Date: May 16, 2016
Interviewee: Robert Houston (interview 2 of 2)
Interviewer: Melissa Ziobro
Transcriber: CastingWords.com; Leigh Anne Woolley, Monmouth University Student
Place: Monmouth University

Melissa Ziobro: This is Melissa Ziobro, Specialist Professor of Public History at Monmouth University interviewing student veteran, Robert Houston, on our campus in West Long Branch, New Jersey. Today's date is 16 May 2016.

Today is my second of two interviews with Robert. Our first interview covered primarily his time in Southwest Asia with the US Marine Corps. Today, we'll be discussing primarily humanitarian aid rendered in Haiti and life as a student veteran at Monmouth University.

But, first, Robert's going to comment for us on how the threat he faced in Iraq and Afghanistan metastasized into ISIS.

Robert Houston: With that, at the time, in my first deployment in...That was [inaudible 0:44]… Kuwait. That area, it sits perpendicular to both Baghdad and Fallujah, Ramadi, which are major cities.

At certain points of the Iraq War or Iraq engagement they were very contested, along with the road on Route Michigan, which is the main …which runs from the western part of the country all the way down to Baghdad and to the southeastern part of the country.

As far as the threat of what we faced as ISIS, ISIS was a contingent part of Baathist party members that were radicalized through us overthrowing the government. From there they were almost deemed too radical or too extreme for al Qaida and Iraq in the type of movements.

How they operated was very similar to what we see in gang activity, as far as just extreme amounts of violence with little direction or any type of orientation, or purpose, or reason of why other than just to distort the system at hand to their own will and power and all that.

With that, at the time we were trying to re-engage the local populace in taking back or taking control on the transition of the war from being an American coalition-led effort fighting against Islam and terrorism overall to having the Iraqis take more of a lead. With that, engaging the local populace. We're engaging the tribal roots.

At that time, we found the tribal king for the largest ethic population in Iraq. Unfortunately, he was assassinated. That was our attempt to try to unite the people.

That's the thing here in America we don't quite understand. In very indigenous, non-Western countries, what we see is there's still a tribal, very basic level of community that people connect through bloodlines and less about here, like more Westernized, like identifying with thoughts.

It's your thoughts are already preconceived through the fact of you following this bloodline. These are our people. This is how we talk to them, and we don't get along with those people, even though they may never have done anything with you. That's something, as a Westerner, it's hard to comprehend.

ISIS assassinated that individual, which sent Iraq back into a free fall, and metastasized into what we see today, along with other issues of the hydroelectric dam, which was placed into Turkey.

That's the thing a lot of people don't realize, is that a lot of the issues that we're facing, the reason why people were initially sucked into ISIS in Iraq was the political discontent with the political system having a non-functioning government. We're having a government that doesn't serve the needs of all, but services the needs of the few, or if you're Shia. If you're Sunni, then, obviously, you get the shit on a stick.

I lost my train of thought.

With Turkey, I think it's the Euphrates or the Tigris which runs from Turkey into Iraq. When they dammed that up, it caused the receding shorelines. That's how they farm. That's the major source of food in Iraq. It's still agricultural. From that, that further caused not being able to provide for your family. That's the other thing that fueled into that.

As far as the going into my next deployment, which led into my humanitarian aid efforts in Haiti, it was what we call a MEU, a Marine Expeditionary Unit. What we deploy in a larger version of is what they call ARG, which is the combination of both Marine Corps air-ground forces with the Navy.

What the ARG stands for is Amphibious Readiness Group. Basically, what we deploy is we're the ground-air element as far as if something were to happen anywhere in the world, we respond to it.

The Navy end of that is that we deploy with their carrier group. The carrier is the big carrier, a submarine, the frigates, the destroyers, all that stuff.

It's interesting. When we do that type of integration, we don't see that part being just strictly the air/ground element.

Where, with us, we deploy on what they call brown navy or gator navy boats, which are ships that have built-in roll docks that are able to deploy L-CATs, which are the big hover crafts, and other various landing crafts to make landfall on shore along with the air unit of having a heavy lift helicopter air wing section along with the fixed of the Harriers, soon to be the F-35s, on the big roll deck.

That's how we deploy. Our MEU was what we call a Mediterranean float or booze cruise. Pretty much you just hit all the ports in Northern Africa and in Southern Europe and make your way into the Middle East. Float around there for a little bit. That's pretty much what we did.

The ports that we originally hit, we hit Paloma, Spain. It's an isle off of the coast of Spain. It's like a sister island to Ibiza. Ibiza's a very party -ish, 20-something, European nightclub scene. While Ibiza does have that, it's very rich historically and there's a lot of interesting sites.

There's a huge citadel on the port where the Spanish Navy, back when they were big and everything, all that stuff were, and it's really cool seeing that part of it and having the night life. Primarily, what we did as far as when we hit the little ports, normally we would go out in groups, at least one other person if not up to four or five.

That was really fun being in Spain, seeing that. We mostly hung out in the German sector. Funny story with that. I got out-drunk by this 50-year-old German guy. We were doing the F boot, so it's like a yard of beer. Being on the boat, we don't drink. When we hit that first little port, we were on the boat for like 30 days, in think. Somewhere between 25 and 30 days.

We hit that first little port. I haven't had a drink of alcohol in almost a month. I go in and this German guy, we just kind of made eye contact. It was three to five and I was just...because it's brown. Here, in America, we don't drink dark beer unless you like dark beer. It wasn't like Guinness, but it was dark like Guinness.

It just like, "Oh, yeah. My stomach wasn't good." We stopped there for two or three days. It was really fun. Funny story is, the first night that we were there on the way back...timeframe of this, this is 2009. This is right in the middle of the buildup to the next World Cup in 2010, which Spain won.

What Spain did that year, in 2009, before they won the World Cup the next year, was when the Euro, which is kind of like the European version of the World Cup on a smaller version, just the European countries. It was interesting when they won, that first night that we were in [inaudible 9:08] .

Literally, on the way back, we see fires [laughs] up on the hills, of the people...light stuff on fire, I guess. That was really fun. That was an interesting night. After that, we hit, I want to say Turkey. We hit Greece. We hung out in Greece. That's the lengthiest deport that we had there. That was really cool.

We did some cross training with the Greek version of Marines. It was cool because they had female...because there, their military's already fully integrated. It was really cool because their female marines were pretty bad-ass.

We were doing a rappel tower, and a lot of them were doing it Aussie style, which is face first, instead of like when you normally see people kick out and all that stuff, or when they just run backwards, facing up to the sky, run backwards like that real quick. They just do it facing down.

Basically, doing the Australian style, it's like what they call a commando style. That's the reason why it was originally developed.

If you're running down, if you're rappelling off the building to get entrance into the first floor, it suits you better to be facing down at the ground, because as you're possibly facing contact, you have your weapon at the ready. Compared to if you're kicked out like this, it's harder to orientate your weapon.

That was cool. We stopped there. It was kind of interesting, this was right before the Greek economy collapsed. I think that's when the first bail-out was happening. I think that's when Obama signed the first bail-out for Greece. I think we just gave them like a billion dollars. Our politicians just write off checks like that. "Yeah, here's a billion dollars." I would like that. Hey, Obama. [laughs]

Ziobro: We're not talking about our $19 trillion debt. [laughter]

Houston: Yeah. It was interesting because, what a lot of people don't understand about Europeans, everyone always thinks Europeans are so forward-thinking, but they're very-especially the ethnic Europeans.

There's Western Europe and Eastern Europe, and once you get to Greece, you start into the realm of Eastern Europe. Kind of like the Soviet bloc type states, even though Greece wasn't part of the Soviet bloc, but Macedonia and all that sits on top of it were formerly Soviet states.

Even with that, you have racial tensions. I went there with the understanding of what was happening, and understanding the welfare, the European welfare state, because it's ridiculous how most conservatives fear the welfare queens here in America, which doesn't exist, by the way, in the way that they think.

It really does exist in Europe. Looking at how basically it's a credit to the system, or the system pays you to have kids. For me, if I come there is an immigrant, and automatically rate welfare without putting into the system, I understand that this content, but because I have brown skin, and you have a lot of people fleeing.

I mean, Syria just started the first remnants of people starting to break off, the hostilities between the regime and the people that want to liberate the country started to happen, but you still have a huge influx in Southern Europe, especially around the Mediterranean countries, of huge African migrants that go there.

To them, they leech off the system, and all that stuff. There were some comments that were made, and with me and my friends, my guys, they automatically naturally have my back. It's interesting that have that perspective, because I've been told that numerous times by Marines that were European, but joined the Marine Corps and stuff.

They said, "Yeah, Americans are like that." Sure enough, I remember the guy I was with, he was Greek, or he knew Greek. He was Russian, so he understood Greek because it's Cyrillic. It's like English and the Romantic languages, you can kind of make them out.

He was telling me some of the things that people were saying, they're not nice things, and it's not because we're US military. It's because of the color of my skin. It was really interesting to hear that, 21st century, because you read about it, and you hear about it, but to actually experience that in a foreign country and all that.

Whatever. That was a good time. We got drunk, ridiculously drunk. After that, we stopped in Turkey for just a quick stop. It was just a refueling port, that was. After that, we broke into the Gulf, into the Middle East, which led to us spending 30 days in Kuwait as just a land exercise.

The reason why we waited, we come to find out, the reason why I signed off on this original deployment was I thought that, because I was in the midst of reenlisting. I was in the midst of reenlisting, I had this great mental place that I was going to reenlist, go back to Iraq, make my money tax-free, I was going to get the job that I wanted. I was going to get the rank that I wanted, all this stuff.

Then my close friends, the guys that I did my first deployments with, they were saying that they were going to stay, and with the first appointment being very difficult, and with the outlook of

Afghanistan picking up, I would never forgive myself if something happened to them, and I wasn't there.

Fast forward to that, back to now, when we're in Kuwait, we were possibly getting the idea that we might go into Afghanistan, because at that time there was elections. It was just like that's what they sold us on, a lot of the older guys, to stick around. For me, I originally signed up in the Marine Corps not just to serve, but to serve in Afghanistan, not so much Iraq.

We just waited there for 30 days, come to find out the unit commander, which is different from our battalion commander, he decided not to, because it's commander's discretion. He didn't want to split up the forces and all that stuff, so we wound up never going to Afghanistan.

Next thing after that was Dubai. Dubai was amazing. It's great if you have money, because being in those countries, in the Middle East, you can't be publicly intoxicated. What you do is they have resorts, and you get fucked up at the resorts. As long as you don't get publicly intoxicated at the mall, you can get messed up at the resorts, and that was fine.

It was really interesting going to the world's largest mall. I remember, for four or five days that we were there, we were just in there every day, because the one section, the jewelry section just has thousands of jewelry stores. My buddy actually got his engagement ring for his now wife, it was like 15 grand, he talked the guy down to $3,000 cash.

He was just going back and forth, because they have all these stores. That's the thing. They literally have everything, so that was cool. After that, we stopped at another place, but I totally forgot what it was. It's like a smaller version of Dubai. It's like a little isle.

That was interesting, but that was really shady because we went off-reservation. They allowed us to go off reservation, of all places, in that godforsaken place. I just remember being so stressed out, because in places like that, in general, when I left, we weren't supposed to carry weapons on us.

I carried a boot knife. That was the only time I felt really sketched out, being with my buddies, because they wanted to go to a local bar and see what that was like. It was just dark. Imagine you go into a hole in the wall, dive bar where people aren't speaking English, and it's dark. [laughs]

Ziobro: You talked about your forays out, whether it's in Greece, or Spain, or Dubai, whatever, are you in uniform when you guys are going?

Houston: Basically, we don't wear uniforms out like that. They used to, but because of terrorist threats, they know one thing that we're American, because tattoos, and the way that we dress, because I can't go off the boat like this. This isn't proper attire. I would have to have what they call shore clothes, which is basically kind of like country club attire. Polo shirt, slacks, and boat shoes.

Ziobro: Now the locals know, when they see Americans dressed like that, that they probably are.

Houston: It's one part, I understand because it's the fact that we're a guest in someone's country, and as much as we're accepting, or we tolerate a lot of different, this culturally homogeneous

type of idea of, you are who you are. In certain cultures, we have to respect that, and that's the thing that people don't understand, why we have to dress like that.

It's just trying to be respectful of other people's cultures. When we were in Dubai, and I went to the world's largest mall, I had to cover up my sleeve. They were saying that, even if it's not threatening, or disrespectful, or inappropriate, you still would have to cover up because of the customs and courtesies of being in a Middle Eastern country. There's a zero tolerance towards tattoos.

It's a disrespect towards their customs and courtesies. You know what I mean? It's just one thing, again, because people see us, and they interact with us. We don't want to have that. We don't want to meet people with a nasty taste of, "This is what the American military is. We're a bunch of hard-asses that drink beer and curse a lot, and we look like we just walked out of bed."

After that, you floated back. That whole deployment, nothing really happened. It was either going to Afghanistan, or they said that when President Obama was going to visit Angola back in 2009, they were just going to have us in forces of readiness. It's amazing, when he goes anywhere, there's always something like that.

Part of our just in case something goes down, again, it's interesting to see how that works. How they plan his visits, or major officials' visits, to questionable areas in the world. It's always around when the military presence is going to be there, just in case something happens, there's a 24-hour response force.

That's the thing that I try to explain to people. That's the difference between the Marine Corps and the Army, is the Army still has that same capability, especially their Ranger units and stuff like that. They have would capability as regular infantry, Marine Corps infantry unit, but when we go on, and we do our MEU prep, we're also America's natural disaster relief if they need bodies.

When Katrina happened, the MEU that was doing their build-up, they were on standby, so if anything happened, they actually got called up to do relief efforts down in New Orleans, when Katrina happened and all that stuff. I come back, that deployment lasted from May of 2009 until December of 2009. I was home for a month, then the earthquake happened within the first week of December or January.

I was on my way, trying to go to Afghanistan, with a friend of mine that was senior to me. He was my senior, when I was at boot. Senior is the guy who was there before you get there in boot. They're considered boot in the Marine Corps. At that time, if you never went to combat, or if you don't have a car.

It changes periodically now, since there's less combat missions, and guys being just massively deployed. Being a boot now means you get deployed. Deployed meaning doing a MEU, or going to one of the commands in Africa, or European command, and just staying there for three or four months.

I was trying to go to Afghanistan. I was one signature away, and then poof, when the earthquake happened, that cut that cord short. It was fine because they said, "We set records," because we were 40 hours from standing down to the next MEU taking it.

It was funny, when we got in theater, into Haiti, the general made that decision and said, even though you guys were getting ready to start your workup for the next deployment, because halfway through your deployments, you know what your next deployment was.

At least with our deployment tempo, even with everything slowing down, everything with normally a unit, now, when things slow down, it's once every three years. Roughly once every two to three years you're going to deploy, if you're in combat arms type of unit, because that's how the Marine Corps is orientated.

Everything supports infantry, and because infantry is there to get the job done, everything else revolves around that. Infantry units, with everything being on them, their tempo now is every two to three years. When the general came down, and all that stuff already came out, that these guys, because I just extended because my contract was already up.

I extended for, what was it? A year? I extended it for 12 months, so I could do that deployment, because I had enough time to do the deployment, or I didn't have enough time to do the deployment, but I needed to have 90 days, by the time I got back, to get out of the Marine Corps, because there were issues.

They started to recognize the issues with just dumping guys off 30 days before they get out of the military, until their AAS point.

Ziobro: Were you considering making a career of it?

Houston: Honestly, I was. I wasn't sure, so that's the reason why I extended, was that I knew that I wanted to possibly think about doing the military as a career, especially with the economy. The money was going to be good. My reenlistment bonus was looking to be six figures. Why not?

I enlisted when I was 17, and they're going to change in 2020. Our retirements, I do 20, I'm 37. You know what I mean? What I was going to move into, it's actually going to be a career, because that's the thing that I was realizing. As much as I credit the Marine Corps for the experiences that have guided me into my profession, of what I expect out of my life, and the fact that what I want out of life is not so much having materialistic things.

It's knowing that I'm making a difference, in as little of a way as maybe I'm inspiring someone else. I remember, back to my basic core, the reason why I chose to do what I do is one part selfish, because I like the feeling that it does for me, but also, the reason why I'm successful, because we talked about it last time, about my speech impediment, and the things I had to come through.

If I didn't have people in my life that helped, and pushed, and prodded me, especially my mom and certain teachers that saw my potential, understanding that I had this potential, I didn't realize it until the Marine Corps showed me all these things I didn't have, these personal traits, the leadership qualities, all the intangible factors that the recruiters sell you on, or people talk about.

I may not have, I won't be able to get an IT job being a grunt, right off the bat, but down the road, once I get my skill sets, as we call them. Once I got my degree, with the lessons that I learned, and all that stuff, I could see the big picture. Going back to the original thought, being young, and going in the military, you think every job's going to be like this.

Even though I hated it, certain points of it, I loved it, because I have a sense of purpose each and every day. We hate the routine of being in the military, but when we get out, and it's like six months later, you feel worthless, you know what I mean? That's the thing.

When we go through our issues in transitioning, it's a sense of purpose. That's the thing that I find, with myself, and talking to other vets, that we struggle with. We had a purpose, each and every day. As monotonous as it was for me, when I was out in the field, doing a range, or doing some type of training, and we were back in the rear with the gear… as we say 5:30 wake up, or 5 o'clock wake up, 5:15 get my guys up.

Be in formation by quarter to six. Six o'clock formation, from six to eight PT, from eight to nine shit, shower and shave. From 9 o'clock to 11, get chow, and then wait. That's the infantry life when you're not in the field. Now, you're in the field, normally, a normal work week, from Tuesday through Thursday, or Tuesday through Friday.

That's how it normally works. It's nice when you don't have to be in the field, or when your unit doesn't require you to be in the field when they're in the field, because it's like basically having your boss being on vacation, and you just being left to your own devices.

You're like 20 years old, and for whatever reason, you're getting some dental work, or you're getting some legal work, some paperwork. Your guys are out in the field, and you're just watching Netflix now, or in dominos, while the guys who are getting shit on, because... [laughs] There's all that going on, but that's the biggest thing.

Going and doing infantry, and being a grunt, it's very difficult to understand how your skills, the skill sets, because you do develop skill sets, and being a grunt. The skill sets that you develop, fighting the war that we're fighting, it's what we call counterinsurgency, to understanding that you work in cohesion as a team. That's the reason why.

The great divide of what we do after the ones that do something that unfortunately either A, don't commit suicide or become junkies, it's finance. Make a lot of shit, a little money, working something finance or business orientated, or going back into and altruistic profession.

Teaching, first responders, nursing, social work, stuff like that. It's interesting, because both of them have fairly key dynamics. Being a grunt, and learning how to read people, understanding how to talk to people, understanding how people interact within their environments, understanding people think that when we talk to each other, or I tell my guys to do something, it's like an order.

Other than boot camp, I didn't get orders. As I got more autonomy, as I picked up rank, I got more autonomy, and my relationship with those who were senior to me, especially officers, at certain points amongst my junior enlisted, it was a first name basis.

That's a very key point of how I see, for instance, how that transfers in my relationships with my professors is that I can...that's one of the reasons why I chose here was that I know what a big school's like, and I don't like big school atmosphere. I like my professor actually knows my name and not my student number. You know what I mean? [laughs]

Again, that's something from the military where the Army is your social security number. In the Marine Corps you're at least a last name. It's more personal.

That's the thing being a grunt, it teaches you a lot of interpersonal skills of reading people and teaches you how to manage people and crisis at the same time, whether if it's directly combat-related, like if it's directly combat-related like someone just got hurt, injured, or shot, or killed. You still have to triage that situation while still maintaining your objective of securing the house.

I'm calling in the [inaudible 31:52] while I'm guiding, I'm directing my fire teams as they clear the house. That's the thing of having those type of management skills, those real-life management skills. It's hard as being a grunt understanding how that works in the real world life.

It goes back to those intangible things that aren't quite "those skill sets" that you can put on paper, but people when...

I've noticed when I've put on my resumes now for grad school internships, motivated or inspired, social work, graduate of Monmouth University, veteran, that gets them sparked and they want to hear less about what makes me qualified for this internship for my experiences as an undergraduate from my real life experience being a US Marine.

It's something that I had to gradually accept that that was something that when you're successful at that young of an age, because I didn't realize how successful it was. I never thought that I was successful at joining the military and serving my country. I just thought the cliché, "I'm just doing my job."

It's just something that I felt I needed to do in service of my country, but as now I see those experiences of when I explain to people how I think or a situation how I would...people, an employer will ask me, "How would you solve this situation?"

What's interesting like...and they say there's no real right way to answer this, but it's interesting to see that construct because again it's the experiences. It's having those experiences and especially because we're such a mixing pot of personalities, cultures, everything that you can think of put together.

But, yet at the same time we're different but yet the same because we're all Marines. We come from different backgrounds, and we learn a lot of things about being...in social work we call it culturally competent. Now it's being cultural humility.

That's one of the reasons why I'm very open. I credit in the sense of my experiences being abroad, stress, dealing with different types of people from the United States so then dealing with different types of internationals on that type of spectrum.

It's prepared me in understanding how to read people and understanding not everyone is going to think like me. You know what I mean? Going back to Haiti, within 48 hours we deployed. The earthquake happened. They said we might go to Haiti because it's earthquake shit. I'm like, "Really?"

The guys were worried about the tempo because they already knew halfway through the MEU part when we were floating around they found out that we were going to deploy next fall, so the fall of 2010 they were going to deploy again.

I think it was 2010. It was going to be late fall so it was going to be a year off again, which at that time we were transitioning and having more and more time off. My two combat deployments are what we call seven and sevens which is like the standard rotations at the time.

During the latter phase in Iraq, I was seven months in country seven months out of country. That's how the deployment cycles worked up until about Obama came in, and then Obama a year for the Marines, a year and a half, now two years, three years, now going back to the regular deployment tempos and all that stuff.

They were worried about that. Then the General came and he explained to us. It made sense. We didn't like it, but it made sense. The interesting thing about that guy...I forgot his name...but he was what we call a mustang.

He went from enlisted to officer. He's one of the few. He's one of the special ones because he was enlisted and he got stars. He had two stars.

For us those type of guys, even though they're bigger dicks because it's...I know this is a bad cliché, but the best way I can put it for me or for people to understand it is when enlisted become officers it can be great in being...

They're what we call an enlisted man's officer, or it could be as black people we call as we get pulled over by another black officer, and it's just like they just give you the biggest green weenie every time. Doesn't cut you any slack.

They just make it such a hard time for you and the biggest ball buster. It's either they're great or they're going to be the biggest ballbusters because they have that chip on their shoulder, because our officers told...

My last officer, he told us they tell us not to trust you guys when they go through OCS. I understand because I've seen when the enlisted don't do their job. Again, that's what the difference between the Marine Corp and the Army. The Marine Corp it's very...

I don't want to say laissez-faire but officers really don't do a lot. They just supervise. That messes a lot with officers. On my first deployment, officers didn't go out. Officers didn't go out. As fucked up as it sounds...excuse my language.

As messed up as it sounds what it is it's more...it's harder to replace them than one of us, [laughs] because they have to pull...granted I read every Marine...it's an infantryman goes both ways for enlisted and officers.

Officers on top of going through OCS how we go through MCT, which is Marine Corp Combat which Marine Corp Combat training for people who aren't going to be infantry, officers go through what they call the basic school TBS.

It's basically, the infantry officer course shortened but allows them to, if they're going to be admin, they go through that course before they go through their admin course, so then no matter what, they have the provisional skill sets to run a provisional infantry platoon.

Ziobro: Let me ask you real quick because I've been jotting down follow-up questions like crazy. You noted earlier that initially your preference was to go to Afghanistan rather than Iraq. Why was that?

Houston: It was a very hard moral pull because I remember seeing the Twin Towers fall. I was a freshman in high school.

I was never jumping to conclusions and all that stuff, and war, war, war. I'm more of as I sat there and I thought and I really thought about it because it's one of the things my mom and I had a conversation about how she allowed me to join the Marine Corps because on the basic fact she knew it was for the right reasons.

It wasn't so much for the fact of vengeance, because especially at that point...I enlisted in 2005 so this was four years later. It was more or less a sense of service, and she understood that because I grew up in a retirement home and 99.99 percent of everyone either served in World War II or Korea.

Those were the types of veterans I was dealing with or that I grew up around. That was the common theme. It's just like the reason why I joined the military. Yeah, it's nice for the ladies, but it's another thing what keeps you there and the bonds that keep you there is the sense of you're defending your country and your country needs you.

It's your civic duty. It's part of the social contract that we sign as being a citizen of this country no matter if...granted there's the ethical reasons and going...why I chose...I know I wanted to go to Afghanistan because that's where Al Qaida was.

I had a hard time rationalizing Iraq, other than the standpoint of the limited reading that I was doing on before I joined the military and understanding why they would do that is when you do coin or when you're fighting a guerilla warfare, the first rule is to make it conventional.

Going into Iraq, as messed up as it sounds, it was our way trying to pull a front away from Afghanistan and make it more of a conventional war to where we're drawing all these radicals into basically a kill box where basically we can fight them conventionally, and we did it.

But they realized early on in Iraq that they couldn't do that. Fallujah One and Two they legitimately dug in, and they fought us and we pummeled them. We pummeled them twice. They knew that they couldn't fight a standup war with us like that.

We weren't the Russians. They knew that the only way that they could fight us and all that was stuff was through the suicide bombers and pressure plates and all that stuff.

But going back to the original decision that's the reason why I saw that. I felt that natural cause but I identified that for all intents and purposes I don't believe in expansion of war. I believe that it's not so much to reenact - to enact revenge but more or less to make the situation better.

Because obviously something didn't go well in that country for them to foster something like Al Qaida. It was just more or less seeing something through. That's the issue at hand we see today not seeing thing's through, just half-ass like they're not attacking us anymore so everything must be good.

Ziobro: Do you think that if the surge or the numbers associated with the surge had been maintained that we'd be in a better place right now?

Houston: No. That's the thing. What people...and this is something that...it's funny because when I talk to my veterans about "We should never have left," da, da, da. I'm like, "Dude, you just want to go back and get some. I understand all that."

The surge was a good idea, but with the surge there should have been more handover. As much as we were, it should have been match for match where every soldier that was Marine soldier airman on the ground there should have been a Iraqi or coalition of Middle Eastern countries on the ground to do that.

Because, again, from my standpoint of when I put experiences both in and from the military, especially now with being a social worker, when I work in at-risk environments. It's just like when I see growing up in the environments that I grew up and gang-like and all that, I've seen better things to be done when change happens from within and change not being forced.

That's the thing. It's not so much the surge. Numbers are a great thing, but we realize because we did put in play the ideas from Vietnam that didn't work which was body count. That went right out the window because there is and isn't an official body count.

Most of the body count is kept by human watch like the human global...not Human Health Watch, I want to say.

Ziobro: Human Rights?

Houston: Yeah, Human Rights Watch. The counts are kept through that. That doesn't work. For much as the surge...the surge did and didn't work. It was what I would call a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound. It was a Band-Aid on an open sore that’s still pussing out puss right now.

That's the thing is that there's no dialog. That's the thing. I understood that concept because going back to how I said we created ISIS earlier on in creating that dialog and doing the tribal awakening by having that guy step up and take control and unifying all the people that's creating that cultural dialog.

That's the thing that people don't understand about fighting terrorism, because the scary thing about fighting terrorism- an attack can happen anywhere, anytime, and unless you really want to live in a police state there's no way to prevent any type.

All we can hope is to prevent the big ones. Some nut walks into the mall with an AK-47 I can't prevent that. [laughs] I don't mean to laugh about that, but random acts, a violence like that, you really can't...there's no way to predicting stuff.

The big stuff like a dirty bomb, a chemical attack, something that requires intricacies and all that stuff...and that's the thing that people have to realize. ISIS, they realize big attacks don't work.

Having a guy that rig up three or four of these with explosives, place them in a school and then set that off and then walk through the school and then shoot, that's what they're more or less likely to do. That's what we live in. That's the thing. It's a door once opened can't stop.

People don't understand terrorism isn't a new idea. When the Europeans started leaving Africa...there's a great movie made in the '60s, *The Battle of Algiers*. Literally the guerillas...and it's funny the guerrillas as they call them in those type of movies, or the older movies, the guerillas are what we would call terrorists today.

Then on the other side of that, when we create that dialog and understanding, because one of the things when you fight a war you have to understand all sides, because if you don't understand your enemy's ideology it's fighting with one hand behind your back.

That's the thing we're not realizing or most people are not realizing it's not a body count. This isn't World War II us against Germans and ideology. We're fighting a faith. We're fighting an ideology that's based in faith.

The only way to defeat that ultimately is creating a dialog. It's not a body count. It's not having Seal Team Six go in and rip and raid. It's not all this direct action stuff. It's having that type of change come from within like the Arab Spring.

That's the thing as Americans that we have to realize, just how our own independence was fought over the course of 90 years culminating in our own civil war. From the time of the inception of our country to the time of our civil war there were over 50 battles.

Fighting between us and the Indians, the French, the British, back and forth, all that, going through all that. That's the thing, we don't realize with our own history. All we can prevent is just the big stuff.

Going back to the original question the only thing that's going to fix this situation overall is having the change come from within and having that dialog.

Ziobro: Now do you think that's possible given that as you noted earlier there's this lack of cohesion around an Iraqi identity? We might say, "They're all Iraqis. Why does the Iraqi Army fall apart and why do they cut and run?"

Is there this lack of cohesion around the Iraqi Army because they don't necessarily identify as Iraqis. They identify as Sunni or Shia or Kurds. How do we get around that?

Houston: That's what that is. It's inspiring the next generation, because just as much as we think about how ultimately the changes here socially have happened in America...because we don't

realize how much we've changed over the past 50 years, how much the social fabric of what a family is here in America has changed.

Sadly, unfortunately, what the reason why as much as we had people pushing an agenda for that that one agenda came from within. It was like this isn't right. When we think about the '60s, the '50s and '60s where we saw the start...or actually at the end of World War II we started seeing some social change. Then it just blew up in the '60s.

But it was a storm like the Civil Rights. The storm of the Civil Rights which culminated in the '60s was taking place right at the start of World War II with African Americans starting to unionize, all that type of stuff. That's the thing that we don't realize. Again, we live in an age where everything's so quick and defined.

Going back to that Iraqi identity and going back to how we've changed, they just have to die off. When I say die off, it's that hate. It's that hate because unfortunately, and it's the truth, when we see the great change...

Not to say our grandparents, but the elders that are esteemed like Don Sterling that owns or owned the Clippers. You can't change a 90-year-old man's opinion. You know what I mean? You can't. There's only so much that you can do for someone like that.

My whole thing is when it goes back to that counter narrative. There's no counter narrative. We don't understand what it's like for these people because people don't understand. As much as I love democracy and all that stuff what the greatest commodity that this country has is order People don't know what it's like to live amongst the chaos.

I couldn't imagine living...granted my first year in Iraq was bad, but I couldn't imagine living somewhere like Aleppo, Syria right now. Literally, this would be my home, but there's no roof. There's just like a little piece of scrap metal which when it rains that's where me and my family stay under. There's no roof, and it's just open. This is my house.

Ziobro: And no services.

Houston: Yeah, no services. No basic necessities. No water. Not even services. No water, no food. Sanitation, like where do I pee and poop and all that stuff. That's the thing, it's this dialog that has to come from within.

It's really funny, the house that I live in I call it the international house, because up until a month ago there was not one white person. The whitest person that we had in here was Daryl and he's half white. He's half white and half black.

One of my roommates, he's Middle Eastern. He's Saudi. When the Paris thing...we've always had these conversations because I understood, it's our dialogue.

It's not saying Muslims or Middle Eastern people are going to solve this shit overnight. It's just honestly, it's what we're seeing how the coalition that's fighting in Yemen right now -- it's stuff like that. The coalition of the world against ISIS.

We're seeing that to die off, but the thing about it is with ISIS, ISIS may not really die off, because I tell people that what I fought in Iraq was a guy that he either would get hurt or just need a break. He puts his AK down, I can't engage. I can't arrest him unless he's actively engaging me or I actively see him with bombing material, propaganda, or just a lot of shady stuff. You know what I mean?

That's the thing. That's the thing that ultimately ISIS, probably within the next year, it's going to be like, "ISIS who?" but 5, 10 years they'll probably pick right back up because that's the thing. It's what we saw in Afghanistan. Reason why Afghanistan went, we let them rebuild for almost a decade. They were like, "Let the idiot Americans, da-da-da-da. Go fight again in Iraq."

That's literally what happened, what we saw, especially with the Northwestern provinces of Pakistan and those [inaudible 53:09] , which are religious Islamic schools, where they just learn to hate. They just pray. They hear the Imam. They don't have Imams. They have Mullahs. The Mullahs, "Da-da-da-da-da. Hate America. Hate America. Hate America" for 18 hours a day.

I'm sure I would hate America, too. You know what I mean? Then again, drones. It's hard to love America when there's a random bomb that's going to just drop on my village just because Mullah Omar is my neighbor two houses down. It's just what? "My life, my family's life? Not worth it." It's a very intricate thing.

It's like when you go to public-policy school, and you learn about policy really comes down to number [inaudible 54:07] . How much by cutting this is this going to support the overall goal? That's the thing.

It's a balance of not dictating a dialogue to them, but letting the dialogue be brought amongst themselves. That's what we're starting to see. There's great hope and sense of the Arab Spring, but we have to realize these might be regimes that aren't growing to the West.

They may not be friendly to the West, but there will be dialogue, like how we're seeing now with Iran. With the new president of Iran, with him being less of a hardliner as [inaudible 54:45] -- I've forgotten how to say his name -- but the new guy and Obama's got them to sign nuclear ta-da-da, saying like, "We will make no nuclear weapons. Our nuclear materials will only be for power."

It's just running that dialogue. Compromise isn't weakness. It's something that needs to change in America because, honestly, we can't afford to fight these wars. It's going to come down to the point, and we started to see now, where it's scary is the war profiteering. Contractors. That's something that's very scary.

I have friends that contract. I got offered a couple contracting gigs, but, from my standpoint ethically, I couldn't do it. Money has never really phased me. I've always etched out to live very basically to where my needs are very basic. I live off $1,000 a month. It's nothing. I'm very frugal. Most of that's my rent.

I don't have a need, but it's hard for guys that...They're gunslingers, as we call them, and they make $10,000 a month or if go over to Somalia and just sit at an NGO office. It's hard. It's hard to give up that lifestyle, because it's something that you're good at and the money's good.

If I'm making $10,000 a month just sitting around, granted in Somalia, of all places, at an NGO, Doctors without Borders, just make sure no one crazy runs in, that's not bad. What happens when the guys go in and they start doing what we call a direct action win? When they're contracted out, the 13 hours for Benghazi.

Those were military contractors, and that's scary. I'm grateful that they were there for doing what they did, but at the end of the day we shouldn't come to rely because that's a very gray area of war propaganda.

We saw it with Dick Cheney and him being the former president of KBR and all that stuff. You have that type of influence even though what was most shocking was he didn't have any stock, but what he had was his daughters. His family members had. I'm like, "That's just a little too..." You know what I mean?

You shouldn't become a politician to make money, but he's a career politician who has worked his way up from being Bush Senior's Secretary of Defense to being the Vice President and in between holding various points in corporations that have military interests.

Ziobro: I mean, this is nothing new, though. Even following World War I, there were congressional inquiries, the Nye Commission investigating the so-called Merchants of Death and...

Houston: It's funny when we talk about this because when we see the commoditization of war you're losing the ethical principle of the reason why wars are fought. It's over the principles of ideas, not profit. The idea of war is not profit, or it shouldn't be so much the idea of gaining resources because we live in a world where we can share.

We're understanding there's a concept of renewable energy and resources, but it's a very gray and scary world when you start to think about things in that way. Eisenhower, the godfather of the military industrial complex, warned against it. What he was saying...

Ziobro: [sneezes] Excuse me.

Houston: That's all right. Was that a sneeze? Bless you.

Ziobro: Allergies. Sorry. [laughs]

Houston: With what he was saying was even though this is good because our economy's booming and all this, it's also bad because it comes to the point where we almost have to go to war to support this habit. You know what I mean? When we look at American history, as much as World War II was great, it was also very bad. It made us very cocky because when we look at how often...

There's a great Ted Talk that talks about this and being a vet today. When we think about vets, we think about from Vietnam era back, the population between 9 to 10 percent. 9 to 11 percent from World War II to Vietnam era, people that served of the population. With us we're around about one percent.

With me being combat arms or combat-arms-related, it's like 0.001 percent. It's from that. You have less and less of people that are involved with going to war that have this personal connection of, "My uncle served. My dad served. My brother serves." You don't have that. You have such a small minority that, since the end of the draft, the military's been called on close to a hundred times.

Most of that is from the idea that no matter any time that we're deployed something can go wrong, and you could die. Within the past 40 years of having an all-volunteer force and making it work, but we started to see that it was squeezing a little too tight. We're focusing on using contractors a little bit too much.

We actually use the military more because there's less of that human connection to it of, "Well, my dad served" and him talking about it. It's just like you literally lose the sense, even talking to the World War II...every time a veteran and I talk, especially the guys that saw a lot of combat, you start to lose the sense, especially the guys.

It's interesting. When we talk about World War II vets, we don't understand. What we're starting to see, most of the guys that we're starting to see pass on now are the latter part of the war. They're not the guys that were there for the full four years. Those guys are dying out really, really quick.

It's really interesting how when I talk to them and I can have those conversations because we have those shared experiences, especially guys that were in the Pacific and the guys that did the full four years in the Pacific, they'll tell me, "After Pavuvu I was done." That was like a year or two. I have another two more years.

You get tired. You get tired, and you get burned out, and you think they're this great generation, which they are, because they lived through a lot, but the reality of the situation is, being at war sucks. You know what I mean? It's hard to communicate that when I think, on the campus, of actual veterans who have served. there's only 40 of us.

I know there's people that qualify for the benefits. There's around, altogether, like 90, but out of that 90, there's only 40 veterans that served either in the Air Force Guard, Marine Corps, Army, or whatever. When you look at 40 out of, I know we're not a big school, so we'll just do full time undergrad population.

Ziobro: Roughly five or six thousand.

Houston: Yeah. 40 people, compared with World War II, guys going on the GI Bill where that would be more like one to two percent. There'd be 100 to 200 vets, out of the five or six thousand. Any more questions?

Ziobro: Tell me, when you talked about the ambiguities of your mission, when you went to Haiti, was there a little bit of a sense of relief like, "We're going, we're doing humanitarian work"?

Houston: Yeah. That's what guided me towards where I'm at, and my career choice, because like I said, I wasn't really sure about reenlisting in the Marine Corps, because the culture started

to change. It started to change from being a brotherhood, to being a corporation, because of the numbers, because the war was slowing down.

They were going to cut the fat from the top, per se, and I wasn't worried about myself being able to reenlist, establishing myself to have a good, long career to where I could retire, but I was worried about the fact of how the Marine Corps fucked people up. We all knew, especially being combat arms, going to the psychiatrist, or the therapist, you would be looked at differently even though the command says...

For the most part, if you need to go see the shrink, or whatever, they'll let you go see the shrink or whatever. For me, I had a hard time managing medications, arranging medications, and being on a sleep aid, and not being able to get eight hours of sleep a night. Being woken up halfway between of the eight hours, being an undead zombie, and being to the point of seeing guys with the substance issues now.

Just about everyone, technically, in the Marine Corps is an alcoholic, because by the standard of it, if you drink more than six beers in one setting, over the course of four hours, if you drink more than six beers, you're an alcoholic.

When a guy gets a DUI because he's hurt, and he doesn't understand how to identify the struggles of what he's processing, of what he's going through, because that's the thing. When we have our issues, we're not processing. That's the thing, is that we understand that a trauma has happened, but we're not identifying that, we don't accept it.

It's somewhere to like a rape victim, in the sense that she's traumatized, but she's not aware of the trauma, or her reactions to it. From the culture of the brotherhood of what I originally saw of, we understand that war messes with people in different ways, we're not going to fuck with everyone that gets a little too drunk, or gets a DUI.

We're not going to force guys out, because we understand this is the wake-up call. This is the wake-up call, pull your head out your ass. You need to get help. Instead of doing that, it's, "Get the fuck out." Being a social work major, I've seen the stats, and I know what the stats are, because I've seen it.

It's zero tolerance. Marijuana, is for weed. Not even for the hard stuff like coke, heroin, all that stuff, but weed. For something that relaxes you, you know what I mean? It is habit-forming, and all that stuff, blah, blah, blah, but for weed, instead of trying to understand why you're using, instead of trying to have the whole clinical experience of what you would see in the private sector.

When I worked in the oil field, for instance, there was a zero tolerance of alcohol. If you had an alcohol problem, they would pay for rehab. You know what I mean? I understood that was an issue. That was an issue of saying that they weren't taking care of people.

You're so zoned in, and you don't realize how you're interacting, because I'm seeing how being in a relationship now, it's definitely changed my perspective on how I see myself, and a sense that I'm not always a nice guy, because my mom, she's come out and told me that there's certain points when we were living together, after I got out, where she said she was frightened.

It wasn't frightened in the sense, she was just frightened because I wasn't sure what I was going to do. She saw that I was angry, and I had things I needed to work on, but I wasn't sure on how to work on them. I knew that being in the military, that wasn't the best environment for that. It just wasn't.

Going to the original question, it was definitely a huge relief of going to Haiti, because it's what we call the cycle of giving humanitarian aid, because it's the ribbons and all that stuff. As far as, that's something cool to do as a grunt.

Ziobro: Give me an overview of what you guys did in Haiti.

Houston: Basically, for the first few weeks, we busted our ass, and then after that, it was just waiting for Obama to sign the executive order to send us back. Just as much as it takes an order for us to go there, it takes an executive order for us to go back.

Ziobro: Are you maintaining order? Are you rebuilding? What are you doing?

Houston: Basically, we did a lot of medevac, hazard evac through various means from transporting them to the LPAC or doing air. We did that, that was the large part, and then just food. Grand-Goave is where we're at. It was about 10 to 15 kilometers outside of Port-au-Prince. We couldn't go to Port-au-Prince, because being a Third World country, everything was toppled over, and there was nowhere to put us.

They chose Grand-Goave because it was like a happy point of putting us close to Port-au-Prince if they need us, but yet still reaching out into the local areas to see what the extent of the damage was. With doing the [inaudible 69:21] , doing the hazard evacs was a huge thing because we had the medical ship there with over 1,000 beds, all that stuff.

Some of the cool medevacs that I did, there was a lady who a week before was in a car accident. Her nipple was cut off in the car accident, and it was pus-y. We medevac-ed her. It was really kind of gross. I'm not sure if you've ever done any wound care or anything like that, but especially with pus, something like that, it was near gangrene. It was definitely infected. The smell, the rotting flesh, it's one of those things that sticks with you.

Rotting flesh and burning flesh are two smells that will stick with you. It was taking a lot for me not to puke, because it was just me and the doc taking turns. We didn't have any respirators on, so we were taking turns literally pumping pus out while we're waiting for the casualty vac.

This other lady, she was fucking tough. Part of her wall collapsed, and she had a compound fracture of her femur. Basically, it just broke the skin, and we couldn't get her out immediately. What we did was, while we were waiting for her, me and doc, and this other kid, we fashioned a traction splint MacGyver style.

We weren't sure if she was able to get seen, plus it was the fact of wound care, and infection. Of controlling the breach site so that stuff doesn't get in there, and all that stuff, and trying to make it as clean as possible so she doesn't get the leg amputated.

With the lady that had the nipple sliced off, her other breast, come to find out, had a breast tumor. It had a lump in the...The docs doubly saved her life. Doc got a [inaudible 71:13] , he got three [inaudible 71:14] for all the medevac stuff, because that's what we mainly did.

Since we were the stable team, we had rucksacks that not everybody else got. We had to buy them, like everyone else in the military. [laughs] What we did was, we would go up into the mountains and do these assessments of the mountain people.

I call it mountains, but huge-ass hills. Huge-ass hills. We do these assessments, and it's really interesting because so far in that we were able to see the border. We were able to see it, but once you get up into the highlands of Haiti, you see they start speaking in offshoot of Spanish, and a Creole.

It's like how we have Spanglish, but it's French Creole and Spanish mixed together. It's really interesting. That was it. We were on a defunct beach resort. We had what we called the beach bums and the rock warriors. The rock warriors were everyone that lived on the inside of the compound of the beach resort, and then the beach bums were the guys that literally lived on the beach.

I started off as a rock warrior, then I migrated to the beach. It was a four month, we call it the "Haitian vacation." It was really cool. One of you people, the history people came down, and we made the typical sign of going home. Someone had, "New York City, 2,300 miles." Someone had, "Naples, Florida, 800 miles." Someone had, "Albuquerque, New Mexico, 3,500 miles."

Actually took that, because they take that stuff, and they actually put it in the Marine Corps Museum into the storage. There's a shitload of shit that they just collect, that sits in the storage. It's like the Smithsonian, how you go to DC and half the Smithsonian stuff is just shit that sits in a giant closet.

Ziobro: Yeah, 90 percent of a museum's collection is in storage.

Houston: They just rotate it. That was pretty much it.

Ziobro: You did four months there, and then you came to CONUS?

Houston: Yeah, I came back to CONUS. I was trying to go back to Afghanistan with my limited time left, I had seven months left. I was trying to do a possible, partial deployment, but within that time of me trying to go back out, they just kicked me out to California where I was at desert warfare instructor at Twentynine Palms, California, and did that for the last six months.

Basically, what that is, it's what we call Mojave Viper. That's the newer name for it. I call it CAX, because CAX stands for combined arms exercise. What it is, it's the full integration of the Marine Corps air and ground task force of an infantry unit with the air and tank.

It's the MAC, the ground, the air, all as one. You get to see a lot of cool stuff, being an instructor. I got to go out on, since I was in a sniper platoon as my last unit, when the recon guys and other battalion sniper units would go out, I would still go out with them.

I would hike up into literally the mountains, because that's what's out there. It's the desert. It's the Mojave Desert, so it's these mountains. I'm up there with them, just for their whole mission, because what they do is, what snipers and recon do is before the main element, the main ground element, they just do reconnaissance.

They'll sit up there, and take pictures, and send them back over a Toughbook, a laptop. They might do a sniper initiated attack, which is basically the first shot is done by the sniper. It takes out the command element, like an officer, you'll just shoot the officer, it's just like, "What the fuck," and then all hell rains loose.

They'll also spot rounds for artillery and air, as far as just calling air support, and all that stuff. Also, I got to do the integration of what we call the mount stuff. That's one of the great things, again, that separates the Marine Corps from the Army, is we don't buy.

The Marine Corps doesn't invest in fancy weapon systems that augments the soldier. What the Marine Corps does, instead of putting into, the Army has the Future Warfighting System, which is great, but instead of buying equipment, the Marine Corps reinvests into the biggest weapon, the smartest weapon that it has, which is the actual Marine, and through the training.

The training that you do receive at CAX is top notch because it is live fire. There's parts of it where it's kind of like a paintball thing, but a large part of it is what we call the CAX part, the combined arms, where you work from the platoon attack, to the company attack. From the company attack, to now they have a battalion attack.

That's really cool, to see where you have all the elements of the infantry battalion, plus air, with engineers, doing their breaches, because that's really cool. If you ever see a [inaudible 76:54] go off, what it is, is it's a tank that shoots this 500-foot line charge of C4.

What it's used for is to clear mine fields and obstacles. When you see that go off, and then they have what they call the APOP, which is the man portable version of that, where some unlucky schmuck carries that on his back. He lays it down on the ground, and what it does is it clears concertina wire, breaches that part, and shoots out, does all that stuff.

You do all that, and then you finish off into what they do with their MEU, I'm going to the MEU camp for a couple of weeks, and they do our three blocks of warfare. It's like clear, hold, secure. Clear, so you clear the city, you hold the city, meaning that you reestablish government after you clear it, and then you just secure it when you're doing security operations for the joint forces. That pretty much summed up my Marine Corps career.

Ziobro: When you're at Twentynine Palms, I know you said that, are you OK?

Houston: Yeah, I'm good.

Ziobro: You were getting a bad taste in your mouth about?

Houston: The bad taste in the Marine Corps, that started when I ended my second appointment, I started seeing things I didn't like. On the second appointment, Sergeant Martinez, he bit the bullet. Some of those guys were drinking, which is a no-no in country, unless it's unit organized. We do get two beers on the Marine Corps birthday. Not near-beers, but actual, real beers.

What happened was, some of those guys, because we were getting hooch, everyone was getting hooch from the contractors, because they were these British contracting guys. Part of the contract was, they would get a pallet of rum and whiskey, like a giant pallet for them.

What they would do is, they would keep a little stash for themselves, and then they would sell the rest to the base. I'm talking about charging $100 for a $20 bottle of whiskey. It's not even great stuff, it's not like Jack or anything like that. Sergeant Martinez, he went down with the ship, with his guys.

What happened with him, he got frocked. Meaning that you get promoted to Staff Sergeant, or to Gunnery Sergeant. For him, it was Staff Sergeant. He was high tenure, which means this was his last chance to pick up. Instead of taking the promotion right then and there, he wanted to finish his deployment out, he wanted to finish out with them.

Even though he was frocked with Staff Sergeant, he stayed on as the squad leader so he maintained that rank of Sergeant. His guys got caught drinking. Again, that's a poor choice. You have a poor choice, or poor leadership of your guys for them to even think that they can drink.

Instead of getting promoted to Staff Sergeant, he got NJP-ed. He got forced reduction. Instead of picking up Staff Sergeant E6, he got broken down to E4, and he got forced out. That's the stuff I'm talking about. Something that, yes, he was responsible, and it does show possibly lacks in command.

He wasn't a part of that. You punish his guys, not him. Granted, the officer that called that in, he was stupid about it because what it was, it's what we call the pit team, which are the hand-over guys. What they do is they cross-train the Iraqi Army guys, and stuff like that, and how to clear rooms and all that stuff, policing techniques and all that.

He wasn't even a boot. He was a First Lieutenant, and he said that over the radio, and everyone heard. It's open. Everyone from, not just our battalion commander, because he called it into our company officer, but the RCT commander, the theater commander. Everyone hears that.

Now they're forcing the hand into that, and that's just the stuff that I didn't like. I didn't like some of the things that, from my standpoint, of guys getting forced out, issues that were forced out, and you were just perpetuating the cycle. You're pretty much loading the gun in their hand when you force them out that way.

When you know that they have a substance issue, and this is the only structure that they have. When you take that away, it's straight to the bottom. Of course they're either going to OD, shoot themselves, commit suicide, or drink themselves into oblivion for the next 30 years and never get clean.

That's where, because they teach us to be our brother's keeper, and ultimately it's up to us, to the individual to maintain our relationships with each other, and helping each other out. At the same time, the Marine Corps shouldn't load the gun in these guys hands when they're identified with these issues.

Instead of a guy, at least, I understand is still in the military, but when a guy gets a DUI, put him in SARPS automatically. That's the substance abuse rehab program that they have. Make it a real

SARPS program, where you actually make him do an IOP. Not Hood style IOP, they talk to the corpsman for half an hour about not drinking, and why do they drink.

I'm talking about actually a real rehab IOP, and something that they should do, that they should have one base. Every base should have a rehab, because that's a legitimate issue. Most of it it's alcohol, but there are other illicit, bad substances like coke, heroin, a lot of pills, painkillers, and stuff like that.

For instance, I got addicted to painkillers, not so much for the point of the pain, but more or less because of the sleep, Flexeril. I messed up my back. I fell out of a helicopter, and I hit a tree going at 30 miles an hour. This was on the workup to the third deployment on the MEU, and instead of not going on that deployment, I just toughed it up.

I told my corpsman, and my corpsman comes back later with a plastic baggie, a crack bag full of Flexeril, and he's like, "Just come back to me when you need some more." He is not giving that to me, it's just he understands that I want to stay in the fight, and he knows that if I go through the proper channels...

He knows my back is messed up, but he knows that I want to stay in the fight. It's like a catch 22, when you have stuff like that, where you have easy ways to get addicted to alcohol and painkillers. It's so easy, because your corpsman will literally do that for you. When they especially know you're not an addict in the first place, they'll hook you up like that and just like, "Here." Anything else?

Ziobro: Tell me about your out processing.

Houston: Out processing? It was done well. It was done well, because of the sense that I had bought myself time, extending forward 18 months, because it was 18 months. It wasn't a year. It allowed me, because I had a whole year to think about what I was going to do before I got out. That's one of the things that I credit with, it was a lot better than some of the guys.

With my first deployment, not only did we deploy because we're only at 50 percent manpower. For instance, a normal infantry platoon is 45 guys, and that's not even with the weapons attachments, because you've got 13 guys in the squad. It's roughly, you have 39 guys, plus your three corpsman, and then three RTS, you have a platoon sergeant, and all that stuff. You're pushing close to 50 guys.

Our platoon only had, not including the weapons attachment, 17. [laughs] You know what I mean?

Ziobro: Yeah, it's back to the numbers problem that we talked about again and again.

Houston: The way that they were able to deploy, because they were waiting on more bodies, but the commander wanted to go really bad was, they did what they call 120-day Marines, or 90-day Marines. They allowed guys that were going to get processed out within 90 days of getting out.

Normally, if you're within a year of getting out, you're not supposed to deploy, because by the time you're deployed, you're only going to have five months of deployment, five to six months

between the workup and all that stuff. Most of the guys, by the time they deploy, had six months, so they had to deploy for literally 90 days.

They worked with us, they just stayed on the main FOB as the security element. That numbers thing, when I think now about not getting sleep, and I think about how tired I am in college, I put it into reference of, we did the math. There's like 168 hours in a week. Of actual, real sleep, we averaged between 40 and 45 hours, because what we would do is, since we were so short numbered, it would be post, react, and then rest.

Post was you're on post, you're watching, you're securing the area. React was more or less being on patrol, and then rest was like being on react/patrol. It depends on what our numbers were that day. It's just pretty much working 24 hours a day, and literally sleeping 20, 30 minutes at a time.

When I say actually sleep, I'm talking about actually being able to take my boots off, you know what I mean? For the most part, I always had cammies and my boots on, and the only thing I had to throw on would be my, depending on what was happening, my flak, and my Kevlar. Or if we're going to go out real quick, I can throw on my blouse.

Ziobro: What did you do between when you got out, and when you came to Monmouth?

Houston: I drilled for oil.

Ziobro: How long was that?

Houston: Two years, I drilled for oil. That was part of the social experiment. I realize that, they talk to us quite a bit, because when we come back from each deployment, they talk to us about what it's like when you get out. Even though you're not getting out, it's just like when you go back home, and all that stuff.

I understood that it was different. Being in the military in general, there's a different process. You're so regimented, your process of doing things and all that stuff, it's all there. I knew I needed to reconnect with my generation, because going from my first deployment to my second deployment, and my age did not match up at all.

It was literally like going from 19 to 30, because I had a squad. I had my own personal issues that I wasn't fully aware of, because I wasn't accepting of them yet, of the fact that I wasn't processing some of the experiences that I had gone through. I was dealing with all of that, and I just felt old.

I felt really, really mature, because like I told everyone, I couldn't have a bad day. I had people depending on me. I had 12 guys depending on me. I can't say I can't get up this morning, I can't say I'm not up to this today. I can't relinquish.

I started in the oil field because I was kind of interested in something, doing engineering. My dad's a chemical engineer. My uncle, he's a computer engineer. It was great money, right off the bat, making 60 grand a year, only working two weeks out of the month, six months out of the year. If I wanted to make more, I just worked more.

I moved to Morgantown, West Virginia, West Virginia University. My best friend, he was going there as a criminology major.

Ziobro: Were you going to school?

Houston: No. What it was, I wanted to see what it was like to be a big school, because he did the walk-around method. It's funny. He did six years of community college in two and a half years, at West Virginia. It was a process. It was a process for him, but it was cool being older, but not being too old.

It's nice being 22, and doing college things, because you're still of that mindset, but you understand how things work, because you've been drinking and partying a little bit longer than the counterparts. It was really cool, living out there, working in the oil field, but I kind of got burned out.

It started to wear on me, the stress. I wasn't addressing some of the personal issues I was going through, and stuff like that. I decided to quit. I knew I had my GI Bill. I started that as soon as I got out of the Marine Corps, from January 2011 just to about fall of 2012, I did it till, so around 18 months.

It was really good money. Even the first year, I broke over just about 60, and of the 9 to 10 months that I worked in 2012, I made close to 80. I would just work over, and ask people to work over. There was a couple of stretches there where I would work two weeks on, and then instead of going home for my regular two weeks, I would just work through. I would literally work through six weeks, and then take two weeks off.

It would be nice stacking that money, because you're literally working 12 hours a day. What it really comes down to, it comes down to about 16 hours between transportation, eating and showers, because we'd go out.

We'd get there, go out to the rig the first night, because I worked the night shift, work the night shift, come back, shit, shower, shave, eat breakfast possibly, and then be in bed by 8, 9 o'clock, wake up by 3:00, and be in the van by 4:30, 5 o'clock to start my shift at 6:00, because we would go out in the vans.

I did that, and then in that time frame that I stopped, between when I was going to school, and I started some online courses, because I wanted just to try it out.

Ziobro: Via what university?

Houston: I was at community college, because I consulted a lot of my friends, and from my own experience, I knew I was out of college, or I was almost out of high school for 10 years, so I knew I needed more of a personal challenge. I didn't want to set myself up for failure.

I knew I needed, before I walked around that day and said, "All right." My first two classes I took, I took Intro to Anthropology and I took Psych 1. That time, that's when I really started going through changes, because it's the first time in almost 10 years I stopped. I wasn't doing anything. I didn't have a job of some sort, where I wasn't in school.

It was the first time that I was in school, but I was taking online classes, so it kind of does and doesn't count. That was going down, and I just started noticing that there were some changes that I needed to address, that I needed to go through. Then I started working. I enrolled for the spring of 2013. Spring of 2013 was my first college semester.

Ziobro: Here?

Houston: No. My first college semester here was fall of 2014. Fall of 2014 was my first college semester here.

Ziobro: You did you online classes via what community college?

Houston: I did my first two classes at a volunteer community college, all online. When I started in the spring of 2013, that was my first actual college experience, in-class experience.

Ziobro: Was that at Burlington again?

Houston: All my classes were at Burlington, except for, before the summer I came here, is a didn't offer one of the courses that I needed for a prereq for a class I was going to take in the fall. I took the class at community college. I think that was another weird psych class or something.

I transferred, primarily all my credits came from Burlington and community college. I did have some credits that transferred from my military experience, along with when I was on the boat, doing the MEU, I did take some classes from instructors that were on the boat, that were actual officers, because that's how the universities do it.

They look at the prelims, make the officers an adjunct. They'll teach their specialty. The [inaudible 94:34] , they did mostly the math classes, because that's mostly math savvy. I did two history classes, and my composition class. I did that, those transferred over. My decision in choosing Monmouth stemmed from the idea of, I really wanted to go to San Diego State, but San Diego State, they were saying that I would need to do all the stuff.

I knew that I was on a timetable, because my GI Bill was only good for 36 months once I started. It's good for 15 years, I can intermittently start and stop it, but that 36 months transfers out to 4 years, because you're only in school technically for 9 months out of the year. We divide that, it comes out to four years, 36 divided by 9. It comes out to nine months.

Ziobro: You had nine months? What did you say?

Houston: Basically, the way it works is that you have 36 months, starting off.

Ziobro: You can cram as many credits as you want into that?

Houston: Basically, the way that it works, since Monmouth, the way our GI Bill works is it goes off of your whole record in the state school. For me, my tuition is based off of Rutgers New Brunswick for in-state tuition, which right now is $19,500.

What happened, since I got accepted here at Monmouth, or if I got accepted at an institution that my tuition wasn't going to fully be covered by my GI Bill, I would hope that the school would have what they call a Yellow Ribbon program.

Ziobro: Monmouth does?

Houston: Yes. The Yellow Ribbon program, what basically happens is whatever the VA throws up, the school also matched. For instance, since Monmouth is $35,000 a year, and I'm short by $17,000, the Yellow Ribbon from VA covers $8,500, and I've got $8,500 from the school. For grad school, I get the same amount.

I remember they said, for my academic accomplishments, I get $6,500 for the year, which isn't bad, because it's only a one-year program, and it's $35,000 for the year. That's one of the things that shows the beach, the location. It's still similar to the fact of being in San Diego State, being in Southern California, but instead of being in Southern California, I'm on the Jersey shoreline.

My choice of degree came from, I originally wanted to do conflict resolution. I was a political science major, and then me and my mom just started having these conversations, and she said, "You do all that stuff with social work." It's in part true, because I've seen my mom, even though she's a property manager, she is more or less a social worker, because she's been a nonprofit property manager for 30 years.

Understanding how to do tax credits, HUD standards, Section 8, all of that stuff to get people properly housed, that's in the social work, altruistic type of mindset. That's something that's really influenced me, and my mom was saying, since I was doing conflict resolution, which was great, basically conflict resolution is like getting a degree in oral discourse.

Basically, learning how to argue things, but instead of argue, seeing the solution in it. That's how I crossed over into social work. I loved my experience here. It's fueled me. As a social worker, it's not so much learning these skill sets, because you're not going to learn everything you need to know, how to be a social worker from school.

You're going to learn it from your experiences from dealing with clients. Putting that together, what being or studying social work has done, it's guided me. It's giving me a focus of how I want to help people. From my experiences of being in a clinical setting, in a sense of my first internship was in a rehab, to my second internship being more of a macro setting, in working for an aid services organization in Asbury Park Center.

Basically, what I do there is property management. We have a residence, we have 25 beds, which we provide a format of healthcare in housing, unsafely housed individuals who have either AIDS or HIV. seeing that perspective of the housing, then connecting people to emergency funds who have AIDS and HIV, that are at risk of losing their housing.

We help out with rent, and utility payments. Recently, with this new grant that we just signed on, we're also doing short-term, kind of like our own version of Section 8.

It's to get people into better access, or when there's a shortfall into, for instance, if they weren't on Section 8 in the first place, and they lost their job, or have some type of benefits reduction, if

there's some shortfall with their rank, we can give them the equivalent of a Section 8 voucher while we're waiting for actual section 8, or some type of housing program for them.

Having that, that's given me more of a broad perspective, and possibly where I am. I shouldn't say possibly. Once I'm done with my study program here, I'm looking to go into public health, and actually getting my BSN in being a public health nurse, just with a social work background.

From my experiences of being in the micro clinical, addictions, and even some of the clinical experience from this macro internship, it's shaped me into understanding that I do better, more objective, dealing with objective problems of, "Damn, your arm's broke," or, "You have high blood pressure." It's identifying.

Ziobro: There's a concrete solution to that problem.

Houston: Yeah, there's a concrete solution, but it's an actual, real area of need for at-risk populations, whether you have AIDS and HIV, or whether if you're African-American male who makes less than $30,000 a year.

When you look at those type of health statistics, the social and demographic information of your population, you see the correlations of how poverty influences health, and everything else.

It's being my experience of here, and not being in such a rigid place like Rutgers, where they were saying, "Oh my God, I love Rutgers." My roommate, she loves Rutgers, but she's here, and she's like, "What a precious little place." One thing I didn't like about Rutgers is that I went to Rutgers open house. They're so rigid.

They're so rigid with who you do your internships with. Here, all I need to do is, I just need to make sure that my supervisor has their CEUs for supervision. That's it. The school doesn't, per se, have to have a working relationship with them, and that's what I like about going to a smaller school.

It's definitely influenced my experiences, because I may not have the type of experience on a macro level of working with an ASO like the one I worked with, where I had a lot of autonomy to do what I wanted to do. I set my work schedule of how I wanted to address people, and all that, instead of going to Rutgers, where they would say I couldn't have gone to the center. I would've had to go to Meridian Health.

I would've had to go through a healthcare system, and that's not me. I'm more grassroots, and that's where the social work buyer comes from. It's more of a grassroots community effort, and that's what I'm associated with, and that's what I'm grateful for with being at Monmouth.

Ziobro: How would you describe your relationship with your professors? Do you think they're aware you're a veteran? Do you want them to know?

Houston: It's something that, there is some times where, with certain professors, the relationship was contested. That's more or less me growing as a person, and learning how to communicate. I had some issues. Last fall, the spring semester of my second semester here, I had some personal issues with my medications that I was on, and also my mother had a massive heart attack.

My mother's divorced, and so I'm the surrogate husband, practically. It was hard for me because I started missing classes at the beginning of the semester.

Like I said, I was having issues, personal issues with my medications. Then I was dealing with my mother having heart complications which that fully led to a stent that they placed in to correct the issue at hand, collapsing. That's almost killing my mother with another whole massive heart attack.

I'm dealing with all this while still taking 19 credits, you know what I mean? There was a professor that we didn't see eye to eye, and it was in language.

I'm a very language oriented person, how you address me because I'm not some 20-something kid. If I'm telling you something, and it takes a lot, for me, as a veteran, I'm realizing to open up and to tell people. At that time, I was being very clannish. I wasn't talking. I wasn't talking to anyone.

I wasn't explaining to people fully what the full picture...they were getting pieces of what was happening. On top of that I got a DUI, while also trying to maintain my internship, go to school, and take care of my mom. I have no [inaudible 104:26] . [laughs] You know what I mean? I didn't do as well as I wanted to.

But at the same time, at the end when everything finally fell apart, and actually sat down with Dean Mama, Dean Mama said -- because she got the emails from my professors -- she asked me, "What's going on? You're not talking to your professors. There's some issues. You can't keep doing this." I had everything documented. You know what I mean?

When I started having problems, what it was, it was treatment issues through the VA care. The outpatient clinic here is very undermanned. They have over 5,000 clients.

Ziobro: Which clinic are you using?

Houston: Ten Falls. Fortunately, I've always maintained my relationship with my primary clinician in Philly because I'm used to going to big hospitals, because I'm five minutes from Philly when I'm down in South Jersey. Here, I would have to go to, not Newark, but East Orange if I really wanted to see someone on a regular basis.

Compared to there, they would overbook or cancel me, or I would have to cancel because I couldn't put in the time windows because of transportation issues.

That was something that I...but as much as I had...I truly did enjoy the vast majority of my relationships with my professors. Even with some of the professors that I did struggle with, I appreciate those relationships even more because it's more of a realistic perception of dealing with someone in a real-life situation of possibly, "That might be my boss."

I may not see eye-to-eye to them, and I have to communicate when I'm having a breakdown in communication with them. As much as my life blew up in front of me, I've been able to rationalize that experience or those set of experiences. It's literally how I look back at my military experience and say, "Wow, I lived through that."

Now as a veteran civilian I'm like, "Wow, life really took a shit on me at the start of 2015, but I survived it. It's 2016 and I'm graduating, and I'm starting grad school in the fall." It just showed me from that experience because, as veterans, we don't really connect with going to college. We don't really connect with that.

Now I connect with it even more so than my friends that have graduated. It's like, "Wow, I have a degree now, so we have something in common with you." As a veteran, I have more in common with a convict than with another regular person, a regular citizen because we're institutionalized just like a convict.

We're used to a routine and high stress environment where, granted, the stress is more or less work-related, but it's similar because it's fairly instinctual and primal in a sense. Inmates, their stress is survival stress. It's a similar type of stressors or how we react to fight-or-flight, the type of thinking, the violence of action. All that type of stuff comes out.

Ziobro: Do you have difficulty relating to your fellow students in a given class, because what they think is so stressful does not compare to your understanding of stress?

Houston: I did, but deal with it, and I'm more engaged with understanding of...I have my own experience. That's like the whole thing is you get into this mentality that's like, "Fuck them, they don't know anything." We have to realize, because it's something...I always talk to them about. I'm like, "There are some issues with a veteran lounge."

Somewhere I've got to raise Kristen [laughs] another dependent of a veteran. We're having issues and it's a sense of we're such a small community and we need to have our safe space. Our safe space used to be upstairs in Jeff's old office, now Dennis's office.

Ziobro: Do you like the new space downstairs?

Houston: Yeah, it's a good place to have our meetings. It's a good place for the guys to study. The reason why we got those computers in the first place was Jeff, when he was here, he identified the need of like, "Damn, I need to get computers.

"When they come in, they're like 20 minutes from a class starting and they need to print out a paper, and I got jackasses out here who are just on Facebook, and eBay, and Amazon just looking at stupid shit." It's understanding that. It's having that thought process, thinking.

There was an issue of, like I said, with the veterans and how we're interacted with and how people deal with us. Dennis, our younger Dennis, Curko, he's actually deploying soon. We're having a going away party for him. He's deploying in July. He cursed out a kid.

This kid literally said, "I know you guys..." Don't quote me on this, but it's something very similar to this, I know you guys risk your life for us and you might die, but I don't think you deserve your own space. [laughs] Dennis is maybe 34 or 35, and he just told him to get the fuck out. [laughs]

It was so funny and he cursed him. That's the stuff that we deal with. When we do our 9/11 Memorial thing, something that I've struggled with, and I've always complained to the

administration about, is when we read off the names, both civilian and military. It's disrespectful when people are talking.

I know it's kind of a hard place, but it's just should aware if people are reading off names, and we have great big old signs that say, "Memorial," going on today, this and that. That's something that kind of irks us. It's little things like that.

Other things, like adjusting here, I understood that this was going to be a process, and this has been a five-year process to be where I'm at. That's the thing I try to explain to people when they talk to me and they see where I'm at. I'm like, "I wasn't always like this. It took a process for me to accepting this is my new reality. I'm not in the Marine Corps."

RJ Reynolds will say when we get out of the Marine corridor, we never stop being Marines, but we're at a different phase of being a Marine, as being a Marine as a civilian, because it's true. It's the mentality, but as far as...It's sort of better for me because I'm able to bring my experiences into the classroom and explaining how, when we talk...

Even from a little bit of limited of therapeutic type classes or my field classes where we talk about therapy sessions with clients, I bring in that perspective about actually being in therapy through various points of my life, from being in therapy from a speech pathology standpoint of working on my stutter to being in therapy to work on psychological issues.

I have those varying dynamics and it helps. I felt better disclosing about my experiences instead of internalizing them about how I feel by actually becoming a social worker. I feel it has made me grow, and it has enhanced my human experience in that sense, in the sense of just people who listen, and I feel like I'm heard, so that's really helpful.

Ziobro: You've been very generous with your time, and I want to make sure I let you get to class. In closing, let me just ask you. What, if anything, could Monmouth do to better serve its student veteran population?

Houston: Better service? I think it's just weird. There's nothing overall. It's pretty much each veteran's going to have a different idea about what to do.

I think it's just informing and having more of an understanding to the veteran experience, that we all don't have PTSD or, if you talk about it, it's not this big thing, because people don't understand. It's just awareness and skill sets for us. It's just the uber-hyper vigilance and all that stuff goes awry.

There are skill sets for us. It's having a better understanding. At the same time some people don't identify what their veteran says. Some people never really truly identify with it. Some people we'll never know because some people really do for their experience. Most people really don't know that I'm a veteran. I really don't disclose it. I don't let it really be known.

My field professor this year disclosed that. Maybe because we're social-work majors, we're a smaller school. Your classes tend to be with the same people, so everyone knows me as the vet. In general, for me it's different because of what I'm studying. For a business major, totally different type of experience. It's going to be various for anyone.

I have my needs met by being here. I guess if anything, if there's just more things accessible or there's better ways to counsel. When we first come here, if we could have a helper for a day. You know what I mean? Something like that? A helper for a day to help us get orientated or a mentor program.

That's more something I should talk to Dennis about. When we get a new guy, someone like a big brother or a little sister.

Ziobro: You imagine this being another veteran?

Houston: Yeah, because that's the thing. It should be only voluntary, and it's just that if you need some help. A lot of the guys, I am that piece that helps them. There's this guy, Mike. He's a paraplegic. Talking to him, it took him a long time to be able to come to school because of him getting used to his condition. I was helping him not feel awkward.

That's the thing of having a program like that, of having a peer mentor. I don't want to say "needy kids," but the kids that are on the assistance program here that come for the extra help. There should almost be something like that but not like where it's intensive of just da-da-da. If it's someone starting immediately away, like starting with college, maybe for the first semester they meet once a month with their advisor.

They just see how they're doing and along with from an academic standpoint. Then they'll also have one of us, a veteran peer mentor. You know what I mean? That's just the only thing because when my stuff went awry, when my shit blew up in my face, I didn't know who to talk to. The only person I knew I could talk to was Jeff.

Then most people wouldn't even talk to Jeff because me and Jeff were talking. Like I said, most people in this situation would just said, "Fuck it" and dropped out. You know what I mean? What kept me here was one part my professors. It was Elie Maza. It was [inaudible 116:24] , and it was my little cohort of my peers. My one roommate is a social-work major, so she was there.

Then my little cohort of friends from my policy class were like my rocks. They really helped me because I told them everything. They're like, "Oh, my God. You're gonna be fine. You're doing everything."

Ziobro: They are not veterans. These are students with whom you formed relationships.

Houston: Yeah. Again, I'm different. I have sisters, so I'm not as awkward around girls. That's the other thing coming from a very uber-masculine world and then coming to a world that's very female-dominated. It doesn't throw me off because I have three sisters, and I primarily grew up with women. My brothers have come from the military.

Male peers in my life. I had one best male friend and a couple of my Marine Corps brothers and all that stuff, but for me I was able to identify with them and have that sisterly bond because I had sisters. It was nice to lean my shoulder on someone that understood the struggle of being a student and doing all this shit all at the same time.

Ziobro: Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't covered?

Houston: No.

Ziobro: All right. Thank you so much...