

Monmouth Memories

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Interviewee: Robert Houston (Session 1 of 2)

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[Recording opens with informal discussion]

Ziobro: My name is Melissa Ziobro. I'm an instructor of history here at Monmouth University. Today is January 14th, 2015 and I'm interviewing Robert Houston for the Monmouth University student veterans' oral history program. We are on campus at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey. I want to start off talking just a little bit about your life before joining the service. Where were you born and raised?

Houston: I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, grew up in Maryland, and went to high school in New Jersey.

Ziobro: OK. Tell me a little bit about your family dynamics.

Houston: I was pretty much raised by my mother. My father was there, but my mother and my father separated when I was four. Then I lived with my mother pretty much until I joined the Marine Corps. My mother met my stepfather when I was nine years old. [Unintelligible] lived together for about four years in our place in Maryland. Once I graduated elementary school, started high school, they got married and we got relocated to here, to New Jersey.

Ziobro: Tell me about your education up to joining the service.

Houston: My education up to joining the service was more or less high school. I got a high school diploma. I didn't start any community college or anything like that. Interesting thing is, I was a stutterer growing up and I had to go to nine years of speech therapy to fix that. It caused some issues, like, I wasn't the best test taker because of that...there would always be something there that my teachers noticed and my parents noticed. They fostered that and just kept me interested in things, and stuff. I credit it a lot to me being the student that I am today. As far as that work ethic. I had to fight to learn how to speak, and properly think about how to formulate what I'm going to say.

Ziobro: Tell me a little just about yourself, what were your hobbies like growing up?

Houston: Growing up like, I wanted to be athletic. I wasn't the most gifted. [laughter]

Ziobro: You wanted to be.

Houston: I wanted to be athletic but from that, I learned a lot about, it's not always how big you are, it's about how big you play. Talking mentality, I wasn't the fastest, I wasn't the strongest type of person, but it was just like, what I had was heart, which my coaches loved. I didn't actually play sports growing up just because I was, like, a heavyset kid and my mom wouldn't let me play football because she thought that because I was heavyset, when I was eight, I would have been playing with 10 or 11-year olds, and then when I was like 10 or 11, I would have been on the

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14-year-old pee wee team just because of my weight, and she was like, “I don't want you to get beat up,” so I just did track for the most part.

The family dynamics, it was very matriarchal, that's the mother. As far as my aunt and my uncle, they lived down the street from us, and I remember all the time going over there and hanging out. I grew up in a retirement home that my mother managed and ran. That was a very interesting perspective of growing up with veterans. I got to see first-hand...there was Mr. Ford, who was a World War I veteran. He wasn't all there, but he would always say how he had to fight for the French because the integration wasn't on. Even still in World War I, blacks were separate and they were normally cooks. They weren't on the line and so wanted to fight for the French.

Ziobro: Even in World War II; it's not until 1948 that they desegregate.

Houston: Yeah, officially. You get the gist that they weren't like the stereotypical, what you see in movies like, “This is the ‘Nam,” or anything like that. It's something that I came to admire, they would always say- even the World War II vets, they were like, “It's about my bubble,” what we call the “bubble” today, as far as, you join for your reasons of patriotism, but when you're downrange, or for them when they were in their battles, they would say that, “It's the man to my left and my right.”

Ziobro: You and your battle buddy.

Houston: Yeah, and that's what it came down to. That's something that kind of drew me into...I was always drawn into camaraderie, and all that, and brotherhood since I was the only child until my mom married my step-dad.

My father, very interesting gentleman, I learned a lot from him. He taught me how life works. I was very sheltered by my mother because where I grew up, which is a suburb, in Maryland, of DC, it's Southeast DC. At that time in the early '90s, DC was the crack capital of the United States. I saw first-hand the crack epidemic on my doorstep. My mother kept me very well sheltered from that by, one, putting me in private school. That was more or less because of the quality of education, especially since I was kind of slow to develop. She didn't want me to be put into the slow classes because as you know, being a mother...When kids start kindergarten, they take an IQ test. In the state of Maryland, to be a developmentally challenged, to be in those classes or -if you score a 70 or below, that's when they put you in those classes. I scored a 72. She had to fight for me to go to private school based off of the fact of that- because I had to go through summer school. What kindergartner goes to summer school? [laughter] I remember pretty much kindergarten, first grade, second grade, third grade. After third grade was the last year that I had to go to summer school because I did poor with my grades, my fourth grade year, the first semester, and my mom took away TV! That's where I started to notice there was a changing of what was going on up here with my head as far as how I was processing the world around me. The whole speech thing was coming around.

With the stutter, it was auditory delay. What that means is that, it would take almost a second or two seconds off. From that, I would rush my thoughts, and in the rush of my thoughts, I would start stuttering. Once that got slowed down, it stopped the process, of me digesting information faster. That's the other thing that people don't realize about people that stutter, it's not the fact that they're mentally handicapped or mentally challenged. It's the fact of how they process

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information. As we all know, most stutterers are geniuses. If you look at Einstein, he was dyslexic and he was like, "I struggled with math." They thought he was borderline special needs. My parents didn't ever let that get to me, which was really, really awesome. They always instilled in me hard work, work ethic.

Like I said, I experienced a lot of negative things. I remember the first time I saw a dead body; I was seven or eight. My dad, he delivered newspapers because, like I said, he was a man of 101 grinds. It was three or four o'clock in the morning because I would help him on the weekends, because that's when he had visitation for me. I go down the alleyway to go pee, and I pee on a blanket, and I see a hand slumped over. I'm like, "Dad, come here." He lifts it up, and he sees the track marks and all that stuff. I remember he said, "That's what happens when you get caught on junk." The most jacked up thing I remember about that is the fact that he didn't call the cops afterwards to say that there was a dead body. [laughs] I feel bad now that I'm laughing at it, but that's what I grew up in. That's what I saw. My parents never allowed that to get to me. Even though I lived in the gutter, they always instilled in me, "This isn't it." My dad would always take me to playgrounds with white kids. He would make me play with white kids just because growing up in a predominantly black neighborhood, and especially low income or not middle class, lower middle class, there's that block mentality that, "This is it."

It's almost like what we see with career criminals, of how they get institutionalized. Where urban children or children in general, they get used to that block mentality that, "This is my world." My parents didn't want that for me. My parents would take me to different places, kept me exposed, made me interact with other people that weren't like me, so I would understand how to do it. And I wouldn't be like, "Oh my God, white people." [laughter] It's just one of those things.

Like I said, very strong matriarchal family. I credit everything, my success in life, to my mother, to my aunt, to my grandmother. Without them always instilling in me hard work...same thing with my dad. He showed me grinds, and what life is about. Having candid discussions, father and son, that helped out as far as him being real.

That's another thing. My parents were always real with me, and they didn't sugarcoat anything. That's what people fail to forget about kids. I especially noticed this with my nephew. They notice a lot of things. My sister's roommate is gay. When my nephew's...he'll be nine in August. I remember I gave him a shower and he was four years old, and he comes out of the shower, and he asked me why Shane, her roommate, is different. I said, "What do you mean Shane is different?" He's like, "Well, he's not like me and you." I'm like, "What do you mean he's not like me and you?" He pretty much said he's feminine. I thought that was great. My nephew's different because he's the only young child- My stepsisters have a younger sister from their mother's second marriage. They're like siblings in a way, because Emily is four or five years older than Justin. That's the closest sibling he has, but he's always been around adults so he picks up. That's cool. You get to see that. At four years old, he's picking up on sexuality. And he's never- Shane, for the most part, he doesn't bring that part of his life home. More so now he does, but not back then, so that he wouldn't confuse Justin, my nephew. My mom would be honest with me. I would have questions about stuff and she would talk to me, but at the same time, I didn't want to out Shane. I told my nephew flat out like, "Just because someone acts or talks different, doesn't mean they're different." I didn't want to categorize people.

Ziobro: Make him an "other."

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Houston: An “other” type of deal. I was like, “Shane's not different. He's just him,” and we had a little discussion. I remember like, “Wow. That's really cool that he's already picking up on those things that people are different. Not everyone's the same.” That was cool.

Ziobro: At what point, throughout this childhood as you're coming into manhood, did you decide that you were going to join the military?

Houston: I knew that right away even before the big economic downturn and all that stuff. I felt compelled based off of my previous history of living with the great generation, with those people of that status, of what they've gone through in their lives, and the fact of how they told me it kind of sets you up for success. This was probably my junior year of high school I started giving it some thought. By my senior year, I had taken my ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] and I was originally supposed to join the Air Force. From there, the Marine Corps recruiters stole me away because the Air Force recruiter was trying to ...make quota... I had originally signed up... I was going to be what they call a JTAC [joint terminal attack controller]. I was going to possibly be a JTAC and they were trying to line up those schools only because it takes three years. You sign a six-year contract. It takes two to three years of schooling, so they were trying to line all that up. In the process of all that, the Marine Corps recruiters stole me.

The main reason, it was the fact of opportunity. I knew I wasn't ready for college. I knew that if I stayed around where I was living, I didn't want to go to “13th grade,” which was the local community college, without real life experiences, because I probably would have been like everybody else amongst my peers. I would have probably kept the same type of mentality of, “Whatever,” not really applying myself. That's something that, I was like, “Why not? Let me do my part.” That part of interconnection of, “Do my part to serve my country.” That was the initial thing with all the intangibles of schooling, then I might like it and so I might turn it into my career, so on, so forth.

Ziobro: Are there any other members of your family who'd served in the military?

Houston: No. My dad, I call him the draft dodger. He'll be 64 in May. He's of that era, the Vietnam era. In talking- I understood his justifications of, that type of era, where he grew up in. “Why would I want to fight a war that I'm not even recognized back home as a full citizen?” I definitely understood. He was very candid with that. He didn't want to serve based off of that factor. It's your right. So he went to college for nine years. [laughs] He stayed in college for like nine years. My grandfather, my mother's father, he served in Korea, but he didn't actually go to Korea. He was Korean-era. He was on the track team for the Army back in the day. Each base had a team, so he did that. My grandmother's brothers, they served sporadically because my grandmother, she is the 13th child, so more than half her brothers served at some point or in some capacity. You don't see people of service of my parents' generation except for my Uncle Ernie, who served like eight years from the late '70s to the mid '80s. That's about it as far as the family history of service. My stepdad's father, he served, but like I said, that's because of the great generation. That's what they did. It was really interesting to talk to him because he was Depression era of America and it made sense for him because he did a career. He flew propped wing aircraft at the tail end of World War II, all the way up to working on jet propulsion jets, all the way up to Vietnam. He tells me the going joke that the reason why he left the Navy was when they started allowing women on the boats, which is partly true. He's like, “I'm done once they started allowing women on the boats.” Again, just a generational thing.

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Ziobro: So the Marine Corps poaches you from the Air Force. Where do you go from there? How do you start your training? What do you recall about that process?

Houston: It was very intense. It was July 18th, 2005. The night before, the recruiter comes, and I remember it was a Sunday, and he comes to get me. I'm like, "Bye mom." She hugs me like 15 times, and kisses me. My Aunt Karen is there, she's like, "Hey, good luck." I remember I'm in the car, getting ready to leave, and I'm like, "Oh, I forgot my social security card." My mom, she's the mom, so she had all my IDs and all that stuff. She still had my social security card. I come back inside, and I hear her crying, and she's in the kitchen, curled up in a ball, crying. My mother being so stoic, I very rarely saw...there were two other times that I saw her crying, and that was when my grandfather died, her father, and then when her best friend died of AIDS. You know what I mean? She's been a very strong pillar, and seeing her like that, I'm like, "I'll be back. I need my Social Security card." [laughter] Just seeing her just like that...so that started like that.

I remember- because I had to make weight, and I was like, "I'm about to go to a Parris Island in South Carolina in the dead of summer. I'm going to sweat all this shit off." My last dinner per se was at the hotel. I just ordered chicken fingers because I was like 30 pounds, I was like 40 pounds overweight. I was like 40 or 50 pounds overweight because I told him...when ...I took my ASVAB, passed my ASVAB, all that stuff, when I went and got processed- I had joined the wrestling team as a favor to my coach, and to drop weight for the Air Force, to make their standards, da da da da, and just to be healthy and all that stuff. So when I went to go weigh in at MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station] in Fort Dix, I weighed like 178 because I wrestled at the 188-weight class. I told him, "I don't naturally weigh this. You guys have to realize the type of starvation I've been going through of not eating. I am making weight for wrestling. I don't naturally weigh this." I made that perfectly clear. Sure enough, this is April and then come July 17, they come and weigh me again and I'm like 220, 230 because I eat. I'm about to go to the Marine Corps boot camp. I'm going to sweat all this stuff off. I had my last meal. I signed up with like two other guys because at first...what we call the poolee program. That's like when you're waiting to ship. Basically, it's just to make sure you stay out of trouble, make sure you know a little bit of knowledge before you go there.

Ziobro: So this is kind of between high school graduation and getting ready to go to Parris Island?

Houston: This is pretty much - because the way I actually got into the Marine Corps was the Marine Corps recruiter came and talked to our gym class. I filled out the card and I was like, "yeah, da da da." But then he gave me a call, "Oh, you mind if I come over and talk?" I'm like, "Well, I'm going to join the Air Force, this that and whatever," but I'm like "all right, whatever." He comes over one day. My mom's there. It was a selection process. My mom threw out the Army recruiter because my uncle had a shitty time. Literally like, "No, my son is not joining the Army" because I was 17. The Marine Corps recruiter came in and he had his little fancy magnets, "This is like the things that da da da the Marine Corps would teach you, and this and that, and whatever." He was trying to do a sales pitch. I go to the bathroom, when I come back and my mom's crying, I'm like, "Why are you crying?" She said, "I signed the papers." I'm like, "I guessing I'm going to be a Marine." Seriously! [laughter] I just brought him just to hear his spiel! That's how that happened. When you flash forward to boot camp, it's the stereotypical...

We flew out. Three guys walked off at the airport because, what happens is that...They give you a plane ticket and you're all by yourself and you have your group and all that. Three, like, guys just like, said, "This ain't for me" and it's just like, you can do that, seriously, so...

Ziobro: Before you even did anything?

Houston: Yeah. They were like, letting the psych-out game get to them. Just like, "Da, da, da...oh, I'm going to go to Iraq, oh, this and that or whatever." It was interesting though because I had like a little group of guys, going back to the poolee program. When- it's like a monthly meeting or weekly meeting, you go to it and that's where I met Hernandez and Myers.

At first, I was going to be a radio transmission person, working on comms, a communications person. Myers was talking to me and he talked me into being infantry. My recruiter was trying to do everything to get me not to do it. Because I did all right. I got like a 50 as my overall score and I did really well in electronics and clerical skills. I got 110 plus or whatever on that scale. I did well. They were really trying...the guy's like, "All right man. If you want to do it. Hey man, best of luck." You'd be surprised because everyone always thinks about when I tell them that- People are very shocked when I tell them I was infantry because they don't think infantry guys- They think bottom of the barrel, because the only thing that's lower than us is cooks as far as middle, overall score. I think when I joined minimum score was 27 and infantry's like 29 and I got 50 in clerical and all that stuff. Myers talked me into that.

I had that little group. Get on the airplane...Somehow, I got told to be the group leader. "You're the group leader." I'm like, "all right." Three guys walked off. I'm like "hey man, it's not my problem." I tried to, like, go, "Man, honestly, just give it a try. It's not that bad." Like, "No, I can't do this, sorry." Those guys walked off. We fly into Savannah and then there it begins. There's reception people and they're like, "Get on the bus right now." They are wanna be drill instructors. They're just like admin clerks. They're like, "Get on the bus right now," so we get on the bus and all that stuff. They tell us- it's some wrong turn type stuff, or like, some scare you straight, because they tell you to put your heads down in between your legs so you can't see where you are going. You can't plan an escape type of deal. That happens for two hours. It's oh-dark-thirty and then the bus stops. Those fabled golden footprints and "Get off my bus right now!" And it begins, da-da, a 30-second phone call, that stuff, get inspected. You're in forming for two weeks as far as getting the platoon together because it takes about two weeks to get all the guys together, as far as everyone that missed flights or da, da, da and all that stuff.

So that happens and- pretty much out of my boot camp experience, I learned a lot. I didn't have a lot of confidence. I always thought that I wasn't a leader. I always thought all of these negative things about myself, but boot camp made me realize that everything that I needed to succeed in life, I already had. It's just this realization that, of me having that experience like "wow," because I was last to qualify on everything. Swim qual, rifle. Yeah, pretty much, yeah, the two biggest, yeah. Swim qual, literally, it was the last day before you got dropped, I qualified. Rifle qual, because there was some shady stuff that happened. It was literally the last day before I got dropped. Then my PT...I would always fail the run. I was good at pull-ups and sit-ups, but I wasn't a strong runner. Through boot camp, all those things and succeeding at those things at the last possible moment made me realize that I could do anything.

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I started boot camp July 18th. It ends October 14th, I graduated, 13 weeks later. At the time, SOI [School of Infantry] is really backed up. I go on what we call Recruiter Assistance for like two weeks to show up at the recruiting office, da, da, da. I don't start SOI or don't go to receiving at SOI until the first or second week of November because you get leave after boot camp or you can take the...I took the Recruiter Assistance to save up on the days.

I finally get into boot camp SOI and it was an accelerated version because there's one part of the holidays- because we would start right at the holiday season, pretty much Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's, that's 10 days right there. Normally SOI is like 13 weeks, but they did it in six weeks. It was one part of the holidays and another part of just ramping up as far as just getting troops into the companies and different infantry battalions. I go do that. Probably other than being deployed, the most depressing thing about my Marine Corps career, morale wise, was what we call defense week. Defense week is where you dig a hole after learning about how to dig a hole, and you live in it for a week. It was just absolutely miserable because I'm like, "Yeah, I'm going be in North Carolina, da, da, da, SOI, it's warm down here." It's the south, uh-uh, but not in summer, no. Honestly, it sucked the life out of me because you have to walk out. At that time, I thought it was like forever. You have to walk out, I think that was part of our 15K. We had a 15K walk out there and then started digging a hole that's at least up to your armpits and everything broke. They told us, "Don't bring anything crazy because you'll have your e-tool [entrenching tool] to dig out the hole," and they were like, "Don't bring no hatchets, da, da, da." Sure enough, I started digging, digging, digging, digging. Literally, I shit you not, there's a root about that freaking big because they put me right next to a tree. They told me- because no, defense week, it's holding a perimeter. You dig a perimeter and each guy digs a hole, you and your buddy. Literally, it took us a day and half to dig our hole. They kept getting pissed off at us. I broke my e-tool hacking at the tree root that's about that big. I literally had to whip out my Leatherman and the little saws on the multi-tool.[laughter] I was like this [motions; laughs], seriously like going like this. Cutting, cutting, cutting. I had to go through like three of those and it was miserable. And then on top of that, it got really cold and it rained. It would rain during the day. It would be 30, 40 degrees during the day and then at night it dropped down to 10 degrees. Every morning, they would get everyone...They would take us in kind of in groups one by one because it states in our training manual that if it drops below freezing you need to be in the warming tent in the morning for at least like 10 minutes to warm up and literally, it didn't do anything. I was just so miserable. It was literally raining during the day and then freezing cold. You couldn't go to sleep because you're supposed to do buddy watch and that didn't work. That's the big thing about SOI.

And then I showed up to my unit, for 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marines. At first, they told us we're going to be in 6th Marines...they were part of Phantom Fury and all that stuff, bad ass shooting. Then they were just standing, re-standing up 1/9 [1st Battalion, 9th Marines], the walking dead [the unit's nickname] and you are like- no one wants to go to that unit because the 9th Marine Regiment, back in Vietnam, was wiped out. That's like, where you see the pictures of the guys with ears and- yeah, those were those guys. I remember I talked to one of the old guys and the shit he was talking to me, telling me about- given the perspective and being in, totally immersed in war, it has a way to change you, in how you see humanity and how you see your enemy and it warps your head. Yeah, so we thought we were going to be in that unit and we were like, "We really like...They got wiped out!" Literally they took 80 percent casualties. I'm not trying to be...As far as history, it's all about this, and da, da, da, and all that stuff.

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...It was very interesting because we were part of the huge hazing scandal. There's hazing and then there's just like EMI. There's a difference. Exterior military instructions only...You're only supposed to do it at boot camp. It's what they call constructive hazing, basically. When we got to our unit, because they're like salt dogs and all this stuff, and we haven't earned our rights, I remember before we actually got into our companies they would harangue us. It was pretty bad, the shit that was happening. I remember one night, Wild Dog, the fucking creature, at the time I didn't have a hatred for him. He was outside smoking a cigarette and the senior guys from God knows what company...Because what happens was, they put us on the backside of the barracks and on the front side was what we call STAR marines. Short timers again reenlisting. It's just guys that are about to get out but they're not in the company. They put us on the back. Those were the guys that were in the initial invasion of Iraq. Those were the guys, some of them were in Fallujah.

Ziobro: Where are you at this point physically located?

Houston: I'm in Camp Lejeune [North Carolina]. I got to my unit. I joined in July. I got to my unit in January. Joined the Marine Corps in July 2005. Do all my training, my basic training from boot camp to SOI. Takes me up to January 2006. January 2006, I roughly began my career in what we call the fleet Marine Corps with 3/2. The STAR guys are on the front side. They would do some interesting things with teasing us and terrorizing us and just doing weird shit.

We finally made it to our platoon. I landed in India Company, 3rd Platoon. I didn't really have an issue with the hazing, our platoon didn't have an issue with the hazing. There was some raunchy shit was going on in first and second platoon with hazing. I remember Reiss [spelling], when we were still - before we actually got to our company, Reiss, who was surprisingly an Asian kid named Reiss- he was adopted. He would come in literally almost crying like, "Dude, I just get made fun of all day. They make me act like Jackie Chan...they call me Jackie..." It's a certain type -- I'm sure you've seen -- it's a certain type of racism and sexism that's tolerated because it's a joke. You've got to have thick skin, that's the great thing about the military. It really teaches you to have thick skin because people just fuck with you. The more that you pay attention to them the more they're going to fuck with you.

So that happened and some hazing incidents where this kid Daniels (spelling), was a fucking retard, excuse my language. He was an idiot. When we're still coming into the company and the doc's doing our medical records, because it's a process of paperwork, they're going around like, "Why did you join the Marine Corps?" Daniels said, "I joined the Marine Corps to get a Purple Heart." I'm like...Everyone's just like...Because for us, we call that enemy combat action ribbon. I'm like, "You can do your service and never..." I mean, I never...I'm in one piece. I took shrap[nel] here and there. I cracked a tooth. But I don't want no Purple Heart. It's really fucked up.

On a back track, my dad tried to scare me straight out of joining the Marine Corps. He sent me, at the time...I moved to Jersey. He stayed in Maryland. I would go and visit him on the weekends. He had some friends at Bethesda Medical Center. The big Navy hospital. He tried to scare me straight. I was candy striping in the burn unit. Burn and amputation unit. There was this Marine Corps vet. I told him...This was right after the initial invasion. Fallujah part one. I asked him, did he regret it and he was like, "No. The reason why I'm like this is because I was looking out for my brothers and shit happens." I was like, "Fuck yeah, I want to have that mentality."

Fast forward to fucking Daniels and he said that shit. That just made him a fucking problem child. There was some hazing incidences of crazy stuff. A lot of bullshit. A lot of bureaucratic bullshit...

I deployed finally in July of 2006... I was deployed to Habbaniyah, Iraq. We flew into TQ-Taqaddum airport. It's right central. Where we were was halfway between Baghdad and Ramadi. We thought the premise of our mission was going to be this clearance of Ramadi because at the time, Ramadi was a huge hotbed. With that, what we call route one or what's commonly referred to a route one, which runs from the Syrian border down southward, I think it traces the Euphrates southward, through Ramadi and then from Ramadi, the next big city is Baghdad. We were the halfway point. TQ and then Habbaniyah was like the little satellite hub where our battalion was out of. It's called route Michigan. We called it the highway to hell. I remember seeing the ISR. The infrared scanner. That's what our FA [Field Artillery] teams would do. They would take ISR scans of the roads because it would show us where the IEDs [Improvised Explosive Devices] were. I remember they were saying the red spots are where IEDs are and, because it's like a white map thing and the red spots are the IEDs- It looked like fucking Mars. Just because of the amount of fucking IEDS. Like, "Fuck! There's that!"

Ziobro: Did you feel that you had adequate protections...?

Houston: Fuck no.

Ziobro: ...as far as traveling. I know...

Houston: [laughter] No.

Ziobro: ...you're trying to up armor these vehicles on your own before they get the MRAPs [Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles] and whatnot over there.

Houston: The first deployment, that was like the tail end...I'm sure you remember. You were probably like a college freshman back in '03 where people were getting court martialled for cutting pieces of steel and ghetto up-armorng their Humvees and stuff. It was really interesting because our posts on our platoon FOBs [Forward Operating Bases], as we called them, it was the glass was from all of the fucked up Humvees. I'm sorry about my language.

Ziobro: No, please.

Houston: Just, the shit, it's thick. It's just honestly like, "Damn, shit's just gotten really jacked up." Part of our convoy thing, they'd talk about the equipment stuff, we had what we called ...the green monster because it had a turbo. It was slightly up- armored and all that, but the door, the passenger side door, front passenger side door, didn't lock because of the up-armor kit. What you had to do is, we had 550 cord and either you tied the door off to your arm or your leg and just hope not to hit an IED because if you hit an IED, that leg or arm is just going. We took a lot of casualties just because the way that we deployed, they were playing the numbers game. It was really fucked up, what happened. Normally a ...company's 180 guys. When we came back from Iraq- a that's through five platoons. There's three line platoons, a weapons platoon, and then your HM [heavy machine gun] platoon. Five platoons. About 180 guys, roughly. Around 180 to 220. When we came back from Iraq, we had 80 split between [laughs] It was that horrible. We barely

squeaked away with this whole volunteer Army shit, volunteer military. We barely squeaked. What happened is, when we deployed, there were guys that they made come that were going to EAS [expiration of active service] over deployment. They just passed the whole thing where if you EAS on deployment, you had to go back home 30 days prior so you can do your full checkout instead of there in the initial phases of the war, where there were guys EASing on the deployment and they're like, doing the last bit either on an extension or just send them home and they'd have like a week to check out of the Marine Corps. That's very hard, especially with your battalion forward. We go through that process and stuff, there was like 80 guys. My platoon, we took the brunt of the casualties within the company.

Ziobro: How did you handle the casualties?

Houston: Honestly, it's hard. It was really hard. It was like it wasn't reality. It wasn't real. I remember our first casualty in our platoon was Champlain (spelling). What happened was...He swapped out with Brooks (spelling) at the last minute because they're like, "Hey, who wants to go on this patrol?" Brooks is like, "Fuck this. I don't want to go on the patrol." Fucking Champlain was like, "I'll go on it. I've been on post all day." He's like, "Yeah, I'll take it." And what happened was, on the way back, they took the shortcut back, and our interpreter, along with him, stepped on...well, Bill the interpreter stepped on an IED, and Champlain had a TBI [traumatic brain injury], serious TBI injury. And four or five days later, his parents pulled the plug in Germany. I thought he was still fine and I remember a couple days after he passed, his parents pulled the plug. I was talking to my team leader and I was like, "Yeah, Champlain's fine. They don't got anything on us." Then my team leader informs me, "Champlain's parents pulled his plug." I remember just taking my cap off and having a few tears. Then after that, two days after my 19th birthday, we take contact. North platoon reports taking contact to the north. Everyone goes out. Then the remainder, there's a small minority of us still at our little PB or patrol base. They say, "Who's left? We need to go out here because...They're taking contact over here now." We go running out there. Normally you do a whole, quick like five-minute brief, this is what's happening," but everything was happening so fast, we just started running and on the way out there, they're telling us to go on Rim Road and Raiders (spelling). From there, I remember the guys, we swapped PBs with second platoon and I remember when we were swapping, they were like, "Yeah, don't go on Rim Road and Raiders. It's heavily IEDed." I remember on the way running out there and at the last second, me and Rene Martinez (spelling) swapped places ... I remember the last second, my platoon sergeant said, "I need a swap." I'm like, "All right." So me and Rene swapped. And 30 seconds later Rene stepped on an IED. I remember it was really graphic. He was on that side of the Rim Road and Raiders, where we shouldn't have been. And he stepped on it.... The assholes fucking saw us out there... I remember hearing the explosion and then I see something clear a 30-foot palm tree and then landing. Me and this other guy, I've forgotten his name, we run over and he's gone. That weighed on me a lot. I remember talking to my team leader. We got really close before the deployment because we had this kid from Tennessee, I'm the northerner and he's the southerner. We got really, really close over the deployment. We were just talking and stuff like that. He's just like, "Are you OK?" Because he wasn't with me. Your team's like your family. Your team leader's like mom and dad. He holds the team together. He wasn't with me and he's like, "Are you OK?" and I'm like, "I'm just in shock, man. Honestly, I don't know what happened. I really, honestly, I remember flipping him over and the face, stuff like that."

So- then- Our last casualty within the platoon, again, was, I was standing on post and I hear a shot and I see dust kick up because the way that our post was set up is, we were at another patrol base and that patrol base had an over-watch with the backside of what's normally our patrol base and it gives you a funnel of where they look out onto the road, route Michigan. I saw dust kick up and the shot. I told the SOG [sergeant of the guard], the guy that's in charge of us, that's our post, "Yo dude. There's a shot." He says it's nothing. 20 minutes later, what's his name, a guy goes up on post and checks on Brown and he sees- because we'd joke around, act like we're dead type shit. He goes up and he brings him a little pocket pizza, because he asked him, "Would you mind getting me a pocket pizza?" He comes up 20 minutes later and he sees Brown slumped over the gun. He pokes him, then he falls over. He sees the gunshot and all that shit. He just screams, "Corpsman up." Doc tried to work on him but he was gone. I remember coming back that night and seeing his gear just displayed out. His flak and Kevlar. I remember just going up and touching it. I just think that's 20 minutes that we could have been working on him that he was just there dying and bleeding out.

After that, there was another platoon loss two days after Christmas, on December 27th, we lost corpsmen off of another command detonated IED. That was most of our casualties, but then again, like I was saying, it was under extreme pressure because they played that numbers game shit and we were so short staffed that pretty much each platoon was like a squad short, roughly, given the numbers. Pretty much a full squad short. That's 13 guys.

Ziobro: What are your thoughts on the draft?

Houston: My whole thing is, I think that people...It's hard to do it and conflicts like Iraq and Afghanistan, where people...It goes to the way we go about war now. What our politicians put our men and women that serve at risk for. I think that if we're not going to enact a draft, because with this whole PMC [private military corporation] bullshit, private military corporations and the privatization of war. That's really scary. I had a couple of offers after I got done with my time of doing PMC work and it just goes against all of my morals. It goes against all of my morals. You don't go to war- Yes, I get paid shitty, but I don't do this because of the pay. I do it because of my family. That's the biggest thing. Everyone says thank you for what I do. No, thank my family, because my family enables me to do what I do. They're there. They're the ones that lose the most, have the most to lose in this whole thing.

Going back to your original question with the draft, I think it's something that it needs to be really thought about as far as with the presidential powers and congressional powers of how they get us involved in conflicts. If you're not going to enact the draft, then we shouldn't be there in it at all just because when we're running on fucking nothing on that first deployment- like I said, I think overall a battalion's normally like 900 people. We only, overall, had like 500 people. That numbers shit. Seriously. I did the math. There's 168 hours in a week. I think for the first three months, I actually clocked in 8 hours of actual sleep a week. That's what I'm saying- where I can actually take my boots off. When you're sleeping- or what they call sleeping time- is when you're on re-act. When you're getting called out for re-act 24/7, you get no sleep. Then you go on post and the way we mitigated that was at least they made us stay post with two guys. Me and Driscoll (spelling), what we would do is we would rotate at night and we'd sleep. You're not supposed to do it but they turned the other eye with that because at least someone is up and paying attention. I've got to get sleep somehow. One, if I get no sleep, then I'm going to see

double and all that stuff. I think if we put people on the ground and depending on what capacity, in Iraq and Afghanistan in that full war capacity, you need to enact the draft.

This whole PMC bullshit. The privatization. War should never be privatized because once you see the fact that the beneficiality of war as being a numbers thing, that defeats the purpose of war. War is the last resort. When you look at war, the definition of war is to break someone's will, not to break someone's piggy bank. When you look at it, and through discussions and all that stuff, I believe war should be a last resort. If so, if we go to war we go to war full-on, because we would always say, "America's not at war, America's at the mall." The Air Force, the Marine Corps, the Navy, the Army, we're at war. That's just because once you get to that point of...Compared to that great generation- I remember I did a paper and I was saying, "On average, out of each generation, 10 percent of the population served." With me being infantry, because we ran the numbers again, there's one percent of the population that served sometime post 9/11. Within that, because that's like the -- I don't try to like ...because with being an infantry, I'm proud of being an infantry. I'm sure you kind of heard POGS, like the Army guys when they talk about POGS, or persons other than grunts. It's kind of like the stolen valor thing. I tell people- I know Motor-T guys that have seen more combat than me. Because as the enemy, what am I more likely to hit? Hardened combat troops or logistical supply trade? That's just like the distinction of just...no, what I try to explain to people- what's fighting about, and what's my job, because people don't understand what infantry does. I just tell them, it's a jack-of-all-trades. There was so much stuff...I mean, my second deployment, I ran the intelligence cell for the company, I ran the logistics section of my platoon. We were more spread out.

The second war was like night and day. We were actually up on the Syrian border. Up there it's way, way fucking different than being in the south, because there's Kurds and they're more civilized. Up there, as far as, there's less sectarian violence, I guess is the word, and it was like night and day. I just hope people like seeing that type of change up there, but that's just based off of the Kurds, regulated.

Ziobro: Do you feel that the military was responsive enough to the IED threat?

Houston: The IED threat? Yes. Honestly once they got their heads out their asses with up armor and all that shit, and the MRAPs, and the Marine Corps kind of went overboard because they spent [laughter] like a hundred million dollars on our flak vests which didn't, I mean, it worked for an urban environment- like the MTVs [modular tactical vests], once we went back full on to Afghanistan, guys couldn't wear a MTV because the shit was too heavy. Going up mountains, I can't be wearing a 90-pound flak vest. I'm going to die. [laughs] I don't care how well conditioned you think I am. I can't carry a 90-pound flak vest, and on top of that, food, water, ammunition, for the next three to four days because we were doing a mobile patrol, foot patrol. I'm not some packed mule going up mountains, not hills, mountains. Iraq's flat, Afghanistan's mountains. Everyone's like, "in Pennsylvania you have hills," they said, "and mountains," and I'm like...You said your husband snowboarded, right? They don't mountains in Vermont. The shit that they've got in. are big hills. Those are really big hills [compared to Afghanistan].

Yes, they were responsive enough, but I think sometimes...with the Marine Corps, I tell people that America doesn't need the Marine Corps. America wants to have the Marine Corps. Hillary Clinton tried to get rid of the Marine Corps back in the early '90s, we all know that. People over time have tried to get rid of the Marine Corps, but it's a fact that we're the 9-1-1 response, and

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we're cheaper because everything that we have, are hand-me-downs, like our tanks, but that's the same thing. If it works, why fix it? I remember when I got my SAW [squad automatic weapon], my first deployment, I was a SAW gunner, which is a light machine gun. My second deployment, I was team leader... Part one and part two of my last deployment per say being on the USS Bataan, and then being deployed to Haiti after we were supposed to go home. I was in a cycle platoon. I pretty much did what I was doing on my second deployment except the fact that I wasn't a team leader because I didn't go to school, but pretty much I was the ATL, Assistant Team Leader. I ran the intelligence cell, which coordinated with the lieutenant. I was one of the stand-to medics, and stuff like that.

Ziobro: That first deployment to Iraq, you're helping to secure this transportation corridor. How long was that first deployment?

Houston: Everything was seven. Both first Iraq, second Iraq, for seven months. Our main mission during the first deployment was COIN [counterinsurgency], same thing on the second deployment, COIN.

Ziobro: How long did you have between deployments?

Houston: Six and a half months, five months.

Ziobro: You got to come CONUS [continental United States] for five months?

Houston: Yeah. It was five because- it was really messed up how they did it because they gave us our pre-deployment leave before we went out to CAX [combined arms exercise] and then once we went to CAX, 30 days of that. Then we're back home for a week. I didn't even take time off because I think we had to take what we call a pig shoot, a live tissue training for medic stuff. So I went to that because it was like, being while I'm told, our Gunny was like, "If you're going to do this. We'll be up here all day." I just raised my hand. I'd already said my goodbyes, I'm already used to it. Coming back home and leaving, no one was ever there. I want it to be that way because I wanted to be locked, stocked, and ready to rock. I didn't want to be thinking about home. I told my family, "No news is good news." I very hardly communicated with them. When I came back home my mom didn't even know I was home. I showed up in my dress blues and she thought I was mortuary services. She thought, because I literally walked up on her and I was wearing my dress blues, she just started crying. She just started bawling. I went, "Mom it's me." She's like, "Oh my God." The only thing that would happen is my Dad- Just because I needed to decompress and I knew that. I knew that I was different. I would just decompress because the first deployment was rough. Everyone was like, "Yo, that's so smart what you did." Because they hated it. They hated being touched. We got mobbed by our families. Literally- you would see stuff like that for Justin Bieber. Coming out of this bus we literally got mobbed. I would just quietly go up to my room, smoke a cigarette and have one or two beers with a couple of guys. Go to sleep. Next morning I'd go out and buy some new clothes, which- I got yelled at because there was a rip in my jeans and this master sergeant or first sergeant's like, "Hey Marine. Why you look so fucked...?" "I just got back from break." And he goes away. I think that- because I knew that there was something...I needed alone time. Then going away, I didn't...I mean it's a double edged sword.

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One of the hardest losses for me was when I lost my sergeant. Because that was my team leader on my first deployment. We stayed in touch. We were close friends. I helped him out becoming a sergeant because I had the answers to the 8,000 series. He became a sergeant that way. We were trying to flip through circles for me to go on his deployment to Afghanistan. But the earthquake happened. I was one signature away from signing out of my battalion going with him with 2/9, I do believe his unit was. Yeah it was 2/9. He died two days after Christmas, ironically...Two days after Christmas and a month from coming home. That's one of the things, when everyone's just like, "Thank you for...." I felt like I failed. Not everyone came home. I felt like, I feel that. Most of us will say that. I feel like I failed.

It wasn't the fact of being anti-terrorist. It's the fact that not everyone came home. With any branch, they tell you it's about bringing everyone home. They don't try to say, "Well not everyone's..." You know not everyone's going to come home but my...that really put me somewhere. Literally, I was checking out of the Marine Corps. My close friend, my roommate for four years, he called me and he told me what had happened. I just broke down. I was ending my Christmas leave and headed back. That really jacked with me. It's something I still struggle with today. At least I acknowledge the fact, and I'm not denying it. That really messed me up. That messed me up more so because he told me how sketched out he was about that deployment. It's like- omens. His corpsman shot himself in the foot. He just didn't have the right feel, his second deployment to Iraq. Those guys know, it's all about your group and how comfortable you feel. He didn't have that comfortability. He had the most amount of experience other than the platoon sergeant in his platoon. As far as the deployments, actual combat deployments of being shot at, not just, "I'm sitting in Iraq. Fuck this." He had the most experience and he was just like- man. When he died it was something like- he just came back from another memorial service, because we have our memorial services over there, for when we lose someone. He just came back from a memorial service and he was a squad leader and a squad was going out. They were short a guy. He volunteers instead of telling one of his own guys to go. He takes a knee, and he bleeds out from an IED.

Like I said yes, and now with the IED thing, it's just proper implementation of what we have. Now, in Afghanistan, you can't leave the wire in a regular old Humvee, you have to go out in the MRAP. Now they have a CROWS [Common Remotely Operated Weapon Station] nest, which is the automated guard on the turret, so when we get sniped at- Because back in the day, all we did was we just threw heavy netting over the turret, and we're just out there. Then to- every time we would go through a condensed area, the turret...I would always sit down because that's another part of what my job...As soon as we would go to the city I would slip down. I'd get pinged, pinged, pinged, pinged.

That was probably the hardest thing in my whole career amongst other things, like my first deployment there was a BBIED [Body-Borne Improvised Explosive Device]. Me and Myers (spelling) called it out because it was a traffic stop, a ...CP [checkpoint] that the battalion commander setup right in front of our PB because they knew that we're right there, so we had them. And we're like, "You know this is fucking stupid." Sure enough, this kid, I think ... the internal report, I think he's like 10 or 14, because that's what most of suicide bombers are, they're kids. It's not some grown ass man, it's some kid and he blew himself up. In the process of blowing himself up, he only took out one Marine. He killed probably close to 40 civilians. I remembered this guy coming up with this kid in two pieces. It's just like...

Ziobro: What do you feel your reception was amongst the Iraqi people?

Houston: It depends on...honestly, I try to explain this to people and they don't understand, they're like, "Oh." The reason why Iraq has fell and reason why we created ISIS is out of the fact of poor planning. Once you really look at the aspects of the Baathists, because that's what ISIS is, it's the Baath people. People don't understand the religious overtones, we were predominantly in a Shia area, so they loved us. They were like, "You know we don't want you and your country, but we like the fact that, you know, you have lifted us enough from oppressors and all that stuff." Because Shia is the religious minority. That's the case- people aren't educated when they talk about this shit, because they don't really look, they just go off of the bylines, what they see on the news and all that stuff, and the propaganda from Fox or CNN and the biasedness.

But it was fairly good, not everyone loved us, but they knew we were trying. We're very -- at that time when I served, when I was in Iraq, it was less kinetics, it was more focusing on that COIN, counter insurgency, which is like being a police officer. I was like a mall cop in Iraq for the most part.

Ziobro: You know, I've had guys complain to me that they're not trained to be policemen. They're trained to be soldiers, not to be policemen. Did you struggle with that?

Houston: No. Honestly, my whole thing is, with being a Marine, yes we're taught about kinetics. Yes, we do things, if you need to clear that building, we know to clear. But I think honestly, it's how they revolt- like, it's more or less how you interpret the situation. Most people want to just go in and kick in doors and kill people. With me, like signing up to fight this war on terror, it wasn't just so much just killing people. It's not about killing people. Because that's the thing, when- what breeds radical Islam, why are these people radicalized? And that's one of the greatest things that, in my experience, that's produced. I have a wealth of knowledge and understanding of what makes these people radicalized.

As to not being trained by police or to be police, but at the same time, it's part...being a Marine is ... being flexible, because they teach us that from day one, Semper Gumby, always flexible. With these missions, it's not always based on kinetics. It's based off of what you want, and how you interpret your mission. My thing is, it's about a killing them with kindness mentality, and because it's basically everything that's kinetics-wise was driven by the population. We got on their good side, we knew how to talk to them, we treated them with respect and then they told us where the assholes were. That's how you do it.

But the new guys, they just want to fucking -- assholes, they just want to kick in doors and be butt stroke, fucking little kids with no fucking reason. I wasn't above it, I told people all the time, you don't understand- every time we would go up north, for one or two times, these kids would, like flicker their bells on their bicycles and we'd think nothing of it. Sure enough, 20 minutes later, there's a poorly dug IED, we start taking SAFs [small arms fire] fire, and we're just like, "All right." And we put two to two together, and sure enough every time they did that shit, I would want to take to buttend of my SAW and say, "just stop that, seriously. We know what you're doing, you're not being sneaky." But I just felt like, yes, we're not trained to be cops, but at the same time, our mission's always changing. You got to be forward thinking about how you grasp concepts and what's our mission. Yes, we're supposed to kick in doors and take names, but at the same time, there's so much, like, the other stuff that we do, like the clinics that we'd ran.

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When the State Department guys, the PRT people, the Provincial Reconstruction Team people, would come down and they would do their assessments and actually talk to the village elders. I tell people about how -- because the big change with us was within our ROEs [rules of engagement]. We couldn't just shoot anyone, that was the change when I was there. We couldn't just shoot anything. We had a PID [positive identification] and then that changed everything into -- because-- we took contact one time and we try to do it right, try the legit way. We get these guys pinned down to the Mosque, and we can't do anything to a Mosque, because that's like the big change. Before '05 you could do anything to a Mosque. Now we couldn't go in the Mosque, so what we did was to bring out the village elder, to talk to the people, try to get them come out. They literally sent his head rolling back to us- like, literally. I try to explain to people, we try to mitigate situations, we try to talk them down and say, like, “Yo, just come out.” And sure enough, because we had to exhaust every means necessary to mitigate the situation, and then we finally had to drop the mosque. Then, on Al Jazeera TV, “Marines blow up mosque.” They don't hear the backstory. They say, “You still blew up a mosque.” I'm like, “I can't...We can't go in...”

But highers are like, “Don't go in. We'll just drop...It has to be...” Trying to explain to people it has to be smooth, and we end up with a bomb. They normally range 50 to 100 pounds and it's to reduce that collateral damage. Collateral damage for the most part was very low. There were some mistakes with ordinance drops. I remember [laughs] one time, 2nd Two gets in a firefight and they call in artillery because that's the Marine's best friend. Everyone always says air support, but a Marine's best friend, we love artillery. Artillery's smart. It's almost like a guided bomb. The gunner was out there and he calls in support and calls in an artillery mission and it was the wrong house [laughs] . Luckily, the house was abandoned, they said it was abandoned.

Like I said, it's just what I tell people, it's not like it's always cracked up to be. Yes, there is some atrocious shit that people do in times of war and it's one of the reasons I got out after. I was on the fence about re-enlisting literally but when Myers died I was like, “I can't do this.” What type of mindset am I going to bring over there? Am I just going to want to extract revenge and make the wrong calls on some things and possibly...I didn't really care about myself. I would tell my Marines all the time, I'll eat a charge if it means that you come home but if I'm doing something like that, as far as eating a charge, was it necessary? Was it the right call to bring my Marines home? I always tell them, it's better to be judged by 12 than carried by 6. I told them that's my mentality when I think about engagement criteria. Is that- is this necessary? Have I exhausted every means necessary to bring you home?

At the end of the day, that's what my main...Mission accomplishment's one and then two, it's like, “No.” But for me it's hand in hand. One equals the other. A mission is not accomplished if I don't bring everyone home and vice versa.

Ziobro: We have to break here because we're losing the room but I sincerely hope that we can maybe set up a second session.

Houston: That's fine.

End of Transcript