Transcription: Robert R. McBride

Today is Tuesday, April 6th, 2010. My name is James Crabtree. And I'll be interviewing Mr. Robert R. McBride, and this interview is being conducted by phone. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. McBride is at the Veterans Service Office in Nolan County, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. It's an honor for us and usually the standard first question is just to tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the service.

Robert R. McBride: All right, will do, Mr. Crabtree, and thank you for what you guys are doing at the Veterans Land Board. I think this is an outstanding program conveying our history to future generations, especially with the World War II guys you've been interviewing.

Thank you.

Robert R. McBride: I grew up in a little town out in West Texas called Roscoe, son of a World War II infantryman. My dad served in the Pacific Theater. Unfortunately he's no longer with us. I'd love to hear some of his stories. He died when I was 13, so I wasn't old enough for him to tell me anything about it. But I'd have loved to have heard some of those stories. I was a typical Roscoe High School graduate and didn't do much, in a little home town there. There was oil fields and cotton fields, and wound up in the paper a lot after I graduated. Everybody thought I'd be winding up in the blotter, but thanks for the Army, it was a different story all the way around. I graduated in 1987. As I said, there wasn't much going on around here and the Army was my ticket out.

Was your dad's service an inspiration for you in choosing the Army?

Robert R. McBride: Oh, you bet. As I'd hang out with dad at his service station, a lot of the old veterans would come in there and talk and I'd eavesdrop and we'd go out to the American Legion VFW every now and again and hear those guys and listen to their stories. They were absolutely my heroes and it was totally enthralling to me about their adventures in life and the places they'd seen and done. So yes, absolutely.

When did you sign up, had you just gotten out of high school or did you sign up before?

Robert R. McBride: I signed up before I got out of high school. I signed up on the late entry program in 1986. Initially I was going to sign up as a field artillery observer because that was the only one that was offering, airborne duty at the time supposedly according to the field recruiter. Then there was a mix-up at MEPs and I couldn't get that job, so I came home and spent a summer and then re-enlisted as an infantryman with an airborne option, and I left that July 1987 for Fort Benning, Georgia.

So when you left, where was your recruiter based out of?

Robert R. McBride: He was based out of Sweetwater, Texas.

OK, and then where did they send you? You mentioned military enlistment processing center. Where did you have to go for that?

Robert R. McBride: That was the Dallas MEPs.

OK, after going through that place once and the next summer you get the contract you want and you get shipped off to boot camp. Tell us what that was like for you.

Robert R. McBride: I tell you that was a mind altering experience at best. My little vision of the world is pretty much Roscoe, Texas, population 1,113 at the time. My graduating class was 24. I got there to Fort Benning and there's all these people from all over the United States and the world. I remember we had a guy from Guam in the platoon. This is totally foreign to me. I really learned how to respect the differences in cultures and colloquialisms and getting immersed in that adventure was something else. Of course I thought I was a pretty tough hombre, too, as a young man. I was prone to fighting and drinking, and I got there and figured out you know what, I'm not as tough as I thought. There's some tough hombres out here in the world.

Tell us a little bit about your drill instructors and your training.

Robert R. McBride: I'll tell you, the one drill sergeant I remember the most was probably drill sergeant Zuniga. He was from Equador, I do believe. I remember I couldn't understand a word that guy was saying. I grew up with a heavy Mexican population around my little home town, but boy, that Ecuadoran accent I could not peg. I remember, just goddamit, do pushup, pushup. Good lord, he was a mean son of a gun. And until we had our mid-cycle pass, at that time infantrymen were still did OSUD, one station unit training, and in between basic training and AIT which is what the rest of the Army called it, they gave us a pass in Columbus, Georgia, and we went downtown and rented us a hotel room and kicked back with a couple of adult beverages and what not, and drill sergeant Zuniga showed up at the hotel, and we thought oh my God, we're gonna die. And he showed us the human side of the Army that night and consumed some beverages with us. Of course there was a complete 100 percent rollover so when he got back the next day, he was still like the anti-Christ. But it was a good experience. I totally enjoyed it, looking back. At the time it was terrible. At one point, we had almost half the company drop out because of heat exhaustion. We'd went to a map reading class. One of the instructors was quite boring, had that very monotone instructor voice, and put most of us to sleep, which didn't sit well with the drill sergeants. And when we got back to the bivouac site, and they PT'd us to death almost, and a few of us went to the hospital.

Wow, that's pretty bad.

Robert R. McBride: Yeah, looking back, and after serving as a drill sergeant I realize now that they were wrong on that, but that was a memorable event. That wound up in a little book. A guy named George C. Wilson wrote a book about it, it was called *Mud Soldiers*. He followed us through our basic training and wrote a story about life inside the new volunteer Army.

Interesting. So you had that happen. How long was your training? Was it about 12 weeks?

Robert R. McBride: 13 weeks for infantry school.

And what would you say the Army was like in 1987?

Robert R. McBride: In 1987, it was an interesting place in that as the Army always is, it's in a constant state of evolution. At that point, there was really, we weren't an Army at war. We had

the Cold War going on. There weren't any bullets flying anywhere. We had the mutual assured destruction. The Russians were the bad guys. We trained against Soviet doctrine constantly. It was all about the Soviets, all about the Soviets, and one of the big blessings for me later on in my career and I didn't realize it until later in my career, we still had a fairly large amount of Vietnam era veterans in the Army that were in the senior non-commissioned officer and senior officer positions. You really paid attention to those guys. They could really shape you for the type of conflicts that we encountered later on in the war on terror.

So you graduate from basic training. Where do you go to next?

Robert R. McBride: I go on the cattle truck across post to airborne school.

OK, tell us a little bit about that.

Robert R. McBride: Well we got there on a Friday. We graduated that Friday morning from OSUT and the drill sergeant put us on the cattle car and they take us across post, and at this point I didn't even know there was a main post Fort Benning. I thought Fort Benning was a whole bunch of ranges and a lot of roads that you walked to on. So they take us over to Vay Post Fort Benning, they drop us off and they hand us over to the Black Cats there, school instructors, and there's the whole hustle and bustle of move your bags over there, sign this, sign that, here's your equipment, and about 1900, they said all right, be back Monday morning 0430 for PT. And all of us basic trainee guys that just graduated, we looked at each other like is this some sort of trick? I mean really, we can actually leave and go to Columbus and not come back until Monday? So we did, and of course we went downtown and had a good time in Columbus, and returned Monday morning, and I thought I was in good shape. I thought I was in Superman shape, and we went on that first airborne school run and I realized that I am not in good shape. These guys are trying to kill me. But that initial sort of got over with and we started jumping out of airplanes in two weeks and that was a good time.

Tell us about the process of going through jump school and some of the first steps they take in training you before you actually do jump out of a plane.

Robert R. McBride: First thing you got ground week, tower week, and jump week. During ground week, it's really physically intense. You're doing pull-ups and lots of PT, lots of physical training, primary course training and upper body strength. Then you start learning how to do the PLF, the parachute landing fall. You start off by just standing in the sawdust pit and jumping to your right, jumping to your left, and jumping to your rear, and then learning how to do the falls. And then you progress up to jumping off of a little platform and then eventually you get to what's called, now there's two devices that you get to. You got the swing landing trainer and then the suspension harness, or suspended agony. Of course I never was an airborne school instructor, so they've got actual great terms for that, but it's what we called 'em anyway. On the suspension, your harness and you learn how to pull slips which is how you guide the parachute for landing. You reach up and grab the straps on the risers and you pull them down to your chest depending on which way you want the U in the parachute to move. Now when I say guide the parachutes, them military parachutes are guidable about as a paper sack in the wind. They're gonna go pretty much where they want to go anyway. But it does help with your landing a little bit. And then the swing landing trainer is a platform that you're in a harness and then the airborne school instructor has a rope and you are attached to this rope and it's on a pulley, and you pull a slip down to your chest and you step off the swing landing trainer, and you ease up on the little riser so you don't jerk the sergeant airborne out of his boots, and you swing back and

forth and he tells you which PLF to do, right side, left side, front, rear, and then once he tells you that, he lets go, and you have to land, and then he evaluates your landing. Of course if you don't pull your slip whenever you are coming off the platform and just bail off the platform, he's not gonna get jerked out of his boots anyway. He's just gonna let you fall like a brick, and land however you land. Then you go to tower week, and you've got the 34-foot towers which is a 34-foot tower, mock door, and you get in a harness and it's got a cable and a pulley, and you practice exiting the aircraft. You slide down the pulley and get to this big berm and you unhook and give your harness to the next guy in line and they run around and hook the rip up, hook up, and you do this until you learn how to exit the aircraft correctly. Then once you get through with that, then you go to the 250-foot towers on Fort Benning, which they're a landmark feature there. You can see them from almost all over the post, real interesting. They were originally at the, oh I can't remember now, the 1920 something World Fair as a ride, and whenever the airborne school started, they fired up the airborne school program as the story goes, and they were trying to do this and one guy said hey, you know I seen these at the World's Fair, so they just went and bought 'em lock, stock and barrel, disassembled them, brought them to Fort Benning, assembled them and they've been training paratroopers ever since off of them. So you get in this rig and you've got, you're in a complete parachute and it hooks up on a big hoop so the parachute's always deployed and it pulls you up to the 250-foot point and it stops, and you get some instructions from the ground. He tells you, you know, you're gonna jump, are you OK, and you go to parade rest in the harness and there's a whole big spiel they give you and then they pull you up to the 250-foot marker and it lets the parachute go and you drop and you are just like falling from the sky because that's what you are doing, and you pull your slip and you land. Then the whole process starts all over again and then you go to jump week.

During that process when you are going through that, I assume since you signed up and you wanted to go to jump school that you didn't have any fear of heights, is that right?

Robert R. McBride: No, I really didn't, and I still don't unless I'm with my kids. Now oddly enough, a lot of paratroopers have a fear of heights.

That's what I was going to ask you. What about some of the others that you were in training with?

Robert R. McBride: A whole lot of people have a fear of heights, and there's a whole lot of paratroopers that got eight million jumps. I got a good friend that's a senior instructor there at the jump school right now, and he's terrified of heights and he's got I think 190 something jumps right now. I think it's just a matter, one of those things of conquering your fears. Paratroops are kind of special kind of weirdos anyway.

And with the guys that you were in training with, were there any that were not able to overcome that fear, that ended up not graduating or washed out?

Robert R. McBride: Oh plenty, there was plenty. I think we started out with 600 and something candidates and I think we graduated like 350 I think.

That's almost a 50 percent attrition rate when you were there.

Robert R. McBride: And of course it's changed a lot. When I went to the airborne school, they were, the females and males would do different runs. We'd do the calisthenics together and then when we'd do the runs, the males would be on one group and the females would be in another

group. But that's all changed. It's all gender integrated now which it should be. It should be one standard.

Tell us then what it was like the first time you went up in a plane to jump out of it.

Robert R. McBride: Oh, it was absolutely terrifying, really. We were in the harness shed – before my first jump, they pulled me and two other guys out of the line and took us to another point outside and they started messing with our rigs and making errors in them. We didn't know what was going on. And then they explained to us we've got a guy that's testing for his jump master and he's gonna come JMPI you. Really, I hope they're going to fix all this.

Now what's JMPI mean?

Robert R. McBride: Jump master pre-inspection. I got to remember not to use all these acronyms. And so anyway this guy come and he inspected our equipment and he passed, he found everything, so that was good, and then they fixed it and we went back in the rigor shed and got aboard the aircraft, a C-130 was the first aircraft I jumped out of – four engine propeller job – incredibly loud machine, incredibly uncomfortable seats. I remember the takeoff was just incredible. That was the fastest airplane takeoff I'd ever been in. I was really impressed with the performance of this aircraft for as big as it was and I'd flown a few times in civilian aircraft, but it was nothing like that thing. I was the number two man. I never got to be the first guy out the door. So I was number two in the chalk, so I was able to look out the door and go wow, we are way up here. And by the time I was really getting scared, it was green light, go, and there was no more time to be scared because I was going out the door whether I wanted to or not, because it's a mad rush out that door.

And you had a static line that –

Robert R. McBride: Yeah, it's static line jumping at that point and it pulls your chute for you, and you exit the aircraft, you're supposed to count to 5. I don't remember ever counting. I think all my jumps were night jumps because you're supposed to jump with your eyes open but I think my eyes were closed. One of the things that always struck me and I remember the most about it was as soon as I looked up and saw that chute open and the noise of the airplane was out of my ears, I just was stunned about how quiet it was for those couple of seconds over the drop zone until you hear the loudspeaker of the instructor on the ground shouting out points of performance over you, and then it's time to land and you land. You're like wow, I'm alive, and it's cool, and you feel pretty good. Second best feeling in the world.

How many times did you jump like that while you were in training?

Robert R. McBride: Five, you get five jumps at airborne school.

And then you get your jump wings?

Robert R. McBride: Yup.

And how many of those, did you do any of those jumps at night or were they all daytime?

Robert R. McBride: They were all daytime jumps. We were supposed to do a night jump. It got canceled because we set the drop zone on fire with the smoke grenades. So the night jump

got canceled and we jumped twice the next day because at that time, that's one of those things they can waive the night jump or you can do the night jump, but you have to do five jumps, any way you slice it.

So how long did you ultimately spend there in jump school?

Robert R. McBride: Three weeks. It's four or three weeks, if you got a zero week. Fortunately I didn't have a zero week. That's the interim between when they do graduate and pick up the next class.

So you finished there, you finished jump school, what's next for you?

Robert R. McBride: I graduated jump school on October 31st, and came home on my little two-week leave before I went to the regular Army and I came home with my Class A uniform and my beret looking all super sharp, and I never will forget it. I stopped in a little truck stop here in Sweetwater, Texas, called Gauges. It's long since torn down now, and with the friends of mine and we was out having some adult beverages and the waitress there looked at me and said well, honey what are you supposed to be? Which of course, young infantryman, paratrooper, I took quite offense to that. But that was a funny thing. I spent two weeks at home enjoying old friends and family again, and then I went off to Fort Stewart, Georgia.

OK, so kind of back where you'd gone through your jump school then.

Robert R. McBride: Just down the road on the coast.

What was it like being an infantryman then at that point? You're on active duty, tell us about that.

Robert R. McBride: I remember my first platoon sergeant was a guy named John Edwin Hanley, and he was a Vietnam era veteran, and really class act, and then my sergeant major was a guy named Ben E. Green, another Vietnam era veteran, and they both made significant impacts on me as a man and a leader. Years later, I remember the first time I met, saw Major Green. He was actually the first command sergeant major I'd ever met. And he was a first cab guy in Vietnam, so he had that great big cab patch, and then he was a sergeant major, so he had a whole bunch of rank down below that, and then he had I think four tours of duty in Vietnam if I remember correctly, so he had the combat hash marks up his sleeve, and I went to the newcomers briefing and we were all out there in our Class A's, and Sergeant Major Green was in his Class A's, and he was walking through the formation shaking everybody's hand after his speech and asking this guy a question, that guy a question, and he got to me and I was really young looking at the time of course, and he shook my hand and said how old are you, son? I said I'm 18, sergeant major. He said shit, I've been NCO longer than you've been alive. That impacted me. I'm like that's cool, I want to say that one of these days.

So early on you knew you wanted to make a career of it -

Robert R. McBride: At that point right there I pretty much thought I was going to make a career out of it. And then John Hanley, one of the first road marches we did out at the training, we were going out for, I think we were going out for 30 days and we were going to walk out, and he got to going through my rucksack and steadily pitching stuff you – you don't need this, you don't need that, where is this – and I thought that was pretty neat. I thought you know what, I'm

going to do that whenever I'm in charge. I'm going to make sure that my guys aren't carrying too much with stuff they don't need to carry and enough of what they're supposed to carry.

You did your tour as an infantryman, what unit were you assigned to when you got to Fort Stewart?

Robert R. McBride: I was assigned to a mortar platoon in an armor outfit which was kind of different for me. We were kind of a little outcast there in the armor battalion, but it was fun nonetheless. We had 4.2-inch mortars. These were all World War II vintage machines. As a matter of fact, the one I took to Desert Storm was a 1943 Whirlpool. We had Himlow 106A3 mortar carriers which is a big, 13-ton, 113 family vehicle with the mortar mounted in the back, and had a four-man crew.

Were you with that unit out of Fort Stewart when you went to Gulf War?

Robert R. McBride: Yes, I was.

Tell us about that. You'd gone through all that training and you talked about the Cold War, now here you are facing an actual real combat. Tell us a little bit about when you found out you'd be going over there and your trip over there and all that sort of thing.

Robert R. McBride: Well, I was a newly married guy. Our daughter was six months old. I was married to a soldier, still married to the same woman.

That's great.

Robert R. McBride: And no longer a soldier though, but anyway, I was on staff duty which is a 24-hour duty where you answer phones, armor never sets down. We'd have been watching the news. The 24th Infantry Division at that time was part of the 18th Airborne Corps. We were the heavy rapid deployment force of the 18th Airborne Corps. So we knew as soon as the 82nd got airborne, we weren't going to be far behind 'em and we sure wasn't. I was on duty and the call came into the deal and we had to activate dealer at roster, and we began the 72-hour sequence because we were supposed to be packed up, wheels up, ready to roll in 72 hours. And that was a long 72 hours. I remember calling my wife, and she says I already got notified, I'm on the way in. She dropped our daughter off at the babysitter's and we activated our family care plan. My sister drove from Sweetwater, Texas, to pick up our daughter. We never saw her from that night forward until we got back. I remember that was the smoothest alert we've ever had because normally when we did the practice, the HEDRE's, emergency deployment readiness exercises, it was a big cluster and did paperwork, got to be filled out right, and all this, the inspections and everything on the rail load, on the vehicles and boy that one, you got bullets, OK, great. Is it halfway tied down on the rail car? OK, great. We flew out of Hunt Army Air Field. My wife and I actually flew on the same plane together. I remember the sergeant first class that was sitting next to her wouldn't give up his seat and I wanted to choke him to death. But anyway we flew out on the same aircraft together and I didn't see her again for quite a while after we landed. But I did get to see her, so that was kind of a bonus. I had a chaplain that anytime he would go to her AO and we weren't doing anything, he would come by and pick me up and we did spend Christmas together in their shield, which was kind of neat.

When was it you guys shipped out? Was that August?

Robert R. McBride: It was in August.

August of 1990.

Robert R. McBride: Yeah.

And so you get over there, where did you arrive in?

Robert R. McBride: We arrived in Saudi Arabia, we flew into one of the many airfields there in Saudi Arabia and then we went into the port and waited on the ship to come in because our ship had got delayed. Once the ship got there, the roll-on/roll-off vessel, we started the procedures of getting the equipment off the ships. Of course it traveled arms, so we just basically threw the machine guns up on top and unpacked some stuff and rolled out to the desert, and that's where we stayed for quite a while. For most of Desert Shield, we lived directly out of the carriers, didn't have any tents. We lived under the camouflage nets. I think the last two months we had tents, which we burned in place because there was no plan to pick them up and take them with us or come back and get 'em.

When you were there, and you spent quite a bit of time just in the desert waiting, how did you pass the time and how did you stay sharp being idle during that time?

Robert R. McBride: We'd do gun drills and crew drills when it wasn't too hot. We usually did 'em in the evenings because the heat of the Saudi Desert was just incredibly brutal in the summertime. Most of the training we did was NBC, nuclear biological and chemical, and first aid training, because at one point for about three months we couldn't move the vehicles. There was a moratorium put on vehicle movement to save on parts and supplies because there was just a huge amount of equipment as you can remember from history there, moving into the region at the time. I mean that was probably the biggest mechanized force ever assembled. So we'd just do what we could, put the vehicles in place, and practice for NBC. Everybody knew at the time that Saddam Hussein would use chemical weapons against us, which fortunately he did not. And lots of card playing. I'll never play Spades again in my entire life.

Tell us then what it was like, did you have a feeling at some point that things were finally gonna start? I guess there was kind of the countdown or the deadline.

Robert R. McBride: Yeah, once the air war started, we moved out of the area of the desert where we had been occupied for most of the time. We loaded up on the combo and headed north. We loaded up and it was real unique how we loaded up then. At that point we'd never done anything like it. We loaded up on civilian flatbeds because we contracted every truck in Saudi Arabia I'm sure to move these vehicles. Instead of riding in a separate vehicle, we just rode in our carriers that were tied down on these flatbed trucks, which was really neat. I can remember at one point they were talking about you've got to have your air guard up. You've got to have somebody on the .50 caliber making sure, look and scan the sky and make sure we don't get hit by 'em. Now you know we had air parity at the time and we all knew that there was nothing flying other than us. I remember rolling down the road and it was my turn, and I was a squad leader at the time. I had my own carrier and my crew, young corporal. And I got up on the .50, spelled my gun, and the vehicle ahead of us and the vehicle behind us had a self-propelled Vulcan anti aircraft gun on it. I'm thinking what in the hell am I gonna do with this .50 caliber that them Vulcans can't do? But I was a good boy and stayed up on the gun. Then when we offloaded that first night in the desert waiting on the rest of the taskforce to assemble

and head north into Iraq, because we knew were going into Iraq. We didn't go into Saudi Arabia. I was with the 24th. We did the big long sweeping movement through the empty quarter and into Iraq around Basra is where we ended up. I remember watching the aircraft coming from the bombing MIGs and sorties into Iraq. We were right about at the point in Saudi Arabia where they cut their lights back on, so it was really neat seeing the steady stream of aircraft getting payloads and payloads of high explosives into Iraq.

Sure. So tell us then what it was like when you guys finally headed out.

Robert R. McBride: We finally held beat. It was in the middle of one of the worst sandstorms I'd ever seen. It was absolutely could not see, and much less breath. Of course the armored taskforce kicks up quite a bit of dust, so it was a sandstorm and storm from the vehicles, and we rode and we rode and we rode…and it was exhausting. OK, when are we gonna make contact, when are we gonna make contact? At that time, GPS technology, we had one GPS for the platoon, and I'm looking at the map and you got maps with the grid square, 1,000-meter by 1,000-meter square on it, and then you've got contour intervals, contour lines showing you the lay of the land. And I remember the contour interval on these maps was 5 meters difference in between each contour, and a vast majority of my map that I was looking at just had grid lines. There wasn't any contour lines on it. I'm like how in the hell do I know where I'm at when there's nothing to reference because the empty corridor is just like nothing, it's empty and that's exactly what it is, empty. Our first contact was outside of a place called Tallil Air Force Base in Iraq. The storm had lifted and we could see a pretty good distance ahead and I'm like all right, there's the Iraqi army, we can see 'em, it's time to get it on. As we got closer and closer, we realized hey, they're not doing anything. They are surrendering. So it was deal with the POWs, deal with POWs, and that was kind of anti-climatic there, and we finished that little operation up and then we went into a place called Deallibyer Field is where we actually got in our first battle, and as the battles were in Desert Storm, it was incredibly one-sided. It was all us. The tanks opened up, and I remember it was just a great cacophony of fire. It was just super brutal the amount of fire power that the tanks and bradley's were putting out on the air field, totally one-sided. The whole battle probably lasted 45 minutes, maybe an hour, and there wasn't nothing left on the air field that wasn't smoking or burning. It was done. Our fire mission was here we are, we're getting ready to fire the mortars the first time, all right, we're gonna do our deal, and the second round out of my tube was a misfire. So here we are in the middle of this big, giant armor battle and I've got to drop my rear deck and expose my entire crew to whatever is out there so we can clear this misfire in our damn mortar. That was interesting. Anyway we cleared that and then we started clearing operations on the Deallibyer Field to make sure there was nothing left that needed to be policed up and we collected some knick-knacks off the battlefield, and then we moved back out on the desert again in pursuit of the Republican Guard Force commandos, Talkonna Division I believe it was, and the scariest moment for me in the entire conflict happened shortly after that. We come up over this little berm, and when the carrier leveled off and we kept moving, one of my gunners started beating me on the back and I turned around and looked and there was a ZSU23-4 which is a Soviet anti-aircraft mobile gun with four 23-mm cannons, quite a mean machine, leveled off on my mortar carrier, and I thought well this is it, there's no way I can defeat this threat. But fortunately for us it was abandoned like so many of those vehicles were, and we secured it with another one of the mortar carriers, pulled it out, and it's at the museum there at Fort Stewart now.

Oh really, that's pretty cool. Have you been back to visit at anytime?

Robert R. McBride: I have not. I need to get back there one of these days.

You mentioned earlier about the Iraqi POWs. Tell us a little bit about what they were like. Did they seem scared?

Robert R. McBride: They were absolutely terrified. I mean if you talk to the World War I air veterans, they were exactly what you talk about shell-shocked. I mean they were just totally demoralized, and the real funny thing about it was they knew that they were going to die, whether they fought us or they surrendered to us because of the propaganda machine that Saddam had. He said hey, you surrender to the Americans, they're gonna kill you. And they were absolutely terrified. At one point we come up on a BRDM, another Soviet vehicle in the desert and it tickled me to death when I saw what had happened. There was a tail of military equipment leading away from it, like a soldier said I quit and just started walking off in the desert, shedding his gear. About every five steps there was a web belt or a piece of a uniform, a helmet, they were totally demoralized.

Amazing. What were some of the souvenirs you were able to find?

Robert R. McBride: I've got a big stainless steel platter that I got out of an officer's mess bunker, and I still serve chicken and ribs on at the house during barbecues, and oh, a helmet. Me and my wife was an NBC specialist. We got several protective masks. I got an Iraqi artillery officer's beret that I've got hanging up next to my beret on the wall. Oh, I had a real nice rifle that I wanted to bring back, but they wouldn't let me.

That's unfortunate, I've heard those stories.

Robert R. McBride: And what I intended to do, being my father and I were both infantry guys, and the symbol of the infantry is crossed rifles, he's got a 7.7 mm Japanese rifle from the South Pacific and I was going to make a deal with his rifle and my rifle.

That would've been neat, yeah. It's unfortunate. I don't know why they won't let those come back. You heard the stories of World War II veterans.

Robert R. McBride: Yeah, it was just a little bolt action rifle. It wasn't like I was trying to bring back an AK.

Sure, World War II, they let them bring back rifles and samurai swords and that sort of thing, and now, well I guess starting in the Gulf War, but even today they won't let them bring anything really like that.

Robert R. McBride: Yeah, nothing really weapon oriented. You're lucky if you can get a bayonet back.

So tell us then, at that point I guess you had to know that the war was going to be over soon.

Robert R. McBride: I will never ever forget the radio transmission. We were getting ready to move on with the second part of the mission which was really go to Baghdad. And it come over the radio, "cease fire, cease fire, cease fire freeze. Do not fire unless fired on. It's over." And I was like wow, really? We haven't even done anything yet. It was a really super lopsided combat, but it was exactly what combat was supposed to be. It was two uniformed armies meeting on the field of battle and duking it out, and that's the way life's supposed to be.

Unfortunately it's not like that all the time. Later on, OIF. And then on our trip back from Saudi Arabia when I really realized that it was over, we were driving back to Saudi Arabia, and darkness fell and of course we went into blackout and the night vision glasses came on and we were moving and they come over the radio and they said hey, go to service drives, which is your regular white headlights, and I'd never done that, training in the States, ever, had I drove at night in my military vehicle with the headlights on. That's when I really realized that we had thoroughly trashed the Iraqi army in the desert.

And how long at that point did it take for you to get back to the States?

Robert R. McBride: We were back in the States in about 30 days.

And tell us then a little bit about what that homecoming was like for you.

Robert R. McBride: Oh, it was incredible. It was good, and well I don't care if I ever hear that Lee Greenman song again. They overplayed it.

Yeah, that definitely was a height of patriotism.

Robert R. McBride: Oh yes, there was. It was a great reception by the American people coming back. My wife, she had flown back about two weeks earlier, so she was already home. Our daughter wasn't home yet, but she was already home and she got the house all set up and ready for us, so it was an easy homecoming there.

That's great. So after you get back, I know you mentioned earlier at one point you became a drill sergeant, when did that happen?

Robert R. McBride: That was in 2000.

OK, so not until a lot later then. So what did you do after you got back from the Gulf War? What was your next assignment?

Robert R. McBride: Fort Polk, Louisiana.

OK, and what were you doing at Fort Polk?

Robert R. McBride: I was an infantryman with 36 Infantry, and we didn't do much but go to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, had a nice little period of peace. And then the first round of BRAC, Base Realignment Closure, and then we went from the 5th MEC to the 2nd Armored, and we moved from Fort Polk to Fort Hood, and that was a neat little transition. We spent in the name of saving money, cleaning up the motor pool there at Fort Polk, I was with the environmental compliance officer at the time, too, for the battalion. And at one point they saved a million dollars cleaning that motor pool up so that 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment could move into it.

Yeah, and how did it work with your spouse being enlisted? Did you guys move together?

Robert R. McBride: When we got back from Desert Storm, she was at the end of her active duty contract. She did her three years and she actually ETS'd, ended her term service before my PCS.

So you didn't have to worry then about her being reassigned to different units.

Robert R. McBride: No, we got lucky on that one. It was just a timing thing for us. Timing is everything.

So then jumping ahead a little bit, to 2000, how did it come about that you became a drill sergeant?

Robert R. McBride: I'm still a little puzzled about that because they always say we take the top 10 percent of the soldiers and being drill sergeants and all that other stuff, and I was on orders – I'd went on leave from Fort Hood and spent a little time in Roscoe, and got back to Fort Hood and there was a purse gram, which was a notice of assignment in my inbox. I pulled it and it said you're on assignment for Fort Brag, North Carolina. I'm like OK, great. I called the wife and said hey, we're on orders for Fort Brag and we'll go back jumping out of airplanes. And she says OK, cool. So she started looking for us a house in Fort Brag and all the stuff that a good Army wife does. I went home and we started talking about OK, this is what we need to start doing, blah-blah-blah, and went back to work the next day and there was another purse gram in my box. So I pulled it and it says your orders for Fort Brag, North Carolina have been rescinded. You are now on orders for Fort Benning, Georgia, in the drill sergeant program. So I called branch. I said hey, what's going on here? Am I going to Fort Brag or am I going to be a drill sergeant? They said oh buddy, you're going to be a drill sergeant whether you'd like to or not. So I called my wife, I said hey babe, scratch all that Fort Brag stuff, I'm going to be a drill sergeant. And she said OK, I'll see you in about two years. Because being a former soldier, she knew I'd be gone.

Yeah, that's right. Well tell us then what that was like when you got there and started going through the training and that sort of thing to become –

Robert R. McBride: I tell you, you got to really swallow a lot of pride that first week in drill sergeant school. You are already as a non-commissioned officer, you're going to be, you established yourself as who you are, and then you get there and there's another staff sergeant or sergeant first class yelling at you like you are a private. You're like dude, I'm about to knock you on your butt. But you got to swallow your pride because drill sergeant school is one, it reminds you of what it's like to be that private, first and foremost, and you do everything that the privates do during drill sergeant school. That's one of the things a lot of people don't realize about it. It's just like going back through basic training again. And then there's the whole leadership aspect of it, and then learning the rules and regulations of being a drill sergeant, and the mental aspect of it and the counseling aspect of it, and then there's all the drilling ceremonies modules that you got to learn, which are, and then you don't use them as a drill sergeant. I can still spit out the position of attention, and I'd get the dumb goat stare from anybody even when you are professional soldiers and you go to drill sergeant school and they first pitch that module to you, you know how to be at attention, and you're staring at them like what did you just say? Because it's just too complicated. When you actually teach it, you break it down a little better, but like I say, you modulate to graduate. And you actually learn how to be a drill sergeant in your first cycle, that's when you really learn the craft of being a drill sergeant.

How did you learn how to do the yelling and the screaming and the intimidation aspect?

Robert R. McBride: You learn that your first cycle. You pick a mentor and you base it off him, and it's really a tricky thing. You can't be that guy all the time. If you try to be that guy all the time, you're gonna be one of those drill sergeants that's in trouble. So you got to pick a cycle at some point where you go I'm going to be the quiet drill sergeant cycle. And you look at it like a comedy routine. I mean really, there's a lot of times when you're yelling and screaming and just being a real animal and you're thinking God, I hope I don't laugh because this is too funny.

Exactly. Tell us a little about some of the basic recruits that you'd come across or deal with, or certain types –

Robert R. McBride: I will never forget my first cycle after 911 because it's a great example of the diversity that you have as a drill sergeant. You've got in the infantry world, you've got 13 weeks to bring these guys into a cohesive unit and train them and get them out to the Army. That first cycle after 911, I had at one end of my spectrum, I had a 33-year-old black British man with a masters degree in business to a 17-year-old white Alabama high school dropout with a GED, and everything in between.

Yeah, that's quite a disparity.

Robert R. McBride: And you've got to figure out as a drill sergeant how do I reach each one of these guys and how do I make them reach out to each other and become a unit that's trainable, because if you have all this little in-fighting and stuff, you can't train, you can't impact them. You can present the material but they're not going to learn it.

You think that was probably the hardest aspect of being a drill sergeant was trying to bring about the cohesiveness?

Robert R. McBride: Trying to bring back the cohesiveness, that is absolutely the hardest part of being a drill sergeant is trying to get your unit to where you can train it. Once you've got it to where you can train it, it's easy being a drill sergeant because they're going to do what you tell 'em, and you've got to be careful with what you tell them. Because one day I come in and my buffer was missing, and oh man, my barracks have got to be spotless. My buffer was missing and I brought a little physical discipline to the platoon and I told them in the morning, I want my damn buffer. In the morning, I had five buffers. OK. In the morning I want one buffer.

That's pretty good. So how long were you a drill sergeant for?

Robert R. McBride: Two years, three months.

OK, and then where'd you go to after that?

Robert R. McBride: Back to Fort Polk, Louisiana. And I'd gotten into some trouble there as a drill sergeant. Now it was all unwarranted. One thing about being a drill sergeant, you've got no friends. All a private's got to say is drill sergeant McBride did X, and you are on the hit list until you can prove yourself innocent, and I was a very aggressive drill sergeant because I believed in the product. I didn't believe about graduating anybody. I believed in graduating warriors. So I was a very aggressive drill sergeant and that landed me in hot water a few times, and I survived. I've got my drill sergeant hat on the wall behind me. I never lost my hat or badge. But anyway, I extended for a third year, and I'd wanted to do a third year as a drill sergeant because I was really enjoying making these warriors. After that last investigation, when the commander asked

me, Sergeant McBride, you got anything for me? I handed him my 4187. I said yeah, I want to be done. Find me a job in the Army. And it was oh no, sir, we need you. I'm like yeah, no you don't. We need to find me a job in the Army and I need you to get me in the ____. So I went to Fort Polk, Louisiana, and got assigned to the 2nd Armored Cavalry regiment, which is armored only in name at this point. It was all HumVee based.

And then how long was it before you saw yourself in action again?

Robert R. McBride: We left in 2003. We got there about I think it was 14 days after they pulled the statue of Saddam down in Sadoon Square, I think that's what the name of that place was. But that's when we arrived in country again.

What was that like for you having been over there once before and now you're returning to kind of finish the job?

Robert R. McBride: Yeah, and that's exactly how I felt about it. They say Desert Storm ended, and I said this is just a long pause in the action. On the way in, we were driving in from Kuwait and I was looking at the route, and I'm like wow, we're gonna go by Deallibyer Air Field, and we actually stopped as one of the overnight stop, outside of Deallibyer Air Field, and while I was there I was looking over the terrain. Of course it's hard to determine. I was trying to remember and I wished I had my maps from way back when, but I had my mortar section there, and I was like hey look guys, this was where my first fight was right here. Last time I saw this, everything was burning.

Yeah, that's got to be kind of a small world feeling I would think.

Robert R. McBride: Oh it was, it was kind of weird, and then as we drove down the old what they called the Highway of Death, which I didn't get to see the first time I was over there, but there's still junk littering that highway from Desert Storm.

Yeah, that's right. But tell us then about your time in Iraq. Were you there for a year?

Robert R. McBride: I was there for 444 days. I was in that first lucky group that got extended.

OK I remember that. Tell us a little bit about being part of that.

Robert R. McBride: We were done with everything. We'd finished our right seat, left seat ride. That's when the unit that's replacing us, they go out with us, their key leaders go out with us and then our guys go back in and start the process of leaving, and then the key leaders go out with them and do the finishing handoff. I came back in from my last ride with the guys that were replacing my section, and went and checked on my guys that were loading up the mill van for sending down to Kuwait. Our advance party was already in Kuwait getting ready to leave. I'd managed to get my two married guys on the advance party by hook or crook and calling in favors. And we had the platoon sergeant meeting that evening, and the first sergeant came in. He said all right platoon sergeant, I got some good news and some bad news. He said the good news is we're still leaving Baghdad. He said the bad news is we're not leaving Iraq for another 90 to 120 days.

You guys think he was joking at that point?

Robert R. McBride: Yeah, we're like yeah, whatever. Some choice words were tossed around, and no, we're going. And when the commander came in and started giving out orders for going down to a place called Al-Koot. The CPA in Al-Koot had been overrun and we were going back down there to take it back. Baghdad was an interesting place.

When you got that extension, how was it you were able, it seems like that would be kind of a demoralizing thing for the guys.

Robert R. McBride: Oh it was, it was terrible. I had got all my section to quit smoking in combat, which is incredibly tough. It's tough to quit smoking any way you look at it. And the minute I told them guys that we were extended, every one of them started smoking again. Of course, we were all ready to go. That's too long to be anywhere.

Sure, wow. Well then tell us about the remainder of your time there from the time you got extended to the time you went home, what was that like?

Robert R. McBride: That was the hardest fighting of the whole shooting match. That's when we really got into some gun battles that were pretty good. Most of the time in Baghdad, we were doing, we worked for the CPA most of our deployment, Coalition Provisional Authority, with the hummers. So basically anybody that was in the business of putting Iraq back together, we'd provide them armed security, which is dangerous in itself because of the ID's and we're a target when you've got two HumVee's with machine guns and then 8 suburbans. That's a pretty tempting target. And the first place we went on the extension was Al-Koot, and like I said, the CPA down there had gotten overrun by the mighty militia, and we went down there to take it back, which we did, and again, big props for Paul Bremmer on that one. He put a couple of J-Dam's into the building before we got there, so that was -

That helps.

Robert R. McBride: Yeah, that helps tremendously. The effect it had on the soldiers of the unit as a whole, we learned through an interpreter, as we were interrogating one night, he said we never thought that the American Army would come through here like Saddam's Army. So we weren't happy guys when we got down there, and then we went back to Baghdad for about a week after we finished operations in Koot, and then we went down to a place called Amnijaf, where Luk-Stal Sodder had taken up his base operations, and we dealt with him the rest of the time we were there.

So you definitely saw a lot of places and a lot of action to be able to move around to see as much as you did.

Robert R. McBride: Yeah, it was the advantage of being with the 2nd Armored Cavalry regiment as such as it was, because it was HumVee based, so we were real mobile. We went everywhere from the Iranian border down to the Saudi side. We were all over the country in Iraq. I think I've been to every major city in Iraq, to Crete, did a lot of movement.

Yeah, it sounds like it. What are some of your best memories of your time in Iraq, if there are any?

Robert R. McBride: There's lots of great memories. There was some funny stuff that happened. There was some sad stuff that happened. I remember coming out of one mission

where we'd went to see a mass grave site, and the human aspect of that. There's a lot of qualms. We made about, there was no weapons of mass destruction, there were weapons of mass destruction, whatever, whatever, but I've seen a mass grave site that was at least a football field wide with bodies every, not a body, a pile of bones about every two feet, where Saddam had just wiped out an entire village, and to depose the guy, get a guy out of power that was capable of ordering something like that, it was entirely worth it.

Sure, absolutely, he was a weapon of mass destruction.

Robert R. McBride: Oh yeah, just by himself. I met a man one night that tore his shirt off and showed me where he had been whipped with a belt from a car by, he claimed Duday Hussein, but who knows, but anyway he was heavily brutalized by somebody.

Wow, yeah that's amazing. So tell us then about when you finally get back, and I know you stayed in until 2008.

Robert R. McBride: Let me give you one more story if I can. One particular fight we had at the end there, where we had moved Patal Sodder, basically hemmed up in about a 2-kilometer area where he couldn't move, and of course we let him go, and that's a whole another story that I've got contention with. But anyway, we'd done this, there had been 120mm mortar that had been just playing the heck out of us in Ajaf. We couldn't move anywhere without this thing, he'd have every street intersection pegged. So finally they gave us authority to go get this thing. Now we couldn't reduce it with fire from aviation or anything because it was close to a mosque and it was in a schoolyard, so we wanted to reduce collateral destruction. So they sent me and my guys in as the catcher team for this mortar. A big gun battle, they didn't want us to have it. So we had to clear this building, me and my guys, and we were finally got to the roof and me and Nick Pengalenen went up on the roof and we were standing up on the roof, and there's bullets whizzing by us and zinging all over the place, and we're looking at each other and we're like why in the hell are we on this damn roof? And we demounted off that and well, my whole section got an award for valor for that. I got the silver star and everybody else got bronze stars archives of the valor devices.

Wow, well congratulations. That is awesome, that really is.

Robert R. McBride: It was a heck of a fight.

Unbelievable.

Robert R. McBride: But you were asking about getting home?

Yes sir.

Robert R. McBride: Well I finally got home. Of course the kids are older now so they get to hear some actual little war stories a little bit, and I get on over to Fort Benning, Georgia, back to Georgia, back where it all started, and I became an instructor at the infantry school, and that's where I ended up.

That's great. And then at some point I guess you retire and now you're back in your home country, right?

Robert R. McBride: Well, my wife's from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and about three years ago we were home in Roscoe, Texas, and she said Robert, we can retire here. It really stunned me. I never thought I'd be living back in Roscoe. I said OK, cool. So I got to thinking about it, and had a real good job offer in Houston, Texas, with a man I met while I was in Iraq, an oil field contractor. The government paid me a lot of money, but it would be working basically doing what I do, a gunslinger for him. And well, he said manage this vehicle fleet, and all this other stuff, and I've still got a job offer with him anytime I want it, but I don't think I'll ever take it, good guy that he is and everything. But I'd come home, I put in my retirement paperwork, and I was debating whether I was going to take that job in Houston or come home. While I was home on leave, my pickup broke down, and a buddy of mine here in town is a mechanic, and I asked him if he could fix my pickup, and he said sure. So he fixed my pickup. I asked him well what do I owe you? And he says come to dinner tonight. I said well gee, I guess I'm retiring in Roscoe. So I did and the first job I had was selling cars, and I figured out real quick I'm not a car salesman. And then I started working for the wind industry. We've got here in Roscoe, Texas, we've got currently the world's largest wind farm. We've got wind turbans as far as you can see. But even with all these turbans, I was working in places like Oklahoma, so I told them well, I retired to be home every night. So I quit that and true to what they told me at my retirement briefing, they said the average veteran changes four jobs in the first year he's retired. I was right on track. I started working back in the oil field which I didn't want to do, but work is work. I was working for a company here in Sweetwater fixing pumps, and the veterans service officer that was here, lost his battle with cancer.

Sorry to hear that.

Robert R. McBride: Yeah, he was a good guy. I was at the American Legion one night and I hadn't even thought about taking the job, and a couple of the old timers out there, they said hey Robert, we want you to go be our service officer. I said I can't do that. They said yeah you can. And so I put my name in the hat. There was 11 veterans that applied and somehow or another the commissioners picked me and here I am.

That's great. Wow, that is great. It's a neat story and that you've come full circle, too, I think, to have had all the experiences you've had and now you're back home and you're still serving veterans in your community. That says a lot.

Robert R. McBride: And I absolutely love it. I got to thinking about it during the interview process. As a matter of fact at the interview they asked me why did I want this job, and a moment of clarity hit me, and I said you know, the thing I missed most about being in the Army is taking care of soldiers and their families, and that's what this job is, is taking care of veterans and their families.

Absolutely. Well sir, I tell you, I've really enjoyed talking to you and I know everybody here at the Land Office from Commissioner Patterson on down is very grateful for your service and this program is about honoring veterans and we're honored to have been able to interview you today. It was really a great thing to be able to interview you.

Robert R. McBride: Well thank you, I appreciate it, and I understand you are a Marine, right?

That's right.

Robert R. McBride: All right, awesome, well thank you for what you do, and I do love the program. I've read every story that's on the web right now and I think it's a great program and I wish you all lots of luck with it, and if I can help you in the future, please let me know and I'm pushing at everybody that comes in here to my office, I tell them about your program.

Any veteran you know of as long as they live in Texas, have them give me a call and we'll get them interviewed, and we've done a lot more interviews than we've even been able to put on the web site. The web site takes longer to get the photos and the transcripts and get it uploaded and all that, but we've done a whole score of interviews and it's really amazing. Every story is unique but there's the common themes of service and patriotism and sacrifice and that sort of thing, so it's really an honor to be part of the program. Yes sir, I really appreciate your time today.

Robert R. McBride: All right.

Yes sir, and like I mentioned before we started the interview, we'll get copies of this to you soon and definitely please keep in touch.

Robert R. McBride: All right sir, thank you.

All right, thank you, have a good day.

Robert R. McBride: You too, bye.

Bye.

[End of recording]