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Robert Coppersmith Oral History

Eryn Coppersmith, Interviewer

Edwardsville, Illinois

July 21, 2019

Eryn Coppersmith (EC): It is July 21, state your name, your branch of the military, your rank.

Robert Coppersmith (RC): Robert R. Coppersmith, United States Marine Corps, private first class.

EC: And where were you, where did you enter the marines?

RC: Where did I enter the Marine Corps? Atlanta, at the MEPS Station, the military processing center, I don't know what it's called. From there I went to Parris Island, South Carolina.

EC: Is that where boot camp was?

RC: That's where boot camp is.

EC: Why did you pick the Marines?

RC: Why, because they're the best.

EC: Why are they the best?

RC: They're the ones that see the most action in combat, and they train better than most branches of the military.

EC: So you wanted to see combat?

RC: I definitely wanted to see combat, that was one of the goals to go in the Marine Corps, most of the time they called the Marine Corps the tip of the spear, because usually they are first. Usually the marines go in before everybody else. They're the smallest group in the military and they're the first reaction in the military. Is that 12 minutes already?

EC: But you didn't get to go...

RC: No.

EC: ...to combat?

RC: Never went overseas. Never left the country. When I joined the Marine Corps I went into tanks, because I had a mechanics MOS, could have been a helicopter mechanic, an aircraft mechanic, a truck mechanic, or a tank mechanic, one of the four.

EC: What'd you pick?

RC: I didn't pick any, they gave me a tank mechanic, there was no options. They give you what you get, and that's what you get. You get slotted into a group depending on your test scores, and if you don't want to be infantry you can pick, if you have a decent enough test score, you can pick another field out of the group, and that's what I got. Tank mechanic.

EC: When did you enter the Marine Corps? What year?

RC: 1991, November, but I don't know what the date was, I think it was November 1, but I can't be sure, maybe November 19. No, I think it was November 1, I'd have to look it up.

EC: Was there a war going on?

RC: There was not a war going on, the war was over, the First Gulf War was over. I've actually got a ribbon for being, for serving during combat operations, but they hadn't declared the war over, but it was over. It was a very short war. The war was over in February or March of that year.

EC: Following the November that you entered?

RC: What?

EC: Following the November that you entered?

RC: No, previous to the November that I entered.

EC: Oh

RC: It ended in February or March, I went in in November. But they don't, it takes the government a long time to declassify a war, so the war went on for a while.

EC: Did you know that it was over when you entered?

RC: Yes, it was television, it was televised. When I went in, when I signed the paperwork though, the war was still going on.

EC: Is that why you...?

RC: No

EC: So what made you...?

RC: That didn't influence my decision at all.

EC: What influenced your decision?

RC: Stuff, life, I knew I wasn't going to college. Wanted to get out of my hometown. See the world. Join the Marine Corps.

EC: What were your first days of service like?

RC: What were my first days in the Marine Corps like?

EC: Yeah, do you know like, what you did as soon as you got off the bus, or...

RC: Yeah, you stand on the yellow footprints, and you get yelled at. Everybody, if you ever watch any documentaries about going in the Marine Corps, at Parris Island, I don't know about West Coast, there's two boot camps for the Marine Corps, Parris Island and there's San Diego. East Coast, West Coast, depending on what side of the Mississippi River you live on. And where you live, some of them choose. I'm not sure if this is East Coast, I think this might be an option. You might have an option in Illinois, depending on where you live, to go East Coast or West Coast. I went East Coast, obviously I lived in Atlanta, so, but the airport at like, probably like 10 o'clock at night, it was late. It was dark when we got on the plane. It was probably only an hour-long flight to South Carolina, get on the bus, like an old school bus, and you get off the bus, and they start boot camp. As soon as you get off the bus, you stand on yellow footprints, put your feet on the yellow footprints, and then go from there. First three days you're awake, there's no sleep. They do that to disorient you, shave your head, take your clothes, check your body, weight, physical measurements, all that stuff. You fill out paperwork, insurance, get your blood drawn, get all your vaccinations, all kinds of shots, get your uniform, get your barracks assignment, everything like that, it takes a long time. There's no sleeping though.

EC: Like they don't let you sleep?

RC: No, no sleeping. We didn't sleep for every bit of three days. Like briefly, I remember filling out paperwork in some barracks one time, sitting at a desk like you do in your school, and I put my head for maybe two minutes, and that was it, that was the sleep I got for the first three days.

EC: When you got to sleep, did you get to sleep for a long time, or was it like...?

RC: Never, never. I would guess, every night, we would go to bed at probably 9 or 10 o'clock, and we probably got up every day at 3, 3:30 in the morning every day.

EC: What did you do when you woke up?

[Dog barking]

RC: Murphy! What would we do when we woke up?

EC: Like why'd you get up so early?

RC: We had stuff to do, PT run, clean the barracks, learn how to march, learn how to drill, learn the history of the Marine Corps, learn combat maneuvers, learn hand-to-hand fighting, I mean we did everything. Obstacle courses. More running, push-ups, chin-ups, crunches, clean stuff, polish boots, clean more stuff, running, yelling, all those things.

EC: What did like a typical day look like?

RC: Typical day, just a normal day, you'd wake up, I guess at 3:30, 4 o'clock in the morning, take a shower, get yelled at probably, do probably a hundred push-ups, some chin-ups, you might get to go to the bathroom straight away. You had maybe, maybe, ten seconds to take a shower. The shower room was a big room, like you'd see in a gymnasium, probably had twenty shower heads in a big square pattern on the walls, and somebody would go through quickly while being yelled at, and turn some valves, hot or cold, whatever, they'd just grab stuff and turn 'em on, and then you would walk as fast as you could, possibly run, around the shower room as you were throwing soap and water in your face, and then you left. Then, if you had to go to the bathroom, which wasn't fun because there was no doors, no walls, just a toilet in the middle of a room, twenty dudes sitting next to you, shittin', pissin', that you didn't have much time in there. The whole time somebody's yelling at you. The entire time somebody was telling you to go faster, you're taking too long, why are you so dumb, hurry up, move faster, I don't have time for this shit. Get out, get dressed, if you didn't do that right, you got yelled at, usually, before you would get completely dressed, you would scrub brush the bulkheads, which was not fun. You took a washcloth, and you'd roll it up in a ball, and you scrub the floors on your hands and feet. Not your knees, your feet, up and down running as fast as you can, scrubbing the floors in line. And if somebody took too long you'd start that over again, and you'd do that for probably an hour. All the time doing crunches and push-ups while somebody's yelling at you. And half the guys would do that, the other half of the guys were usually cleaning windows, emptying garbage cans, not that we made any garbage, but that's what you did. Generally squaring things away, mopping, polishing the toilets, cleaning the head, all that stuff.

EC: So, by the time that was over, what time was it?

RC: I don't know, we didn't have clocks, there was no, I'm gonna say that took, hour, hour and a half, then we would do, what do they call, circle the quarterdeck, which was the front of the barracks, you would sit in formation, everybody's got their boots on at that point, I don't know that we're wearing blouses, but everybody's somewhat dressed and awake, because you've been yelled and spit on a lot. Then we would have some instructions about general military knowledge, movements, we would talk about old military Marine Corps battles and wars and Khe Sanh and Vietnam, and who died when and different things, just different knowledge-based things. And then that was probably half-an-hour to 45 minutes, then you would have some kind of inspection once you put your uniform on, whatever the uniform of the day was, usually it was just fatigues, and then always somebody would do something wrong, and then we would do more push-ups and crunches and chin-ups and running and stuff, fun things. Made sure the barracks were clean, and we would go to breakfast, maybe 6, 6:30, I dunno, depending, everything was by name. So that's where you would stand in the chow line, so sometimes you would get breakfast first, sometimes they would go back-to-front, sometimes they would go front-to-back, because whoever was the last person to sit down and eat didn't have much time to eat, because it was all, whenever the first person sat down, that's when the clock started. So depending on when the last guy sat down, if the first person is done eating, it's time to go. So depending on who the last ten guys were in the line, wasn't a long time to eat food. Sometimes that was dependent on, it was port side or the starboard side, a lot of stuff in the Marine Corps is navy based, because the Marine Corps is a division of the navy. So sometimes the port side would go first, sometimes the starboard side would go first, depending on where you were at, and it was all by name and stuff, so because my name started with a C, most of the time it was okay unless they flipped it, because somebody in the front of the line did something stupid, then we got to go last, and usually I would get to eat last, and that happened about 50 percent of the time. And you literally had to shove a tray of food in your mouth with no chewing while walking, there's no standing while

eating. So you had to eat while you sat down, and sometimes it was literally as soon as your butt hit the table you had to get back up. And you had to put as much food in your mouth and swallow whole as fast as you could. And then you got out and the whole time people were doing push-ups and crunches all around you, people screaming at you, and then we got lucky because our barracks were right next door to the chow hall. So we didn't have to run very far to get to the chow hall. Some people had to run very far to get to the chow hall. There were multiple platoons in the battalion, in the company whatever you were in, and we always carried rifles everywhere we went. M16s. So every time another platoon or company was in the chow hall, we had to watch their gear, and all their equipment, so we had to stand guard depending on the timing of when you ate, how long, what order your platoon got there, because each platoon was doing different things every day. There was always like stations, and each platoon would go to different stations, depending on what station you were going to that day, it was when you got to eat chow, and this and that. After that you'd go back to the barracks, clean the barracks some more, get yelled at, do push-ups, crunches, you might have some more instruction time, but I ain't know what they talked about, how to tie your shoes, how to breathe, just stuff. How to sew, how to treat wounds, you know, stuff like that. The whole time getting screamed and yelled at. And then usually we'd run two to three miles after that, then you'd go do calisthenics and chin-ups and push-ups and jumping jacks and mountain climbers and up-downs and all kinds of fun things. And then you would go do whatever you were doing that day, hand-to-hand combat, sometimes we would watch lengthy videos on, you know, Marine Corps victories in battle and Battle of Belleau Woods and Khe Sanh and Grenada and Panama and all that stuff. And then you would run some more, and then you did some more push-ups and chin-ups and stuff, and then you go back to the barracks and lay some more knowledge on you about some things, then you'd get ready for bed, clean the barracks again, make your bed again, get yelled at and screamed at, push-ups and chin-ups and crunches, shower time, portside shower up, starboard side shave em' up.

EC: And you said that was by like 9 and 10 o'clock.

RC: I don't know, you know it could be 8, 9 o'clock, you know, it was dark out.

EC: How many meals did you get a day?

RC: Three meals a day, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, that was it. If you got to eat, depending on where you were at in the chow hall in line, sometimes you didn't get to eat.

EC: All day?

RC: Yeah, there was no snacking, you ate in the chow hall, that was the only time you saw food, ever.

EC: What was the food like?

RC: It was terrible, it was very bland, bread, pancakes, I don't remember the syrup, it might have just been pancakes, I don't remember any meat in the breakfast, grits, a lot of grits, some cereal maybe, and then milk, chocolate milk or white milk, one or the other, 2 percent, got a little carton of milk like a school lunch basically, and then lunch was, lot of times it was like a really disgusting peanut butter sandwich, no jelly, just peanut butter, but it wasn't like good peanut butter, it was like runny peanut butter, but like with some chunks in it. It was not good at all. And the bread was nasty too. It wasn't like good bread, it was really nasty bread. Apples, I didn't eat a lot of food, 'cause I didn't like a lot of it. But what I

did eat, I ate as much as I could. And then dinner, dinner was nasty, dinner was the worst lunch food you've ever had. Sometimes you would get a cheeseburger, they weren't good though. They didn't pride themselves on food. Wasn't what you were there for.

EC: So how long did boot camp, or does boot camp last?

RC: Three months, I believe I went in, I think, maybe it was November 19, I went in on November 19, I got out on Valentine's Day, February 14.

EC: Out of boot camp?

EC: Out of boot camp. What happened when you left boot camp?

RC: What happened when I left boot camp? I went home on a ten-day leave, and I had ten days off. I didn't actually have ten days off, because I had to have surgery on my finger, I had an infection on my finger, so I left early, went back to MCT, which is Marine Combat Training, after boot camp. And that was in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. After a week of that, after a week of leave, I went to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, for MCT, which was a month or six weeks long, which was a lot of staying in the woods, camping in the woods and doing combat training, all combat training, live fire drills, learn how to set up defense perimeters, kick in doors, shoot guns, all kinds of fun things. That was interesting...

EC: Did you enjoy that...?

RC: ...but we ran a lot, we did a lot of force marches, we did a 22-mile force march with full gear. That was hard. We did a couple 15 and 17 mile-an-hour marches, 17-mile marches.

EC: What do you mean march, like literally walk...?

RC: Get in formation and walk for 15 miles without stopping. 22 miles was hard. 22 miles almost took all day. You're not just marching, you're getting yelled at, screamed at, push-ups and crunches and stuff. Some running. Fun stuff.

EC: So you mentioned getting yelled at a lot.

RC: A lot.

EC: How did you feel about the people yelling at you, the officers?

RC: I didn't like it, it wasn't no officers.

EC: Oh, who were they?

RC: Drill instructors. I think both my drill instructors were sergeants, and then the senior drill instructor was a staff sergeant. There were three people, there was two junior drill instructors and a senior drill instructor.

EC: And you didn't like any of them?

RC: I liked the senior drill instructor, we didn't see him a lot. He was a staff sergeant, Staff Sergeant Brown. My drill instructors, two of them were black, one of them was white. I didn't like the junior drill instructors. Hughley, the black junior drill instructor, he didn't talk much. I forget what the little white guy's name was, I'm sure it's in that book somewhere. He was a terrible person, and I would've broke him if I wasn't in the Marine Corps. We did not like each other.

EC: Why do you say that?

RC: We just didn't like... He knew, I was bigger than he was, and he wasn't having it. Which I wasn't at all, by any means the largest person in the platoon, we had some really big dudes in there. He didn't like me, I didn't like him, we didn't get along. But we interacted a lot.

EC: 'Cause you had to.

RC: Yeah, I didn't have a choice [laughs] like I could not do it. So, but yeah, I always had a problem with authority, so, probably shouldn't have went in the Marine Corps.

[EC laughs]

EC: So what was, so you said that you were like assigned to the tank...

RC: Tank mechanic.

EC: Yeah, and boot camp, is that what you were assigned after boot camp?

RC: Yes, everybody goes to the same boot camp, same MCT. And then you go to school, and then after you get out of MCT, you get another week's leave, and then you go to schooling. After, some people go to radio schools, some go to helicopter whatever, some people are, most people are 0311s, which is what the vast majority of the people in the Marine Corps are, infantry. They do more, basically Marine Combat Training, they just never stop doing that. It's always the same. They might do some exploseward and stuff. Those guys are always on the ready to go somewhere, like if they need a bunch of marines to throw at a combat situation, they throw a bunch of 0311s at them. Basic riflemen.

EC: Did you enjoy being a tank mechanic?

RC: Uh, no, not really. Not a lot tanks out in the real world to be fixing, so I knew there wasn't much of a future in being a tank mechanic. You know what I mean? But, I like being around tanks, just because they're cool machines.

EC: What would you have preferred to be assigned to?

RC: I don't know, I mean it's all the same I think, at some point. I mean, I like working with my hands but I don't know what else, any other type of mechanic I guess. Helicopter mechanic, because there's helicopters in the real world. Airplane mechanic because there's airplanes in the real world. Not a lot of

tanks running around in the streets. I definitely wouldn't have wanted to be a motor T mechanic, motor pool.

EC: What is a motor T?

RC: Mechanized Transportation, motorized Transportation, humvees, big trucks, five tons, half tons, whatever. That wouldn't have been great.

EC: Why?

RC: Because that's just boring, I don't know. Tanks are cool, they shoot stuff. They're big, and they go fast, and they're loud. They've got a lot of guns.

EC: How did you keep in contact with your family?

RC: Well that was before cell phones, so, in boot camp, there was no contact. We wrote letters. MCT we were in the field the whole time, so we didn't, I don't even think I wrote a letter in MCT, but I was only going to be gone for a month. And then after that I'd call, usually once a week on Sunday nights. I think I had a prepaid phone card or a lot of calls were collect, it's on a payphone, but in boot camp we wrote a lot of letters. Lots and lots of letters to everybody. Uncles, sister, aunts, grandpas, grandmas, all that stuff.

EC: And you did that, you wrote to...

RC: Yes

EC: ...all those people?

RC: Yeah, you had, probably a half hour, 45 minutes every night in boot camp to write letters and read letters if you get mail. You would get mail before you'd go to bed.

EC: Is that something you'd look forward to?

RC: Absolutely. Absolutely. 'Cause it wasn't, you know, the same old thing you'd been doing.

EC: Did you travel anywhere while you were...

RC: In the Marine Corps?

EC: ...in the Marine Corps?

RC: No, California.

EC: Well that's traveling.

RC: Nah, that's not overseas.

EC: Why'd you go to California?

RC: 'Cause that's the tank division I was assigned to.

EC: How long were you there?

RC: How long was I in California? Right at a year and a half. Not very long. I was only in the Marine Corps for just under, just over two years, right at two years. Most people do four.

EC: So you were in California for a majority of those two years that...

RC: Yes

EC: Did you like being in California?

RC: Absolutely. I got to California in the summer of '92, and I left in the end of '93, right before Christmas '93.

EC: So what did you do while you were in California?

RC: Well, I worked on tanks, I was a tank mechanic. You go back in the tape, and it'll tell you tank mechanic.

[EC laughs]

EC: But that's all you were permitted to do? Did you get to do anything else other than being a mechanic?

RC: Uh, the only other thing I did while I was in California, I was on a machine gun shoot. It was a battalion machine gun competition for everybody in the Marine Corps, and I got picked to go on a machine gun team. I was on the mark 19 automatic grenade launcher weapons team. For about a month and a half we did drills and learned how to shoot the gun, take the gun apart, service the weapon, blah blah blah, and then we went to Camp Pendleton, San Diego, and we had a machine gun competition between all the different battalions and divisions in the entire Marine Corps.

EC: Well that sound fun.

RC: Yeah, we won.

EC: You won!

RC: We won. Our mark 19 team won, about four guys, out of noncombat divisions. We were considered noncombat, because we weren't 0311s.

EC: Well that's cool.

RC: Yeah, we got a medal. I don't know what I did with that. I got a medal, and I got written up in the Marine Corps paper, got our picture taken with, I don't think it was the Commandant, it was somebody big in the Marine Corps like a three or four-star general, or something. There was a parade, and a thing.

EC: Sounds like a big deal.

RC: It wasn't really a parade, we were on the parade deck, it was like a ceremony, where they took our pictures and stuff. It wasn't that big of a deal.

EC: So you got a medal and you got a ribbon.

RC: Yes

EC: Did you get any other awards...

RC: No

EC: ...while you were in there?

RC: No

EC: And you don't know where either of those things are today?

RC: No, nope. I was young, I mean I was 18 years old. I was young. I didn't know nothing.

EC: So you were 18 when you entered, and you were 20 when you left?

RC: Uh huh, yeah.

EC: Why'd you leave?

RC: Why did I leave the Marine Corps? I had a level 3 alcohol failure, which is a rehab. I didn't pass rehab.

EC: What does that mean?

RC: What do you mean what does that mean?

EC: You didn't...

RC: I got kicked out of rehab.

EC: In the Marine Corps.

RC: In the Marine Corps.

EC: So it's something they made you do?

RC: Yes, [laughs]. It was something they made me do, yeah.

EC: So, like entertainment in the Marine Corps?

RC: Entertainment?

EC: Yeah

RC: What?

EC: Like what did you do for entertainment?

RC: What do you mean, like on our own time?

EC: Yeah, if you had your own time, did you have any form of entertainment in boot camp?

RC: No, what? No, nope.

EC: No?

RC: We did watch Full Metal Jacket and, what wasn't Platoon, it was something else on Christmas Eve in boot camp. In the barracks that they filmed Full Metal Jacket in, we watched the movie Full Metal Jacket, which was kind of crazy.

EC: And that was...

RC: Christmas Eve.

EC: ...it.

RC: Yes, we got to eat cookies, everybody got two cookies.

EC: But after boot camp, when your had your own time?

RC: After boot camp it was like a normal job. It was 9 to 5, do what you want at night, weekends were usually pretty wide open, whatever. I went from Parris Island to Camp Lejeune to Fort Knox to California. So, after you leave boot camp, besides MCT, because we were in the woods, you couldn't do anything. But after MCT, it was like a normal 9 to 5 job. Unless you had to pull guard duty, I was on a flag detail for a while when I was in Fort Knox, but that was only because I got out of running. So I joined the flag detail where we would raise the flag, reveille, all that jazz, folded the flag, took the flag up, took the flag down, all that stuff. Me and, there might have been six of us, did that every day at Fort Knox. And I don't know why, because Fort Knox is an army base, but because we were marines, we were in charge of shit, so we did that every day, and the army guys didn't. And they were like, probably, Fort Knox one of the larger installations in the army, I'm gonna guess there's 40 thousand soldiers there. And we might of had a hundred marines. And we were in charge of the flag for the base. I don't know why, very strange. But, they probably deferred to us, us being marines, so, they knew.

EC: So when it was like a 9 to 5, you were still around people in the Marine Corps?

RC: During the week yes, all the time, I mean, we hung out with Marines, what do you mean? Yeah.

EC: Right, so did you guys do anything for fun together?

RC: Drank, drank and fought.

EC: Fought?

RC: Fought.

EC: For fun.

RC: Nothing else to do. I mean California, Fort Knox, Fort Knox we weren't allowed to have cars, so you just hung out. We shot pool, we had a pool table. I think there was a dart board there. There might have been a foosball table, and that was about it. You'd watch TV, played spades, played cards, and that was... And then, I mean it's a bunch of dudes in a barracks, where there was always fighting going on, all the time. And then, you got out of Fort Knox and went to California, that was a little bit more laid back, because I had a buddy that lived in California, we had a car, and we hung out in LA for two weeks on leave. We took the time off. Hung out with all his buddies, and then we went to Twentynine Palms. In the barracks though, no, there was no entertainment. We had, everybody had a room, you had two guys to a room. Bunk beds, PlayStation was new thing then, so a couple guys had PlayStations. But other than that you had cable TV. Not even, I don't even know if it was cable. It might have just been antennas. I don't think we had cable. They had VCRs, VHS, you know, you had, you rented movies and watched movies. You'd go down the road and rent movies from the PX, and all that stuff.

EC: But you had to stay in the barracks?

RC: You didn't have to, but not everybody had cars. I didn't have a car for a long time, in California, I didn't have a...it took me awhile. I guess, I had my motorcycle. I bought my motorcycle the first week I was in California. But I didn't have a motorcycle license, or insurance, or registration, so I couldn't ride my bike on base, so I had to leave it at the front gate locked up in impound, and the only time I could get there was if somebody would give me a ride to the front base, front gate, but I still didn't have a license, so I didn't. Twentynine Palms is an hour and a half from Palm Springs, and it's three hours from LA, so, and there's nothing near there. That's it, there's a Marine Corps base and then an hour and a half away there's a town. There was a couple bars, but I wasn't allowed to get in bars, so.

EC: Were you like one of the younger ones?

RC: No...

EC: No?

RC: ...everybody was my age. Everybody in the Marine Corps is young, they're 18 years old, 19 years old, everybody. There were some, I mean obviously there's dudes who were older, but they had been in it awhile. Most people go in the military right out of high school. 17, 18 years old. Young guys. Like old dudes were probably like 25. They would be considered, they were like the sergeants and stuff. Corporals, sergeants. Problem with the Marine Corps, the tank battalions, during the First Gulf War there were three or four, there were four tank battalions. After the Gulf War, they switched all the tanks over to a M1A1

Abrams. They used to be a 60, called the M60 tank. They got rid of those tanks, and they consolidated the four battalions into two battalions. It was 1st Tank Battalion and 3rd Tank Battalion. They got rid of 2nd Tanks and 4th Tanks, I was in 1st Tank Battalion, so they consolidated and got all these tanks together, and squeezed four battalions into two battalions, and then that was all that was left. There was no upper mobility in the Marine Corps in that tank battalion, because you had so many guys that they crunched into two smaller battalions, and they got rid of half the tanks. So it was a very weird time to be in the tank divisions in the Marine Corps after the war, because they were, the old tanks they knew they needed a lot of people to keep them going. The new tanks work a lot better, you don't need as many people to keep a tank battalion as you do. So, it was a bit of a mess. When I got in the Marine Corps, they had a tank battalion in Okinawa, Japan, and usually the new guys, all of them, went to Japan. I was on board with that. And that's what my recruiter told me would happen, that I was going to Japan. I was all about it. Well, when they consolidated all the tank battalions, no more Japan. They brought them all stateside. One tank battalion camp was Lejeune, North Carolina, one tank battalion at Twentynine Palms, California. No more Okinawa, Japan.

EC: And that was disappointing to you?

RC: It was very disappointing to me, and to a lot of other people in the tank battalion. But whatever.

EC: Would you still have joined if you knew that wouldn't get to go to Japan?

RC: Uh, knowing what I know now, I wouldn't have joined as the MOS that I was going into, no. I would've gotten another MOS.

EC: What's an MOS?

RC: It's your job, it's your job classification.

EC: I thought you said you said you couldn't choose it?

RC: You had options. You could choose fields you would go into. I don't know what the options are, but I would probably have chosen a different option.

EC: So knowing what you know now, would you, you would've still joined the Marines though?

RC: Probably, I somewhat enjoyed it, for the most part.

EC: What did you enjoy about it?

RC: Uh, it made me grow up. It made me the person that I am now. It made me disciplined. It made me realize that I was young and immature when I went in. And made me see what the world is like, for real. Real shit going on.

EC: So you appreciated the lessons that it taught you?

RC: Absolutely. Absolutely.

EC: Do you do anything today that you learned in the Marine Corps.

RC: No, nope. [laughs] Not really. I do good push-ups. My discipline is a lot better, no doubt. I was a bit of a hooligan when I was growing up. And not very self-aware. I'm more self-aware now.

EC: How do you mean, self-aware?

RC: Well, I'm aware of my surroundings, I'm aware of different types of people. Different situations that people are put into.

EC: And you weren't before the Marine Corps.

RC: No I was oblivious to most everything in the world, and my parents babied me. Well, they always took care of me, so, the Marine Corps teaches you to take care of yourself. For the most part.

EC: What kind of people did you meet in the Marine Corps?

RC: What kind of people did I meet? Mostly dumb people, there's a lot of really stupid people in the Marine Corps.

EC: Why do you say that?

RC: Well because it's true. I mean, most of the people in the Marine Corps can't do anything else but be in the Marine Corps. Enlisted, not the officers, the officers have a whole different mindset, and I don't really understand that mindset, but that's because I wasn't an officer. I was around enlisted people. And the vast majority of enlisted are poor, they come from depressed parts of the country, low education. Not everybody, but I would say, 75 percent of the people in the Marine Corps were not that intelligent. Bullet stoppers, really, just all they were. It's what I'm telling you, some stupid people in there. But you don't have to be smart to pull a trigger. I mean, you follow orders, and you go forward, and you get shot at, and that's what they're looking for. Wasn't my thing, wasn't my thing. We had a lot of ignorant people.

EC: Did you make any relationships.

RC: Oh yeah, good friends. Good friends.

EC: Any that you're still in contact with?

RC: No, not really.

EC: Not even on Facebook or anything.

RC: No, I mean there's a couple guys on Facebook that I keep in contact with, but not really. The only talk to every once in a while, he's a bit of a hooligan, so.

EC: What's that mean?

RC: He goes to jail still. He's doing bad things, so. He's one of the stupider ones. We ran around with him a lot, Cory Rochelle. Cory Rochelle Pigg, Pigg is his last. P I G G. Pigg, he's from Tennessee. Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

EC: Did you keep in contact with them, like for a little bit after the Marine Corps? Nope? It was just...

RC: Uh, Tom Herget, I met with him a couple times when Facebook started coming out, Cory obviously calls me every once in a while, but no, nope.

EC: Even your friend in California that had the car?

RC: Yeah, no. I don't know if he's on Facebook, I've looked for him on Facebook. I would be interested to see what he's doing. Good chance he's in jail or prison. He did bad things a lot.

[laughs]

EC: So, say you had not gotten kicked out of rehab, would you have stayed in the Marine Corps?

RC: Oh yeah, I didn't have an option. There was no, people were really, really surprised that I did get out, the way I got out with the discharge that I got because I got a good discharge. That's almost unheard of to get out of the Marine Corps without serving the first four years and still get a good discharge.

EC: Then how'd you do it?

RC: What?

EC: Then how'd you do it if it's hard?

RC: I think, more than anything they were coming out of a war, and they were downsizing the branch, so any excuse they could do to get somebody out, they would use it. But I had a, really I probably had somewhat of a freedom of religion case, because when you go to rehab, the 12 step methods, one of the first steps that you have to give yourself over to a higher power. And that was my whole hangup with rehab, was I couldn't give myself over to a higher power if I don't believe in a higher power. So we had a lot of in depth discussions about God and religion and all those things in rehab. We debated, and they chose that because I couldn't believe in a higher power, that I didn't need to be there anymore, and I said, "I get what you're saying, write it up."

EC: So you think that your lack of belief influenced your good discharge?

RC: I don't know, I don't know. I don't know why.

EC: You don't know why you got a good discharge.

RC: No, I mean I do, because it was no, the separation wasn't, there was no animosity. You know, I didn't really do anything wrong, they couldn't point to the fact that I did anything wrong. There was no, no disciplinary measures that got me out. With most people, you either get a good discharge, or you don't. Dishonorable discharge, or I don't even, there's five different levels of discharge. There's only two good

ones. I got a general discharge under, general under honorable conditions, was the discharge I got. The other three, all the way down to a dishonorable discharge, become somewhat, felonies or misdemeanors. Well I hadn't done anything that was illegal, but, to per se. And I think the fact that I had a problem with the whole religious hang-up was a reason for me to get out without them...

EC: So you said that, a lot, all of you drank.

RC: Yes.

EC: Did you know anybody else that was made to go to rehab?

RC: No

EC: Then why were you the only one that was made to go?

RC: 'Cause I think I told the truth too much when they asked me about things. And I actually told them how much I drank and stuff, and they were shocked. So the lady who did the evaluations and stuff, I don't know.

EC: So you think other people lied?

RC: Yes, I think so. I know so, when I came back, and they were like, "How'd that go?" And I told them, and they were like, "Why'd you tell them that?" And I was like, "What do I care, why am I gonna lie to 'em, I've got no reason to lie to 'em." We got, I had a, we were cleaning the barracks one night. Something happened, we got in trouble somehow, like the whole platoon. Somebody didn't pass inspection, or something was messed up. We had a new platoon commander, he was a dick. Something happened, and we got confined to barracks, and we had to clean the barracks. But I was drinking barrack beer while I was cleaning my room, and one of the sergeants who I didn't get along with, little bitty black guy. Coleman, Sergeant Coleman. I don't know what his deal was. He didn't even say nothing to me. The next day I was called into platoon commander's office, and he asked me if I was drinking beer last night underage, blah blah. And I was like, yeah. Started a whole process. Next thing I know I'm being evaluated. Told her how much I was drinking. That lady was blown away by that. She couldn't believe it. Said I needed help, and I said I didn't. The next thing I know I'm in a naval hospital in San Diego. And we're talking about God, higher powers, and stuff. And I wanted to have no part of it.

EC: So this was in California?

RC: Mmhmm.

EC: Do you regret telling the truth then?

RC: Uh maybe? Maybe. But, no, I mean. You gotta be honest, right? I'm not gonna bullshit somebody just to bullshit, I mean what do I care? I knew it wouldn't affect me that much. I knew I had a leg to stand on if push came to shove. You know what I'm saying? If they really wanted to make a big deal of it, I could have went with religious liberty, religious freedom, whatever, but nobody's gonna do that. I wasn't

going to compromise my position just to appease their mind, you know what I mean, their whole thought process. Their whole position that they were on. Whether they're willing to compromise.

EC: So did you not think that being kicked out was gonna was a possibility?

RC: Absolutely. I knew that that was definitely a possibility. I mean I knew that going into it. Level 3 alcohol failure is a reason for discharge. Not every time, but it is something they can use to discharge you with, yes. I was kind of surprised when they told me I was getting kicked out of rehab. It was very weird. I was a little bit shocked. But I understood where they were coming from.

EC: So you were kicked out of rehab because you were not willing to comply with their...

RC: Yes

EC: ...and that ultimately is why you were kicked out of the Marine Corps?

RC: Yes

EC: 'Cause you were kicked out of rehab.

RC: Yes

EC: So had you successfully completely the rehab you would have stayed in the Marine Corps?

RC: Absolutely, yep. But I would've went right back in there because I was young and dumb and drank all the time. That's why that lady was blown away because we were drinking a lot. I mean, we were drinking a lot.

EC: But you somehow hid it from...

RC: No

EC: Well then why were they surprised, did they just not...

RC: Who was surprised?

EC: The evaluation lady.

RC: Oh she didn't know us. She had nothing to do with us.

EC: Was the rehab like, it was just like an actual rehab, or did it, or was it through the Marine Corps?

RC: It was through the Marine Corps. Through a naval hospital. San Diego.

EC: I'm just confused as to why she would be surprised about the volume.

RC: 'Cause it was a lot. She was in Twentynine Palms, she wasn't in the rehab. She was just a person who worked in an administrative office and was asking me questions on a form. And as she was writing, I think the numbers might have overwhelmed her a little bit.

[Phone rings]

RC: I will pause that.

EC: What was your last day like, do you remember your last day?

RC: Last day? Hectic. Packing, loadin' up, get all my shit together. Get my discharge papers, go through admin, turn in all my gear. I probably turned in my gear the day before. Drove out the gate.

EC: Did you say goodbye to everybody?

RC: Uh, yeah, somewhat. I think I left during the day, so everybody else was doing their stuff. Working. But no, not really. I mean we went out the weekend before. I knew a week or two before I left that I was leaving. Why do you keep tapping your phone?

EC: How did your service experience affect your life?

RC: How did my service experience affect my life? I dunno. It made be a little bit more disciplined than I was. More mature, I dunno.

EC: Did your military experience influence your views on war or the military, United States military?

RC: I mean, obviously yes.

EC: How so? How is it different before you got there from leaving?

RC: Uh, I don't know. I don't know. I don't know that my views, I mean my views have changed because obviously I've gotten older, and I paid a little bit more attention to geopolitical things. But I'm still somewhat a fan of war, if war is used properly. I didn't realize what war was before I went in, what combat, and I still don't know combat is, obviously, because I've never seen combat. But I've gotta think I have a different take on what combat would be like now, as opposed to prior to going in. It was a little bit more glorified prior to going in than it would be now.

EC: Glorified how?

RC: You know, patriotic, rah rah rah, Uncle Sam type shit. Whereas it's not that.

EC: What is it?

RC: I think it's a tool that the government uses now, that I didn't really realize before, you know what I mean? You're just oblivious to the fact that it's just a lot of propaganda being thrown at you, but, I dunno, it's a hard question to answer.

EC: So when you say you're a fan of war, if war is used properly...

RC: Yes.

EC: What does that mean? Under what circumstance?

RC: Well I mean obviously like World War II was a justifiable war, when you say we had to stop fascism, and then obviously it's, we don't have that anymore.

EC: Necessary wars?

RC: Yes, we don't have proper justification for using military forces anymore. We really don't. The First Gulf War, you could say we did because Iraq invaded Kuwait, but we kind of forced his hand into doing that with the sanctions that we imposed on him before the Iran-Iraq War. But in the same term we gave him all the weapons of war, so it's a bit of a conundrum that you get yourself into, you know what I mean? It's just a mess. But you can't let other countries go invading other countries, but like Russia right now is invading Crimea, and we didn't stop that, so. That's really no different than the First Gulf War, except they're a big superpower, and we don't want to do that.

EC: So you think the last justifiable war was World War II?

RC: Uh, yeah, I mean unless something else happens, you know, I don't know, I don't know. We'll see if we get another four years of Trump, good chance we'll have to defend ourselves against somebody, 'cause he's such a terrible person. That'll be justified if another country attacks us, but yeah. We're the ones committing atrocities today, so, we're okay until somebody decides we're not. Nobody spends the money we spend on defense, so, that'll be a bit of a stupid thing for anybody else to do.

EC: Okay.

RC: Okay, that's the end of the conversation.