until December of 2000. So I wasnâ€™t gonna receive a branch for six, seven months. So maybe â€“ it was January. And so I tried to become a Gold Bar Recruiter, and our professor of military science at the time told me to â€œGo beat feet. I got no room for you here.â€

Interviewer:

Really?

Paul Belmont III:

And so I was basically awash for seven months with a commission and no pay. And so I worked as a campus minister â€“ assistant campus minister at Virginia Commonwealth University for the Catholic Campus Ministries in Richmond, on a \$400.00-a-month stipend in a program to discern the priesthood. And I walked outta that with a wife and a commission. [Laughter] If you coulda seen â€“ what was that? â€“ Father Mike Renningerâ€™s face when I said, â€œHey, Father Renninger, I discerned something. Iâ€™d like you to marry me.â€ And as my wife tells the story, his face dropped, just for a moment, but then he got very positive. So yeah, so I worked as a civilian, basically. I had a commission, but I was a civilian, and I lived on \$400.00 a month working as this assistant campus minister. Iâ€™d been big in the campus ministry in college, and I stuck with it, and so I worked for the Diocese of Richmond, and then till, I think, in February, finally.

So I did that from, like, July until â€“ I guess it was February, end of February somewhere. I had to go off to â€“ I went off to the second BOLC course down at â€“ I was gonna be a

quartermaster, but I had to go â€“ went to Infantry Basic Course first. And so I went down to Benning at that point. So yeah, and then I started, so I actually â€“ my pay date is July 2000, but for retirement I have to say March â€˜01.

Interviewer:

Really? So you actually â€“ as you say, March â€˜01, thatâ€™s pretty close to 9/11.

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah. Was it â€“ yeah, that wouldâ€™ve been. Yeah. So March â€˜01 off to â€“ I went to the second BOLC course, which BOLC I think just ended, and I think they just canned it after ten years. I think there is no longer Basic Officer Leaders Course. It was essentially supposed to be â€“ we were gonna be like the Marines. Weâ€™ll train everybody to be infantry officers first. Whatever the politics in between that. But I went down and went through a whole Infantry Officer Basic Course. At the end of it, theyâ€™re like, â€œHereâ€™s your blue cord, and hereâ€™s your certificate. Hereâ€™s your cord, hereâ€™s your â€“â€ If youâ€™re an infantry officer, then you got a blue cord; if you werenâ€™t, then you got a certificate that says you went to BOLC. And then I went off to, then, the quartermaster course, so it was kinda funny. So Iâ€™d been living in Virginia, in Richmond, and I went down for â€“ it was only a couple months down at Benning. I canâ€™t remember, maybe two, three months, something like that. And then back up to â€“ by spring, early summer, I was back at the Quartermaster Officer Basic Course back at Fort Lee, just south of home. I went through that, which has all worked out well. Over one pushup is why I had to come and repeat the â€“

Interviewer:

Over one pushup?

Paul Belmont III:

Thatâ€™s why I had to come back and redo my â€“ what do you call it? â€“ Advanced Camp.

Interviewer:

What happened?

Paul Belmont III:

I got â€“ I remember doing 15 pushups at, like, 39 or whatever it is. I needed one more push-up, and the guy just kept saying the same number over again, and as he told me, â€œYour butt was moving this much on the way up.â€ Perhaps one of the reasons they donâ€™t have lieutenants grade those anymore, but itâ€™s kinda funny. And so then I was taking a retest, and my hand slipped in the retest. It was like, you gotta be kidding me. So I bled my test. They put me on a plane home. I had to come back and retake or I guess get enlisted or something like that. So I ended up retaking that and encountering this gap, and that was â€“ I met my wife right before graduation, in 2000, so I actually had this year in there to sort of court my wife, my eventual wife. And so that worked out well for me and personally was interesting, and so then it delayed my coming in, and so then I went through quartermaster course. I remember I had proposed to my wife on the way to Germany. I had drawn an assignment in Germany and â€“

Interviewer:

On your way to Germany, you proposed?

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, so before I left, I was like, â€œI better either seal the deal, or otherwise Iâ€™m gonna be surrounded by frauleins and perhaps this relationship wonâ€™t last, and Iâ€™m interested in this relationship.â€ So I did, I got a ring and I proposed to my wife, and I went off to Germany a single, engaged man. And I got to Germany in August of 2001. Right near the end of August, I remember that. It was Labor Day weekend, I remember, because everybody was gone. I didnâ€™t know anybody, so I was just wandering around this German town by myself â€˜cause I had the day off. And everybody had, like, skipped town, and I didnâ€™t know anybody. So I wandered, and there was this huge festival going on that ends up lining up at this thing called Sandkerwa, which is this big festival in August,

which is like this ten-day, end-of-summer festival that they would run in Germany, and so I was like, "Wow, this place is great." And so we did that, and then I remember "I remember, yeah, September 11th, so I remember sitting in an S2 brief. We were getting intelligence briefs in the morning. And I kid you not, I was receiving " what I remember about that day

Interviewer:

Are they talking " is this Bin Laden they're discussing?

{.per Yeah, we're talking about Al-Qaeda and Bin Laden. And I guess I can't talk about all the specifics "cause it was classified.

Interviewer:

Which is fine.

Paul Belmont III:

And who knows if it is or not now, but bottom line is I'm getting a brief about " amongst other things. But what I, of course, remember was we're getting this brief about Al-Qaeda and Bin Laden and everything else, and I remember I didn't have any " I was still living in a hotel at the time. And so I remember going to the library to check my e-mail, my Internet, and the only thing on the webpage " this was in the early days of web pages; I guess they couldn't update things quickly " was just " like, CNN was the default page, and the only thing there was a picture of a smoking Twin Tower, and I didn't understand what that was. And there was no link. There was no article. Like, the whole " it was like the only thing on the webpage. And so then I remember just running downstairs and being like, "Somebody turn on the frickin' television." And so we turn on the TV, and there's " and then we catch up, and it was just " the first tower had just been hit. And then we stood there, and there was like a common area in this sorta library in Bamberg, Germany, in the post library. And we watched on the TV, and it was that guy. We're watching the broadcast of somebody standing there, and there goes the second plane. And then it was like the whole base was just " I mean, we're just locking down everything, and there was arming. And we were actually just getting ready to go on a rotation to Poland, just a training rotation, and then it becomes this big, massive exercise. You know, all of a sudden we gotta get live ammo before we get a plane. I mean, it seems laughable, but things were so scary. It was like, I remember going to Poland on two other rotations after that. We would never take ammo with us, even the next year. But it was like, well, what's gonna happen?

"Are we gonna even go on the training exercise?" "Of course we're gonna do the training exercise. We'll just arm our " "You know, so it was really a whirlwind of things. You know, the world changed that day. You know, you come into an Army where posts used to be completely open. I mean, you could take a cab onto the post, and Germans would come in, and "Oh, yeah, whatever," they'd have German ice cream day, and everybody would come get ice cream. And they would do these " it was a very open place, and then suddenly it was just like, wham, lock the gates, do everything, nobody comes in. If you took a cab, it had to drop you off at the gate and you had to walk on in. And the whole world was just a different place. I mean, it's just even dumb things, like for a while we couldn't run off post. We couldn't PT out of the gate. All of a sudden we lived on this little German kaserne, and you're, like, running in circles for, like, months, you know, like, "Ah, geez, I can't run down that road that we've been running down " "And so it did though, it changed the " it kinda really changed the world, and then it was "

and then on some levels it felt very close because, you know, oh, we know that there are terror cells in Germany and in Europe, and you felt more vulnerable because you were abroad. And then traveling became weird. You didn't wanna advertise you're in the military anymore if you went to some " I remember I was " I always had a civilian passport instead of " and I never used my military passport for anything. And I didn't like to show my " you know, I could just blend in. I used to " I remember pretending to

be French Canadian one time because I was â€œ actually, I was just trying to get into a party, but â€œ â€œOh, no Americans.â€ I was like, â€œOh. Je suis Canadien franÃ§ais,â€ or â€œJe parle franÃ§ais?â€ And theyâ€™re like, â€œYouâ€™re not French.â€ I was like, â€œCanadien franÃ§ais,â€ basically like I was _____, like, â€œHey, I wanna come in here,â€ and they didnâ€™t want any Americans hanging out. It was pretty funny, so I spoke a little French, and it was funny. But yeah, so the world changed. Go ahead, yeah.

Interviewer:

Did you feel personally attacked at all?

How did you feel â€œ

Paul Belmont III:

Well, I mean, one was, it was like, geez, you know, what are we gonna do? Are we gonna go to war? Are we gonna do something? Whatâ€™s going to happen? Are we going to be attacked? You know what I mean? Like, â€œGeez, I just got this brief. I know these guys are â€œâ€œ Could I be attacked? Could something happen to me? Could something happen to my family? And then I think as personal as it got is, my wife is from Brooklyn, and at the time her two brothers were still living in Brooklyn. And Bill used to work in Times Square, and so Bill was on the streets. Bill was out there when the Towers came down, and I just remember him recollecting. And my wife has classmates from grade school and high school and stuff that died in the Towers, I mean, so knew people, so that made it very personal. And I remember Bill telling me the story of just when the building came down. He just â€œ I remember he said, all he could think to do was, like, here comes this wall of nothingness at him, and so he said he pulled his wallet out, and he clutched it to his chest, and he laid down on his face

â€œcause he just thought, â€œThatâ€™s it, Iâ€™m going to die.â€ And he thought, â€œIf I can cling onto thisâ€ I donâ€™t even know what made him think that he would lose it. Maybe just something about your clothes blowing off in an explosion or something, but he thought somebody might find his identification and then know who he was, â€œcause thatâ€™s how traumatic it was. And then people having to walk home. So I had a lot of kinda personal contact with that, whatâ€™s going â€œ my fiancÃ©eâ€™s family lives â€œ you know, so you got all these different things going on there. And so whatâ€™s going to happen, and of course, then the Pentagonâ€™s attacked. So everything just felt really vulnerable, but then at the same time felt like â€œWhat does this mean now? What are we going â€œâ€œ And then theyâ€™re starting to mobilize, and then it sort of switched to a distant thing where itâ€™s like, okay, theyâ€™re gonna send the â€œ it wasnâ€™t till â€œ02 that they deployed the 10th Mountain to â€œ

Interviewer:

Afghanistan?

Paul Belmont III:

â€œ to Afghanistan, and then theyâ€™re â€œOh, okay, so thereâ€™s this thing in Afghanistan.â€ But that was

really low intensity. I mean, you know, when you think about it, it was like, â€œOh, okay, well, thatâ€™s good. Theyâ€™re sending brigades over there. Well, weâ€™re not brigades.â€ Iâ€™m part of a corps â€œ whatâ€™s it gonna mean? And then, of course, then things started building in towards Iraq, and thatâ€™s where, like, everything started to become real for the rest of the Army. So I deployed to Iraq in, what was it, â€œ03. So here we go, one â€œ so basically, thereâ€™s this period of time where things were tight, and then we had another year in there. It was like, â€œI donâ€™t know what this means.â€ You know, kinda life is normal, but everything is different, but I was young enough in the Army â€œ you know, youâ€™d hear people complain about how things used to be and â€œOh, why canâ€™t I walk out this gate anymore?â€ and heck, I was only there for a couple weeks. I donâ€™t even â€œ I probably never used that gate. But then things started escalating in Iraq, and that was, what, a year later weâ€™re in Poland again. So I find myself a year later,

September/October â€œ02 â€œ now weâ€™re in Poland on a training exercise again.

Victory Strike, they used to call it. And now the things are starting to heat up, and it was kinda really rapid. And quickly it became "Okay, we're in Germany. We're forward-deployed. We'll probably " And you're sort of expecting that you're gonna go, and then next thing you know, we went through this whole process of " they would tell your unit you were going, and you would get on a bus, and they'd be like, "Nope. Nope, there's not a plane. Get off the bus." Because, well, they didn't have enough planes to get everybody. They were trying to fly us all down to Kuwait.

Interviewer:

_____, and there was just not enough planes?

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, I mean, basically, it was just so unorganized. I remember there'd be units. Like, they'd activate the 317 engineers, and these guys would " I remember one time these guys got all the way on the bus. They drove all the way down. You say goodbye to your wife, and everything would go along, and then you would leave, and then you would come home. And then it's like, "Well, we're not gonna keep you in a tent for three days, because the planes broke down for maintenance or something," whatever it was. Or "We think we're going, we think we're going," so back and forth. Nobody had done " the Air Force hadn't mobilized anything this big in so long, so it was a lot of hiccups. And so I remember I had a buddy that was part of our " in Germany, your battalions, even. You'd have a battalion that would be stretched across three different posts. It'd be, like, three hours to drive from one side of the battalion to the other, you know? So I remember this one guy, a transportation officer, and he got so fed up. They'd call us and activate us. He'd drive from Vilseck to Bamberg, get all ready to go. He got so fed up, he just checked into a hotel 'cause he got sick of saying " I mean, he said goodbye to his family, like, three times. He's like, "I can't go home and see my kids again and then go through, like, tears and gnashing of teeth." He's like, "I've told 'em I'm gone. I told 'em I'm leaving. We're gonna leave eventually, so I'm just gonna " He just checked into a hotel in Bamberg and lived there for " he ended up living there for a week until we finally left, 'cause he just got sick of it. So it was kinda traumatic. And then it was like, how long is this gonna take?

That was the big thing there. You know, "Oh, yeah." Some general got up and briefed everybody: it would take three months and we'd all be home. And I remember our colonel trying to explain, like, "It might take three months to fight the war, but we'll be there longer." And so it was no " it wasn't a timetable on that first deployment. It was just, you're going and you didn't know when you were coming home, so that was interesting. And then it just kept extending. Eventually we thought, "Well, maybe we'll never go home."

Interviewer:

It must've been frightening, though, 'cause at this time, did you still feel " and everyone felt " there were still WMDs possibly?

Paul Belmont III:

Well, yeah. I mean, you think about frightening, but you've had all this training, and you got gas masks, and you got everything else. I don't remember being very frightened. I remember being disconcerted, but also, it felt like, you know, I am doing something now, I'm going somewhere. And you get down to Kuwait, and I remember I was on the advanced guard or something like that. I remember having to carry extra weapons for some majors that were " whatever flight they were on. It was so bad, there were people taking civilian flights into Kuwait.

And so these guys got booked on a civilian flight to get part of the staff into Kuwait, and I was going on the military flight, so I had to carry all these weapons 'cause they couldn't take weapons on the military flight. So I remember being, like, strapped down

with extra â€œ

Interviewer:

On a civilian flight, yeah.

Paul Belmont III:

lâ€™m on the military flight.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Paul Belmont III:

And so I remember being strapped down with, like, extra 9-mils and an extra â€œ so I had, like, a pair of M16s, a pair of 9-mils, and maybe some other â€œ so lâ€™m, like, strapped down, walking around. I remember walking around Kuwait for a couple weeks with all these weapons attached to me, and I donâ€™t know, people mustâ€™ve thought I was some kinda special soldier. I do remember â€œ I donâ€™t have it on now â€œ I was under the 3rd Corps Support Group â€œ no, or 7th Corps Support Group, they used to call it. They donâ€™t call â€œem groups anymore; they call â€œem brigades. It was called a group. And thereâ€™s also a 7th Group, which is the Special Forces. Thereâ€™s 7th Special Forces Group, and thereâ€™s 7th Corps Support Group. I didnâ€™t even think anything of it.

Maybe this is how I found out. I told somebody I was in this â€œ â€œWhat unit are you in?

â€œ I didnâ€™t think â€œ â€œOh, lâ€™m in the 7th Group.â€œ

So all of a sudden, like, some rumor got back around to me that I was some kind of, like, secret, special killer guy, â€œcause lâ€™m walking around with all these weapons strapped to my back everywhere I go. And I didnâ€™t â€œ and I was just a young lieutenant, and I didnâ€™t â€œ I was on this advanced guard of people, and so I didnâ€™t really have anybody in charge of me, except for, like, I would tag around with this other guy. And they just thought, like, â€œOh, yeah, so-and-soâ€œ â€œ in the DFAC, and I was like, â€œNo, no, no, lâ€™m just a logistician. Not doing any of that.â€œ So yeah, there we were. All of a sudden itâ€™s, what, February â€œ03, and lâ€™m sitting in Kuwait, like, late January, early February â€œ03. And lâ€™m down in Kuwait putting things together, trying to figure out how to run logistics as a young lieutenant, low man on the totem pole, getting all the little jobs. So it was fun.

Interviewer:

How did you feel, or what do you remember, right when the invasion started, right when

Paul Belmont III:

I was â€œ

I remember â€œ this is very confusing, but thereâ€™s lots of units being attached to other units, and if they couldnâ€™t get a unit to do something, sometimes they would, like, attach it to another unit, and maybe they could get that unit to do it. And so I remember there was this one poor little, like, PLS company. We didnâ€™t have enough trucks to move everything around, and so we had this one group of Palletized Loading System trucks. And they were really supposed to move stuff around â€œ their purpose was to move things around a yard. And so I remember getting, like, this phone call, like, â€œHey, we now own this unit, and you need to get this stuff from, like, A to B. You need to go take care, go find their platoon leader, or go find their â€œâ€œ I donâ€™t know if they had a platoon leader or not, but like, â€œGo find this unit, Lieutenant, and take charge of it and just get it from A to B.â€œ You know, like, â€œGet this mission done.â€œ And so I remember lâ€™m, like, trying to find the orders, and lâ€™m running around, lâ€™m running around this tent, and lâ€™m talking to somebody, and lâ€™m talking to this guy, and this guy goes, â€œYou need â€œ come here, Lieutenant. Come here, Captain.â€œ And thereâ€™s this female captain, and she was from another headquarters unit â€œ or from another unit than I was. And apparently three times in a day theyâ€™d assign this PLS truck company to three different units, or this platoon, or whatever they were. And they said they couldnâ€™t get â€œ they took â€œem from one unit, gave â€œem to the other, and now lâ€™ve been the third person to receive it. And so the other â€œ thereâ€™s another, like,

me running around that thinks they own this unit, and weâ€™re both trying to find out who they are and where do I need to go to find â€™em and what do you need me to do. And so weâ€™re like these two â€™ and so they â€™ â€™You guys figure out between you who wants to get it done.â€™ And I remember we were â€™ so we did it, so then we got â€™ this poor truck companyâ€™s just like â€™ and theyâ€™re being overtasked. Their job was to move things around, like, a yard, set up like â€™ basically just to have a big ammunitions supply area and just move things from one thing and stage it. But they donâ€™t have enough to do convoys, so they want â€™em to take this convoy and move things forward. So I ended up having to get this convoy

of what they called ATACMs, like big, big, giant multiple-launch rocket system rockets, like, you know, to blow up a grid squareâ€™s worth of stuff, and theyâ€™re like, â€™We need these things moved.â€™ And so I remember, like, Major Buehler at the time â€™ I guess he retired as a lieutenant colonel eventually â€™ Gregg Buehler, and he was like, â€™Get this done, like, seriously, like, yesterday.â€™ And Iâ€™m like, â€™Okay. I got it. Iâ€™m doing my best.â€™ And Iâ€™m finding these guys, and Iâ€™m working around, and Iâ€™m running down the areas. â€™Okay, do you have it? Letâ€™s get â€™em there.â€™ And so â€™

Interviewer:

___?

Paul Belmont III:

Oh, yeah. And so we finally get this stuff, and I remember, like, â€™Okay, itâ€™s been delivered. Weâ€™ve accomplished our mission for the last six hours.â€™ Everything was always changing. And I remember getting back to the tactical operations center, our TOC, and I walk in and we had a little â€™ I remember we had, like, a wire that we ran to the big TOC so we could get a little feed, like, of news and stuff, and this one computer where we could watch things happen. And so they had, like, the â€™ they usually had the CNN streaming on it or something like that. And all of a sudden, there it was. Iâ€™d get back, and theyâ€™ve started the invasion.

Interviewer: * {:.text} Wow.

Paul Belmont III:

And Gregg Buehler looked at me, and expletive something, â€™el told you we were waiting on you.â€™ [Laughter]

Interviewer:

Wow.

Paul Belmont III:

So Iâ€™m like, â€™You werenâ€™t kidding.â€™ And that was what they started with. They were launching those rockets, like, right into â€™

Interviewer:

Really?

Paul Belmont III: * {:.text} Yeah, it was the first thing they did was launch these â€™ theyâ€™d start with this huge Shavo in the thing, and so that was some of the first stuff. Iâ€™m sure there were some planes or â€™ I donâ€™t know if it was the first thing to hit the ground, but that was it when it started. And theyâ€™re showing shock-and-awe, and it was like, hey, they needed this unit to have these special rockets so they could start the invasion. I mean, I guess they were waiting on me, so that was pretty funny. And that poor little platoon from the ammunitions supply point, they were like â€™ oh, poor ASP guys. Those poor guys were working harder than anybody at the time. And so there it was, and so then next thing you know, weâ€™re all like, â€™Okay, how are we gonna get up there? â€™

And then weâ€™re â€™ I ended up â€™ suddenly, I remember Iâ€™d just recently been pulled up to staff work. Iâ€™d gone from being an XO to being on this big logistics staff, and I was, like, ___ on the totem pole. I was this lieutenant, and I remember sitting in a majorâ€™s billet at one point, and youâ€™re running around. And so basically any task that comes down, it was always like â€™ there are not a lot of lieutenants floating around

this unit, so anything that seemed like lieutenant work, you know what I mean? In these ad hoc units, they would just â€œOh, Belmont, you got this,â€ you know, like, â€œGo put it together,â€ or they go, â€œWe need someone to lead a convoy. Get that captain, or get that lieutenant and put him in charge of it,â€ or â€œYou can do it. This is good work for you. You can be like kind of a quasi-platoon leader again.â€ â€œOkay, great,â€ and you go figure it out. So different jobs every day doing stuff, and so I remember we just got in there in these trucks, and we were like, â€œOkay, weâ€™re gonna chase the infantry division all the way to wherever they get. Weâ€™re gonna stand behind â€˜em, weâ€™re gonna stay behind â€˜em.â€ And so â€œ

Interviewer:

So you were following â€œ

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, so everybody basically was like â€œ

it was like a traffic jam at one point. I mean, thereâ€™s like one main road to get into Iraq, and the deserts, most of the vehicles canâ€™t handle it. Not everybodyâ€™s got a tank or something like that, so youâ€™re trying to stay â€œ so thereâ€™s this massive â€œ I mean, it took, like, days. It took days to â€œ â€˜cause youâ€™re just following the advance. And we ended up eventually â€œ I remember driving in the middle of the night. I think I was even physically driving this truck, and it had, like, no brakes. We got these trucks from this PREPO yard. Theyâ€™d been floating in a boat somewhere now. Itâ€™s like, â€œOh, yeah,â€ so our mechanics grab it. And God bless the maintenance guys we had. I mean, they just got these trucks that barely worked, and it was like, â€œJust make it run.â€ You know, like, it was literally â€œJust make it work.â€ And so Iâ€™m just sitting in this Humvee, and it ran, and it didnâ€™t everything, but I remember it had no brakes. I had to drive, like, from Kuwait to Najaf with no brakes, and it was like, you never saw somebody that as good convoy discipline as I did. Youâ€™re supposed to keep your distance, and I was, like, the best guy in the world about keeping my distance from the truck in front of me because I didnâ€™t wanna rear-end somebody or wreck or do whatever. I mean, you had metal on metal or something. But basically, you just needed to count on the weight of this thing to slow you down. I remember showing up in the middle of the night, and Staff Sergeant Balcom was like, â€œPark over here, sir,â€ and I was like, â€œI canâ€™t park there.â€ Heâ€™s like, â€œNo, look, we got this defensive position, something. We need to be in this array â€œâ€ I said, â€œI canâ€™t park there.â€ â€œOh, I want you â€œ the hill and the defilade, and you need to be â€œâ€ I said, â€œLook, youâ€™re not listening to me. You want me to park on this big incline right here, and Iâ€™m driving a truck that has no brakes. Iâ€™m telling you, physically, I can put the truck there six times outta six, and itâ€™s going to roll back down the hill because it has no brakes, so Iâ€™m going to have to park somewhere flat.â€

Interviewer:

Itâ€™s almost unbelievable. What mustâ€™ve been happening? Thereâ€™s so much movement, with thousands upon thousands of people, and thousands of pieces of equipment moving. Were people getting lost? Were people â€œ

Paul Belmont III:

Oh, yeah. Oh, God. I mean, most people didnâ€™t, but there were people that got lost.

Interviewer:

Yeah, tell me.

Paul Belmont III:

I wonâ€™t name any names here. I do remember, we had this brand-new thing called Movement Tracking System. It was essentially a way to track convoys. Theyâ€™d call it MT â€œ it was a civilian version weâ€™d run in Germany. They have a â€œ I forget what they call it. The Army eventually had a green version of this thing. But essentially, you put this little tracker â€œ it sits on your truck, and you look on the system, and you can see the little truck plugging on down the road, and you can talk to it, like, â€œHey, where are you?â€ You can send it a message, and you could see the icon, so you could track â€œ

“Oh, we can track the convoy now. We can see where itâ€™s at.” So you only had so many, and would they work, and I remember getting “ I didnâ€™t know how to run this thing, and I knew it was important, so I just sat with this young specialist that was “ his job was to run the system. And I used to “ if I had some time, I would go grab him and I would say, “Show me how to work the Movement Tracking System. I need to understand this piece of equipment. How can I communicate with the convoy? If Iâ€™m in the convoy, how can I communicate to someone that I need help? How can I use this to find “ And so he was saying, “Yeah.” I said, “So you can look up any unit?” And he goes, “Yeah, you can look ‘em up by how theyâ€™re named. Everybodyâ€™s named after their unit.” So I was like, “So if I type in 317 Maintenance, it will just pop up.” Heâ€™s like, “Yeah.” So I was like, “Oh, letâ€™s play with this.” And so weâ€™re sitting in this little tent, and we pull the thing up, and I remember looking and seeing “ pulls up this icon. And I was like, “Well, that canâ€™t be right.” I said, “What?” and I said, “Weâ€™re not supposed to have any trucks, like, over here.” You know what I mean? All our convoys are supposed to be going this way. The whole Armyâ€™s going this way. This is the Marines sector, and this is the British sector, and this truck is darn near, like, past the British sector. And theyâ€™re like, “Oh, keep “ Iâ€™m just looking at it. So I remember, like, “Well, letâ€™s see if we can talk to them,” and Iâ€™m like, “Where are you?” And then I remember talking to somebody. I donâ€™t know who they are. Itâ€™s just an icon. And Iâ€™m kinda like “ I remember saying, like,

“Either these people are very lost, or someone other than the United States Army is driving this truck right now,” you know what I mean? If this thing is correct. And so I remember later running into my former battalion commander, Colonel Cusumano, and asking him, like, “Sir, I gotta ask you about something. I was sitting in the TOC, and I found “ there was this thing, and we wrote ‘em a message that said, like, “‘Seriously, youâ€™re going the wrong way basically.” And itâ€™s was like, what was going on with that? And he was like, basically, this lieutenant had just gotten so F-ed up that sheâ€™d gone “ she was literally heading the wrong direction. Like, instead of heading northwest, she was effectively heading mostly east and almost south. Took a wrong turn.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Paul Belmont III:

And sheâ€™d ended up driving “ and, you know, itâ€™s just like “ like I said, itâ€™s kinda chaos, and as it went, they had these big wretches, which are contained handling units. Theyâ€™re almost like these big claw things that grab “ if youâ€™ve ever seen big connexes on a train or a truck, these wretches were designed to grab those connexes off the truck and move ‘em around, and theyâ€™re real tall, kinda look like Godzilla-looking things. And so they got ‘em on big trucks, and theyâ€™re driving down. So eventually, I guess when they got in the British sector, itâ€™s like, these Brits were like, “What are you “ Like, the same thing. You know, like, “We thought the “ the Marines on our flank. You guys have got Army all over you. What are you doing out here?” And theyâ€™re basically heading the wrong “ I mean, you know, they got on a highway and went the wrong way. And so then they turned around, and I guess, as the story went, they drove through some town, and this thing just ripped “ this is the story I got, that they were basically driving through some Iraqi town and so afraid that they were gonna get killed that they were just, like, ripping down “ like, one of the wretches got hung up in some power lines, and they just drove through the town like some kinda Godzilla monster and, like, ripped all these power lines down, and they didnâ€™t wanna stop until they got far enough outta the town they felt like they could safely detangle themselves.

I donâ€™t “ and apparently, by the time I come to this guy, this was the big discussion: were they gonna relieve the lieutenant or not? Like, this is bad stuff. Of course, everybody

remembers Jessica Lynch and some of the other people. Itâ€™s the same kinda thing: â€œOh, Iâ€™m supposed to go this way, and now Iâ€™m going this way.â€ Itâ€™s just like taking a wrong turn on any highway somewhere. Youâ€™re trying to follow a road, and you get a little turned around. I mean, people have done it, but â€

Interviewer:

In the desert, too. The scenery â€

Paul Belmont III:

Well, mostly, though, youâ€™re trying to stick to a road. I mean, if youâ€™re rolling a convoy, you canâ€™t roll a convoy full of wretches through a desert. I mean, youâ€™re driving on a highway for the most part. I mean, Iraqâ€™s got American-looking green road signs and everything else.

Interviewer:

Really?

Paul Belmont III:

Oh, yeah. I mean, this part of Baghdad â€ other than the Arabic on it, but even then sometimes thereâ€™s a little English on the side. So I mean, youâ€™re basically going up Highway 1. â€œOkay, Highway 1 goes to Baghdad.â€ I mean, you might end up breaking off and going down some roads later, but at this point it was basically like the difference between â€ it was like going the wrong way on 95. Thatâ€™s the equivalent of what this person did. And so, yeah, it was confusing and it was interesting.

Interviewer:

Speaking of the British, and I guess the coalition as a whole, what was it like working with them? Did you have any â€

Paul Belmont III: * {:.text} No, I didnâ€™t. Like I said, I was mostly â€ I donâ€™t think I really saw very many foreign people my whole tour in Iraq. I mean, I was solidly in the U.S. Army green areas. We were running corps support to support other logistics units or straight to Army divisions. I canâ€™t remember â€ I donâ€™t have any recollection of seeing any kinda coalition forces. I mean, eventually we were probably supporting some people at some point, like off in the distance, managing logistics from a big picture, but I wasnâ€™t â€ like I said, we werenâ€™t operating â€ I mean, you got Marines, and then you got Brits, and so the Brits werenâ€™t working anywhere near where we were working. And you would maybe

run into them once in a while. I remember there being some Germans and some random people, but it wasnâ€™t â€ I didnâ€™t have any kind of coalition experience in Iraq. Talk about Afghanistan, that would be a different story, but yeah, I mean, I saw Army all day long. Thatâ€™s about all I saw.

Interviewer:

Yeah, weâ€™re definitely gonna get to that later. In terms of Iraq, I mentioned before that, at that time, it mustâ€™ve been â€ I mentioned that it mightâ€™ve been scary with the WMDs there and these thoughts. What precautions were you taking personally? What was happening â€

Paul Belmont III:

Well, I remember they were doing a lot of scud missile attacks when we were down in Kuwait, and that was really the big thing there. And basically the alarms would go off. Weâ€™d have to get up. I used to sleep next to a Patriot battery, I remember, not far away. And the thing would go off, and weâ€™d all throw on your gas mask, and then you go to, like, some scud bunker somewhere, and youâ€™d sit in this hotbox until they gave the all-clear. So that was really just kinda ridiculous. I mean, the big thing I remember about that is, apparently me and Steve Carroll, who was a captain at the time, we were basically working reverse shifts. We were probably working a 16-hour night shift. So we worked in the middle of the night, and then we had to try and sleep in the day, and it was totally hot, and itâ€™s one of those things. Youâ€™re working a 12-hour shift, but then weâ€™d end up working an hour either side of that shift to take it to 14 hours. So a lot of the days, we did 14-, 16-hour days. And so one day we

just apparently came in, and we thought, “Finally, there was no alarm today. We didn’t have to get up.” And everybody was looking at us like, “You’re kidding, right? We just had, like, the biggest, most major alarm emergency we’ve had yet.” And I was like “we were like, “Ah, yeah, that’s funny, guys,” like, “Come on, no. We finally got a full night’s sleep. We got six straight hours. It was glorious.” “You didn’t know “ And they were all like, “We were in the bunkers for, like, two hours this afternoon.” We’re like, “No, you weren’t.” And then the deal “ apparently, we just slept “ apparently, one had, like, hit right inside our cantonment, but it didn’t blow up.

But apparently “ so I guess if that thing had gone off or whatever had happened, I guess we all would’ve choked to death in our beds, Steve and I, but who knows? If the wind was blowing the right way. But I don’t know. It’s like, everybody’s going through it. I mean, you hear about people in Israel and stuff like that. All of a sudden, later on the rockets would start, and we would get rocketed, and you would get shot at, or maybe something would blow up. But it really became “ I mean, eventually it just got to the point where, like, if something was happening “ like, you could watch a firefight happening a half-mile away, and that’s just something going on over there. You wonder, how do people live in Israel? I assume they do it that way, because if it isn’t really actually directly affecting you, human beings have an amazing capability to compartmentalize themselves, and I think that’s what you do. You just say, “Ah, crap, well, it didn’t blow up.” You know what I mean? “So I guess I’m okay.” You know what I mean? “Like, oh, they’re shooting, but you eventually learn that they’re not shooting at me; they’re shooting at that, or they’re shooting there. And you learn to differentiate between “

what becomes real danger changes very quickly, you know what I mean? Like, okay, a bomb “ a rocket came and exploded a hundred yards from me; I am safe; I have learned over times that if the rocket is 100 yards away, it’s not going to hurt me. I might feel some dirt, I might feel some dust, or I might feel the explosion. But you learn to say, “Well, they missed, and I’m okay.” Otherwise, I mean, what are you gonna do? Every time the rockets hit, you would be unable to function. You kinda trust that your armor will protect you, or whatever will happen, or you have all these drills, but you just “ I mean, what are you gonna do? Doing a convoy, and someone would shoot fire at you; if you could return fire and break it, then you didn’t “ you get a new sense of what danger is, and I can only imagine. I’ve never kicked a door in, in my life. Or not in a real combat situation. I haven’t had to “ I mean, outside of a mounted convoy through an area, and I’ve never done “ I’ve had fire exchanged, but I can only imagine that the guy that’s even that closer to the fight “ but I have been “ okay, I’ve been around fire. I’ve been shot at, I’ve been things, and eventually you “ but you kinda turned it off. There’s always somebody that’s got it worse than you. And, hey, I didn’t die, or I wasn’t even harmed. And so you kinda learn to just kinda be okay with that, like “Okay.” It’s, like, pretty traumatic the first time a bomb goes off. The 10th or 15th time something explodes near you, you’ve got a new conditioned response to be “Well, it didn’t hurt me. I’m okay.”

Interviewer:

Is that one of the “ what are some of the other things that surprised you about war?

Apparently you _____

Paul Belmont III:

Well, I mean, I don’t know if it’s surprising. I mean, you sort of expect “ I mean, I know y’all have this imagination about what’s gonna happen to you. So perhaps the surprising thing is

how well most everybody just copes with it. People do pretty well, and your training kicks in or whatever. I remember there was a convoy, and we had “ I remember they had wired “ we had welded “ I mean, we had no mount. We had all these crew-served weapons

and no way to mount them, so we just welded our own mounts. We just fabricated â€œlike, â€œAll right, here goes. This doesnâ€™t meet any â€œAnd people go, â€œThis doesnâ€™t meet a standard,â€ and youâ€™re like, â€œStandard? My standard is that I can employ this weapon and fire it.â€ And so we, like, built all these crazy mounts and put this stuff together. And I remember, if you ever fire a Mk 19, itâ€™s like, you have to, like, pull this thing, right? And actually, the first time you pull it, it just primes the weapon; it doesnâ€™t load or arm it. And so then you actually have to, like, pull this thing again to actually load the belt of grenades into it. And I remember this kid, like, sitting there â€œand itâ€™s like,

whose training kicks in, and whose doesnâ€™t? And I remember this â€œI canâ€™t remember his name, but he apparently pulled the thing back. And itâ€™s like â€œI donâ€™t know, youâ€™ve seen it happen a million times in training, and youâ€™ve seen it happen before, but itâ€™s like, the guy forgot that heâ€™s gotta pull it twice, and heâ€™s like, you canâ€™t employ the weapon if you want me to go, and itâ€™s like, â€œLook, dumbass.â€

Interviewer:

Wow.

Paul Belmont III:

â€œThis is how it works. Now point that way.â€ And things like that just sort of take over, and itâ€™s like, â€œOh, good, I know how to do this. And so, okay, I need â€œI just remember that kicked in, you gotta pull it twice. Itâ€™s like, you gotta remember that, and sometimes you forget, and you gotta move on. What are you gonna do? So I think the other surprising thing â€œI mean, I donâ€™t know what was surprising â€œitâ€™s like I said. You expected something, and then I think the other surprising thing is, I donâ€™t think â€œfrom my perspective, I never really saw an Iraqi division up close, you know, like the regular Army. But we did see the Fedayeen. These guys in technical vehicles would come try and roll up on your position, a bunch of guys in white pickup trucks. Like, not much better than the things we had built, but with less training. And I remember one night they tried to pierce the wire. Weâ€™re at Balad Air base later on, and they tried to come, like, fight for this bridge, and rolling up in these technical vehicles. So thereâ€™s a couple guys in guard towers, and theyâ€™re kinda pinning â€œem down with just regular weapons. And then all of a sudden, you got a QRF. All of a sudden the Bradleys roll up. So it was about ten minutes of pin these guys down and shoot back and forth a bunch of â€œmy boss used to call everybody jamokes. They donâ€™t really know how to fight. And all of a sudden itâ€™s like â€œroll up with trained dudes and Bradleys and everything else, and itâ€™s over fast, you know what I mean? And so itâ€™s like, when you had direct â€œwhen they would attack a convoy back when weâ€™d try and physically attack a convoy, that would go on a lot early in the war. And itâ€™s like, well, I got a .50-caliber

machine gun on this thing. I can end this fast. So when the first convoys started getting hit and people were being attacked directly, with direct human attack, itâ€™s like, hey, as long as you can put a gun on â€œem. Itâ€™s like, itâ€™s really not that â€œbecame not that threatening, and then that was â€œthen it was like all of a sudden the road bombs, and that really changed things for people. Of course, back then you know â€œsorta the whole cat-and-mouse game, you know. As we armored more, then the bombs got bigger, you know what I mean? Itâ€™s almost like â€œit was almost better when they were blowing little bombs that you could sorta survive, until now they gotta beat our armored devices. But then that really changed the nature of it, and all of a sudden it was this faceless enemy. And then I remember trying to explain to the unit that replaced us, like, â€œHey, theyâ€™re just fighting. Weâ€™re being shot at. Weâ€™re being rocketed. Weâ€™re being attacked. Itâ€™s dangerous.â€ There was a guy, Ali, he used to run â€œwe started â€œyou donâ€™t have enough logistics. I remember we started hiring local contracts. â€œOh, yeah, weâ€™ll get some contracts. Weâ€™ll get some Iraqis to drive around for us.â€ And I remember this guy, Ali â€œI think that was his name. And he was sorta the

head of this little de facto Iraqi truck company that we stood up, and they were gonna help bring us water from, like, the Jordanian border or wherever else. And then, so this guy was driving, so then all of a sudden this faction of Muslims started to pop up. And we come to the gate one morning. There's Ali's head. I mean, so here's this guy that was like, hey, these people are friendly. This guy's working with me, and I mean, they chopped his head off to make an example out of him, and they threatened his family, and it was like, holy crap. Like, that was, I think, a shaking day, I mean, for our whole unit. This was kinda like "there's this guy, and we'd gotten to know him, and he's like a person and everything else, and then there was "all of a sudden he's murdered. He was just "not murdered. Executed. I mean, everything short of putting his head on a pike to basically be like, "Don't work with the Americans."

And that was like, whoa. That was shocking. And that's when you started to realize that "what was this all about? And that was kinda the ____ what is this about for the Iraqi people? What does this mean? It went from tearing down Saddam's statue and all this stuff to, all of a sudden, well, what's it gonna mean for people? And the things we're really hearing, people watching the news when we get a new unit, like "Yeah, we're here." We had a new commander come through, the general officer, and I remember he had been my brigade commander back in the day, and he was very "dress right dress" kind of thing, and now he was this general for this other unit that was replacing us, and I'd remembered him. Like, oh, yeah, everything had to be just so. He was part of that old Army. It's probably just his comfort zone for a while, everything just dress-right-dress. "Oh, that's how we do it," "cause we had nothing better to do in the Army, and you keep your stuff clean, you make it look good, and he wanted us to pull down "we had connexes. We'd take and we'd put "em in "big window, you put a connex in front of it so a rocket can't come through. Hey, you're gonna put concertina "even inside the wire, we didn't feel totally safe on Balad Airbase, so we had our own area wired up. We had our own little defensive networks and things like that just in case. And all of a sudden this guy's like, "Take this stuff down. Line it up. Why is this here?" You know, he's out putting all these orders. Convoy speed limits. You know, back then if someone's actually shooting at you, or when the bombs were smaller, I felt like your best defense was just to drive fast, because when this remote detonated, maybe it'll take a second. The faster you're moving, human reaction times and stuff like that, "cause they hadn't developed to, like, the sorta pressure things yet. So when you were driving fast, the faster you're moving, the less likely you get hit. And hey, of course, if you're on improved roads 70 miles an hour, that's no problem for a truck to do. Eighty, easy. Truck drivers do it every day. All of a sudden this guy wanted to "he was worried about accidents, so he was like, "So you got a 45-mile-an-hour speed limit for all the convoys." Everybody's like, "You're losing your mind. We can't go 45." And I remember it all went down, and he was gonna ____ I remember our NCO who was in charge of our security detail just losing his mind.

Like, "el just set all this stuff up. We need these defenses. We can't be caught with our pants down." And it was like, I remember what happened was, a rocket landed right between the incoming "little tents where you stayed temporarily while they were ripping out a unit, and it was right between the two tents that hold, like, most of this guy's staff. And if they got "it was a dud, but it was like [Makes quiet blipping noise], and it didn't go off. But there it was. The guy coulda lost his whole staff, and he never rescinded his orders as far as I knew, but they were never enforced, you know what I mean? So it was like, hey, yeah, like, this is real. People are really being shot at. You could really just die, like, walking around this base, and a bomb could really "something could land on you. You could get shot. I remember the first night we were woken up. We were getting rocketed like crazy for a while. We figured out "we're, like, bracketing, so those big lights. You had to have lights to work at night, so in some areas that we're

trying to do 24 hours, we need lights to see, and so it was near an airfield, so thereâ€™s this area of light. I remember thereâ€™s these big lights that were on, and we looked. There was, like, these buildings, and it was like, man, this is like a field goal-post. Like, no wonder thereâ€™s so many mortars and rockets heading our way, â€™cause theyâ€™re kinda like, â€œLetâ€™s aim for that.â€ And then we turned the light off, and thenâ€ [Laughter]

Interviewer:

Wow.

Paul Belmont III:

Suddenly we werenâ€™t having the nightly roll-outta-bed-and-duck routine anymore. They were getting really close, and it was getting really routine. And I remember walking out with this NCO, and we walked in front of it, and we got way out and tried to look â€“ what are they seeing at night that makes â€™em wanna shoot? Oh, look at that. Like, way behind us, not in our area, but somebody else has got this light in this base. Theyâ€™re just making us a perfect target. Letâ€™s experiment. Letâ€™s go see if we could get that unit to turn the light off. And then they figured out where the helicopters were, and then theyâ€™re always trying to rocket the helicopters. So, you know, go back and forth, the mortars and everything. So it was a different experience, but it was also challenging. I was working logistics, and so I think my biggest daily challenges and everything else was just about problem solving. Itâ€™s like, how do you feed four divisionsâ€™ worth of people with two and a half divisionsâ€™ worth of rations, you know what I mean? And itâ€™s not like anybody was starving, but when I say two and a half, itâ€™s like, you know, youâ€™re supposed to hand â€™em six days of supply. Well, guess what? Weâ€™re only gonna be able to hand you three days of supply today. Weâ€™ll be back in â€“ weâ€™ll try and be back in two days with more. So it was very kinda hand-to-mouth, so it was constantly playing the shell game, and moving back and forth, and not having enough trucks, not having enough â€“ how can you solve these problems of â€“ and really, that was â€“ I think someone looked it up. That was as far â€“ I mean, we pushed logistics, pushed supplies, further and faster than in any other conflict in the history of the United States Army in Iraq.

Interviewer:

Really?

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah. I mean, like, someone figured it out. Like, the supply chain we had going was moving â€“ it was faster and it was further than â€“ I mean, itâ€™s arguably â€“ we were very proud of this. Arguably, the greatest logistical feed in the history of the United States Army was supplying this Iraqi â€“ was surrounding the Army in the invasion of Iraq was like â€“ the supply chains had never been longer, theyâ€™d never moved faster, theyâ€™d never done anything else â€“

Interviewer: Across the world.

Paul Belmont III:

â€“ and it was this whole new idea, this hand-to-mouth feeding, where youâ€™re not just gonna have this big pile of stuff. Weâ€™re just gonna try and make it move as fast as I can. How quick can I get a part from the States and get it on a plane and get it down here, move into this thing, and quickly organize it and send it out and keep it going? And so that was â€“ we were really proud. And we really felt like â€“ I remember coming home and just feeling like we had really conquered the world. I mean, and it was an interesting thing. Of course, seven years later now, here we are seven years later in Iraq, and itâ€™s like, maybe. But we defeated the formal Army. We had knocked it down. Weâ€™d liberated a country. Things were starting to degenerate, but you thought, â€œHow hard could this be to deal with?â€ And everybody was, like, really on a high of, like, â€œWe won. We did it. We did things we never thought we could do.â€ Like I said, we pushed â€“ we were inventing new ways of doing logistics. I mean, all these concepts. Itâ€™s like, â€œWeâ€™re really gonna do it.

Weâ€™re gonna build this. Weâ€™re gonna go, and we survived.â€ Itâ€™s like, â€œYou

might get killed. You could get hurt and never come back to a ball. I just remember feeling so good, sitting at this brigade ball back in '03 or maybe it was even the whole '03. I don't know, like the general officer '03 our new general officer came to speak to us, and he put a big board up of all the things that we'd accomplished. And I remember putting these things together. You had to put all the history together. I can't remember off the top of my head anymore, but so many gallons of water, so many '03 fed this many troops, this much ammunition. You know, it's like, it's a very measurable thing, logistics. It's very measurable. You'd be like, 'Look what I did.' And you start putting all this stuff on it, and then you look at the missions that were accomplished and everything else, and how many miles driven, and it's like, 'Yeah, we must've driven like a million miles.' Like, it was crazy. And so we just felt like we conquered the world when we got back from Iraq. And for myself, I had been very proud. I ended up being promoted.

I had just been finishing my platoon time at the start of this whole conflict, and I remember being very sad, like, 'Oh, God, I'm not gonna be a platoon leader anymore.'

Interviewer:

What year is this now? Where are we?

Paul Belmont III:

We're back up to '03. So when I'm getting ready to deploy, and now I'm being pulled up to this staff, and I'm like, 'Ah, I don't wanna be on a staff. I wanna be a leader.' But I got a chance to lead in a lot of other different ways, and I was given a lot of latitude, a lot of soldiers, and we had to do a lot of things very nontraditionally. So I still got to do these kinda hands-on missions from time to time. I didn't feel chained to a desk. I was encouraged to get out and go figure that out, go out and go do this, and go see the land. And I had a good team of leaders, and you had to take care of your stuff, and you had to work it, and you had to report everything. So it was a lot of staff work, and probably for me, I did more staff work than probably most, but I also had the opportunities to get out and lead and be in charge of soldiers and solve problems. And I faced danger and survived,

and that was '03 I felt good about myself, and I never felt like '03 by the end of it, I didn't feel like I was missing out on something, 'cause like I said, it was so crazy. I remember just sitting out '03 and so here we were, and now we're back, and it really felt like, man, we really did something. And I still think we did. I still think we really, really did something. And yeah, we opened a can of worms too, and we could talk about '03 I don't know. You know, I guess the history's yet to be written on what Iraq will be. I hope that it will be positive. I suspect that it will be positive. We've engaged in seven years of partnership and working with and everything else, and I really hope that that '03 in the future, I have a fantasy that one day I would go back and take my children to Baghdad. That's my fantasy. If I could take 'em to Baghdad and I could show them '03 This is where Dad was. This is Najaf. Hey, guess what? This is supposedly the Garden of Eden. This was at one point the cradle of civilization, and when I was there, it was the furthest thing from any kinda anything anyone wanted to be involved in. And I did actually have a chance to go back '03 well, we'll come back later. I actually '03 it was not my last trip to Iraq. So I did go back in '07, '08, something like that, but if we wanna stay chronology,

Interviewer:

I wanna ask you a few questions about that time. You were there very, very early. I mean, one of the earliest. You were right there when the operation started.

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah. Pretty much '03 other than the tankers and the infantry grunts, yeah, I was right behind 'em.

Interviewer:

How did the Iraqis look at you as an American, as a person?

Paul Belmont III:

You know, I had limited interaction with Iraqis on that trip.

I wasn't out there" wasn't kind of involved in that kinda way, where we were doing these outreach " I mean, I remember we did some school stuff and some supplies and "

Interviewer:

But with the contractors.

Paul Belmont III:

Like, those guys would come up and you'd work with them, and these guys, at first it was like they're very happy to have employment and to work, and they're really nice. Kinda culturally, it was like, you kinda learn, hey, these are people and they're moving along. And at first it was very trusting, like, "Oh, you trust these " we freed you. " Yes, you freed us. Everything's great. Hey, give us some money. " But you don't understand all the sectionalism that's about to happen, of Sunnis and Shiites. I couldn't have told you the difference between a Sunni and Shiite back then.

Interviewer:

Really?

Paul Belmont III:

You know, "I don't wanna think about that. " I mean, maybe somebody gave me a brief, but outside, that's not important. They're all " it's just like, hey, these people, and they're oppressed, and we're gonna free 'em. And so you're trying to work with 'em, and I remember they were training up Iraqi Army guys, and it was like, "Oh, look at these guys. They're all marching around. " I had a buddy that got assigned to train the Iraqi Army, and they were, like, teaching 'em left face, right face, march in a column.

And you don't really think, "Why are they training this army? " Well, "cause we stood down their old army. Of course, that seemed like a great idea at the time. Nobody would argue against that. Well, we just defeated this army. Why would we let them be in power? Why would we let them still be an army? We need a new army. We need an army we can trust. That's one of those debatable points in history now: maybe we shoulda left the Iraqi Army intact. I don't know. It might've eased the tensions between the Sunnis, "cause we essentially took everything from the Sunnis. I know this now, on the other side. We took everything from the Sunnis. They were the political minority in power. They ran the Army. They ran the government. They ran everything. And then we took everything from them, and they were all the people with " many of them were the people with know-how. And of course, the Shiites, because of their circumstances, are demographically " they're many of the people without know-how. They don't have degrees. They don't have the advanced stuff. They're a majority of the population. And suddenly they're in charge, and now it's like, "Hey, we got ours now, " and they don't wanna share with the Sunnis, and then you start to realize this is what's causing the tension, this is what's causing the violence.

But at the time, you didn't understand it at all. Like, what's going on? Are these all just terrorists? Everybody's just either a good guy or a terrorist. And of course, we evolved that over time to understand that some people were working for the terrorists because that was the way they could feed their family or because "I gotta pick my poison: I have to go with the terrorists, or I go with the Americans. What's gonna be worse? Are the Americans gonna be here tomorrow? " And that was the other thing, is the suspicion. I guess, you know, promises, promises. We had promised to liberate the Iraqi people. A lot of people remembered that. People remembered that we had promised to liberate them before, and there was a bit of a trepidation, like, "Well, how long are you going to be here? " If you were going to work with an Iraqi, they were very cool to work with you at first. The Sunnis were very hot, it seemed like, but it seemed like they were cool because how long is this going to last? And then when you start realizing, like, people are getting killed " when a guy like Ali has his head cut off because he's driving a truck

for the Americans,

what do you need from the Americans, then, in terms of support and protection and everything else? And I had someone once tell me, "Everywhere that an American soldier is standing in Iraq, things are better." And taken to its full extent, what does that comment mean? "Everywhere that an American soldier is standing." In other words, if there's a platoon in your neighborhood, life is great. If that platoon leaves, life is whatever it degenerates to, you know what I mean? "Hey, life is great. The Americans are here. I like Americans. Now they're gone. Now I have to deal with these guys." And so I didn't really see that for a while. You're talking to friends. You're watching things degenerate. Things were really kinda moving along, and of course, the history showed that things got really escalated and very bloody. So I was removed from that. Meanwhile, while that's going on, I'm training up to go to Afghanistan, so then that became my focus for a couple years. We were very Afghanistan-focused.

Interviewer:

The last thing about OIF I wanna ask you is, did anything about it culturally surprise you, that you weren't prepared to deal with?

Paul Belmont III:

I don't think so. No. I mean, if anything, you got a lot of briefs about how sensitive Islam is to everything. I mean, you quickly learn that they're as sensitive as anybody else is to their religion, giving their own individual tendencies. It's kinda like, "Oh, yeah, we can't have beer. Except, look, I found this guy that drinks. No, we can't do it." You know, it's kinda like any other code of conduct or religion. There's the people that really follow it and then others, other people that are just out there, and then there's a culture that enforces it. But it's hard to say, and of course, in Iraq "my exposure to Iraqi culture as a young lieutenant in Iraq, at the most I'm talking to guys that are driving trucks, you know what I mean? So I'm not running into 'em in a mosque. I'm not running into 'em in their homes. I think once we went and ate dinner with a guy, and it just was like, "Oh, look, this guy fed us." We went out somewhere, and this guy we were working with "it might've even been Ali's house. He fed us fish and stuff, and it was like, "Oh, this is really great." But most of my interaction, I would deal with these truck drivers. I would deal with these guys, like, coming from Jordan, and maybe they weren't even Iraqi. Maybe they were from Jordan. Maybe they were from wherever. They could've been from any "they used to have these little badges. And really, at the end of the day, truck drivers were truck drivers. I mean, you know, they had little weird tassels on their trucks and everything else, and instead of smoking cigarettes, they would burn fruit and smoke it out of a pipe.

Interviewer:

Really?

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah. And, okay, but hey, what do these guys do, you know? They drive a truck all day long. They're dirty. They smell a bit. They got their "whatever their personal accoutrements they like to have in their truck. They like to get done and take a load off and smoke and eat something, and they're a little overweight because they drive a truck all day long. Boy, this isn't really "like, I can identify with this guy. So it's not "you're not really meeting 'em "and they're generally meeting you on your terms. They're meeting you in uniform, so it's not "it's hard to say, and especially back then. It's all, "Oh, we'll build a school, and it'll be great, and they'll like it."

And then at the same time, you would see this internal "I think they had the internal violence going on. Like, there was a "so that's one level, and the other interaction was this distant kinda stuff. Like, I mentioned firing. I remember sitting out very towards the end, and there was a "Balad Airbase had a housing area for the military officers. It was

the other side of this river, the same place where there was this battle one night for this bridge. And it was this big area of discontent. Essentially, a bunch of guys came in after we ran everybody outta the base. We decided, â€œItâ€™s across the river. Weâ€™re not gonna secure it. Itâ€™s not worth â€œâ€œ Itâ€™s like, â€œOh, weâ€™d all love to have those houses to live in. Wouldnâ€™t that be great? But we donâ€™t want â€œâ€œ We just didnâ€™t wanna secure it. Itâ€™s the other side of the river. Itâ€™s kinda untenable. You could be attacked. And so weâ€™re like, â€œEh.â€œ Thereâ€™s this river or canal or something right there. Yeah, I guess it was a river. And there would be firefights in there at night, and we could sit out. And we were sitting out smoking cigars, and there was a new guy, and he was really panicking. Heâ€™s looking around. I said, â€œYouâ€™re worried about all that firing?â€œ He goes, â€œYeah.â€œ

I said â€œand we were smoking cigars, and we werenâ€™t even looking at it. I mean, I was really used to what we got. There was this â€œ I said, â€œWell, what are the â€œ you see the tracers out there?â€œ He goes, â€œYeah. Yeah, shouldnâ€™t we do something?â€œ I said, â€œI donâ€™t know. Are they going like this? Or are they going like this?â€œ And he goes, â€œTheyâ€™re going like this.â€œ I said, â€œWell, then theyâ€™re shooting at each other. Call me when theyâ€™re doing this, â€œcause that means theyâ€™re coming at us.â€œ And they were fighting over â€œ basically, a bunch of guys came in, and they said, â€œOh, yes,â€œ and they were like, â€œOh, weâ€™ve lived here for generations.â€œ No, you havenâ€™t. This was the Iraqi air base. But weâ€™re not gonna deal with it, and so then there was, like, the â€œ thatâ€™s an interesting piece of culture is that â€œ so I decide to squat here, and then someone else shows up and says, â€œWell, guess what? Iâ€™m more powerful than you. Iâ€™m Sheik whatever, and I want it,â€œ and then they were literally gonna fight each other over it. And we donâ€™t have the people to deal with that at the time. How do you deal with that? And at the time, it was kinda like, at least theyâ€™re not shooting at us, and that was a part of it too.

Hindsight 20/20, maybe these shoulda been areas where we shoulda been arbitrating and moving in. I donâ€™t know. Maybe they just needed to duke it out. But it was an interesting experience, and so culturally, â€œOh, theyâ€™re willing to kill each other,â€œ and that was different. As a historian, I know that other cultures have been through the same thing before, but that was a little different. But that was a very distant reaction. And the other one was, I got to see, like, the sheiks at a big level. I play guitar, and I play guitar at church, and so I get a phone call one day. Sergeant Travers: â€œSir, General So-and-So wants to borrow your guitar.â€œ I was like â€œ Sergeant Travers used to speak in riddles all the time. â€œWhat do you mean he wants to borrow my guitar?â€œ Well, they wanted â€œ I literally had to go audition. â€œI hear you play guitar.â€œ Okay. So they had all the sheiks in. Amazad had all the sheiks in. I forgot about this till now. And all these sheiks come in, and he was gonna â€œ and he put this big banquet.

He wanted to talk to all the sheiks, and Amazad could speak Arabic, and so he could talk to them on their terms. And I got to be a fly on the wall at this thing â€œcause I was the mood music. I sat in the back and played guitar.

Interviewer:

So youâ€™re playing guitar for a bunch of sheiks.

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Mood music.

Paul Belmont III:

Yes. Yes. Mood music. I was lightly plucking out such songs as â€œBabeâ€œ by Led Zeppelin, and playing CCR. Basically, I was playing classic rock, except I was putting a nice flavor on it to make it not exactly recognizable as classic rock. And people had been very direct about me not playing any kind â€œ they were very scared Iâ€™d play Catholic church music or something like that. Not like anyone would recognize that either, but they were like, â€œYou canâ€™t play, like, Christian music or something.â€œ Itâ€™s not like I

was gonna sit there and sing "Jesus Loves Me," and I wasn't singing anyway. And it was just, at the end of the day, all the guitars just stringing chords together and making music. And so I thought, "Okay, I got it, background music," and so I was basically playing Muzak versions of classic rock songs 'cause that's what I knew how to play, and I could disguise them so they sounded pretty. I remember somebody going, "Oh, you play an excellent classical guitar." I was like, "Not really." So that was how I amused myself. But I remember, like, seeing that whole "_____ culture, this kinda sheik culture. Some of these guys had, like, military regalia that they would all wear, and other guys would be wearing, like, their traditional garments. Like, there were different levels of sheiks. And I remember the whole thing degenerated, like, really fast. Like, he was trying to talk to 'em, and they were like, "We don't care about you or who you are," and blah, blah, and then they all stormed out, and it got ridiculous. But they didn't 'em they all stormed, but then they refused to leave until they were fed, which was an interesting piece of culture, because, of course, you invite someone to your home, the expectation is you're going to feed and you're going to do this. And so it was kind of really funny that you could "I mean, literally, it was almost like "you think about, like, the ultimate offense to an American is they would just storm out on you: "We care nothing about what you say." But they don't just storm out. They storm out, and then they run into the banquet hall and they demand to be fed

before they finish storming out of your house, because Lord knows "I mean, they've traveled this far to be there. So it's an interesting piece of culture, and that's kinda that idea that you would feed someone. Like, _____ I guess that's all the way back to biblical times. You show up. Someone's at your door. You're responsible to feed them. It's not taken to another thing. Like, the guy didn't drive there, but their culture's so ingrained in that that it'd be completely acceptable, like, "You're terrible. You're crazy." And then it would degenerate, yelling over each other, and then they storm out of the room, and then they sit there in the banquet, and they start smiling again: "It's time to eat. And after I eat, I'm going to storm out again." [Laughter] So that was an "but like I said, these are all sort of "

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Paul Belmont III:

It was not direct for me, mostly. Maybe interpersonal reactions here and there. It's not like I was living in an Iraqi village or working back and forth or seeing people in their environment. I was seeing them in our environment.

Interviewer:

We'll definitely get back to Iraq later for your next deployment, but what happens next?

So you said you go home. You're on top of the world, you feel like.

You really felt like you made a difference.

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, and I still do. I still feel like I made a difference. It was like, well, it was great, but now you're home and you're back to your family. I had a "

Interviewer:

Yeah, where were you, actually?

Paul Belmont III:

I was stationed out of Bamberg, Germany, and so I deployed to Iraq, and I had "I think I eventually got to take some leave "where did I go on my leave? Did I go back to the "I don't remember what I did for my leave anymore. I can't remember if I went back to Germany or if I went to the States. I think I must've gone to the States, 'cause it would've been important to see my family. My wife was in the States at the time. Boy, I really can't remember what I did for R&R. But now I'm back to Germany. And so we had the thing, we're back, and we did it. We're winning awards, and we're

pinning things on our chests, and weâ€™re getting â€œare you crazy?â€ briefs. â€œOf course Iâ€™m not crazy. Iâ€™m fine.â€ You just wanna go home, and you wanna see your kids.

And I remember, like, walking in, thinking â€œ they had us all march into this â€œ I guess it was the roller rink on the base, but we all marched into the roller rink, and our families were there. I mean, the biggest thing for me is I left a three-month-old daughter home when I deployed, and hereâ€™s this, like, little girl standing there in an Army T-shirt and a pair of jeans with a balloon in her hand. Iâ€™m like â€œ yeah. I mean, the last time I see her, it was like Halloween right before I left, and I remember we had a little dumb Halloween party and her birthday party in November, and painted her, like, Peter Cresmead stuff. But she wasnâ€™t walking. She wasnâ€™t talking. All of a sudden Iâ€™ve got this, like, walking, talking â€œ like you skip everything. Went from a lump to this walking person who sits in a car seat and looks at you and is kinda â€œ so itâ€™s like, I remember coming home, and so that was like, â€œOh, wow.â€ And sheâ€™d look at me like, â€œOh. Whaâ€™?â€ Like, look confused, like, â€œWhy is this guy driving the car?â€

You know what I mean? Like, â€œMom always drives the car.â€ Looks confused, like, â€œOh, this guyâ€™s still at the house.â€ Get up in the morning: â€œOh, youâ€™re still here, and youâ€™re not the milkman.â€ No. [Laughter] â€œYouâ€™re not the milkman.â€ No, but the â€œyouâ€™re still here.â€ And I remember I had made a tape of myself, like, playing guitar and singing songs, called The Dad Show. And later I pulled out my guitar and I started playing on it, and I was recognized as not â€œDadâ€ but this celebrity sort of television show guy I get to watch in the day. I might as well have been Barney. Like, â€œOh, look. Thereâ€™s that guy. I know that guy. He plays the guitar. He sings the song that I listen to all the time.â€ And so that was a big change, and so you get really focused on that, like, â€œIâ€™ve got this family. Iâ€™m a young dad. I gotta kinda invest myself in this.â€ It was a big transition to come home. They really talked a lot about these reunion briefs. Like, how do you â€œ itâ€™s like youâ€™ve been apart from your wife for a year, I mean, 14 months almost. Itâ€™s like, how are you going to do this? And itâ€™s kinda just dumb stuff.

You donâ€™t even think about â€œ I still use this today when I talk about reunion and soldiers. Itâ€™s like, â€œYouâ€™ve changed and theyâ€™ve changed. If you havenâ€™t changed, then youâ€™ve regressed.â€ You know what I mean? Like, you havenâ€™t positively changed yourself as a person in the last year youâ€™ve been deployed, then youâ€™ve regressed as a person. But youâ€™ve changed. Thereâ€™s no such thing as static in life. And so your wife has changed in some way, for better or for worse, and your relationship has either gotten stronger or itâ€™s grown further apart. It didnâ€™t do one or the other. Youâ€™ve either managed to keep it up â€œ and itâ€™s just little dumb things. I remember losing my mind because I couldnâ€™t find anything in the kitchen. My wife comes in, everything on the floor. Everything on the floor, and Iâ€™m reordering this whole kitchen, like mad. And sheâ€™s like, â€œWhat are you doing?â€ I was like, â€œThey drive me nuts. The coffee cups are supposed to be here, and this is supposed to be there, and why did you move all this stuff?â€ And sheâ€™s like, â€œBecause youâ€™re six foot tall, and if the coffee cup is up there, you can just grab it. I am five-foot-six, and I need to be able to reach the coffee cup. The coffee cup is the most important thing to me, so I put it right here in this shelf where I can grab it, â€œcause what I need in the morning is my coffee, and you donâ€™t even drink coffee, so this is why I did what I did. And now youâ€™re back, and you wanna do this, and you donâ€™t mind grabbing my coffee cup for me in the morning, then weâ€™re good to go.â€ But it was kinda funny, and you just donâ€™t think, like, â€œOh, thatâ€™s right,â€ â€œcause to me it had been like I had left that apartment yesterday, and so I could â€œ your brainâ€™s a funny thing. Literally, it was maddening, like, â€œOh, thatâ€™s not where it was,â€ and so then you gotta get back to that. And then I had a lot of time to take some vacation and everything out, and I was finishing my tour of Germany at that point, so you had the summer, and we wound everything down. I had to kinda transfer a bunch of duties

to some people, then I was back off the States for my captain's course. And so there we were, and so we took our little tour around Europe and did those things and put on 15 pounds 'cause I had to eat at all the great places that I needed to eat one more time. I was like, "Oh, man." And then back to Virginia, back home, 'cause I was back to Fort Lee for training, which is just down the street from Richmond, a half hour away. Your kid, almost two. Camping out at the parents' house, getting a place at Fort Lee. I get this nice period of time to kinda "it was real well timed for me. It was time to recharge and reset. Made another baby. So yeah, we had " I guess it was about nine months that we were there, because we got back, baby made, baby born just before I went to Drum. And then I remember that's when you really kinda deal with your experience. You get to this course, and everybody's trying to tell you how to be a officer and how to run logistics, and nobody at this course knows half of what you do.

Interviewer:

"Cause you'd been there.

Paul Belmont III:

Right. And so, suddenly " and we ran into another situation. Everybody teaching this course has been stuck at this course the whole time. They haven't been to war. They haven't been anywhere. They haven't seen all this stuff, and suddenly they're supposed to tell you how to do logistics, how to do your job, and they have no idea how to do your job. That was an interesting dynamic. And, of course, you've got most of the people in this class, many " maybe half the class had been previously deployed, or maybe not even half at that point, 'cause it's only OIF-1. So you were either on the first tour or you're currently in your second tour, so anybody here was " I don't know the percentages. It was definitely less than half.

Interviewer:

Is this '04 now?

Paul Belmont III:

Yup, this is 2004, so yeah, I'm back. I'm back from Iraq in 2004, in March, and then March " and by, I think, July/August I left Germany, in August, in '04, back then. And so now here we are, and it's like " people are trying to tell you about a linear battlefield. There used to be this thing in the Army, the linear battlefield. Like, you know, we were all gonna go to war with the Russians. All the fighting stuff was gonna be up here. We were gonna do all this fighting, and then back here was gonna be the stuff that could kinda support the fighting, and then back here was gonna be this other stuff, and then you just move it on up and back, and it's all great, and these concepts. "You'll never be shot at in your job. The closest you'll ever get to the battle is driving up to an infantry unit in the rear somewhere and handing 'em some stuff so they can go back up." There's no such thing as a linear battlefield. You're like, "Okay. Well, the infantry unit was up there. There was an Iraqi division over here and over here, and if they knew where we were, we all woulda been in trouble." And then you gotta drive from "

Interviewer: * {.text} A different kinda battle.

Paul Belmont III:

" A to B. It's a three-dimensional battle space. It's like, "Yeah, I may just be taking logistics to this infantry unit, but I'm gonna get shot at and attacked on the way, and the lines aren't secure, and I gotta secure it myself the whole way there because it's all just discombobulated." So it becomes pretty interesting. So that was an interesting time. It was a great time to be back in Virginia. Picked up golf. Kinda got certified a captain, and I walked out the other end of that, take an assignment to Fort Drum, and walking straight into company command, which I was very excited about. So I went up to Drum

and had a baby, 10th Mountain Division, got a aviation brigade. Got to stand up a forward

support company, and I got to be in charge of that unit from â€“ letâ€™s see, I got there, like, April â€™05. July, September, October, November, December, January, February, March â€“ April, yeah. So April â€™05, nine months later, brand-new baby, number two. Showing at up Fort Drum, and Iâ€™m standing up a brand-new company, and I stayed in command of that company from the day I showed up, April â€™05 â€“ we stood it up at some point, but itâ€™s already got soldiers and everything, so April â€™05 until July â€™07, I was in charge of that company with a combat deployment in between.

Interviewer:

And this is when â€“ you went to a _____ with this â€“

Paul Belmont III: * {:.text} Yup, so I was the forward support company commander for an aviation brigade. 210 Aviation was a Black Hawk unit, so that was a very interesting time to try and stand up a brand-new unit. I got lieutenants Iâ€™m responsible for. I got all these supplies. I got brand-new soldiers. I mean, itâ€™s like a new soldier every day. Like, weâ€™re literally building the unit as we come down to the deployment, you know what I mean? I mean, itâ€™s like,

â€œOh, I gotta train, I gotta do this.â€ I remember going off to JRTC and, like, meanwhile this stuff is coming in, and nobodyâ€™s inventorying it. You gotta, like, get back â€“ â€œWhat did we get?â€ â€œI donâ€™t know. What do we need to take with us? What do we leave behind?â€ And so then we went off to Afghanistan to go run basically logistics for an aviation taskforce. Ends up being made up of our battalion headquarters, our helicopter maintenance company, my support company, one of our Black Hawk companies, and we get an Apache company and a company full of Chinooks, and suddenly that was â€“ that was a great job. That was the best job a quartermaster could have, and itâ€™s like totally sexy. Itâ€™s just like, oh, yeah. We run out and we go to, like, the desert, and we set up in some random place, and weâ€™d load rockets, and weâ€™d hot refuel, and these guys are, like, flying in outta combat missions, and theyâ€™re coming back from being shot at, and weâ€™re hooking up gas to â€“em, and weâ€™re out â€“ my company was split over, like, four locations in Afghanistan, and three of â€“em were little small FOBs. I got guys embedded with SF teams everywhere. So there was these little bases, and there was one place that was just an SF team and my guys, and thatâ€™s it. And theyâ€™re all training with the SF, and go out there and be responsible for, like, the base security and doing these different things, and really got a chance to what they call a forward area refuel â€“ they call it the forward area refueling patrolling, I guess. What is the thing P stands for? I should know this. I should be fired. Canâ€™t remember the P. I canâ€™t â€“ shame on me. Iâ€™ll remember it eventually.

Interviewer:

Yeah, thatâ€™s fine.

Paul Belmont III:

But basically, you set up this â€“ oh, forward area refuel point. So the forward area â€“ so simple. So you set up these points, and so we had, like, three static ones that we ran 24/7, just constantly so they could run their missions. Basically, it extends the helicopterâ€™s ability. If the helicopter has to leave from here, if youâ€™re out in the battle space somewhere

where they donâ€™t have to go all the way back to home base to refuel or rearm, they can come to you and get ammunition, and then they can extend, they can go further, they can go somewhere else, or they can make a quicker turnaround if weâ€™re gonna do a deliberate attack. And then sometimes weâ€™d set up what theyâ€™d call a jump FARP, and weâ€™d do those a couple of different ways. Like, maybe weâ€™d just take out some equipment where I could just set up on the spot, pretty quickly, with blivets and things like that, and you could just sling it out there. And we could go set up for a couple of days at some random little spot thatâ€™s secured by the SF, or maybe we could even set up for a couple hours using what they call a Fat Cow. You could use the internal tanks. They had these big, giant tanks you could stuff inside a Chinook. Weâ€™d just set up and secure

ourselves in the desert. And I think we got to do about, I don't know, 19, 20-something what they called jump FARPs. We'd just go out and set up for a day or two, or even just hours. We would set up. We're gonna refuel you. Just, we're gonna pick a patch of dirt, so the idea is otherwise, it's like, "Oh, the helicopters come from the same direction as where we're shooting," so that was "it was an exciting job. I got to do a lot, and I didn't have to be in the office a lot, and I was always flying around, and I was always out kinda forward. I got to really interact with a lot of different kinda people. I got to know the Afghans locally. You'd be seeing the guys at the gates at the small places. I ran the access control point in Afghanistan, and so you deal with these guys at work every day, and you get to work with interpreters and know these guys. I worked with "there was two bases that were basically run by the Special Forces, and so you work with these SF teams all the time and go out and work with those guys. There was another base that was just an infantry base, and then there was all this "then the coalition stuff. I worked with Canadian Special Forces, Canadian regular army. I worked with the British Air Force "their Air Force is their helicopters and stuff. So I worked with the Brits. I got to work with British engineers in different places. We worked with Australian Air Force, and ended up being embedded in our task force with their helicopters.

Interviewer:

Really?

Paul Belmont III:

Yup. We had Australians working in our task force "

Interviewer:

Talk to me about that.

Paul Belmont III:

"and flying missions with that. I mean, for me it was basically "it's all the same. I mean, I don't care "for our mission, I can

hook up a Australian Chinook the same way I hook up a American Chinook. I think the big difference woulda been for the pilots there. They never mixed the crews, but they did fly mixed flights, so like Australians with Americans in a mixed flight, so that was very different. And then, of course, you get to experience a little Aussie culture and stuff like that, and you hang out with these guys all the time, and you live on the Kandahar Air base, and suddenly we're working for a Canadian general, and everything switched to the ISAF, the international forces. So we switched to a UN mission while we were there. Went from American-only to UN. So that was pretty interesting. I think the "some of "em were fantastic. I ended up being disappointed in the ability of the British Army. I felt like they were really kinda stuck in what they learned in Ireland, and they weren't "

Interviewer:

Reflexive?

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, they weren't fighting the fight the way we were, and they handed a lot of stuff back. Like, I remember this one place that was a British SF "or not " American Special Forces compound that we used to work on, and they were securing this area in the Helmand provinces. And we had to, like, pull outta there "cause they'd replaced these guys, this American Special Forces A-team, with this engineer unit from the British Army. And these engineers were, like, totally focused inside this little piece of wire. The only reason this wire existed was so I could refuel helicopters and extend operations so that the SF could do active combat operations outside the wire, and patrols, and to secure the area. And the British were sitting there, just gonna come in this little wire, and it's not the most secure place in the world. And so all of a sudden they're just getting rocketed and attacked, and they handed back all kinds of territory. They abandoned a lot of towns. They quit doing patrols. Part of it was just the unit itself. They weren't the right unit. It was like they didn't match what we were

doing out there. We were out there, offensive operations and doing a lot of different things, and the Americans and the British wanted to come in and set up cantonments and set up camps and just kinda sit there and be lovey-dovey with the populace, which is great except, like I said before, if you leave the populace alone, then all of a sudden the populace is left to the devices of the Taliban or whoever else wants to tell them what to do. And so you learn a lot about Afghan culture. Very tribal. It's like, down in Helmand, it's like they don't know who Karzai is. Like, "Who the hell is Karzai?" I don't know, hopefully that's changed now, but it doesn't mean anything. He can't do anything to affect 'em. There's not like there's, like, some Afghan police force. There's not like this Afghan army that's out there protecting you. You're just out on your own, and you live in this village, and you deal with a local warlord. You know what I mean? And maybe you owe the guy a dowry 'cause he paid for your wedding, and now you have to grow poppies for him. If you don't grow the poppies for him, then he's gonna come and cut your head off, and there's nobody to stop him. Right? I mean, this is the way life works. It's tribal. It's very tribal. And so what does Karzai mean? That's just some guy. I mean, like, "Afghanistan?" I don't know what Afghanistan is. I'm part of this tribe, and I work for these people." So that was a very different way of being. And so you got to work with a lot of different people, and the same time, you learn that "just like the truck drivers from before, you got all these guys that just wanna make a buck. They wanna do their thing. They wanna work hard. They wanna drive truck on post. They're helping construct the airfield. They're helping rebuild this base. They're helping support the Army. We bring these trucks in every day, logistical supplies, and they'd come through, and you develop relationships with 'em, and "Oh, that's great." And we started a thing to hand shoes over. A lot of guys used to run. We'd wear our shoes out real fast. And I'd throw these shoes away, and then they'd say, "No, no, don't throw 'em away." If we throw something, we'd just turn our shoes over to the guys at the gate. Like, shoes, it was like the biggest deal in the world to give these people shoes.

Interviewer:

Wow, really?

Paul Belmont III:

Oh, yeah, 'cause, I mean, they walk everywhere. They wear their shoes out. I mean, that's the thing, there's a Nike store there, and you're giving these guys a pair of beat-up Nikes, and it's like you just gave 'em a Cadillac, you know what I mean? And so it was like, so we start turning over all our "Hey, don't throw your shoes out. We'll take 'em to the gate." That was an area "we had the access control point at Kandahar. We used to let everybody in and out, search the vehicles. You're searching buses, pop the top out, people load it with marijuana, which is kinda scary to think. Why are they bringing marijuana into the American base unless they're selling it to a bunch of people inside of here, you know what I mean? There would be no other reason to bring it in except they're going to try and sell it.

If you're selling it to the Afghans, you could do that outside the gate. So they're bringing it all in, and so that's kinda scary.

Interviewer:

Did you have any close encounters when you were running that checkpoint?

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah. Actually, one day " and I'll never forget this. The closest call we had out there " when we found some different stuff " usually you would just find drugs. You would find drugs, like, every day. And then a lot of times you would find " you would look at pen drives. They would try and hide, like, devices. I mean, that was the big thing, watching out for intelligence, 'cause that was a great way to make a buck. They'd get a pen drive, get it in some computer, pass it to somebody, and you think it's fake until you realize, like, why would the guy go to the trouble to hide this pen drive in here? We don't let

â€œem bring a pen drive in. You would find â€“ I mean, literally, when we would go to the point, we would pull engines apart. Weâ€™d pull â€“ there was like an easy tube to get out of an engine. Boom, there it is. You pop a hole, and all of a sudden itâ€™s like, â€œHey, this is kinda loose.â€ Youâ€™d pop the whole dash off, and thereâ€™s all kinds of stuff up in there, you know? So the main things they were trying to bring was, like, drugs and trying to get intelligence out. But I remember one day â€“ and I tell you, itâ€™s gotta show you about building

close relationships. A busload of guys are coming in, and itâ€™s a big thing. You had to be vetted. You gotta be secured. We take their thumbprints. You start to learn who they are, and they start to learn who you are. And so one day the bus was just outside the gate, and all of a sudden this huge â€“ I mean, the whole bus just blew up. And thank â€“

Interviewer:

When you were right there.

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, and thank God it was not in the gate yet. I mean, I say â€œthank God.â€ Thank God for my soldiers that it wasnâ€™t all the way in the gate yet. And what had happened is this guy jumps on the bus. Itâ€™s like, â€œOkay, Iâ€™m jumping on from the local town to Kandahar, and Iâ€™m gonna catch the bus, and Iâ€™m gonna go work on the base.â€ And you build the relationships, and all of a sudden â€“ so we pieced it all together. What had happened is, this guy jumps on the bus, and heâ€™s not a normal on the bus.

Heâ€™s not a regular. And so all the Afghans were like, â€œWhat are you doing on the bus?â€ Theyâ€™re all worried â€“cause weâ€™ll turn â€œem away. Thereâ€™s one guy on the bus without an ID or without something, that whole bus is getting â€“ theyâ€™re not gonna work that day. And so theyâ€™re like, â€œWhat are you doing? Youâ€™re not supposed to be here.â€ And so then the guy panicked.

They kept questioning him. So just as theyâ€™re getting in the gate, this guy panics. Now heâ€™s getting close to the gate, heâ€™s seeing the gun, everything else. Theyâ€™re questioning him who he is, and it turns out heâ€™s just wearing a vest, and he just obliterated the whole â€“ thereâ€™s a couple survivors from the bus that were able to tell us what happened, but he killed, like, 80 percent, 90 percent â€“ everybody died on the bus. And it was like, we hadnâ€™t been building good relationships. They werenâ€™t, like, â€œWe like America. We like these guys.â€ They didnâ€™t care if this guy wanted to come in and blow up the bus or wanted to blow up a bomb. I mean, at least he woulda been at the guard point. And the sad thing is, that woulda been, like, major news. This guy, thatâ€™s gonna make the news: it blew up American soldiers. Sadly, the bus blows up, it probably isnâ€™t even a blip. A whole busload of Afghans dead, and itâ€™s not even a blip on the radar because it doesnâ€™t affect the mission anymore. But if anything, itâ€™s bad news for the Taliban because they didnâ€™t kill Americans; they killed a busload of â€“ this guy ends up killing a busload of Afghan nationals that are just trying to do a good thing, and so now nobody likes the Taliban anymore. So itâ€™s like defeat for them. But I mean, that was a scary day, realizing â€“ it just goes to show you how thorough you had to be. Itâ€™s like everything weâ€™ve been preaching about, being thorough about â€“ â€“cause you got a lot of young soldiers never been in these situations before, and you got vets, like myself, been to Afghanistan before, been to Iraq before, and weâ€™re constantly harping, like, you gotta be vigilant, like, you gotta stay on top of this stuff. You canâ€™t ostracize these people, but at the same time â€“ itâ€™s like, how do you walk this line between being a friend, developing a relationship, doing all these things, yet not allowing something to get past you? In other words, you can be their friend, and you can still pull their â€“ hey, man, this is just the way it is. Like, Iâ€™m gonna pop your hood. If I see something loose, Iâ€™m gonna pull open the frickinâ€™ gasket and Iâ€™m gonna look. Iâ€™m gonna pull your dashboard off. And then it becomes this kinda rule, and then if they werenâ€™t interested â€“ right? If youâ€™re just assholes to â€œem all day long, then they donâ€™t care. And then itâ€™s like, hey, let that guy come on in. Or

if youâ€™re not vigilant, like, â€œHey, we get through the bus every day. Maybe theyâ€™re not worried about their job. Theyâ€™re not worried about ____.

Interviewer:

____ operation.

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, I mean, and it just shows you, like, boom, you know? Other days where someone makes a run at the gate, itâ€™s like â€œ I remember going to Iraq one time later, and I was looking at a control point. Itâ€™s just like simple things that you donâ€™t even think about, like employment of weapons, like, â€œOh, whatâ€™s gonna happen, right?â€ I remember going to a control point in Baghdad one time, and thereâ€™s like a .50-cal just sitting there. Itâ€™s like, you canâ€™t even shoot this at anybody. I mean, if someone sees a .50-cal, maybe itâ€™ll scare â€œem. But the reality is like, can you even employ this? Will this even â€œ is this the best place to put it? Itâ€™s like, it doesnâ€™t do anything. Itâ€™s like, and that was the way it was when you got to this gate.

Itâ€™s like, why do you got a .50-cal here when it doesnâ€™t do anything? So learning that was a â€œ I mean, we put a lot of emphasis on that place, and itâ€™s like, it shoulda paid off, you know what I mean? Weâ€™re able to â€œ and it was also something else to know every day that you were deterring drugs, every day you were helping with the â€œ I mean, every day when you did it, you were helping control the intelligence, to help secrets or whatever from getting out. And then literally you were like, â€œLook, we are protecting the safety of this base. Look, these guys have happens. We found them today. Look what they did,â€ not like â€œOh, whatâ€™s gonna happen?â€ So that became a very rewarding mission for my guys, and that was that incident. And there was a couple incidents where there were some vehicles that had to be kinda stopped outside the gate, I mean, with force. And those were the days that would â€œ all it takes is one or two days like that to make everybody realize, like, hey, this stuff is not a game. Itâ€™s real. And, like, itâ€™s not just â€œOh, weâ€™re fantasizing about stuff coming in here.â€ And it can seem so innocuous.

Like, â€œOh, itâ€™s the same guys that come in every day. Oh, what are they gonna do? â€œ Well, hereâ€™s what they could do. And so that was big. And you get these heartbreaking stories too, like _____, like Arden says, he just really developed this relationship with this guy. So then itâ€™s like, this guy wants his help. Itâ€™s like, heâ€™s working for this company. Itâ€™s like, this guyâ€™s not even an Afghan. Heâ€™s come from, like, Pakistan or something like â€œ not Pakistan. Heâ€™s come from, like, some other country to Afghanistan to work for this Egyptian company, to get a job, to do this stuff, and heâ€™s working for the Americans, and his whole dream in life is to get to America. And itâ€™s like, and heâ€™s trying to â€œ and itâ€™s like, I wanna try and â€œ how do I get this guy to be a citizen? I remember going through this. Like, oh, my God. To get him to be a citizen, itâ€™s like, do you know what youâ€™re gonna have to â€œ and I was like, â€œWeâ€™ll start this process.â€ I said, â€œI have no idea where this is gonna go.â€ But itâ€™s like, at the end of the day youâ€™re vouching for this guy. You know what kinda checks itâ€™s gonna take. You know what heâ€™s gonna have to prove, and then you realize â€œ I mean, it made me realize what it would take just to get to â€œ for some people to get to America.

It was almost like â€œ it would be like a one-in-a-thousand shot for this guy, and Iâ€™m probably being conservative to say that, for this guy to make it to America, â€œcause itâ€™s like, â€œWhere are you coming from? Who are you?â€ How are you gonna do a background â€œ and the only way to do it is maybe he works for this Egyptian company. Maybe the reality is for him â€œ what he really needs is a reference to get outta here, if this company would then hire him and take him to, like, Egypt. That would be the thing. Heâ€™d have to make it to Egypt, and move up in this company and get to Egypt, and then from Egypt you could probably get into America. But thereâ€™s no way this guyâ€™s â€œ I was like, â€œI mean, you could try.â€ And then they were like â€œ theyâ€™d see me out at the gate, and theyâ€™d think, like, â€œOh, you work for the man who is the god of the

gate. I mean, they didn't use it in terms of god or something like that, but they were like, "That guy is." In other words, "You, Sergeant Aston, are the most powerful man at the gate. You control our lives. You say who comes; you say who goes; you say who does, who doesn't. This guy is, like, the man that's in charge, you know what I mean?"

You say the vehicle can't come. You make the call. You make this. And it's like, "You decide whether we get paid or not for the day." You know what I mean?

"You can tell my boss, this Egyptian boss of mine, to go pounce in, you know, this lowly staff sergeant, right? And I come out to the gate, and everybody steps to. Like, all these soldiers that, like, hold your and it's like, if you want, you could mow us dead out there, and here comes this man to the gate who everybody locks up and gets ready for, and then to try and communicate to this guy. I am but a lowly captain in the Army. It's like, do you even realize like, you would at least " I figured it out. I mean, like, for somebody in this theater to do it, they would basically need a relationship with, like, a general officer. You would need a general officer to say, like " you would need to be that kinda high up in some kinda hierarchy that you've been vetted enough that you're allowed to approach as a contractor or whatever, an Iraqi, and deal with the general officer. And this general officer had enough relationship with you " that's almost what it would take to somebody even to consider taking you seriously. I remember at the time going like,

"I know who the general officer is on this post," you know what I mean? Like, I know " I've met the general officers, but it's like, I don't " just like everybody steps to for me, this guy shows up. I am but " it's like, there's this many levels between me and the general officer, so it's like really " it was really kinda heartbreaking. This guy was a great guy, so good stuff. He worked " he was an interpreter for us, and he wanted " but it's like, you know, so he'd have to work his way up. And so you learn a lot about the culture and those kinda things. It's like, there's just people that wanna make it in the world. It's interesting. You think, "Oh, even in this backwards place where no one understands quite what Afghanistan is or what Karzai means or anything else, but this guy's got a concept of " I tell you what I do know, though. I do know that I'd rather be in America than here. I'd rather be anywhere but here right now, and if I can get there, that's my life's goal is just to get the hell outta whatever country I'm in. I've taken this risk to come to Afghanistan and work so that I can hopefully one day go somewhere else.

This is my life's work, getting my family outta this hellhole," and you're like, "Oh, my God." And that kinda stuff, daily relationships work in that way, and then you'd go out. And I remember working the SF bases. You'd almost just be employing locals. You'd employ a guy from the village to come cook for you or something like that, and he'd come working there and stuff like that, and you'd work with these guys. And so you get a lot more personal contact with Afghans than I did with Iraqis on the first trip, and with people also a little closer to their environment, not just " you got to do "em. Or then being a company commander, I had a lot more responsibility and ability to interact with people. And then, of course, the coalition experience was different. But that was a good mission. I was proud to bring everybody home. I had to send a couple guys home for injury. But hey, nobody died. That was great. And probably one of the proudest things I ever did. And not like my guys ever had to see direct combat, but it's still " you're working on helicopters. You're working on stuff all day long.

You had to put "em in situations where they could be attacked. You know, they have to do something. They're not kicking in doors, but they are flying on combat missions. They are flying places " what could potentially be a lot of dangerous situations, especially those jump FARPs, where it's just like they're out in the middle of nowhere, and the helicopters leave, and we're just gonna hold it down till somebody

comes.

Interviewer: * {:.text} Even at the gate? Do you have a guy _____

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, exactly. So a lot of different stuff. And we had people on the taskforce die. We lost helicopters. We lost people. Anybody coulda been in one of those, and so itâ€™s not all me. Some of it was just a little luck. I was in a helicopter that got shot at one day, and I didnâ€™t even know it.

Interviewer:

Really?

Paul Belmont III: * {:.text} Yeah. I guess I was sleeping in the back, but I mean, Iâ€™m just a passenger. What can you do? And I was catching a ride back from one of the bases. We were sitting in a brief, and everybody was really panicked about, like, what happened, and they were mad â€˜cause nobody brought the report in yet about â€˜“ â€˜“What do you mean someone was shot at? Now we gotta disengage. We return fire.â€˜ And sometimes you never know, youâ€™d hear firing, but theyâ€™d mess with you sometimes.

Theyâ€™d shoot their test fires on the way out, so if I heard fire outta the helicopter, Iâ€™m not necessarily gonna panic, â€˜cause â€˜“Oh, weâ€™re probably just in the test-fire area to make sure â€˜“ theyâ€™re checking their guns or whatever, and theyâ€™re gonna break contact.â€˜ I remember the whole thing, Iâ€™m looking at this flight route, and I just got back, and I was like, â€˜“Man, that all looks familiar,â€˜ and then I realize, like, â€˜“Oh, theyâ€™re talking about the helicopter I was just in.â€˜

Interviewer:

Wow.

Paul Belmont III:

But I was asleep, and I didnâ€™t even know that we were being â€˜“ taking fire. Itâ€™s like, oh, well. I just didnâ€™t wake up for it.

Interviewer:

Iâ€™m just gonna change the tape.

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, sure.

[Beginning of Part 2]

Interviewer:

It seems to be a recurring theme in war that, for some reason, men get really, really closely brought together. What is it about war, you think, that does that, that brings people together as comrades?

Paul Belmont III:

I guess itâ€™s just shared experience, I mean, for the most part. I mean, at the end of the day you have to be able to count on the people next to you to do things right. And so on one level, depending how intense the experience is, thereâ€™s no one else thatâ€™s gonna understand that experience except for the person you experienced it with, and so thatâ€™s a sort of, kind of bond. But at the same time, as you move away from your experience, thereâ€™s people that you donâ€™t talk to anymore despite the fact â€˜“ â€˜“cause theyâ€™re just not there. And so part of it is the intensity of specific experiences that you mightâ€™ve shared together, like, you know, if I wanted to get back and talk about the time that the rockets landed outside while we were just, like, getting ready for a mission, and all of a sudden weâ€™re about to get, like, rockets coming through, and I could talk with a bunch of guys about that. A lot of my soldiers who were out on the TARP. I could talk to Pete Godfriend, who was a fellow company commander, and the rockets getting in his TARP. And we would all kinda rally around that. And itâ€™s like, who else are you gonna talk to â€˜“ who else can you talk to about, like, â€˜“Oh, yeah, do you remember the nightâ€“?â€˜ Itâ€™s one thing to talk about sitting in the dining facility, and youâ€™re in a tent and all of a sudden itâ€™s like [imitates whooshing noise], you hear this noise, and you realize, â€˜“Oh, crap, thereâ€™s a rocket overhead.â€˜ I remember sitting there with my first sergeant. Here we are, and what do you do? And I just remember

my first sergeant just saying, "Well, I'm gonna keep eating for a second," and it's blowing up right outside the tent. And you can't really explain that to somebody else. We were there. Wayne and I -- he just retired as a command sergeant major, and it's like, you spend that time with your first sergeant. It's like, every waking moment, leading this company, doing everything together, moving back and forth, meals and times and ridiculousness that you deal with.

Just some of the mundane -- oh, problems with soldiers sleeping together, problems with -- Oh, crap, this guy's making a mistake, or we have to discipline somebody for doing the wrong thing. And so you develop this really tight bond with certain people. So there's that bond of shared experience, and I think that's the biggest thing. It's like, you'd spend all your time with the same people for a year, going back and forth. And depending how close or not you let yourself get personally with those people is a part of it, and then there's those moments, those events. Being in Iraq, and the first time that the rocket landed, like, right outside, and talking to people about the dirt hitting their face and the way you felt, but you wouldn't wanna talk about that with everybody. Or seeing something -- there's a way that you can talk about it with someone that experienced it that is different than the way that I could express it here for you or anything else. I mean, there's a --

Interviewer:

Or _____ might see it two different ways if they were in combat.

Paul Belmont III:

Bill Mauldin wrote once -- there's like -- you could make a joke with somebody -- Bill Mauldin was a cartoonist, and he'd talk about this a little bit. There are jokes and there are things that are funny when you're talking to that person, because they understand. You could be missing your wife, and everybody's missing their wife, and so I could make a joke with somebody. I could get pretty off-color about missing their wife, and I could tease --em about it. I could say, "Oh, yeah, you know, get over it. Why don't you go buddy up with your pillow tonight?" or something like that, and that's on the tame side. And part of it is like, "Yeah, you know what? I miss my wife too. Suck it up," blah, blah -- there's a kind of understanding. If the same person said -- and I'm being tame -- the same person said something else, you might be likely to just knock --em out, and you really couldn't talk to that experience with somebody, because there's certain things -- they're just internalized. And so I guess there's a depth of shared understanding that allows you to leave things unsaid or say things that you would normally have to leave unsaid. I guess that would be the way to say that. So I think that's part of the experience. And then the other part is, just like I said, these are it. This is your circle. This is your family. I have a slide I'll show to cadets about -- my icebreaker: what's your favorite historical person, your favorite historical people, and your favorite historical event? My favorite historical people is soldiers. And I have this montage of soldiers, and in that montage of soldiers, I have my platoon leaders, my warrant officer -- little pictures of them from combat. And it's like, those are my soldiers. Those are my family.

Dan Simons was one of my platoon leaders, and it would be hard to call us friends. We had a very tumultuous and difficult relationship as officer and subordinate, to the point of -- I have probably dressed him down as bad or worse than anybody that I've dressed down in my life. I have been through personal and integrity issues and things -- back and forth, and miscommunications with this guy. It was a tough road to hoe, I mean, to the point where both of us mutually wanted to separate from each other professionally. Like, "Can you help me get to a new unit?" -- Boy, I would love to help you get to a new unit. I think our relationship got as cold as ice as anything could possibly get at one point, our personal and professional relationship.

Through circumstances, one thing or another, we were lotted to not be separated. Had the point -- I'd like to leave. -- I'd like you to leave. Let's go to the XO and

see if you can leave. The XO would love for you to leave. Letâ€™s go let you leave.â€ And then the battalion commander was like, â€œHeâ€™s your problem. Fix it.â€ All right, then, sir. And you know what? The funny thing is I stay in pretty good contact with Dan today. I smile. I Facebook him. I talk to him on the phone once in a while. Iâ€™ll go back and forth. I mean, separated from the intensity of the things that we were dealing with at the time, and the professional relationship, personally we were able to reconnect. We were able â€“ we were forced in some ways to deal with it, and there were things that he didnâ€™t understand too. I mean, it almost took him moving on somewhere else and getting a new job and saying, â€œNow I understand things from your perspective.â€ Actually, it was a conversation where he had moved up in the world. Heâ€™d become a captain. And heâ€™d contact me one day. He goes, â€œYou know, I didnâ€™t understand things from your perspective. I was reading things from my perspective. And so now I understand that just because you were telling me

to suck it up and do something didnâ€™t necessarily mean it was just â€˜cause you were an asshole and thatâ€™s the way you wanted it to happen. It was just â€˜cause this was the way itâ€™s gonna be.â€ You know what I mean? Like, he used to get mad because he was the maintenance platoon leader. And I talked about all my forward area refuel points, how important these guys were, how sexy the job was, and theyâ€™re out and theyâ€™re in danger, and theyâ€™re doing stuff, and theyâ€™re deploying weapons, and theyâ€™re refueling helicopters. And theyâ€™re like the studs, and theyâ€™re all the effort, because guess what? Weâ€™re an aviation battalion, and this is the main â€“ youâ€™re the main effort. And Dan was never, ever gonna be the main effort. I used to steal Danâ€™s soldiers to go train them up. Iâ€™d take â€˜em out of his motor pool, and Iâ€™d put â€˜em on the FARP team and teach â€˜em how to be refuelers because that was more important, and he used to get really upset about that. But, you know, itâ€™s like, he didnâ€™t have the perspective to understand and, like, â€œHey, wait a second. Your boss has a job, and your boss â€“â€ Itâ€™s like, I couldnâ€™t get through to him that, like, yeah, it sucks to hear this. Itâ€™s not that youâ€™re unimportant, but weâ€™re in an aviation regiment, and low on the list of priorities is fixing the trucks.

Low on the list of priorities is getting this stuff together. Itâ€™s high on my priorities. Itâ€™s high on your priorities. We have to drive these trucks. We have to go places in â€˜em. But the battalion commander does it, and his mission wonâ€™t fail if we canâ€™t drive these trucks from A to B. He doesnâ€™t need â€˜em to. He needs these helicopters to fly, and he needs â€˜em to shoot, and he needs â€˜em to have fuel in â€˜em. Thatâ€™s what he needs. And so youâ€™re the B effort, you know what I mean? Weâ€™re only gonna have to drive these trucks if this â€“ basically, itâ€™s not even our â€“ weâ€™re prepared, and we had to do it. We had to dry some fuel up in our trucks, but thatâ€™s not our â€“ so guess what? Those guys that are normally truck drivers, theyâ€™re doing this, and yes, I need you to â€“ and itâ€™s like, I know, fixing trucks seems more important, but what I really need you to focus on is these generators that keep my fuel points running, is these commo systems that keep us talking to each other, is these things that you donâ€™t â€“ in any other unit, they would be â€“ the trucks would be so important, and you wanna be so important, but you canâ€™t be. And so now I talk to Dan all the time, and weâ€™re â€“ itâ€™s hard to call it friends, but weâ€™re definitely friendly. Weâ€™re definitely acquaintances. And I was happy it got to the point of no hard feelings and stuff like that. And so thereâ€™s a bond there that is not a bond of friendship; itâ€™s a bond of experience, itâ€™s a bond of sharing things, and itâ€™s a bond of pain. I mean, misery loves company, I guess. Maybe thatâ€™s part of it. Conversely, my first sergeant and I had the best working relationship in the world, and boy, weâ€™re so tight. They always talk about youâ€™re supposed to be tight with your first sergeant. I had two first sergeants; Iâ€™m only tight with one of â€˜em. Iâ€™m only tight with the one. I like the other guy as my first sergeant back and forth, but we were like Jedi mind trick. The other guy was like â€“ heâ€™s my first sergeant. I went back and wound up with this guy. With Wayne, itâ€™s like, â€œI have got you.â€ We are on the wavelength. And so thereâ€™s that

experience. There's the experience of my soldiers. I mean, just about any soldier that was in my unit at the time,

I was charged with these young men and women's care for 28 months of my life. They were my responsibility, people's children. Regina Perry, Lovely Rose - Lovely Rayanne; she changed her name to Rose, so she was - Lovely Rose. - Funny name. Christina Lay. Going back and forth, so I'm trying to think of - Bloomberg, and Sergeant Avery, and I think all the way back to 7th CSG and Staff Sergeant Balcom. Used to work on night shifts every single night. And it's like, Staff Sergeant Balcom was a - I think, personally, it's like, here I am, white-bred, Virginian, Catholic, and this guy is a black Muslim. He didn't wanna talk about

being Muslim - cause we were in Iraq all the time, you know? And I'm probably the only - I shouldn't even say this. Sorry, Sergeant Balcom. I'm one of the only guys that know that the dude likes Journey. [Laughter] You know what I mean? It's like, - cause I spent every waking minute with this guy. And it was like, yeah, Staff Sergeant Balcom, and I haven't talked to Staff Sergeant Balcom in six years, but if I saw him tomorrow, it'd be like, - How are you? What's going on? Come. Let me buy you dinner. - And I think I mentioned some soldiers from - and Regina Perry and Lovely Rose that were just awesome, awesome, awesome soldiers. And I mentioned a guy like Bloomberg, who was kinda like sometimes getting into trouble, sometimes doing some things he shouldn't have been doing, like some real - but he was a kid. You work with him, and it's like, - Oh, let's go, - you know what I mean? - Let's get it together. - I mean, there's probably like two guys I don't ever wanna see again in my life. One of - em I put in jail. He's a degenerate human being, and that's another story.

But there's that common experience.

And my other platoon leader, Shane Matlock, I still talk to him all the time. I try and stay in touch with my XO's, and it's like, this was our experience. I think in any situation where you're forced to just live with some people and do some things, you're gonna build bonds, and in any situation, you're gonna leave - you're gonna make close friends, and sometimes you make friends for life, and sometimes you have those people that you don't see for a while but if you saw - em again, it's gonna be great. So it's a combination of intensity of experience and then shared experience. I mean, that's how we make friends, right? And so you spend 13 months eating, shitting, and sleeping together, and that's gonna change the nature of your relationship. And there's gonna be, oddly, people that don't - there are people that are not even my friends that may know deeper, darker things about me than my best friends. And there are things that some of my Army buddies know about me

that my wife will never, ever find out. Like, it's just something that - I talk about 99 percent of everything in the world with my wife, but there's some things I just can't go there. I can't be that person to my wife. I can't be that guy. That was another guy. You almost have to be - and so that's just something - there's a couple things probably I just don't talk about with my own wife. And I talk about just about everything with my wife, but I just don't find it appropriate or healing or positive, because it's a place I don't wanna go. And so there's some things that some people know that - not secrets, but just, like - - Oh, yeah, honey, I've seen some things - - Oh, yeah, I remember that - I've had to do whatever. - I talk vaguely, kinda like I'm doing right now. I don't wanna talk about that with my wife, but if I run into Wayne Ward or

Shane Matlock or Sergeant Balcom, we could talk about that stuff. Some is just personal issues. Some is experiences with combat. Some of it's just, like, experiences with just people.

Interviewer:

Let's fast-forward to your time in Iraq, which was with - as you said, this was with the

same kinda family that you were with. You were with the same guys.

Paul Belmont III:

This is my second â€“

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Paul Belmont III:

Well, you know, this is the gag. You go back to Iraq â€“ this is not the same guys. I finished up my tour. I did my time in Afghanistan. I came back. I was waiting to get a job. Pete Godfrend, who had moved from being one of my peer company commanders to then the XO of our battalion, calls me on the phone one morning after PT and says, â€œWhat are youâ€“ â€“ or in the evening. Shame on me, I was working my â€“ my phone rings, 5:30, on my walk home. Iâ€™ll take it. Could be a boss. Lo and behold, there it is, itâ€™s the XO. â€œSir, what do you need?â€“ â€œWhat are you doing at 8:30 tomorrow morning?â€“ â€œTaking a shower after I eat breakfast, after PT. Why? Getting ready for my day.â€“ â€œWell, General Oates wants to see you.â€“ â€œOh, geez, what the hell did I do?â€“ Well, next thing I know, I end up being the aide to camp to the 10th Mountain Division. And so I took a trip or two, week-long kinda things, to Iraq on a couple different occasions because as the way deployments work now, youâ€™ve got â€“ I donâ€™t think the whole 10th Mountain Divisionâ€™s ever deployed anywhere at one time. You send brigades out. And so weâ€™re going out to see the brigades of the 10th Mountain Division. They were going to Iraq, and so I was back in Baghdad. I was back in Balad for just one day to see how completely different that place was. I was driving around with our second brigade and our first brigade and also elements of my own aviation brigade that I used to be in, that I barely ever dealt with because they send the little birds to Iraq.

They didnâ€™t go â€“ we had this one battalion that would always go to Iraq while the rest of us all went to Afghanistan, â€˜cause they didnâ€™t like to fly the birds there. So itâ€™s like, oh, here they are in their element. Itâ€™s like, thereâ€™s a guy here in the department that was in the same brigade as me all at the same time. We never even knew each other because we were on different rotation cycles.

Interviewer:

Who is that?

Paul Belmont III:

Itâ€™s Major â€“ I keep wanting to say Shaw, but thatâ€™s not right. Scott. One of the Major Scotts. Not skinny Major Scott, but stocky Major Scott.

Interviewer:

Kevin Scott, yeah.

Paul Belmont III:

Major Kevin Scott. Apparently, he was in the little bird battalion the whole time, but his deployment schedule was always go to Iraq, and we were almost like never â€“ and it was kinda funny. I was like, â€œHow do I not know you?â€“ and then we realized, well, because we were on the Afghanistan team, and you were on the Iraq team, so it was never to cross paths. And we know some of the same people, which is interesting.

Interviewer:

Yeah, what was your deployment like? What were you â€“

Paul Belmont III:

Well, so what this was, is

2:11:00

Iâ€™m a generalâ€™s aide, flying this guy in. Weâ€™re hitting the dirt. Weâ€™re picking things up. I mean, this is everything from the puzzle palace over in Baghdad, like, sitting in General Odiernoâ€™s office, General Petraeusâ€™ office, all the way down to, like, sitting in patrol bases with infantry guys â€˜cause thatâ€™s what my boss, General Oates, liked to do. He liked to â€“ he had his way. He wanted to be out there. He wants to â€“ I guess you could call him a G.I. general. He wanted to be out, and he wanted to see what people were doing up front. He wanted to go. â€œHey, letâ€™s get in â€“ I donâ€™t need

a helicopter. Letâ€™s get in a convoy and letâ€™s drive. It may not be safe, but weâ€™re not gonna waste resources. Iâ€™m just gonna get there. Itâ€™ll be fine.â€ And all of a sudden weâ€™re driving through, and this is a little bit during the period where theyâ€™ve just made this peace with the Sunnis. And itâ€™s like, I mean, whatâ€™s the bottom line? We chose to

hand money â€“ all of a sudden this guy that used to plant a road bomb, used to take money from Al-Qaeda to plant bombs at the side of the road and try to kill you or raid you or do whatever in the middle of the night, â€˜cause thatâ€™s how heâ€™s feeding his family â€˜cause he canâ€™t get a job, because heâ€™s cut out â€˜cause heâ€™s Sunni or whatever. He canâ€™t get employed in any other way. Heâ€™s gotta feed his family. We told him he canâ€™t be in the army, he canâ€™t be in the government, so now all of a sudden heâ€™s looking to get back in, and heâ€™s desperately scared that the Iranians are gonna come over, running all the Shiites, and so heâ€™s got a pure motive to feed his family. Heâ€™s got a somewhat justified motive to try and make his way in the world. Heâ€™s got a misguided motive that â€œOkay, if I canâ€™t get ____ Americans, Iâ€™ll take it from these Al-Qaeda guys, and at the end of the day Iâ€™m trying to arm myself â€“â€ Right or wrong, but in his perception, to protect himself from the Shiite horde thatâ€™s gonna come running across. And he think heâ€™s gonna have to fight for it, and this is what heâ€™s gotten used to. And so suddenly we basically sorta found a way to employ these guys, and I remember driving in a convoy

on a Route Cherry, which would get hit, like, every other time you drove on it just about. Itâ€™s like, you could guarantee someone was gonna blow up or someone was gonna shoot at you in a Route Cherry, and nothing happened. All of a sudden Iâ€™m driving around this country in convoys for five days, and I suddenly had a hard time staying awake. And I thought, â€œWhy canâ€™t I stay awake?â€ Itâ€™s like, because I have no adrenaline.â€ Nothingâ€™s happening, and you canâ€™t keep the adrenaline to keep you awake, and all of a sudden itâ€™s just like, Iâ€™m tired. Iâ€™m only running on â€“ Iâ€™ve only got so much sleep, and I used to have no problem staying awake because I had adrenaline surging through my veins, absolutely convinced somethingâ€™s going to happen, and now you donâ€™t have adrenaline anymore. And itâ€™s like, I have to stay up. I gotta â€“ but then, like, the longer it goes without anything happening. I remember the only time I saw any kinda shooting on that whole trip â€“ we come to a crosswalk in downtown Baghdad on the south side. Weâ€™re with one of the brigade teams, and roll up through this intersection. All of a sudden this guy is, like, firing a weapon. ____ lock and load. No, this guy â€“ heâ€™s acting as a traffic guard. Heâ€™s, like, just firing in the air to hold up traffic: â€œAllow the

grand Americans to pass,â€ you know what I mean? You know, like, â€œEverybody give notice. Here comes the American Army. Theyâ€™re rolling through.â€ And it was, like, wild. I mean, things had changed, and this was during the thing, and all of a sudden, like, all the intelligence changes because now all the same guys that used to be in bed with these guys are turning â€˜em over, and Iâ€™m hearing the briefs, and weâ€™re just rolling people up left and right. All the real bad guys are getting turned over. Theyâ€™re just â€“ â€œHere they are, and this is how we get â€˜em.â€ And it was just absolutely â€“ {.:pers Itâ€™s a contrast, a huge contrast.

Paul Belmont III:

â€“ incredible. I mean, it was just so different. And it just shows you that the whole â€“ in my opinion, the whole future of it basically revolves around the ability of the Sunnis and the Shias to sort of get along and share power. And who knows how well thatâ€™ll happen? Weâ€™re getting ready to do a drawdown, and thatâ€™s gonna be the test. Can they forge their way in an Iraqi future? Is that what they want to do? Can everybody have their piece of the pie?

As a historian, I see throughout history that it often takes conflict to bring that about.

I studied the Civil War, and I wonder what it woulda looked like if they took all the land from

the plantation owners and everything else and handed it all over, if the Civil War wouldâ€™ve ended. I donâ€™t know. I question that now, like, looking at Iraq, like, man, maybe they woulda fought tooth and nail and run a counterinsurgency because they werenâ€™t about to be second-class citizens again. Who knows? But itâ€™s an interesting thing to think about. But it made me hopeful that, like, man, maybe this could work. Maybe they can get along, but thereâ€™s still years of animosity. I mean, things that just run so deep, you know, and mistrust that, like, â€œOh, how do you forge a way in the new environment?â€ Who knows?

Interviewer:

Has your experience with war affected your religion in any way? â€˜Cause you are very â€œare you a religious man _____

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, more than so. Yeah.

Itâ€™s only deepened. Itâ€™s deepened my faith. Itâ€™s made me perhaps a better Catholic. Religion has been an integral part of my experience from start to finish. I mean, I was in Iraq. I mean, I came out of it. I was just really a very involved guy in college, and back and forth. I had discerned to be a priest once in my life. Thatâ€™s where I went through this discern process. I mentioned I worked as a campus minister, and here I am in the Army, and I thought, â€œOh, am I gonna be a chaplain? Maybe thatâ€™s not what I wanna do.â€ And no, thatâ€™s not what I feel called to do. Iâ€™m doing this. But then how do I reconcile that? And I remember going to Iraq, and I was the â€œwhat they call an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist. And what an EME, extraordinary minister of the Eucharist, does in its simplest form is, if there are people that are sick that canâ€™t come to the church and get the Communion, then you take that to them. Like, okay, they give it to you, and youâ€™re trusted not to, like, drop it, and then we believe this is the body of, like, Jesus, so Iâ€™m not gonna drop it, and Iâ€™m gonna minister to the sick and Iâ€™m gonna minister to these people. And theyâ€™ve changed this in the militaryâ€™s diocese a little bit. But it used to be that theyâ€™d kinda train us all up, and we got ready to go, and I got a certain amount of Communion all blessed by this priest, and I would do what they would call a Communion service. Itâ€™s not Mass, because thereâ€™s no priest, thereâ€™s no consecration, but itâ€™s like, hey, if youâ€™re Catholic and you wanna come to this service, thatâ€™s me. Itâ€™s Lieutenant Paul Belmont sitting in Najaf, the Garden of Eden, pulling palm trees off the thing, having a Palm Sunday service. And we just read the Scripture for the day, and I pass out the Communion and maybe a short reflection on it, and then we move forward. And apparently â€œif you understand Catholicism, this is like a big deal, this stuff, and apparently some Air Force priest stuck some communion out of control of anybody on an airplane, and then the military archdiocese cracked down on the thing. And now they donâ€™t officially allow the EME to take the Communion and run these services anymore, which is sad for Catholics. Now itâ€™s like, you gotta find some other way. But people were looking everywhere for some kinda service.

And so people would come, and for a while I was, like, sort of the face of the Catholic Church for everybody around. I got to meet the archbishop of Baghdad.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Paul Belmont III:

I didnâ€™t even realize â€œI was like, â€œWhoa, thereâ€™s Catholics in Iraq?â€ and like, â€œTheyâ€™re trying to kill us. Oh, God.â€ Itâ€™s like, â€œI gotta meet this guy.â€ I went down. I saw, like, the â€œI was in Baghdad on my second trip â€œthe first time I met the archbishop of Baghdad, he came up and said Mass for us in Balad, and the second time, I actually went down and saw their cathedral in Baghdad. I was like, â€œHoly crap, thereâ€™s a Catholic church. Thereâ€™s a Catholic church right there. Like, holy crap, in the middle of this Muslim country.â€ And that was really â€œwowâ€ for me, and that taught me some of the culture. So having to basically be that for a while, the guitar on my

back, and I walked around, and I did services, and on my second trip I worked closely with the priest. And it's like, I mean, I rarely missed a Sunday. I was the EME. I didn't have to miss Sunday. If there was no priest, then I would be like, "Hey, guys. I am Sunday. So let's get together and let's do something for a minute." And I remember when the priest finally got "I

I saw the first priest in six, seven months "I hadn't seen a priest since Kuwait, and all of a sudden the priest came. It's like, he already had a congregation ready to go. It's like, "Yeah, we meet at mass at this time, and here it is, and we're all in a tent. Here you go. All you have to do is just add your part now, and if you want me to change anything, I will." So that was a very "I mean, that was a powerful, powerful experience for me. It was very important, and I'm really not doing justice right now to really what it meant to me, what it meant to my faith. And it's like, to really know that "it's like, that's it. I'm it. You know what I mean? And people take that up all over the place. I mean, there's like the "I mean, I used to tease "cause it's part of my faith, as baptism's only one time. There'd be people running out getting baptized just like "Can I get baptized again? There's like the group of people doing baptism. People were running off getting baptized just to feel good. And I had someone "there was one of my Catholic people who were like, "Oh, I really feel like I wanna get baptized." I had to be like, "It's not supposed to work that way for us. You've been baptized. It's kinda like this one-time "you've always got God's grace." I didn't know what to tell "em. I was basically like, "This is the answer. But I guess if it makes you feel better." I couldn't tell "em "I don't know if I told "em "I wasn't give "em a lecture or anything, but I remember this girl, she was just running off "and to me it seems silly based on my understanding of faith. But to her it was important. She was running off "any time someone would offer a baptism, she'd run off and get baptized again. They'd be dunking her, and they'd make some makeshift pool, and somebody would be over there baptizing people. They'd be like, "I just feel like I need it." I'm like, "Hey, what am I supposed to tell you? You're a free person." And so that was very important to me. And I actually had a Canadian priest the whole time in Afghanistan to kinda help that stuff moving along and going back and forth, so it was extremely important, and it continues to be. And I think people "many people need that. Many people find that. I mean, you gotta cling to something sometimes, and if you're a believer, then you believe in that stuff,

and there's a lot of people that have to ask a lot of questions. And maybe it's only for that tour. I had guys that came to church with me "I mean, I had guys that would show up to every single Sunday for 14 straight months. And then as soon as we would get back, you couldn't get "em to come to a regular church service with you, regular Mass, you know? "But okay, that's all right, Pete. No, no, it's a bridge too far right now, and I guess you can go on a date and go swimming on Sunday morning instead of "got nothing better to do, I guess." But it's like, hey, this was important to you, and I think it's important to a lot of people. And like anything else, it's "I mean, these days it's at least a year of your life, maybe more, and there's things that are part "you either have to "I used to tell my soldiers, "You either gotta "you have to continue to evolve as a person or you're going to regress. You gotta read a book. You gotta go to church. You gotta practice your faith. You gotta pick up a hobby, play guitar, do something else. Do something that makes you feel like you as a person and that makes you better. Take an online correspondence course. Do something that, when you leave here, you'll feel like "I grew as a person. I learned to play chess. I did whatever. I had something to pass the time." We used to play tons of chess. Oh, my God. I became a pretty good chess player. I learned to play chess in Iraq. I became a chess player in Afghanistan. I have a very nice carved Afghani chess set. That's the one he made for me.

Interviewer:

Oh, nice.

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, itâ€™s awesome. But Iâ€™d keep that thing around. We played a ton of chess.

Interviewer:

Okay, so Iraq, thatâ€™s deployment. What year do you leave when you â€

Paul Belmont III:

For the most recent one?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Paul Belmont III:

It was basically, I think â€ letâ€™s see, I started being the generalâ€™s aide in â~07, and I canâ€™t remember â€ itâ€™s hard to remember when both the trips were. I think we went before the turn of the New Year and once after, so I made a week-long trip during fall â~07 and once during spring â~08, I think is the way that it ended up working out. So those were the two times. And one was just

at the beginning of this sort of new sort of peace between the Sunnis and Shias and everything else, and then another was right after it had been going on for several months.

Interviewer: * {:.text} And what did you do after that? What was your next â€

Paul Belmont III: * {:.text} Well, then after Iâ€™d spent a year as the generalâ€™s aide and I was already slotted â€ I had applied while I was in Afghanistan to be here now. Iâ€™m sitting here in West Point. Iâ€™m in the history department. I had applied for that. I found out that you could be a history teacher in the Army. I had no idea. I remember â€ actually, I was a history major at VMI, and I had a professor who really wanted me to pursue it, and Iâ€™m like, âœWell, Iâ€™m joining the Army. Who knows if Iâ€™ll ever get a degree in history? Nobody pays you for that.â€ You know what I mean? So I donâ€™t have the money or the time. I thought, maybe later in my life Iâ€™ll go get a degree or something, or maybe Iâ€™ll get outta the Army after a few years and transition, but I ended up really liking the Army and didnâ€™t wanna leave. And I got an e-mail, or somebody told me, like, âœHey, would you like to be a â€ you can be a professor of history at West Point.â€ I was like, âœYou can do that? I could be both?â€ And so I wouldâ€™ve applied earlier, but my â€ I was getting ready to deploy to Afghanistan. My GREs were no longer any good, so I couldnâ€™t apply to the program, and I didnâ€™t have time to take the GRE test when I found out about this. I was like, âœI donâ€™t have time to take this test.â€ And so I found out I had a window, I could apply, and so I went and applied and did everything. I got all my packets together. It was one of my hobbies in Afghanistan; I would e-mail people and professors and get my packet together, and then I got selected. And then as soon as I got back was the tail end. I had to, like, rush. And I was to study for my GREs in my spare time, and I did a big olâ€™ crash study as soon as I got back. I took my GREs, sent â~em off, and I got picked up for this program, and that was before â€ so I was picked up for the â€ I knew I was picked up for the program while I was still a company commander, and I remember going like, âœOkay, so when am I gonna go to this?â€ And so then I interviewed for the job, but my only caveat to General Oates was, âœSir, Iâ€™m already selected for this. Iâ€™m supposed to leave and go to grad school at this time. How long do you keep an aide?â€ And he said he kept aides for 12 months, and thatâ€™s all he believed in keeping â€em for, and so I said, âœOkay. Iâ€™d like to hold you to that, â~cause at the end of this 12 months Iâ€™m supposed to PCS and go to grad school.â€ So thatâ€™s what I did. I spent a little time â€ I was the rear S3 training guy, so I got to see â€ I did that for three months. I had to go to a big training conference and slot school training for everybody down at Waynesburg, which was kinda interesting look at the Army. I got to learn how the Army actually requests training for, like, masses of people, and pull my hair out as a staff officer, and I was charged with putting together all the organization. I was the guy that had to write all the orders and get everybody together for â€ we had a centennial air show at Fort Drum, so I got this air show.

It was like â€“ my last big capstone thing was this air show. It was great because I had, like, the VIP â€“ I was like the man, had my own golf cart, so I could pull up to the area and like, â€œSir, youâ€™re getting too close to the jets.â€ â€œNo, Iâ€™m not.â€ â€œOh, how would you like to sit in the cockpit?â€ â€œYes, I would.â€ â€œWould you put my daughter in the cockpit?â€ â€œYes, absolutely, sir.â€ So that was great. And so then I went off to James Madison for two years, which was great. I ended up applying to a bunch of schools and settling on James Madison, which was 45 minutes up the Down Valley from VMI. My wife had been a James Madison University graduate in 2001.

Interviewer:

Really?

Paul Belmont III:

Oh, yeah, so a long history at James Madison University and hanging out there. I worked with the campus ministry a lot, and I had known the old priest. I kinda came back in, and so it was really easy to plug into JMU. My brother had recently moved to Winchester, which was an hour north of me. My wifeâ€™s parents had expatriated from New York down to Charlottesville back in the day, and so we had grandparents an hour away, brother an hour away. My parents were still in Richmond with my other brother. So we had, like, most of our family,

like, right close together, and so that was a â€“

Interviewer:

Not a bad deal.

Paul Belmont III:

It was a fun two years. I absolutely loved graduate school, and got a chance to â€“ I worked with the RTC department. I was a freelancer, which was fun. I wasnâ€™t owned by the RTC department. I would go over there and do PT with them in the mornings, or in the remedial PT program, and then would take them on their staff rides. Theyâ€™d charge me with staff rides, and so I became the staff ride guru for the RTC department. Take â€“em out to â€“ we used to take â€“em to New Market Battlefield, which I, as a historian and a VMI guy, knew a lot about. The Battle of New Market was VMIâ€™s big day in the sun in the Civil War just before they got rolled up.

Interviewer: * {:.text} What were you studying in school? What was your â€“

Paul Belmont III:

I focused in â€“ I wrote a thesis about the advent of â€“ my thesis was titled â€œThe Advent of Public Education in the State of Virginia, Reconstruction to the Progressive Era, 1865-1920.â€ And essentially what itâ€™s about is how does public schooling begin in Virginia,

which is tied to Reconstruction, getting the ball rolling, and how did these â€“ and then seeing this idea of public education, and Virginia being a forerunner in it. So it seeded in Reconstruction and moves into Progressive Era, and that led out of me trying to study Reconstruction and Civil War topics. I was trying to figure out what was happening to communities after the Civil War, and I was noticing that communities were disappearing. And the answer to my question was, well, â€“cause they opened a brand-new, fandangled, consolidated school as opposed to the old one-room shack that they were going to school in, and so â€“ well, this isnâ€™t a bad thing. So then answering that question of what was happening to these communities of free blacks, and what was happening to poor white communities after the Civil War, during Reconstruction. Why are these new and seemingly successful communities disappearing? Because theyâ€™re getting brand-new and very much more successful schools. So that was kinda the thrust of it. So Iâ€™m kind of a Civil War/Reconstruction guy, and you canâ€™t really do Reconstruction without the Civil War. Thereâ€™s like maybe two colleges in the nation, I donâ€™t know, that actually have a course in Reconstruction. And so I was like, â€œYeah.â€ The Civil War and Reconstruction, usually they call it, as I believe they call it here, and Iâ€™m crossing my fingers that Iâ€™ll get to do that to â€“

Interviewer:

So what are you teaching here?

Paul Belmont III:

Right now I'm just teaching the HI, American history in two semesters to plebes. I start that on Monday from that also. In just a few short days I start that, and crossing my fingers maybe next semester they'll let me teach Civil War and Reconstruction.

Interviewer:

That would be great. How did you feel I'm just curious. We usually ask all the West Point alumni we interview how they viewed West Point before they got here. As someone from Virginia, from VMI, how did you view West Point?

Paul Belmont III:

You know, it's kinda funny. I'm finally inside. So I was always an outsider looking in, and you go to VMI, and of course, you hate West Point:

"West Point, they're like the tool tools. Fuck West Point." You know, it's like you look at West Point like, that's your rival, and you constantly are convincing yourself, well "which wasn't hard to do, considering that we were still all male, everything's going on, and blah, blah, blah. And so it was really easy to say, "Oh, yeah, it's tougher," so you're always "VMI's still working on an attrition-based model, and so you're constantly trying to assess how tough you are. And it was part of the reason I decided VMI would replace us, 'cause it looked like the toughest. A bad idea. [Laughter] And it was, it's a tough place, and so you're constantly " "Okay, how tough are we? Do I get beat up more in my rat line than they do and there'd be summer? or whatever's going on. So of course, it's this reference point, and I think it means more to the people on the periphery than probably " of course, West Point they all know, well, we're the best. Someone told me this is the " when I got here " this is the Mecca of all the Army. This is our Holy Grail here. And rightly so.

I mean, this is where most of the officers come from. This is where the Army dumps its money. This is the model we " VMI was trying to be the West Point of the South. I mean, this is the whole reason they built the place in the first place: "We need our own military school." "That's absolutely right." And so my initial impressions were that. My impressions go all the way back to high school. I didn't want to go to West Point, actually. I had some " I went to this Catholic military high school. I also experienced the first civilian headmaster of the school. When I say "civilian," I mean he was actually ex-Army, but he wasn't a monk, wasn't a priest. In the other sense of civilian. And had been not a really good example of a person. He ended up being fired from " anyway, he left the school under bad circumstances, involving some things with my brother. He brought in a couple of his Army-slash-West Point people that he'd kinda maintained relations throughout the year, one guy to be the commandant, who, looking back on it, I disagreed with a lot of stuff. It really pissed me off.

I really liked the old commandant. The new commandant was like " he was tough, and he wanted to do everything Army, and I did " I still to this day disagree with the amount of money they were spending to get things done. The guys " they came from this big Army mentality. Like, I used to do the drill team, and we would earn our money, and we would take the bus down to Florida for the national championships. Not a bus; we would take a van. And we'd just earn our own money, and we used to earn all our own money. We'd go work. We'd clean basketball stadiums. We'd do lawn care. We'd do whatever it takes. And we would finance ourselves, and we would learn a lot, and we'd do the whole trip, and then he just decided "Well, this isn't professional. You have to have a chartered bus." Well, chartered buses cost, like, tons of money. So then they started spending all this money, and really, the school got in trouble eventually. Now the school's very " I mentioned earlier that it was a cheap place. Now it's very expensive. And so I had a lot of philosophical disagreements with this guy. I had a lot of personal disagreements with the headmaster. And then there was a guidance counselor

who, in retrospect, could not find me money to go to VMI, told me he couldn't get me a scholarship or anything, even though VMI has the largest per-student alumni endowment in the world.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Paul Belmont III:

And I found this out, like, two years in, when I was broke and having to pay this room and board I couldn't come up with. VMI gave me an interest-free loan that I had, like, paid back

Interviewer:

Oh, that's great.

Paul Belmont III:

Yeah, I paid \$100.00 a month over the course of about eight years to pay that back. Woo-hoo. They're like, "Oh, you need money? We have money everywhere." I was like, "Man." So I had this guidance counselor that didn't do his job. He was never in his office. He was out golfing during the business day. And so I had two bad examples of people, one guy at the time, and proceed to be a bad example of a person. And I thought, "Well, West Point's a piece-of-shit place." That's what was my initial impression. And of course, I went to VMI, and that festered. Then you get outta VMI, and you get in the Army, and you're gonna run into West Point officers. And when you're a young lieutenant, they always talk about "Oh, they're going crazy," but of course, I just came outta VMI, so I didn't think the West Point guys were too crazy. I was like, "Yeah, go for it." And then, you know, I've been in the Army ten years, and some of my best friends are West Point grads. Some of the best officers I've ever run into are West Point guys. My first

one of my first "the brigade commander I worked for in Iraq was a guy named Paul Gardner, who was the "retired as a colonel from the Army, and God, it's all politics at some point. He shoulda been a general officer, in my opinion. And the guy was the most on it, detail-oriented, just strict, yet at the same time knew-he-had-your-back guy. I mean, it was like a love/hate relationship working for the guy that ended up in nothing but love, once you realized that was just a standard and there was nothing personal, and even though he "he dressed me down as bad as anybody has ever dressed me down in the Army. But I mean, he was one of the most fantastic examples of an officer ____, and I was like, "Wow, this guy's amazing." Lo and behold, I think somehow he was Beast roommate "someone told me this. I never quite got it all sorted out, but I think he was, like, Beast roommate with General Oates, who then I worked with. And General Oates is the "also one of the best examples "I don't just say this 'cause I worked for the guy.

I never envisioned myself as a general's aide, and I never thought I would make it as general's aide, and I still say to this day, I never woulda survived as anyone else's general's aide, because this guy was "I was on a "I guess ideally they're picking someone that suits their personality. But this guy was a fantastic "and you could probably ask anybody else from 10th Mountain Division what they think of General Oates, and they're gonna tell you, "This guy's awesome, and I love him to death." You know, I mean, hopefully they'll hand this guy something else one day. I think he's a lieutenant general up in JIDO now, working with IEDs, but if he hangs out there, I'd love to see this guy "and there's none at West Point "they're the best dudes I ever ran into in my entire life. I learned so much from these guys. And Kevin Coughlin was in the cohort "actually, one of my guys in my American division with me was a classmate of Kevin's, and Kevin was probably one of my best friends in the Army. Another guy " [Coughs] Excuse me. [Coughs] Sorry.

Interviewer:

Do you want a drink?

Paul Belmont III:

No, it's just a little cough. Maybe I should. But one of my other best friends, one of these guys from the aviation game, John Winger, one of the other just best guys I ever met in the Army. And so then you get some perspective, and you realize "you know, I tease, but I guess it's kinda like being Catholic: one Catholic screws up, and then the rest of the world has gotta " the rest of us have to suffer for it. And so you run into " I mean, hey, they've got 4,000 guys coming through this school right now. They're dropping out over 1,000 officers a year. There's bound to be some assholes in there, you know what I mean?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Paul Belmont III:

But there's also bound to be some really great individuals, and then you get that perspective. You know what? Assholes are assholes, and great people are great people; and everyplace has their assholes, and everyplace has their great people. And for the most part, I think it's turning out a great product, and being an outsider coming in, I had never set foot on West Point before I got here for this tour. I'd seen it from the river and from the Amtrak train.

And I was kinda overwhelmed by the size of this place and the impressiveness. I'd try my best not to compare it to VMI, because that's just a bad game. You know, I have to just " this isn't VMI, and if I were to compare it to VMI, it would never live up in my mind to VMI. I'm a VMI guy, you know? And it's different, and so I try not to do that. I told myself, "I'm not gonna do that." I mean, I have my experiences, and those are my experiences, and this is a different thing. And so I'm working " it became a very conscious decision to just take this for what it is. And so for me, what it is, is what it is now. So I don't have myself dealing with the biases of a West Point or, I guess, in other words, the ownership. There's some things " you know, oh, everything changes, right? And I'm sure " I see my peers, and I see them losing their minds over changes. And I have the benefit of objective perspective. And I told somebody. They're like, "Oh, what do you mean?" Well, you know, I mean, it seems like some people are kind of upset about, you know, one thing or the other. You know, the progress of West Point. Are things as tough as they should be? Are we yelling at people enough? Are we being too positive? Is the honor code being as strict as it could possibly be? And these seem to be " and these are things that I'm able to look at objectively and hear briefs and say, "Oh, yeah, okay, I can take that." But I know, if someone told me the same thing when I was at VMI, I'd probably lose my mind to see the changes or if these changes " if I perceive some of the same changes. But at the same time, I mean, I feel like everything here is completely professional. I feel like everything is completely all about the Army. And I've just gone through this new-instructor training, and I don't think anybody else, really, in the country is doing what West Point is doing, and I feel like, wow, this is " I mean, some days I'm like, "Really?

I mean, really? We're gonna harp on this all day long?" And you step back and you say " I told somebody. I said " I mean, I told one of my friends " he's still in grad school " I said, "You would not believe what I'm going through right now to prepare myself to be in front of cadets in the classroom." I said, "You're a TA. You're in a classroom." I'm telling you, there are people looking at me about how my eyes are drifting off, which I've probably done 5,000 times in this interview. When I have to think about something, I just tend to look away. And so when I'm in class, if I look away, and then people are like, "Hey, you look like disconnected. I'm losing you." And I'm like, "Really?" Like I'm disconnected. Or "Is that what you really meant to say?" "What do you mean? I'm telling you this." "Well, I'm here to tell you " "You know, to be challenged on " "What exactly are you communicating? What do you mean to communicate?" I'm really pretty impressed about the detail going on around here. I guess I got a couple years to go here to see what it

is, and maybe you ask me again what I think about it on the backside â€“

Interviewer:

Yeah, definitely.

Paul Belmont III:

But coming in, Iâ€™m just â€“ it canâ€™t â€“ it seems just like VMI, but you canâ€™t compare it.

[End of Audio]