

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
NATALIE R. ISENSEE  
Logistics Officer, Marine, Iraq War  
2014

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**Isensee, Natalie R.,** (b.1978). Oral History Interview, 2014.

Approximate length: 2 hours 16 minutes

*Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.*

**Abstract:**

In this oral history interview, Natalie (Rubocki) Isensee discusses her service in the Marine Corps. Isensee was born in 1978 and raised in New Berlin, Wisconsin. Following high school, she joined the Army Reserve and trained in Fort Jackson, while also attending Purdue. Subsequently Isensee transferred to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and due to her poor eyesight, joined the Marine Corps. She was in the first class of women to attend a two summer Officer Candidate School and went to The Basic School in Quantico, Virginia. While at Camp Lejeune (North Carolina) for her Logistic Officer's training, September 11, 2001 occurred and changed the projection for her future training and deployments. Isensee was assigned to the 1st Transportation Support Battalion, 1st Force Service Support Group, Camp Pendleton (California).

Six weeks prior to deploying with her unit to Kuwait in February 2003, Isensee's unit started training with helicopter pilots rigging and lifting equipment. Sitting at the border of Kuwait and Iraq, she heard President Bush's last warning to Saddam Hussein and watched scud missiles fly overhead in the direction of the base camp she just left. As XO of her unit, she was in a convoy proceeding slowly north into Iraq under cover of night. For the next months, she and her unit proceeded to expeditionary airfields making liaison with air units and aiding with supplies and people as the US efforts proceeded to Baghdad. Isensee, then a lieutenant in the Corps, describes the challenges, the rats, the lack of privacy, care packages, and memories of moments shared with Marines and sailors in combat operations, as well as re-integration into garrison life at Camp Pendleton. Serving temporarily as the acting company commander, prior to discharge from the Marine Corps, Natalie served as XO, tending to legal matters and augments and training, while others in her unit prepared to deploy again.

Following discharge, Isensee returned to Wisconsin, gained employment, and then pursued her master's degree while raising her three children.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Isensee (b. 1978) served with the 1st Transportation Support Battalion 1st Force Service Support Group United States Marine Corps during Operation Iraqi Freedom. She was involved in Kuwait and Iraq before retiring in 2005.

**Archivist's Note:**

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript.

Interviewed by Ellen Bowers Healey, 2014.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2016.

Reviewed by Robert Brito, 2017.

Abstract written by Robert Brito, 2017.

## **Interview Transcript:**

[Beginning of Isensee.OH1952\_file1]

Healey: Today is Monday, December 22, 2014. This is an interview with Natalie Robachi Isensee who served with the 1st Transportation Support Battalion 1st Force Service Support Group United States Marine Corps during Operation Iraqi Freedom. This is an interview being conducted in Madison, Wisconsin and the interviewer is Ellen Bowers Healey. The interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program. All right, that was just an introduction and now I'm going to start asking you some questions, Natalie. When and where were you born?

Isensee: I was born July 2, 1978 in West Allis, Wisconsin.

Healey: Okay. And where were you raised?

Isensee: In New Berlin, Wisconsin.

Healey: Okay. And tell me a little bit about your life there in terms of your family.

Isensee: I grew up with my parents and I was one of five siblings. I have one older brother, a younger sister, and two younger brothers. Grew up in New Berlin, graduated from New Berlin Eisenhower High School.

Healey: Okay. And then after high school what did you do?

Isensee: After high school, I actually enlisted in the Army Reserves, and went to basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and then I went to Purdue University my freshman year of college.

Healey: Why did you join the Army Reserve?

Isensee: I joined the Army Reserve because I was really interested in going through basic training. I thought that would be a really interesting way to start out after high school.

Healey: Where did you hear about that?

Isensee: I always knew that it was an option and my parents were very supportive of the military, so.

Healey: Okay. Were they in the military?

Isensee: No, they never were. But they just—

Healey: How about any of your brothers or sisters?

Isensee: My younger brother is in the Marine Corps.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: So after I—while I was going to Purdue, I was also part of Army ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] and then after my freshman year, I went to my job training school for the Army Reserves.

Healey: What was your job training school?

Isensee: I was, um, 63 Juliet quartermaster and small engine repair in—

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: —in Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Maryland.

Healey: Did you select that?

Isensee: I did.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: It sounded like an interesting part-time job basically while I was going to college.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: And then I went back to Purdue for one more semester and then after that I transferred to UW Madison for my middle of my sophomore year of college.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: And when I transferred to Madison, I also transferred out of the Army Reserves and into a Marine Corps officer's program, Platoon Leaders Course.

Healey: Okay. And why did you do that?

Isensee: I did that for a number of reasons, mostly because the Army wouldn't give me a medical waiver my eyesight, which kept me from getting commissioned in the Army.

Healey: Oh, okay.

Isensee: And so when that was no longer an option, um, I went to the Marine Corps recruiter—the Marine Corps officer recruiter—in Indiana and I told him my story and I told him I was very interested in becoming an officer. And the Marine Corps seemed like a great place to be, but my eyes are really bad.

Healey: And did you get most of your information from the Marine Corps recruiter, or did you get it online, or where did you find out about the different options concerning your eyesight?

Isensee: I didn't get much online just because there wasn't a lot available. I got a lot from the officer recruiters.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: Both from the Army and then the Marine Corps as well and I learned a lot while I was in high school as well, trying to figure out what my options were.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: So I transferred to the Platoon Leaders Course and then I did one summer of Officer Candidate School in Quantico and that was in 1998. And then I did my junior year of college and then did a second summer of Officer Candidate School in 1999 in Quantico.

Healey: What was your impression of Officer Candidate School?

Isensee: It was very difficult.

Healey: How was it difficult?

Isensee: Um, it was physically very, very, very, very challenging. We had to be fast and strong and it was very intense. It was very intense.

Healey: Were you told that it was going to be difficult? Or were you surprised when you got to Quantico to find out what the training was like?

Isensee: No. Uh, it was as difficult as I was expecting it to be. It was very challenging. And so when I started, we had—I was with the first group of women to do a Platoon Leaders Course that was divided up into two summers. So it was a little bit unique. We're the first group of female candidates to go through the six-week program and then to follow up the next year with another six-week program.

Healey: And what summers were those?

[00:05:00]

Isensee: Ninety-eight and '99. And so when I started, we had about fifty or sixty women in the program in my platoon and we graduated thirty-five. So we lost—

Healey: And the end of two summers?

Isensee: —at the end of the first summer. And then the second summer, there were five of us that returned for the second summer.

Healey: Five out of fifty or sixty?

Isensee: Yes.

Healey: Did some of the go—do you know what happened to the rest of them?

Isensee: They chose not to return. They just—they decided it wasn't for them. A lot of them had gone through that first summer thinking that it would be a good challenge and it was a good challenge. But that's not enough to motivate you to go back. So I was pretty motivated to be a Marine officer and so that was my motivation. But it was very intense. It was very intense. And the second summer was a lot harder than the first summer.

Healey: And both of those sessions were in Quantico, Virginia?

Isensee: Yes. In the summer.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: It was hot.

Healey: All right. And then you went back to school. What's your degree in?

Isensee: My undergraduate degree is in history. So I got my degree in history, I graduated in May of 2000 from UW Madison and then the next day I got commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps, which is fantastic.

Healey: Okay. And then what'd you do that summer?

Isensee: That summer I got a job. It was a part-time job working for an architecture firm in Madison, and it was the architecture firm that was working on the renovations of the state capitol. So I got a job, and my office was in the state capitol on the fourth floor, and I helped to set up an archives of all the historical documents related to the initial construction and renovations of the state capitol, which was really interesting.

Healey: I bet. Yeah.

Isensee: But then I was scheduled to go into active duty and at the end of the October of 2000. So I left that job and went to Quantico for The Basic School.

Healey: Did you ever give consideration to resigning your commission and not going to the Marine Corps?

Isensee: No. [laughs]

Healey: No? Okay. [laughs]

Isensee: No. That wasn't—no. No. That was always my—my goal was to be an officer in the military, and the Marine Corps is the best branch, and that was—yes. No, I was very motivated to go through that.

Healey: So when you got back to Quantico, what did you do there?

Isensee: I spent six months there going through The Basic School, um, and so that's where all Marine Corps lieutenants are taught how to be infantry platoon commanders. And so that—

Healey: Can you tell me a little more about your training there at The Basic School?

Isensee: So it was integrated, men with women, as opposed to OCS [Officer Candidate School], which was females all together and men, uh—female platoons and male platoons. But in TBS, [The Basic School] it was all integrated. And so we did a lot of field training, um, spent a week out on the field carrying our packs and carrying our weapons, and learning how to patrol and learning how to go on long hikes, and then that was supplemented by—

Healey: Let me go back OCS.

Isensee: Yes.

Healey: The two summers that you were there. I just didn't catch that it wasn't integrated. None of your coursework there was integrated at all?

Isensee: We were a female platoon within a male company. And so all the staff that we worked with at the platoon level were all females and all my peers were all females. And at the company level, the company commander was a male and then all the other platoons were male platoons.

Healey: So the second year of your platoon, of OCS, was just five women?

Isensee: No, they put us together with ROTC candidates. So the ROTC candidates went through one six-week summer, and so they went through just the one, and the five of us returned back for our second summer and they combined us together, which was—

Healey: Okay. How many ROTC candidates did you have?

Isensee: Uh, somewhere around fifty or so.

Healey: Oh, okay.

Isensee: So that was a good-sized group. That was a very good-sized group. But it was very strange though because I knew how OCS was run, and so I knew how to play the games, and where the parade deck was, and where the chow hall was, and all the kind of the daily operations of how the whole thing ran. Um, but the ROTC candidates had a lot more academic experience than I did, so they did very well in the classroom, where I struggled to keep up with them on that aspect.

Healey: Sure. Okay. When did you graduate from The Basic School?

Isensee: I graduated in—I think it was May and that was in 2001. And then after I graduated, I had about a month off or six weeks off, so I came back to Wisconsin and worked with



the recruiting station for a little while.

[00:10:01]

Healey: Did you know what your military occupational specialty was going to be by then?

Isensee: Yes. By then I did. I became a logistics officer. And so I got that assigned—

Healey: Was that your choice?

Isensee: That was my first choice, yes.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: So I got to—I got my first choice of MOS of specialty, logistics officer, and then I got to—from there I also got my first choice of duty station, which was Camp Pendleton.

Healey: Was logistics officer something that was sought after by other people? Was it hard to become a—to be selected to be a logistics officer? Was it based on something else that you did or what?

Isensee: Well, I'm not—I don't know that it was hard to become a logistics officer, but as a female that was—there were more logistics officer positions available than there were other specialties that were open to me. So there was a lot—they produce a lot of infantry officers and a lot of logistics officers, um, are kind of two big ones. But beyond that it was based on my class rank within TBS, and my class rank was high enough that as they went through the selection process, I ended up getting my first choice of MOS, and then within that my first choice of duty station.

Healey: Compared to OCS, did you find TBS difficult or not?

Isensee: I found it difficult, but in very, very different ways.

Healey: How so?

Isensee: Um, TBS they really emphasized the leadership and the leadership is sustained over six months. So instead of holding a leadership position for a week, the way you may in OCS—you just tried to survive through that one week—in TBS, it was two or three weeks long and just a lot more intense that way. Um, I thought the academics were easier to understand because it was a little bit less stressful. There was a lot less yelling at TBS—um, so that helped. But six months is a long time and it's challenging.

Healey: Okay. You said you came back to Wisconsin and you did a little recruiting here during a month or a six weeks that—

Isensee: Yes.

Healey: —you had off?

Isensee: Mm-hm.

Healey: And how was that experience?

Isensee: It was good, but it was strange. I was in Madison and working with—the recruiting officer I was working with was in Milwaukee. I did a little bit of driving back and forth, but, um, walking around on campus in Madison with my uniform was a little bit strange. There aren't too many folks that wear a uniform.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: But it was good and it—you kind of pass the time and save myself some leave time, so...

Healey: Okay. And then after you finished your duty here in Madison, what did you do?

Isensee: Then I went to Logistics Officer Course and that was at Camp Lejeune. And I must have started that in August—July or August. And that was, I think, three months long. And so that's when we learned the specialty of doing logistics and that was honestly a fantastic experience.

Healey: Oh, why?

Isensee: Because we were in school during the day, and then we had nights and weekends off, and we only went to the field once or twice. So we just had a really great tie. And my peers that I was with, they didn't bring their families with them, so everybody was unaccompanied and no one had any other responsibilities except for going to school during the day.

Healey: And were a lot of your peers right out of your Basic School course or not?

Isensee: Yes, yes. We all went to Basic School together, plus one other class as well. Yes.

Healey: Okay. So you knew most of them.

Isensee: I knew everybody and there was some fantastic people.

Healey: Where at Camp Lejeune was the logistics course held?

Isensee: I think Camp Johnson? I think that's where it was. Um.

Healey: And you already knew by then where you were going to be assigned?

Isensee: Yes. I knew I was going to Camp Pendleton.

Healey: Why did you choose Camp Pendleton?

Isensee: I chose Camp Pendleton because it's in Southern California. [laughs]

Healey: [laughs] Okay.

Isensee: So it's by the ocean, it's by Disneyland; it's a great place to go on vacation. I knew we'd have a lot of people come visit us because it's such a great place.

Healey: All right. And tell me a little bit about your assignments out at Camp Pendleton. What was your first duty assignment?

Isensee: My first duty assignment was as a platoon commander, heavy equipment platoon commander. And I did that for—I don't know—maybe six months or so, and then I became a landing support platoon commander, and then after that I became the executive officer for landing support company.

[00:15:03]

But while I was at logistics school, that's when September 11<sup>th</sup> happened and so we were, um, in class taking an exam when we—they interrupted our exam to tell us that a plane had hit the towers. We finished our exam, and went to take a break, and found out that another plane had hit the towers.

Healey: They interrupted you during an exam?

Isensee: Mm-hm. And then kind of everything changed after that.

Healey: What were some of the—you said everything changed, yes. How did it change among your peers?

Isensee: So—

Healey: What were their reactions?

Isensee: —when I was going through The Basic School, we all had an understanding that if you wanted to deploy, if you wanted go out on float, it was very competitive to get a spot to go out on one of the mews to go overseas. It was very competitive. Um, and then we just anticipated it was going to be peacetime during our careers. That's just what we were looking at and there was no reason to believe that it wouldn't be peaceful, um, and that only some of us would get the opportunity to deploy. But when September 11<sup>th</sup> happened and we knew that the world had changed, and security was different, and there were gonna be some sort of consequences as a result of that, but we had no idea what that was gonna look like. We just knew that our time in the Marine Corps was not just going to be peacetime.

Healey: Were there some changes in security out at Camp Lejeune?

Isensee: Yes. So all of a sudden, instead of kind of saluting as you drove onto the base, every vehicle was inspected, everybody driving in was inspected, and so it would take twenty

or thirty minutes to get onto base. I was living on base in the officer's quarters, so we just didn't leave very often because it was too much of a hassle to try to get back onto base. So we went to a lot of memorial ceremonies during our last couple weeks at Camp Lejeune and then we graduated from school and split up from there.

Healey: You said you went to memorial services?

Isensee: The chaplains would hold services in the chapel and—to talk about all the victims of September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. So that's—it was a lot of fun up until then.

Healey: Were you pretty well through your logistics school by then?

Isensee: We were. We were pretty close to the end. We could kind of see the end and—yes. There was a little bit of talk about us graduating early and them sending us out to fleet, but that didn't happen.

Healey: Okay. Did you have any time between logistics school and Camp Pendleton or did you report right away?

Isensee: Um, I had enough time to drive from North Carolina to Wisconsin to pick up my husband and move to California. So while I was at logistics school, actually, I got married as well. So I got married September 1, 2001 and—

Healey: Did you marry someone in the Marine Corps or not?

Isensee: No. He's a—

Healey: No?

Isensee: —he's always been a civilian.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: So he was living in Madison while I was going to school in North Carolina. So I flew—

Healey: And obviously he knew you were going to be a Marine?

Isensee: Yes. He knew I was going to be a Marine. Mm-hm. So I flew home for the weekend, and we got married in Hayward, and then at the end of the weekend—that was Labor Day weekend—at the end of that time, I went back to North Carolina to finish up school, he went back to Madison to continue working, and then September 11<sup>th</sup> happened. A little bit while later, I graduated from logistics school, and drove to Wisconsin, picked up my new husband, and we drove to California together.

Healey: Okay. And I didn't ask you, what was your obligation for it when you signed up?

Isensee: My obligation was, I think, four years active and four Reserve, for a total of eight.

Healey: Okay. And so you picked up your husband to go out to Camp Pendleton—

Isensee: Mm-hm.

Healey: —and what were your plans as well as his plans in terms of what he was gonna do?

Isensee: He was planning on looking for a job and that's what he did. So he got a job working as a chemist in San Diego.

Healey: All right. And where did you reside when you were out at Camp Pendleton?

Isensee: We lived in Carlsbad.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: We got an apartment in Carlsbad.

Healey: Okay. And how was your first—you said you were a—what were you, a platoon commander?

Isensee: Platoon commander. Mm-hm.

Healey: And how was your—was being a platoon commander what you expected it would be—

Isensee: It was.

Healey: —or not?

Isensee: It was.

Healey: Okay.

[00:19:57]

Isensee: One of my goals going into the Marine Corps is I really wanted to be a platoon commander because I just thought that would be a fantastic job. And it was. It was a really great job. I really enjoyed it. So I had some—I had a platoon sergeant that I was working with, and he, of course, was very good at what he did and he trained me on how to take care of Marines, of course, and—yeah. I just had a great group of people I got to work with.

Healey: And explain the size of your platoon and what it was comprised of.

Isensee: I had about forty Marines that I worked with. A staff sergeant was my platoon sergeant and it's broken up into—I can't remember—three or four different squads. And then we had forklifts. We had a lot of equipment with us, so, um—and I can't remember how many forklifts we had. Twenty or so.

Healey: Is that something you ever operate?

Isensee: Uh, no. I mean, they let me ride one once in a while, but they tried not to get me on the equipment. So my Marines were all trained in material handling equipment, so moving.

Healey: And it was still 2001 when you got out to Camp Pendleton?

Isensee: Yes. And my company commander, my boss at that time, he did a really great job training our company in really kind of seeing what we would be involved in and so we kind of spent the next year preparing to go to war. And so—

Healey: Is that the expectation of you and the entire company all the while you were out there?

Isensee: Yes, the whole time. It was as soon as I got there. Every Friday morning, he—my company commander—would get in front of all the Marines after working—doing company PT [physical training] and he would talk about how we need to be ready and we need to continue training because something's gonna happen and it's not our job to know when, or where, or how, but it's our job to be ready when we get called. So we pretty much spent that full year training to go to war.

Healey: In the entire company, what was the mix of men and women percentage wise?

Isensee: Um, we were about ten percent female. There were about 200 Marines in the company and that was—that was actually a bravo company, 1st Transportation Support Battalion. And then I became the platoon commander for the landing support company—landing support platoon, excuse me, which is part of Bravo Company, and that had about fifty Marines in it.

Healey: Now was that a—was the move from one platoon to another a lateral move, or was it a move up, or how would you describe that?

Isensee: It was a lateral move.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: But the landing support platoon had more Marines and, uh, they ran more landing support missions. So they were a little bit busier than the Heavy Transportation—

Healey: Where did you train during those first months that you got out there?

Isensee: We did a lot of training at Camp Pendleton, Red Beach. You may have heard of it—you may have been there.

Healey: Mm-hm.

Isensee: It's a big training beach right on the water at Camp Pendleton. And then we also did some training at Twentynine Palms. And so when we were at Twentynine Palms, we did a—I think it was a command post exercise, when they sent the headquarters units out to

Camp Pendleton to practice communicating with each other, and sending reports back and forth, and pretending to run convoys to see if we could all—to see if we can make all that communication happen.

Healey: During that first year or year and a half that you were in the Marine Corps out at Camp Pendleton, any real big surprises of something you didn't anticipate?

Isensee: Uh, good question.

Healey: Or maybe I should ask—what were some of your biggest challenges while you were out there?

Isensee: I think that some of the biggest challenges were coming in as an officer and you're supposed to be in charge of people, but the people you're in charge of know far more than I knew about forklifts, about landing support operations.

Healey: Mm-hm.

Isensee: They'd been doing it for years already by the time I came in. So it really—it was a lot of building relationships and respecting the people that really knew their jobs well and that were experts in their work.

Healey: When you got replacement personnel into the platoons, did they come in onesies and twosies or did you get, um, like a whole group or a significant group of people from one boot camp or something?

Isensee: Um, it was between, maybe, five and ten at a time. But they would come in in waves, so every couple weeks, we'd get a new folk—new group joining us and that was always a lot of fun.

[00:24:59]

And then at the end of 2002—so actually when I'd been there for about a year—we reorganized the battalion. And so instead of having a landing support platoon in each of the line companies, they wanted to consolidate all the landing support platoons into one landing support company. So they did that reorganization, and then when that happened, I became the executive officer for that new company.

Healey: And was your company commander somebody that you already knew?

Isensee: I knew of him because he was the battalion operations officer. He was the battalion S3, so I knew of him, but I had never worked directly for him. So when we formed the company, he was doing two jobs. He was a battalion operations officer trying to get the battalion ready to go to war. At the same time, he was also responsible for forming the company. So a lot of that responsibility fell to me to kind of gather all the different platoons together, and find office space, and gather the equipment. And that was a really good challenge, but it was also really fast because it happened, again, at the end of 2002 and we knew that something was probably coming. We were probably going to be

deploying, but we just didn't know for sure. And we had planned a company training exercise for the—I think the first week of December. And so that was one of my big jobs, was planning this training exercise, getting all these landing support platoons out to the field, getting them working with all the helicopter pilots to practice helicopter support teams where the helicopter would pick up freight. We'd drop a rope out down its belly, and we'd hook up freight to that rope, and then the helicopter pilot would pick it up and fly it to another location—to another landing zone—and then we'd have Marines at that second landing zone that would help the helicopter pilot kind of lower of the freight and then release it. Um, so there was a lot of training involved in that. So we're planning this training exercise and my company commander wanted it to be pretty complex and really good training, very realistic training, so there was a lot of planning happening. And then one day I went to a meeting at the battalion headquarters and found out from our battalion commander that he had canceled the training exercise and that's—

Healey: That was in December of 2002?

Isensee: —was in December of 2002—

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: —and at that point in my career, I had never heard of a battalion commander canceling a training exercise. That just—that didn't happen. Training was always the top priority above everything and so that was one more sign that things were serious. So we started, um, figuring out what equipment we needed to take with us when we were gonna deploy to Kuwait.

Healey: Did you get actual word that you were gonna deploy or you just, uh, kind of put two and two together?

Isensee: Well, we got actual word that we were deploying. And that was, again, the beginning of—well, that was the beginning of December we got word that we were going. But when it was going to happen, we just didn't know. We didn't know if it was—we just didn't know how soon it was going to be. And then within my battalion, we started sending—different companies started leaving the states at the end of December. I think some of the companies went on ship. And then the folks that flew over there started leaving, I think, in January. And my company, we got split up into two or three different waves of people flying to Kuwait and I flew over in the beginning of February of 2003. So I left—left from March Air Force Base and flew to Kuwait. And by then, all of our equipment had already been loaded on ships, so.

Healey: Were you involved in the loading of the ship?

Isensee: I was not involved in loading a ship, but my Marines were. Marines from my company were responsible for loading almost all the ships that left the port at San Diego. So that was one of their responsibilities.

Healey: What other duties did you have? You were an executive officer at that time. What other



day-to-day duties does an executive officer perform?

Isensee: I was responsible for all the training, which was a big component of it, and so that involved making sure that all of our Marines were—went through their annual rifle qualification, their annual PFT, the physical fitness test. I was responsible to make sure that all their administrative paperwork was up to date and there was a lot of paperwork to be done before we could deploy, so that was a—that was pretty time-consuming. I was also responsible for all the operations, so all the company operations and kind of deciding which platoon was gonna go take care of which work.

[00:30:00]

So we had a platoon that was supporting air operations at March Air Force Base, loading and unloading aircraft, working as an AGDAG [military airport terminal] team—and I don't remember what that stands for—but they worked at the air field up in March Air Force Base, and we would have a Marine platoon down at the port in San Diego helping periodically. So figuring out which platoon is gonna go where, and when they're gonna do that, and which platoons were gonna be supporting the pilots doing their helicopter support training, meeting those requirements, and then figuring out which platoons were gonna go support the different Marines out in the field, and who was gonna go out to get augmented to the different mews. So there was a lot of operations work that happened with that, too. And then a lot of what I did also was coordinating the efforts amongst the different platoons. So we had, I think, four or five platoons of Marines. And so all those platoon commanders, I helped them to make sure that they knew what was happening and that they had the information and the support they needed to keep their platoons running as well.

Healey: And then you got over—you flew over directly to Kuwait.

Isensee: I flew to Kuwait and we stopped in Germany on the way over there. But yes, flew directly to Kuwait.

Healey: Just in the airport or did you have a layover there?

Isensee: There was no layover. I think we got off long enough to walk through the airport and get back on the plane. But we were so tired that I don't—I'm not even sure why we got off the plane. But, um, when we got there—it was nighttime when we got there, and they shut off all the lights in the airplane, and we had to close all of our windows, and I think we kind of landed in the dark. Then we got off, off the plane, and they handed us ammunition to put—um, so I had a pistol with me and everyone else had rifles, so they gave us live ammunition to carry.

Healey: So the Marines carried their weapons with them on the plane?

Isensee: We carried our weapons with us on the plane.

Healey: An Air Force plane took you over?

Isensee: No. It was a civilian contracted plane. I don't—it wasn't United or any other—any major carrier. It was—but it was contracted.

Healey: The pilots and the stewards were—

Isensee: Yes, mm-hm.

Healey: —civilian?

Isensee: Yes, flight attendants—civilian flight attendants. Mm-hm. Yes. We carried our weapons on the plane. The weapons we didn't carry were the cruiser weapons, so the .50 cal's and the Martin 19s.

Healey: How did those weapons get to Kuwait?

Isensee: Uh, I think we put them as, um, checked baggage. I think we just—we checked them.

Healey: To put this in perspective, you were talking about your unit. Some people going over on ship—

Isensee: Yes.

Healey: —and some flying over. With respect to the entire division, the 1st Marine Division, and also the supporting aircraft units—

Isensee: Mm-hm.

Healey: —or supporting air units, had they gone over? Were they going over at the same time?

Isensee: Everybody was going over just about at the same time. So Camp Pendleton was pretty much emptying out is what was happening. Just about everybody at Camp Pendleton left. Um, so there were companies within our battalion—Transportation Support Battalion—that got detached from a battalion and then attached to combat service support groups that were in direct support of 1st Marine Division. And so those companies left.

Healey: Before you went over to Kuwait, were there members of your unit—did most of your unit go with you? Or were there members that for this, that, and the other reason did not deploy with you?

Isensee: We left a handful of people behind and that was only for medical reasons. So I know we had one Marine that was pregnant. We had another Marine that hurt his shoulder in an accident out in town the week before. So we just left a handful of people back. And actually, we lost a Marine. He died right before we deployed in a car accident. And so there were a couple of people that stayed back. But every able-bodied person went over there and they did a stop-loss also, which meant that Marines that were scheduled to get out of active duty—that were scheduled to leave active duty—they put a stop-loss on that and said nobody's leaving active duty until it's time.

Healey: And that impacted some of your Marines?

Isensee: That impacted a lot of our Marines. Because what was happening is as we were getting five or ten new Marines every couple weeks, that almost that same number of people were coming to the end of their contract and getting ready to go home and move onto their civilian lives.

[00:35:06]

And as we were making up rosters for who was going to deploy, there was a lot—one of the things I did was review rosters and to figure out who was going with us and who is staying home. Everybody who had an EAS date—end of active service date—that was within, say, three months or six months of today, we would say, “Okay, you don’t have to deploy. You don’t have to be on the deployment roster.” And so they would continue on with their regular work, preparing to get out, preparing to get a civilian job, but then as it became more and more clear that we were deploying and we were gonna be deploying soon, we had to stop that. We had to say, “If you’re on our roster, you’re going. We can no longer honor the EAS date.” But that wasn’t our decision. That came from much higher up than us.

Healey: Mm-hm. So when you deployed, you actually were high in your numbers?

Isensee: Yes. We had a full company. But when we got to Kuwait, we ended up getting more Marines assigned to us.

Healey: Where did those Marines come from?

Isensee: We got Reservists. Marine Corps Reservists that were assigned to us. And I know that we got five or six Reservists that were communication Marines and I don’t remember where they came from.

Healey: Is communication something you typically have in your unit?

Isensee: Yes, we had some communication folks, but we just didn’t have enough. We just didn’t have enough people that—we didn’t have that expertise. So they got assigned to us while we were in Kuwait. Um, and then when we were actually in Iraq, we got a gunnery sergeant from Puerto Rico assigned to us. He just kind of showed up one day and said he was here to help and we said great.

Healey: And he was communication?

Isensee: No.

Healey: No?

Isensee: No, he was a landing support specialist.

Healey: Oh, okay.

Isensee: He was landing support and he was fantastic.

Healey: And a Reserve?

Isensee: He was a Reservist. Yes. So I don't know how he got there, but.

Healey: Let me go back to your first night when you landed in Kuwait. You said you got off the plane, it was dark, and they handed you ammunition for your weapons?

Isensee: Yes.

Healey: What'd you do from there?

Isensee: We got on buses and, um, somehow—

Healey: Operated by Marines or not?

Isensee: No. No. They were civilians, but I'm drawing a—I don't remember a lot of that. But they drove us to a camp in the middle of the desert in Kuwait. So we—the airport is in town with paved roads and all that, and they drove us out to the middle of the desert, and I can't remember how far away that was, um, to a bunch of tents. Big tents.

Healey: Okay, I was about to ask. The camp was all tents?

Isensee: It was all tents. It was all temporary tents and—

Healey: And who put up the tents, do you know?

Isensee: Uh, a third party. They were contracted. And so the tents didn't belong to the military, they were all rented tents.

Healey: Big tents? How big? How many people in a tent?

Isensee: We had several different sizes. And so the biggest tents probably had 100 Marines in them. And then I was in one that you could fit probably ten people, because they had it segregated by male or female, officer or enlisted. And so as a female officer, there were probably—I don't know—five or six of us in the battalion in our location. So we had one tent.

Healey: Just out of curiosity, were the other people in your tent people that you knew or were—no?

Isensee: I did. I did know them. They were all from my battalion. There was one female that—she was one of the platoon commanders from my company, so I knew her very well, and then the other folks were from my battalion. So I knew them.

Healey: Describe the camp other than big tents.

Isensee: It was dusty. There was a lot of sand or dirt, I guess. Surrounding all the tents was a big berm that was quickly built by excavators that had built up this big dirt berm all the way around it.

Healey: Was security on the berm?

Isensee: Um, not—there was security on the corners of the berm, but it was pretty—took up a lot of real estate. And then we had security on the entrance to the camp as well.

[00:40:02]

Healey: Concertina wire? You mentioned the entrance, I just wondered what defined the entrance.

Isensee: Well, I think we must have had concertina wire, but I'm not sure if we had it at first. We must have had it. I don't remember.

Healey: What other amenities in the camp?

Isensee: We had porta-potties and then we had a shower trailer—um, two shower trailers. One for men, one for women. And in the trailers were sinks with water, running water, which was good, which was nice. And then there was a chow hall and—

Healey: Who operated the chow hall?

Isensee: The chow hall was contracted, so it was not run by the military. It was contracted out to—

Healey: Was all this up and running when you got there?

Isensee: It was. When I got there, it was all there, and the tents were empty waiting for us. So my Marines that had already traveled from my company and then from the battalion—the rest of the battalion—were already there. So you kind of found a place to sleep and got some sleep. And it took a couple days to adjust to the new time zone, but thankfully everybody that we were with—like my company commander, he was already there. He didn't expect me to start working and being productive the next day. We kind of got to get oriented a little bit and—

Healey: And this is February 2003?

Isensee: Yes.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: And then—

Healey: What was the weather like?

Isensee: Um, it was warm during the day and cold at night. So at nighttime, we were wearing hats and gloves.

Healey: What kind of gear did you take over and how did the gear get over there?

Isensee: We carried all of our personal gear with us. Flak jacket and the toiletries—

Healey: Was that in pallets, or was it in your own sea bag, or just what?

Isensee: Uh, that was in our own sea bag. We had that and all of our own stuff with us. And then while we were in Kuwait, we were doing a bunch of things. The most important thing was getting reunited with all of our equipment. So we had loaded up all of our equipment—forklifts, rigging equipment—onto ships that left San Diego and then had to travel. And so we got reunited with all that gear and then we also started accepting gear that was from the Maritime Prepositioning Force, all these ships that float on the ocean full of equipment—Marine Corps equipment—that was just waiting to be used. And so they brought those ships into the port in Kuwait and then we just, um—

Healey: You said your base was—your camp was way out in the desert somewhere.

Isensee: Mm-hm.

Healey: Did you go back to the port ever?

Isensee: No. I didn't. Not before the war. I ended up going for a quick fieldtrip at the end, but I was not working at the port. The gear got convoyed up to our camp and then our supply officer was in charge of receiving it and dividing it up. So that was probably the most important activity that was happening. But while all that was happening, my Marines—we were busy training and it was some of the best training that I've ever done. And we had—we did a lot of work with helicopters. So the helicopters would, like I said, drop a rope from the belly of the helicopter and hover and then we would rig up equipment, or pallets of supplies, or pallets of water that was on the ground. We'd hook it up that rope and then my Marines would give hand and arm signals to the helicopter pilot that he can raise up, and he can fly off, and then, again, go to a different landing zone where my Marines would be there as well. And then they would help that helicopter pilot lower the equipment and then we'd disconnect the rigging so—

Healey: Was the equipment actually raised up into the helicopter or not?

Isensee: It was not raised in—it was not put into the helicopter. It was hanging from the bottom. So when we got there, to Kuwait, the helicopter pilots were very interested in doing as much training as they could. They really wanted to. They knew that that was gonna be one of their primary missions—the CH-53 and 46 pilots—one of their primary missions was going to be moving equipment using that technique and so they were very much interested in training. When we were at Camp Pendleton, they weren't as interested in training. They knew that they had to do it once, or once a month, or every other month

or so, but they weren't super excited about it. It wasn't that interesting to them. But once we got over there, they were very interested in doing it.

[00:44:58]

So we spent a lot of time practicing, practicing rigging and we got to pick up and move forklifts and Humvees, whereas at Camp Pendleton we always picked up cement blocks, which is not real equipment and that was is very easy for landing support Marines to figure out how to do and it's not complicated it at all. But if you have a forklift, you had to figure out how to rig it and where to hook it to and it's a lot more challenging, a lot more interesting.

Healey: Damage any equipment during your training?

Isensee: We did damage some equipment during our training, [laughs] yes. How did you know?

Healey: You said it's not a cement box.

Isensee: So actually one of the funniest things that happened is my company commander, he wanted us to lift a Humvee. So he grabbed one of the Marines that was with us in this little area in the desert away from our camp where we were training, and he told the Marine that we were going to take his Humvee and the Marine said, "But sir, you can't take my Humvee. I'm not even part of your unit. I'm part of this other company." Like, "You can't just take—it's not your Humvee, sir." It belongs to this other company. And my boss said, "Oh, I know your boss. It'll be fine. Don't worry about it." And the Marine said, "Sir, no. I can't do that. It's not gonna be okay." And he—my boss—put that Marine in an uncomfortable situation of he was gonna be in trouble one way or the other. So he lifted up his Humvee and then we dropped it. [laughs] And it still ran, but the windshield was broken. So I felt really bad for him that he had to go back and report that he broke his Humvee—that we broke his Humvee. But one of the things that we trained for—that thankfully we never had to do—was figure out how to rig and lift bridging sections.

And so the engineering support battalion had these bridging sections where they're floating bridges that we planned on using if we needed to cross the rivers and canals if the Iraqis had blown the bridges. So if that happened and 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division or anybody else needed to keep pushing north but the bridges were blown, we were going to work with the helicopter pilots and the engineers to transport those bridging sections by helicopter. So it was a really big challenge because none of my Marines had done that before and the engineering battalion had never done it before either, because in peacetime you just—that's just not something that you ever have to think about doing. But that was a big part of our plan going into the war. So we spent a lot of time figuring out how to do that and—

Healey: How much time did you have after you got there in February—I don't know if you got there early or late February—until the war started?

Isensee: It was about six weeks. And so we spent that six weeks training and, like I said,

gathering up all the equipment.

Healey: How long were your days?

Isensee: Um, most of the days weren't too bad. We'd get up at six in the morning, and get ready for the day, eat breakfast, kind of work and train all day, and eat dinner, and talk with Marines at night, and go to bed at nighttime. So the days during that six weeks, they—I mean they went by really fast, but they weren't—we weren't staying up all night trying to get everything done up until—I guess up until right before we went. Yeah. So the days actually weren't that bad. There were nights when we'd take turns standing watch and standing duty. So I did that and that kind of changed things a little bit.

Healey: Seven days a week?

Isensee: Somebody was standing duty seven days a week, but it wasn't me.

Healey: Not just standing duty, but just your training and everything was seven days a week?

Isensee: Oh. Yes. Yes. Yes. It was seven days a week, yes. But there was a chaplain with us and he did church services on Sunday mornings. And while I was there, we had Ash Wednesday service in that camp. So that was—I don't know—at the time, that was very important to have that service. And while I was standing watch, one of the things that I was helping to track was the amount of equipment that we had and whether or not we had enough to do our battalion's mission. And so we were—it wasn't very fancy. We just said are we red, yellow, or green for the equipment that need, and do we have enough trucks, do we have enough of this forklift, do we have enough of that forklift, do we have enough of this type of truck and this type of trailer. And over and over again, we said, "We're red. We're red. We don't have enough. We don't have enough." And then a couple more convoys would come up from the port and we'd say, "All right. Well, we almost have enough of these trailers, but we don't have enough trucks to do it." So at that time, all this other equipment started showing up. They attached to our battalion—they attached, I think, an Army Reserve company and all their trucks were attached to us so we could get enough equipment.

[00:50:02]

And then they started leasing civilian trucks and hiring civilian drivers to run our convoys. So like semi-trailers, which I thought was really—we didn't know that that was gonna happen.

Healey: Okay. Was your battalion commander with you there in the camp?

Isensee: He was. Yeah.

Healey: Who was your battalion commander?

Isensee: I'm drawing a blank on his name right now. [laughs]



Healey: How about your company commander?

Isensee: We called him sir. [laughs]

Healey: Yeah. Sure.

Isensee: My company commander was Maj. Cook, Mac Cook. And he's a colonel now. Yeah, my battalion commander was fantastic. Before we left, we needed to fill sandbags to dig out shelters—bomb shelters—kind of in the middle of the camp. So we had—some of the Marines were tasked with digging out the shelters and then each person in our battalion was tasked with filling—I don't know—like 200 sandbags a person. And our battalion commander said, "Everyone's doing it. Everyone's doing their fair share. It's an equal share amongst everybody." So we filled sandbags next to him to build all of those. But he was fantastic. He is fantastic. And while we were there, we were trying to figure out what the plan was gonna look like and how all this was going to happen. And then that's when we kind of learned that the plan was for ninety-six hours before the war started that our company—the landing support company—was gonna go up to the border to wait.

Healey: And you got that word how?

Isensee: Staff planning meetings. So, yeah, just the leadership meetings—

Healey: And were you told that at some juncture you're going to have ninety-six hour warning or you got ninety-six hours and that was warning?

Isensee: Ninety-six hours was the warning. Yes. Yeah. Yeah. So there was one more—

Healey: And when did that come?

Isensee: Um, that came—I have the date here actually.

Healey: You brought a logbook with you.

Isensee: I brought my logbook because I don't ever remember the dates. March 18 at 7:30 in the morning we found out that our company—about half our company was gonna go up to the border and that was it. That was gonna be the start. But that was—I mean that was really intense. And it was a stressful morning, because it was 7:30, start of the day. And that was gonna be the day I took a shower, actually, because you didn't get to take a shower every day because there wasn't enough water for everybody. So I was on my way to the shower, and gonna go get some breakfast, and just have a regular day, and it turns out nope, we're going to the border. So we—

Healey: How far was the border from where you were? Have you any idea?

Isensee: It took us a couple of hours to drive there. But I don't know how many kind of miles it was. And it was called Breach Point West, that's what we called it.

Healey: At this time, did you have maps—

Isensee: We did.

Healey: —part of your briefings?

Isensee: We did. We had a big stack of maps. And so I had my own set of maps, which was great. Yeah. I had maps.

Healey: So you had an idea where your camp was with respect to the borders, Kuwait—

Isensee: Yes.

Healey: —and Iraq?

Isensee: Mm-hm. Yep. So we, it—

Healey: What—let me—before you go any further, let me ask you what was the communication like? Did you have any communication back to the states or not?

Isensee: Um, I remember we—for a little while, we had Internet access. So at one point, I sent an email to my parents and a couple friends saying that everything was fine, I'm in Kuwait. Just to—

Healey: Any restrictions on what you sent?

Isensee: Um, yeah. Not all of the websites worked. So I think I created a different email account because my regular email account didn't work and—I mean the restrictions that we couldn't say where we were, or what we were doing, or what we're going to be doing. So yes, I guess yes, there were restrictions, but...

Healey: And was the Internet—did you have to go to a comm center or something or did you have Internet within your own unit?

Isensee: Uh, you know, it was so sporadic and it was so short—um, we definitely didn't have a comm center. I think—I'm not sure. But our camp wasn't established long enough to have anything like that.

[00:55:06]

Healey: All right. Well, I interrupted you. I'm not sure if you remember where you were going from there. You're at the ninety-six hour appoint.

Isensee: Yes.

Healey: And when you finally got the word that you were gonna go forward, what gear did you take with you?

Isensee: I brought my two or three MOPP [mission oriented protective posture] suits, the NBC [nuclear, biological, chemical] protective gear, my flak jacket, my LBV [load bearing vest] with my canteens, my pistol. Um, I brought my pack, which had—I don't know—just a couple changes of clothes.

Healey: When you left your base camp, did you take everything with you or—

Isensee: We did not take everything with us. We left a lot of stuff behind because we just didn't—we left quite a bit of stuff behind.

Healey: Both personal gear as well as military gear?

Isensee: All personal stuff. We left a lot of personal stuff back. So we kind of threw it in a trailer and locked it up.

Healey: Did some people stay at the base camp as security?

Isensee: Yes. I think some people stayed and secured—

Healey: So you had an expectation that you were going to get back to the base camp?

Isensee: That was the plan. At some point, we were coming back there. Mm-hm. Yeah. And we—yeah. I brought my sleeping bag with me. I had a fleece jacket, which I really loved. It was—

Healey: At the base camp, were you sleeping on the ground or were you sleeping on cots?

Isensee: We had cots. And we did not bring the cots with us, so that was actually one of the big tasks—was tearing down your cot and throwing it in the trailer that we were going to lock up and leave. Yeah. So there was a lot of work doing that sort of cleanup and packing our trucks. We already knew which trucks we were taking with us for that initial convoy because we took, I think, half our company with us. The other half of the company stayed back and then the plan was to meet up with them later on. So we already knew what trucks were coming with us, we had already knew how to pack them because we had practiced doing that, but then it was just a matter of getting all the trucks loaded up and driving north.

Healey: So you said about half the company? Approximately—

Isensee: Yes.

Healey: —how many men or women went forward?

Isensee: We brought 100 with us. And then a couple days into the war, we brought all but—we probably brought sixty more Marines into Iraq with us later.

Healey: What was happening in the last day before you went forward?

Isensee: Uh, I don't remember specifically, but it would have been training with the helicopter pilots. We also practiced setting up our command post tents, practicing putting them up, and taking them down, and making sure we knew how they all got put together.

Healey: In your information, which you provided to the veterans museum, you indicated that ninety-six hours before the war started, you recall sitting at the border of Kuwait listening to President Bush's last speech. You know where you were forward? Or what? Where were you?

Isensee: We were at Breach Point West and we had our company—our trucks were all lined up in a circle. And we were—it was dark, it was quiet. My boss had a hand crank radio that he brought with him and the only station that came through was BBC. So we cranked up his radio and listened to BBC and it was President Bush giving his speech. And I don't know the—

Healey: Do you remember the content of his speech?

Isensee: Yes. He told—I mean he told Saddam Hussein that he had twenty-four more hours to do something and I can't remember if it was to let the inspectors in or—I think that must have been it, but I remember he said, "You have twenty-four more hours." And if Saddam Hussein didn't comply, then the—I can't remember his words exactly—but the war was going to start and it was just quiet—it was quiet. We all kind of looked at each other and there was nothing to say because knew what was happening and we knew we couldn't go home until the war started. We couldn't go home until the war was over and the war can't be over until the war starts, and apparently that's starting in twenty-four hours. And here we are, we're just waiting for it to happen. And we knew were part of the beginning. And I knew I was part of history, and I knew that my parents didn't know where I was, and I knew that kind of nobody knew where we were except for us.

Healey: How many other units were out there at Breach Point West?

Isensee: Breach Point West. There were a lot. But I'm not—I don't have any idea of how many. There were other battalions there. Engineering support battalion was there.

[01:00:00]

Healey: Other services? Anyone other than Marines?

Isensee: No. It was all Marines. It was all Marines. Navy Corpsmen, of course, too. But all Marines. And that night, we just watched the scud missiles fly across. So from the north of us, we would watch them kind of go above overhead and they were lit up kind of like fireworks when fireworks fly up before they burst. You can see the light that goes up, right? And so we'd watch them and then about half of them would stop. Like the light would stop shining right above us. And we knew that was because the anti-aircraft missiles that the U.S. had were knocking them out. That was our understanding of what was happening and we thought that was good. But then we were watching other scud missiles and we'd watch their light, their hull trajectory, and it would go from one side of us on the north side, all the way down to the south, and then it would stop at the

horizon. And then we found out—I don't know—the next day or two that they were landing right outside of our camp. And so all of those bomb shelters that we had built and we had filled with sandbags, that's—these alarms were going off and all the Marines that were back at the camp were running into these shelters, hoping that the scud missiles weren't dirty. That they weren't—that there was no NBC attached to them. So it was a—I mean it was kind of crazy. And at one point, one of my Marines said to our first sergeant, "First Sergeant, are those American missiles?" And his answer was, "No, double dog, those are not ours." [laughs] But I don't know. It was just intense.

And then the next morning, um, we staged our convoy to cross the border and they had it divided up into different lanes. So the engineers had broken through the border, like they had cut the concertina wire and made a path through it. And so we were staged in one of the lanes and just kind of waiting our turn kind of like a traffic jam where there's someone in charge of sending convoys through. And we were in our convoy waiting to go and we waited there for several hours. And then somehow—I don't know—my company commander was—I think he got tired of waiting, so we started up all of our trucks and drove through. And that was right before sunset when we were crossing the border and it was the strangest thing. It was really quiet and we had, I think, probably forty or fifty trucks with us. No, it's less than that. Less than that. We had 100 Marines, but I can't remember how many vehicles we had with us. But my boss was in the front vehicle, my company commander as the XOL [excess of loss] was in the rear vehicle making sure that we stayed together—that nobody got lost. And we drove all night and we got to that first air field, um, just before midnight, but it was slow because we had our lights turned off for most of it and the road wasn't marked. So—and there were a lot of other vehicles on the road too, so it was confusing and stressful trying not to get lost, trying not to lose our convoy.

And the way our communication was set up, my company commander—I could hear him, but he couldn't hear me on the radio. And so he was the lead vehicle, I was in the rear, and we had a radio operator in the middle relaying messages. So I could hear him, but he couldn't hear me. So, yeah, we drove all the way there—

Healey: Was there an ambient light so you could actually see the vehicle ahead of you or not?

Isensee: We were driving so close, that's how we would not get lost. And so the truck have these little—I don't know—glow in the dark lights at the back of the truck and it's not complicated, but it's pretty simple. If you're close enough where you can see, I think, four points, then you're too close. But if you're far enough way where it looks like it's just two points of light, that's the proper distance. If you can't see any light from the truck in front of you, you're probably too far away. So it's not very complicated. But we managed to stick together and we heard later on that—oh, so my company commander had a blue force tracker in his vehicle, which was a GPS unit attached to a laptop computer, which is pretty powerful, actually.

[01:05:07]

So you could, from that laptop, click on any other blue force tracker in the world and you could send that person, like, an email message—send that computer an email

message, which is pretty amazing, actually. And we heard later on that the rest of our battalion at our camp in Kuwait was watching this blue force tracker at the headquarters. And they were saying that all the convoys from all these other units just kind of pulled over to the side of the road because it was dark, and you couldn't see anything, and you didn't know where you were going, and the convoys got all separated, but our company's convoy just kept on moving forward. So slowly, but surely, we just kept on moving north. And then my company commander, we were joking later, he said, "I didn't know that was an option. I didn't know we can just pull over on the side of the road. I thought we were supposed to go to the air field, so we went to the air field." [laughs] So we got to this airfield at midnight and I think we moved to a different—

Healey: Do you know what airfield it was?

Isensee: Um, I can't remember. It had a couple of different names. Uh—

Healey: But it was an airfield in Iraq because you were in Iraq.

Isensee: Yes. It was an airfield in Iraq and it was the very first resupply point for 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division. So we were—it was just north of Breach Point West, but up into Iraq, and then the rest of 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division was going into Iraq from the southeast side. And so they were gonna push north and get resupplied at that very first airfield, which was where we were at. So the next morning, we provided security, stayed in our trucks, and hoped that nothing happened that night for the couple of hours until the sun came up. And then in the morning, we were waiting for somebody to come clear the airfield to make sure that there was no unexploded ordnance there before we started bringing in helicopters. But a helicopter just started—helicopters just started showing up with gear. So we just started unloading those helicopters as they came in, and started staging gear. And kind of at that point all this resupply power just started gathering and more convoys came up and set up an ammunition supply point and set up a water point. And we—it was our Marines that were working the air field, loading and unloading aircraft helicopters and C-130s that started landing.

Then after a couple days, we left a platoon there and then my company commander and I took a platoon with us, and drove another convoy up to another air field and worked there for several days and left some Marines there, and then pushed up north to another air field, and we just kind of leapfrogged our way up to just south of Baghdad over the first three weeks of the war.

Healey: Kind of skipping ahead. How long were you in Iraq all told?

Isensee: I was there from March 20 or 21 until the first or second week of May. And then at that point in May, we—my company was sent back to Kuwait.

Healey: So from that time to March—from March until May—you were with personnel from your unit who were working at airfields primarily?

Isensee: Yes. We worked at expeditionary air fields and at one point we had our company spread—we had a platoon in running operations at the air field in Kuwait, we had, I

think, three different platoons spread at air fields throughout Iraq, and then I was always with the northernmost platoon, wherever that was. So every time we'd show up to a new air field, my responsibility was to go find the air boss, and let him know that we're there, and ask him where he wants us to set up. And so air boss was the guy who was in charge of the air, so he was in charge of the airfield.

Healey: So he's somebody from the Wing?

Isensee: He was from the Marine Air Wing. So it was his airfield and we were there in support—

Healey: And air boss is what rank?

Isensee: Probably a colonel, maybe?

[01:10:02]

Healey: Okay. And what was your rank at the time?

Isensee: I was a first lieutenant. So yeah, my first job was—my first responsibility was to go and check in, basically, and say, "My company's here. I've got a platoon of Marines ready to run AGDAG. Where would you like to set them to set up? On the east side, on the west side, what part of the air field would you like my Marines to be working out of?" And then they would just—if there was aircraft that was landing, they would unload it. If there was aircraft that needed to be loaded, they would put on whatever freight needed to get loaded onto it and then move it forward for—

Healey: From day-to-day, what was the stress level like?

Isensee: The—

Healey: Not just yours, but other people that you came in contact with.

Isensee: It was high. It was high. I mean the first three or four weeks were just—they were crazy. I mean it was like nothing—it was just—it was crazy because it was dangerous, and we didn't know which areas were secure, and pretty much there wasn't a lot of the areas that were secure. And we—one of our responsibilities working at the air fields was to unload casualties, and so every place we were, we were also collocated with a medical unit. And they weren't ours and we weren't theirs, but we were located at the same place, all there to support that same mission. So one of my jobs was also to check in with the folks in the medical unit and say, "Hey, we're here. We're your team unloading the helicopters. When you need us, give us a call. We're on the radio. We're right here." And so we would unload a lot of casualties and bring them over to the medical tents. So it was, uh—I don't know—it was crazy. And there were nights when we could hear and see fire fights out in the distance and we were just kind of hoping they weren't bad fire fights. That's—and then we had a lot of stress about the possibility of chemical warfare. So when we crossed the border, we were wearing our MOPP suits, which was the heavy protective suits that you wear over your regular uniform, and then on top of that is a flak jacket, and then on top of that is your vest with the canteens and all that stuff on it. And

then there were—

Healey: So a lot of gear that you're wearing?

Isensee: We were wearing a lot of gear. A lot of gear.

Healey: When did you take off the MOPP suits?

Isensee: We took them off, I think, the third week in. So there was one night we were at an airfield—and I think it was the second one that we were at, but I could be wrong about that—and we were with Marines from 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division. We were always with those folks and we got all of our intelligence reports from 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division. And we got a report that night that they said that if the Iraqis were going to use chemical warfare, tonight was gonna be the night because our Third ID was in the process of securing Baghdad and if it was going to happen, tonight was gonna be the night that it happened. So I had to deliver that message to my Marines and they said, "What does that mean? Do we have to sleep with our gas masks on or what do we have to do?" And I said, "I'm not telling you you have to do anything. I'm telling that the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division intelligence officer says that if Saddam Hussein is gonna use chemical warfare, he's gonna do it tonight." So we slept that night with our rubber boots on just because those always take a long time to put on. So we slept with those on and kept our MOPP suits on the whole night and thankfully, of course, nothing—nothing like that happened. But that was stressful.

And there were a lot of times when we were getting incoming rounds—incoming artillery—and we just didn't know if it was clean or dirty. And so we'd—someone would call, "Gas, gas, gas," and we'd put on the gas mask. And then not knowing if it was all clear, there was somebody that would test the air with those little test strips that we learned how to do during training that no one ever thought we'd have to use for real. And thankfully, all the tests came that there was no chemicals in the air. But then we had to do selective unmasking, which is just a terrible procedure where the lowest ranking Marine takes off his gas mask first and if he's still alive after ten minutes, everybody else can take off theirs, too. It was just terrible, but that's—we did that three or four times before we knew that we had no reason to believe that we were going to be hit with anything chemical.

[01:15:03]

Healey: You mention artillery many nights. Did the artillery hit the airfield ever where you were?

Isensee: Yes, but not close enough to me where I had any—nothing hit in my immediate vicinity. It was in the area where I could hear it, but not super close.

Healey: At night, where were you sleeping? In your trucks, in your vehicles, or?

Isensee: We spent a lot of nights in our vehicles. The first—I don't know—the first maybe week we slept in our trucks. I know there was one night, which was after we left the first air



field, heading towards the second one, we stopped at this little—it was kind of like a little wayside where there are other Marine Corps units and we figured, well, if Marines are here, I guess this is where we'll sleep the night. But there were so many trucks there that we couldn't sleep on the ground. We always preferred to sleep on the ground right next to our trucks. It just always seemed like the natural thing to do. But there were so many vehicles there, it just wasn't safe enough. We'd gotten a report that a Marine had gotten killed by getting run over by a truck the day before and so we slept in our vehicles then.

And then after that, we had tents. They were two-person tents. They were actually really nice. We were the first people to use it and getting new gear from the Marine Corps was pretty fun. And I had my own tent because I was female and there just weren't that many of us. So we each—we had a little two-person tent.

Healey: You mentioned that there were casualties in medical there.

Isensee: Mm-hm.

Healey: Did you have surgeons with you?

Isensee: We did. We had—yes. So they were always collocated with those medical units and so they—yes, there were surgeons and they did some really amazing work. I know there was one night when one of the officers from the medical unit had some questions about how the casualties were coming in from the helicopters. And so I went to go and talk with him and he said, “Well, when you're getting your reports—”—because we listen to the radio, we're talking on the radio—and the radio operators from the headquarters would say, “There are casualties coming in. You can expect ten casualties.” Or twenty or thirty casualties coming in on helicopters. This medical officer was saying, “Well, it would be really helpful if we knew more about those casualties. If we knew if they could walk, how serious was it. Are they civilian? Are they military? What type of injuries do they have?” And I had to explain to him that by the time we could talk to those helicopters to find out what kind of casualties they had on their bird, we couldn't get information soon enough. So we could only talk to the helicopters line of sight. So if you can see a helicopter, you can talk to a helicopter. Well, if you can see a helicopter, it doesn't matter what's on the helicopter because he's coming in anyway and he's gonna be here in just a minute. So I said, “I could get that information, but you're going to get it sooner than I am. So I'm sorry. All we have is what we have.”

And then there was another actually kind of a funny situation. There was a higher-ranking officer, I don't know if he was a general, maybe? He was kind of walking around one of the airfields talking to my Marines who were working and he was saying, “Look, how do you know? What's the flight schedule? Like how do you know what's coming in today? Or what's going out today? Or what aircraft is coming in and how many are going out?” And my Marine, he was really funny because he said, “Well, sir. See, what we do is, we sit in there and we hear kind of a buzz—a buzz in the distance—and we look up and say, “Hey, a bird's coming in,” and then that's how we know, sir.” [laughs] And the gentleman that asked the question knew that it was, at that point, kind of a silly question, but kind of a funny answer, too. And that was the truth.

We didn't know what was coming in until it landed.

Healey: Did you have contact or any sign—did you see Iraqis? Civilians?

Isensee: Yes. We saw quite a few. So when we were running convoys, we ran convoys moving from one airfield to the next as we were moving positions. But then once we were located in those airfields—

Healey: Were you going through built up areas? Towns?

Isensee: We were going through towns. Yes.

[01:20:03]

And then I needed up running a lot of convoys in between our different airfields to check in with the Marines. So we were going through towns and—yeah, we were going through towns.

Healey: What type of security did you have on your vehicles? What kind of weapons, as you were on convoys going from air base to air base?

Isensee: Well, we had a couple .50 cal machine guns with us, a couple 240 Golf, automatic grenade launchers, but we also had—I'm sorry—Martin 19s. But we had—I can't remember what the—but we had a different weapon. It was one the one-time use.

Healey: Who were manning those weapons?

Isensee: Our Marines.

Healey: From?

Isensee: From our company.

Healey: From your company? They were not Infantry Marines?

Isensee: No, we provided our own security. We provided our own security.

Healey: So part of their training also was use of those weapons?

Isensee: Yes. Yeah, that was really important. And of course, everyone had their own rifle and I had a pistol. And then I kind of got into the habit of when I was—I would carry my driver's rifle because his primary responsibility was to keep driving. If anything happens, he should not be in a position where he's stopping to shoot. So I would take his rifle, too. Yeah, so we provided our own security. And then helicopters provided security for a lot of convoys as well. Helicopter air support.

Healey: Oh, okay. So they often just flew along with you through town?

Isensee: They flew along. Mm-hm. Yep. And there was one situation, actually, that we were at

that first airfield and then we were ready to go to the next airfield. My company commander said he's ready, our Marines are ready. Let's go. And so our plan was to join up with another unit and kind of create a big convoy and kind of all travel together. But at that time, our battalion commander said, "No, I don't need to you go, landing support company. Stay where you're at for a couple more days. You don't need to go right now." And so that original convoy went without us and then we learned later that there was an ambush set up for that convoy. So the convoy commander had sent out a lead vehicle to kind of scan the route ahead of time and that lead vehicle had spotted that there was an ambush set up. And so they stopped the convoy and the convoy commander called in for air support—helicopter air support—and so these helicopter gun ships came in and kind of destroyed the whole area. And then the convoy drove through the area and there were no incidents after that. They made it to the next airfield. And the convoy commander was my boss' peer and so they were equal rank and friends also. And we were collocated together, so we were always running into each other.

And then when we got to that second air field, I went in to go check in with the air boss and let him know that, "My company's here, sir. We're ready to work. Where would you like to set up?" And that convoy commander was there and so he and I were just talking because it's fun to run into somebody you know. And then a helicopter pilot walked by—and you could tell he was a helicopter pilot from his uniform—and this convoy commander, who was a major at the time, stopped him and then he stopped his captain helicopter pilot and said, "Hey, I just want to say thank you. I'm a really big fan of helicopter pilots these days. I'm just a really big fan." And then that captain—the helicopter pilot—said, "Oh, sir, it's good to meet you. I was your pilot the other day. I was the pilot that you called in for air support." And the major—the convoy commander—just kind of teared up a little bit, and he shook his hand, and he said, "Thank you. Thank you." And then the helicopter pilot—I thought he had just a great response—he said, "You know what, sir? It's my pleasure. It's my job to protect those Marines." And it was just—I just thought it was so, so amazing that I got to see that interaction. It was two people that didn't know that one person had protected the lives of 100, 200 Marines in this big, long convoy and that the officer that was in charge of that convoy and responsible for all those lives had called him for help and that was just a—just a phenomenal moment.

[01:25:04]

And it also was, you know, kind of a little scary that I was supposed to be part of that convoy. If my boss had gotten his way, I was supposed to be there, too. But I wasn't, so.

Healey: Okay. When did you get the word? Or how did you find out that you were gonna be leaving Iraq?

Isensee: I don't remember how I found out exactly. I know that one of my responsibilities was to go to any meetings that they had within the airfield. So if they had—they had daily meetings a lot of times where they just kind of quick updates about any changes that were happening, or people that were moving around, or units that were coming in, or coming or going, or some of the major activities. So that's how I probably found out.

Healey: Okay. And you personally never went into Baghdad?

Isensee: I did not go into Baghdad. The farthest north I made it was Salman Pak, which is actually a suburb of Baghdad. It's like seven or eight miles southeast of Baghdad and that was an airfield. So that's as far north as I went. My company commander and a couple other Marines did go up to Baghdad, but that wasn't where our mission was.

Healey: Okay. Kind of tell me historically what was going at that time at the end of March. Was there anybody being pulled out? Or no? Just you left? Or when did you leave Iraq? March? No?

Isensee: Um, no. Well, I went in in March and left Iraq in—

Healey: Okay, I'm sorry.

Isensee: —in May.

Healey: Okay. May.

Isensee: So they pulled our company back and we kind of regrouped in Kuwait back at our original camp. And then the rest of the battalion—a lot of those—they ran a lot of convoys. The rest of our battalion, their primary mission was convoys. Resupply convoys. A lot of fuel. So they still were in convoys, actually I think through the rest of the summer. But our company went back to Kuwait and the rest of the battalion—some of them started coming back to Kuwait, some of them were on convoy operations out of Kuwait, and then we kind of waited for our turn to go back home. And so we waited there, and cleaned up our gear as best we could, and tried to find all of our gear. And I wrote a lot of reports explaining how we lost so much of our gear and we wrote a lot of reports, wrote performance evaluations for all of our Marines, wrote Marines up for awards when it was time.

Healey: Explain a little bit about losing gear. How does that occur? [laughs]

Isensee: Well, what happened was, probably the first set of gear we lost was that first convoy into Iraq. We had a lot of gear that was—our trucks are kind of overloaded and so it just kind of fell off the trucks. And so we lost a lot of cami netting—it was probably the biggest thing we lost—and chairs, and tables, and some things that would have been really helpful for us to have in Iraq we lost along the side of the road. And we didn't stop to pick anything up because we just wanted to keep moving forward. Had I known how expensive some of that gear was that we lost, we may have slowed down a little bit to grab some of it, but we just kept moving forward. We also lost at least one Humvee. I know there was one Humvee that, at one of the platoons, it got damaged on one of their convoys. They weren't immediately with us. They were running their own convoy and the Humvee broke down. There was no time to fix it. The standing order was just don't stop. You're not in a position to be stopping. So they pulled all their equipment off of it, and shot a round through the engine block, and left it on the side of the road. The next time anybody saw it, the whole thing was stripped and there was nothing left of it. So that was one Humvee. I know we lost a forklift because it was on a lowboy trailer. The

trailer got some flat tires, we couldn't fix those tires, so we left it in one of the towns and then never saw it again after that. So I had to write up that report and my report said something like, "This gigantic forklift was last seen in the town of," whatever it was.

[01:30:02]

And then we lost some gear by—some of the rigging equipment. Some of the big, long kind of like ropes or straps. We put them in—either in a helicopter or in a C-130 and sent it to a different airfield. Well, it got lost in transit. So we never saw those again. I think those are the stories that I remember.

Healey: Back in Kuwait, a lot of time cleaning up gear?

Isensee: Mm-hm. We did. We just kind of tried to do a lot of inventory and making sure all our supply records matched what we had and the stuff that was missing. We tried to find it, actually. So like those straps that went missing in transit, we actually went to a couple different bases, and met up with a landing support unit from the east coast hoping that they had our equipment, and we just kind of looked for things and had a little bit of luck that way. And we sent a group of Marines to one of the air force bases to see what kind of equipment they had laying around, and we packed some of their equipment up, and some of the Marines, I think, took it down to the port to wash it and to load it back up on onto ships. But I wasn't involved in that directly.

Healey: You talked about writing reports. What type of computer equipment did you have available to you during your time in Iraq, and in Baghdad, and Kuwait?

Isensee: I had a laptop. So I had my own laptop and I brought it with me to Iraq. And—

Healey: Military issue?

Isensee: Military issue. Yes. And it had a DVD player on it. And then at some point, we ended up getting secure email access at one of the airfields. So we started getting—gosh, we must've gotten email communication. But we couldn't email back home. It was all very local network stuff. Yeah, so I had a computer. I had a laptop with me. My boss had a laptop. I think the other platoon commanders had laptops.

Healey: What was your daily routine like back in Kuwait?

Isensee: Once all of our equipment was packed up, we didn't have much left to do. So we'd get up in the morning and go to the chow hall. Maybe go for a run before the sun came up if we could. We did a lot of reading, a lot of sitting around, a lot of waiting. And it was a long—I don't know how long it was—a month or so. It was a long time of waiting, waiting for our turn to fly back home. So we'd work out, we'd watch movies, read books. It was just a lot of waiting.

Healey: Were you back in the same base camp that you started out in?

Isensee: Yes. Same base camp in Kuwait. At that point, there were a lot more rules, a lot more

structure, a lot more people living there. It was a lot more crowded. We had rats, a lot of rats. And yeah. That was just actually kind of a miserable experience, waiting to go home. I know at one point, though, one of the nice parts was that we had Marine Corps Reservists that were attached to the battalion—actually, I think it was a whole company. It must have been a whole company attached to the battalion working with us. And some of their officers, what they did as civilians was a little bit of recruiting, and HR, and interviewing sort of things. And so one night, one of them kind of gave us a class. All the officers in the battalion gave us a class on what it's like to go out and get a job, and how do you write a resume, and how do you do an interview, and how do you go out and look for a job? What kind of jobs does someone go out and look for? So that was actually—that was pretty interesting. But it was a fairly miserable experience waiting to go home.

Healey: And then you flew back to the United States?

Isensee: Yes.

Healey: And how much of your unit with you on the same flight?

Isensee: Uh, most of my company went almost at the same time. While we were still in Kuwait, my company commander got orders to go someplace else. So he left. He left and went home and started preparing to move, I think, to Quantico or DC. So I was left in charge of the company. And we all traveled pretty much at the same time within a couple of air flights.

[01:35:01]

It was a civilian airplane going back home again as well. So it took us a couple days to process through Kuwait, and paperwork, and customs, and I'm not sure what else we did there. A lot of shuffling through different tents, sitting through briefs about how going home is gonna be more difficult than you think it will be and kind of what to expect. But we got back into—we flew into March Air Force Base and then we took busses from March Air Force Base to Camp Pendleton. And they had a pretty nice setup where they let us drop off our weapons at a staging area at Camp Pendleton. So we locked up all of our weapons in these shipping containers in this portable armory that they had set up. So we did that at Camp Pendleton, and then we got back onto the bus, and the next stop was gonna be to the parade deck where our families were waiting for us. It was the parade deck right across from the airfield. But I can't remember the name of the parade deck. But our busses rolled in and then at that point all of our families were there. My husband was there waiting for me. So he picked me up, and we were dismissed, and we got a couple days off. I think we got a ninety-six—got four days off [laughs] after coming back. So we went back to our apartment, and I remember I took a shower, which was great, and then my husband made me dinner, and then I called my mom.

Healey: By that time, she knew you'd been in Iraq? Or not?

Isensee: She knew I was in Iraq and she knew I'd made it back to Kuwait and was waiting to go home. But none of us knew when we were going back home, so I stopped giving her

updates on, “Well, we might next week. Nope, it’s not. Might be next week. Nope, it’s not.” So I called her when I got back to California. And actually along the way, we flew in through Maine—through Bangor, Maine—and we got off the airplane just to kind of stretch our legs, I guess, and while we were there, there were all these local civilians that were cheering for us. Like this is—okay, this is great.

Healey: Hm. Okay. You didn’t suspect there to be civilians in Bangor, Maine?

Isensee: No, we just didn’t—we had no expectation of anything. We were just on our way home.

Healey: Did you have cell phones at that time or not?

Isensee: A lot of people had cellphones. But when we first went over to Kuwait, a lot of people mailed them home because we weren’t allowed to have them. They weren’t secure communication, so we couldn’t have them. And I didn’t have one, but I know my friend, as soon as we got there, she just mailed it home. And the cellphones didn’t—they didn’t do anything anyway. So yeah. We didn’t have a lot of cell phones.

Healey: Have any mail? Good old-fashioned mail while you were there?

Isensee: We did. Yeah. It was great. We were in Kuwait long enough to get—I don’t know—a little bit of mail. I think I got a couple care packages and letters in Kuwait. And then once we got to Iraq—or as we went through Iraq, we probably went—I don’t know—three or four weeks without getting any mail. And it wasn’t because they didn’t want us to have it, it’s that they couldn’t keep up with it. They couldn’t catch us. We were moving too fast for their mail trucks to get to us. But yeah, it was great. My mom sent a lot of care packages. She sent a lot of care packages, which was really fun. And the rule, though, we had for care packages within our company—and I don’t know if it’s like this everywhere—but our rule was if it’s your care package, you get first dibs. And so you open up, first dibs. You get first choice. Because it’s yours, right? But then after that, it’s community property and so then it just starts getting passed around. And then if it comes back to you, great, then you can choose again because it’s your turn to choose. So that was really good because otherwise it just wouldn’t be right. It wouldn’t be right. And my mom knew that and so she sent a lot of things that weren’t just for me, but were for my Marines also. There was one point where my company commander was kind of joking and kind of serious—I couldn’t really tell—but he said we got mail call, and I got a care package from my mom, and he didn’t get anything or he didn’t get a big care package, and then he said, “Well, that one’s gonna be mine.” I said, “Sir, it’s mine.” And he said, “Well, you got the last one.” And I said, “I know, sir, because it’s mine. [laughs] My mom sent it. It has my name on it.” [laughs]

[01:40:05]

Healey: What sort of things did she send?

Isensee: A lot of granola bars. She sent little fruit cups, like fruit snacks. She would send a little bit of candy, but that didn’t transport very well. But a lot of granola bars.

Healey: While you were forward, what types of things did you miss? Did you have PXs [post exchanges] at all?

Isensee: No.

Healey: Never a PX set up?

Isensee: Maybe after we had been there for—no, there was one that was set up right before we went back to Kuwait. But I think the only thing in there was Pringles. I don't know. Somehow Pringles made it to the front of the supply chain. I don't know how that happened. But no, we didn't have any PXs. And actually, we just didn't have a lot anything. So we got things from the airplane pilots. So these Air Force pilots would give us things. So it was my Marines working at the airfields, right? And sometimes they just gave us boxes of donations. And I don't know where they came from or how they got to us, but the pilots would say, "Here, take this." And there was one day when the pilot had given my Marines this box and it was not marked. It wasn't on a pallet. It was just this box. And we didn't know who it belonged to or whose it was, so we just kind of put it in our tent and said, well, I don't know, maybe someone will claim it later. We thought it belonged to another unit or something. And then at one point, someone just opened it up and said, "I wonder what this is." And he opens it up and it's toothbrushes, and toothpaste, and deodorant. And we were so stinking happy.

My first sergeant actually took the box, and he gathered all the Marines that were with us and lined them up, and they would come up in line and he would say, "All right, double dog. What do you need?" And the Marine would say, "What do you have?" And he goes, "No. Tell me what you need." And he goes, "I lost my toothbrush a week ago. I could really use a toothbrush." So the first sergeant gave him a toothbrush and toothpaste and sent him on his way. And the next guy goes, "I've been out of deodorant for two weeks," [laughs] and he gives him a thing of deodorant and we kind of passed stuff out that way. And it was just amazing how a toothbrush was—it was really nice because my toothbrush was full of sand. We went through all these sandstorms. Sand was everywhere. It got into everything, including our toothbrushes. So I've been brushing my teeth with this stupid toothbrush that has sand in it, but what else am I going to do? There's no place to get another one. So I got a new toothbrush that day and that was awesome. And then somehow we got Girl Scout Cookies. I don't know how they got to us or what, but we had Thin Mints and Caramel deLites, and that was just such a nice treat. And for a minute, it kind of felt we were at home eating Girl Scouts Cookies. And we weren't, we were in trucks, you know, running convoys, but eating Thin Mints at the same time. So it's kind of like a really terrible situation, but hey, I got a Thin Mint. [laughs] It was kind of nice.

And one of the things that we did was—there was one day also we got a box full of apples. And they were Red Delicious apples and they came from this helicopter pilot—or not helicopter, it was an airplane pilot from the Air Force and he gave us this box of apples and then there was a palette of water. And the water was bottled water. And the water wasn't for anybody in particular, it just showed up and there it was. And so the very first thing we did was put those apples and these cases of water on a couple Humvees and we run those Humvees out to all the Marines in the area. All those 1st



Marine Division Marines that just didn't have access to anything. We just passed that stuff out as fast as we could because we knew it was our responsibility to get rid of it as quickly as we could, to pass it out. But it was—I don't know—we were very lucky that way. There was one point when early on I was at one of those daily meetings at the airfield and I think it was our second airfield. They had a meeting at eight o'clock in the morning, I would show up, and it was a representative from every unit in the immediate area. And they kind of talk about what's happening and if there's anything different, and at that point there was a staff NCO [non-commissioned officer] from the Army. He was representing his unit and he was there. And he was there to ask some questions and get some information about the area. And I tried really hard not to laugh out loud and I didn't which is good. One of his questions was, "Where are the showers?" And the Marine officer who was running the meeting said, "Oh. We don't have any showers. There are no showers. But there's a water point down the road if you need water to drink. But there are no showers."

[01:45:09]

And then he said, "Oh, okay. You have a chow hall?" [laughs] And the Marine officer says, "There's no chow hall, but if you need MREs [meal ready eat] that unit over there—I know that they have some, so they can probably give you some. But there's no chow hall." And then he goes, "Mail? Is there any mail?" And the Marine officer just kind of throws up his hands and says, "We haven't had mail since this started. There's no mail. Maybe someday. I guess we'll let you know." But we just didn't have any of that.

Healey: Yeah. Interesting situation when you're moving forward.

Isensee: Yeah.

Healey: Those amenities just go away.

Isensee: They were completely gone. And there was no privacy, and there were no showers, there's no running water, so I got really good at—

Healey: Now let me ask you this. No privacy.

Isensee: Mm-hm.

Healey: No porta-potties.

Isensee: No porta-potties. No trees, no hills, nothing.

Healey: You want to explain how you did that when you made the necessary call?

Isensee: Sure, so I—I don't recommend this—but I tried hard not to drink a lot of water, which is—again, that's a terrible thing to do, I would never recommend anybody do that. So I tried not to drink a lot and then I'd try to make before the sun came up. And then kind of as soon as the sun went down, go out and do that. Another trick that we learned that we

figured out is that if you wear a poncho—one of the military ponchos—and you kind of squat down, you get a little bit privacy there. I mean everybody knows exactly what's happening, but for just a quick second if you close your eyes, you can try to pretend that no one sees what's happening. But it was just kind of the way it was. So we'd run these convoys and I learned pretty quickly that as soon as the convoy stops, all the male Marines get off and start doing their business on the side of the road. So I would just wait a minute or two and then get off my vehicle and then they were pretty much done. But yeah, there was just—there was no privacy. That was probably one of the hardest things about it. I mean the living the conditions were not good. Privacy was gone. But I do remember I washed my hair in a bucket, which felt pretty good. And I also figured out that if you wash your feet—like take off your boots, and take off your socks, and wash your feet in a bucket, which I had my own collapsible bucket which was a necessity. It was really handy. It almost feels like a shower. You can almost pretend. [laughs]

Healey: Okay. [laughs]

Isensee: I mean it's not—that's not the same thing as taking a shower, but it felt really good to wash your feet, so. And I do remember when my Marines set up our first shower. It was in Salman Pak, our very last airfield. And Marines are pretty good at rigging things up and so one of our Marines found a palette and figured out a way to rig up a couple of ponchos for privacy—kind of like, you know, shower curtains sort of—and he put it away from the airfield, away from everybody else. You can see everything because it's all open desert, but there was a little bit of distance there. And it wasn't really shower, it was just, um—I brought my bucket, filled my bucket up with water, and then I kind of rinsed off there. But that was great. That really was a good day. [laughs]

Healey: All right. Okay. You're back at Camp Pendleton?

Isensee: Mm-hm.

Healey: Finished your ninety-six and went back to work.

Isensee: I went back to work. Yeah. So the first five days back to work, they had us working half-days. And I think the purpose of that was so that we'd have time every day to be with the people that we deployed with, to be with all the people that had exactly the same experience with us. To keep us together for that, but then also to give us a break to adjust to the time change and to give us a couple minutes alone. So it was—

Healey: Did just your company do that or were a lot of companies—

Isensee: I think that—

Healey: —doing that half-day?

Isensee: —I feel like that was the whole base. I feel like that was all of Camp Pendleton, but I might be wrong about that. I'm not—yeah. I might be wrong about that, but it was definitely my battalion did that for sure. So that first week, we did a lot of medical

processing. Like we'd kind of stand in line, and they'd review our medical records, and have us fill out these surveys about what we saw, what we did, or experienced. And I think they were trying to gauge PTSD, if there is need for any treatment that way. And then—

Healey: How did most of the Marines in your company do transitioning back to California, having been in a warzone?

[01:50:00]

Isensee: Uh, most of them did pretty well. I mean it all happened pretty quick. We got back and just started trying to get back into the regular swing of things of PT in the morning, and showing up to work in the office, and it took us a long time to get enough Marines back in our company back home in order for us to run any operations or just to support any other units with landing support. So we had a lot of downtime, again, to do PT. And I think most of my Marines did pretty well for that first tour. I know that later on, when Marines came back from their second tour, the second tour was a lot different for them, but I feel like they made the transition pretty well. We got a lot of people—everybody took leave. Everybody had had some vacation time and went back home to their families, so that all worked pretty well. But like I said, it took a long time for us to get enough Marines back. So as soon as we got back, the people that had been stop-loss— the ones that should have gotten out of the Marine Corps before we went to war—they all separated. So we started losing people that way.

Healey: Were they kept around for a while? Like—

Isensee: They must—

Healey: —like for medical processing and—

Isensee: —they must have been just for the medical processing and turning in all their gear because all that stuff takes time. But it couldn't have been more than a couple months, I wouldn't think. But I could be wrong about that. And then for me personally, I waited until October to take leave and definitely enjoyed that. Took a vacation with my husband. And then kind of once I got back from that, we had that fall—the fall of 2003—we had started hearing that things weren't going well in Iraq. So when we left Iraq, we thought that we were done. We thought that that was—you know, we went over there to take Saddam Hussein out of power and that's what we did, and we came home and we thought that was going to be the end of it. And then when we got back, we started hearing how things weren't going well, and IEDs [improvised explosive device] became a problem, and there was a different enemy than—when we were there, Saddam Fedayeen was our biggest concern. They were our biggest enemy risk. But kind of once Saddam was out of power, the enemy changed, their weapons changed, their tactics changed, and things just weren't going well.

So we started hearing stories about Marine Corps units going back over there and redeploying and kind of thought, well, you know—just waiting to see. You just never know. And some of our battalion was still over there. They were there for the whole

summer, longer than we were. So we just didn't know. And then at that time, I was still in charge of the company. I was the acting company commander all that summer and then through the beginning of the fall as well. We got a new company commander and then—yeah. We started ramping up to send Marines back. So we started creating our deployment rosters again, figuring out who's going over there, who can't go—

Healey: Did you anticipate that you would be one of the ones that would go?

Isensee: Yes. I was on the list to go. I was gonna go back as the company executive officer with my new company commander to run operations at an airfield in Iraq, or Kuwait, or both. I guess we didn't know.

Healey: Had the new company commander been over to Iraq or no?

Isensee: He had been over there. He went over there with a different unit in, I think, a staff position. But then he got transferred to be our company commander. So we made plans to go, and we packed everything up, and we were ready to go. I was on the roster and doing that whole thing that we had just done a year ago. Kind of a similar process, but we knew what we were doing and we were bringing a lot of the same Marines, a lot of brand new Marines who had never been anywhere before, and there were new platoon commanders because everyone else had transferred out except for me. And so we had these new platoon commanders who were young, and eager, and ready to go and do something. And then I found out I was pregnant and I found out right around New Year's. So that very next Monday morning, I went into work. And actually a friend of mine—we had deployed together and came back together—she was one of the platoon commanders. She came into my office and shut the door and said, "Natalie, I'm pregnant." And she said she was pregnant and I said, "I am, too." [laughs] And she goes, "Oh no, how are we going to tell our boss?"

[01:55:00]

And I said, "All right. Well, you go tell him first." Because the plan at that point was she was gonna be the one person that stays behind, that takes care of all the Marines that don't redeploy. That was already going to be the plan. And so she went into his office and told him the good news that she was pregnant, and her and her husband were very happy about, and they were happy about it. And he said, "Congratulations, that's great." And then she kind of left. And then I gave him a couple of hours to think about it for a little bit. And I went into his office and I shut the door and I said, "Sir, I'm pregnant." [laughs] And he goes, "Oh crap." [laughs] And then he said, "Does that mean you can't deploy?" And I said, "Yes, sir. It means I can't deploy." Because if you're pregnant you can't go anywhere. And he said, "Oh. I knew that. I knew that." And he goes, "Well, I mean—congratulations. Congratulations. I'm happy for you." [laughs] And I could see he was just thinking about what is he gonna do without me going. And not that I was, you know, super important, but I had a job and it was a big job. There was work to be done. I was gonna do it. And I knew the company, and I knew the Marines, and I knew the work. So he just kind of started thinking about how he was gonna do that. And then right after that, I had to tell my operations chief, who was either a staff sergeant or a gunnery sergeant at that time, I had to pull him in my office and tell him that the plans

had changed, that I wasn't going, and I didn't want to tell him that I was pregnant because it felt too soon and it wasn't for public knowledge yet.

And he got really upset and he started to say, "But ma'am, why would you leave me? Your job is to take care of all of the other officers and keep them out of my hair so I can do my job. If you're not doing your job, how am I gonna do my job if I had to deal with all those officers?" And I kept saying, "The plan's changed. I'm sorry. The plan's changed." And he was pretty disappointed. And then the next morning, he came into my office and shut the door and he said, "I know what's going on." [laughs] He goes, "Ma'am, you're pregnant." And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Of course you are. That's the only reason you wouldn't go." I said, "Yes, I'm pregnant." So my company deployed again for a second time, all except for the people that couldn't deploy for a reason like being pregnant or any other medical issue or family issue. So they deployed again. They did a lot of good work doing kind of similar stuff, working at airfields, landing support in Kuwait and in Iraq.

Healey: And what did you do in the rear in Camp Pendleton?

Isensee: I took care of a lot of legal issues. So we had—

Healey: Did you stay as the executive officer?

Isensee: I stayed as the executive officer. And so I actually had that job for a lot longer than most people would have a single job like that. But at that time, I knew what I was doing and I just kept that job. They kept me in that role which was great. I loved it. So I took care of a lot of legal things, Marines that were in trouble getting processed out of the Marine Corps. I took care of a lot of legal paperwork that way, and I kept in contact with the families, and I'm not sure—I assume I did other things, too, but those are the biggest things. And then kind of right after they started coming home—they were gone for a couple months—they started coming home and then I got transferred to a different unit. I went to 1<sup>st</sup> Medical Battalion and became their S4—their logistics officer—the summer of 2004. So I transferred units and became a battalion logistics officer for medical battalion, which was almost all Navy personnel, with the exception of the Marines working in the S4 and some S1 admin staff, and then there was also a motor transport platoon. So I did a lot of work with billeting and weapons armory because the 1st Medical Battalion was bringing in a lot of augmented support. They were bringing a lot of Reservists, activating them, attaching them to 1st Medical Battalion. From 1st Medical Battalion they were deploying to Iraq and serving in these combat medical units and then after their tours they were coming—we had 1st Medical Battalion was forward and I was in the rear—and then they started coming back home. So I did that and then I had my daughter in September. The middle of September 2004, went out on maternity leave. And then when I came back from maternity leave, the staff had shaken up just a little bit.

[02:00:00]

They had kind of shuffled people around to cover what needed to be done and I ended up being in charge of the motor transport platoon, and then also did S4 work, and did a

little bit H&S [Headquarters and Service] Company commander duties. So I ended up doing a little bit of everything and those Marines had just gotten back from Iraq at the same time that I had gotten done with maternity leave.

Healey: What was the duration of their deployment? How long were they in Iraq?

Isensee: That was their second tour.

Healey: Their second tour—

Isensee: Their second tour.

Healey: —and tours were six months, four months?

Isensee: Between four months and six months.

Healey: Okay.

Isensee: It ended up stabilizing to be six-month tours. But at that point, nothing was regular yet, mostly because we were surprised that the war was still going on. So they had come back from their second tour and their primary mission was as ambulance drivers. So as the motor transport platoon for a medical battalion they had a lot of ambulances. And so they were ambulance operators and they did a lot of litter bearing. And that tour was hard on a lot of those Marines. They saw a lot, and they did a lot, and that was a very hard tour for them. And then we ended up sending a couple Marines back to Iraq during that same time that it was there for a third tour. Kind of individual augmentments went back. And then I kept that job until May or April 2005, and then I left active duty and moved back home.

Healey: Why did you decide to leave active duty?

Isensee: I left active duty because it's, uh—it's a hard life. It's a really hard life. And we could see what was happening, that it was going to be deployment, after deployment, after deployment. And the way it was when I was in, and I think it kept going like this for quite a while, is they'd take turns. It would be west coast Marines would deploy to Iraq. So everyone from Camp Pendleton and Miramar would go for a tour—or for one year. So two six-month tours. And then they'd transfer over to the east coast and the east coast Marines would go over there. And so a lot of what was happening is Marines would go from deploying on the west coast, and then they'd get transferred to the east coast, and then deploy from the east coast. And even when it was the east coast's turn to go and they were the primaries in Iraq, from the west coast we'd still have to send individual augmentments. And the skills as a logistics officer are needed everywhere. You can't go anywhere unless you have logistics officers. So there's always gonna be a need for that and I could see that it was gonna be deployment, after deployment, after deployment, and I was also looking at B-billet options.

So after the first tour in the fleet in operating forces, then you go to a secondary billet where you do some other type of work. Like recruiting is one example, or being an

instructor at Parris Island would be another option, or going to Quantico and being an instructor at OCS, or TBS would be another option. And I looked at all those options and there wasn't a single job in the Marine Corps where it was Monday through Friday, and you're home at night, and you don't have to work the weekends. That job is not one of the available positions out there. And I had a new baby, and my husband and I knew that we wanted to have several children—hopefully one right after the other, that was kind of what we were hoping for—and so we decided it was time to go home and get a regular job.

Healey: So you spent how long on active duty?

Isensee: It was five years. So I got commissioned in May of 2000, actually reported for active duty in October of 2000, and then left active duty at the end of April of 2005, and—

Healey: Was that the length of your tour or had you augmented or?

[End of Isensee.OH1952\_file1] [Beginning of Isensee.OH1952\_file2]

Isensee: I declined augmentation, but I requested an extension of my contract. So my contract was supposed to be up, I think, in—well, I think in October of 2004 is when it was supposed to be up. But I was thinking I knew that my baby was gonna be due. My daughter was gonna be due the middle of September. And I knew that it would be a really tough transition to be out on maternity leave and then get a civilian job kind of all in one big motion. But I knew that at least on active duty, I knew what to expect, and I knew the work, and I knew the Marines, and we wouldn't be moving anywhere, and I also knew that there was plenty of work, again, for a logistics officer with some experience. So I requested an extension of my contract, I think—well, for six months, I suppose, and they granted that which I definitely appreciated.

Healey: Okay. And then you came back to Wisconsin. Did you have a job when you came back?

Isensee: I did. While I was in California, I started looking for work and I was looking for work in Madison. Madison was the place that we were moving to and so that's where I was gonna find a job. And I ended up working with one of those military recruiter's that specializes in junior military officers—finding them work. And they generally find them work in operations management or in sales. And I said I'm not gonna do sales, so please don't try to find me a sales job. Also, I'm moving to Madison, Wisconsin, so don't try to give me a job in Chicago because I'm not going to Chicago. I'm going to Madison, Wisconsin. And that's kind of a pretty limiting—pretty significant limitation. But there just wasn't a lot of—I was looking for operations management, distribution operations management, some type of logistics work in Madison and I wasn't really finding anything in the area. And then one day I was talking with the recruiter on the phone and he said he had started drawing a circle that was a little bigger than Madison, started drawing concentric circles around it to see what's around—and he's not familiar with Wisconsin—and he said, "What about Okanama?" And I said, "Oconomowoc?" [laughs] And he said, "Sure." And I said, "Yeah, I know Oconomowoc." And he said, "Well, there's a Target Distribution Center in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin." And he described the position and it was operations management—distribution operations

management—and I said, “It sounds fantastic. It sounds like exactly the type of work that I would like to do.”

So he got me in contact with them and I flew back one weekend while I was still living in California. Flew back home, and stayed with my parents, and did a day of interviews with Target, and went back to California, and they ended up making me an offer which I accepted. So I moved back to Wisconsin with my daughter and we left my husband in California for about a month to finish working, and to close up our apartment, and do those sorts of things. So my last official day in active duty in the Marine Corps was May 14, 2005. And then my first day at Target was May 15, 2005 and I started working there. And my first week there was all training and onboarding, orientation, that sort of thing. And I was generally a little bit confused by how nice everybody was. I thought that everybody was pretending and being fake and I thought, well, you know, I’m sure this will stop happening and people will just start talking to me like regular people do. And nope, turns out that’s how people talk to each other. So they were very nice. So I did that for eight years, worked a couple different shifts there—a lot of nights and weekends—but it was very similar work to what I did as a platoon commander. So yeah. It was a lot of fun. And actually, I told people it was actually pretty similar to what I did in the Marine Corps, except that we didn’t have any weapons at Target and people were a lot nicer. There was a lot less yelling. But operations management, there was a lot of similarities there.

And then while I was working at Target, I started looking at the GI Bill and seeing what kind of options are out there to take advantage of that because I knew that there was a time limit on it and I knew that all my peers are going back to school—were going back to school for MBAs, mostly. I knew I didn’t want to get an MBA. I wasn’t interested in doing that, but I found a project management program at UW Platteville. So I started taking one class at a time, one semester at a time, and got my master’s degree in project management thanks to the GI Bill which was really helpful.

[00:05:00]

So I got my master’s degree and it took me a while to finish that. When I started, I had two children, I think, a three-year-old and a two-year-old and when I graduated I had three children—a six-year-old, a four-year-old, and a two-year-old, I think, were their ages. But yeah, it took me a while. And so I got my master’s degree, and then started looking for work in project management, got a job at CUNA Mutual Group, and I’m there.

Healey: Okay. I’m curious. Why did you decide to do an oral history?

Isensee: I would really like to do the interviewing. I think that would be really interesting. When I was doing my undergraduate work at Madison, I had an archival assistant job in the State Historical Society and it was really interesting. So I helped process and categorize these archive collections and it was just a really interesting job, interesting work. So I just have an appreciation for the archives. And I also just think there’s a lot of value in people telling their stories and people hearing your stories. So I like hearing about other people’s stories of what they did in the military and I think there’s a lot of value in that.



So when I called and said, “Hey, I’d like to—” or I emailed and said, “Hey, I’m really interested in doing an interview,” and talked with Ellen on the phone, and she said, “Well, the first step is you have to do the interview first.” [laughs] I said, “Oh.” She said, “No, no, no. It will be a good experience for you.” [laughs]

Healey: Okay, yeah.

Isensee: I said, “All right. That’s fine.” But yeah. I just think there’s a lot of value in hearing people’s stories and as I think back on—like, the Civil War collections that we have here in Wisconsin are pretty comprehensive. There’s a lot of Civil War records and, well, the reason we have those is people collected them, right? And they preserved them and they valued them. And to be able to go back and look at some of those individual stories and see how it fits in with the overall picture of history is just fascinating. And one of the things that I’ve really come to understand since I got out is that my story is not the most exciting story, and I wasn’t in the most dangerous situation, and I didn’t win any big prizes or awards for valor, but my story is valuable and it’s important, and that’s the case with everybody’s story. Everybody’s story is different, but everybody’s story is valuable.

Healey: Your children’s ages right now is what?

Isensee: My oldest is ten—Emily is ten—and Katie is eight, and then Allison—

Healey: Excuse me a moment. When do we have to leave?

F1: Oh, usually we ask that people wrap it up right around now, but we close at nine.

Healey: Okay. All right. Thank you.

F1: You’re welcome.

Isensee: —and my youngest, Allison, is turning six in another week.

Healey: Okay. Do you tell them about your military experience and history?

Isensee: No, I don’t.

Healey: No?

Isensee: They know that I served in the Marine Corps and then my husband told them I was in Iraq, but that’s about all they know. They know that I was stationed at Camp Pendleton because we like to go on vacation to Carlsbad because we like Southern California so much.

Healey: Oh, you do? Okay.

Isensee: And so they know I was stationed at Camp Pendleton, but that’s about the extent of what they know.

Healey: How's your life different because you were in the military?

Isensee: I had leadership opportunities and experiences to lead Marines in far more stressful and dangerous situations than a lot of people have had the opportunity to and that's an experience that I'm really grateful for and humbled by. So I'm proud of the work that we did, proud of the work that I did, but also humbled that I got to the opportunity to lead Marines in the war and that's very humbling. But I also know that I don't have anything to prove to anybody. I don't have to show off. I've got nothing to prove. I've served my country honorably, I've served my Marines honorably, I take care of my family, my husband and I have a great marriage together, and I've got nothing to prove to anybody. It's a nice sense of peace knowing that I did what I was supposed to do and I was where I was supposed to be, doing the work that I should be doing.

[00:10:00]

Healey: Do you keep in contact with Marines?

Isensee: I do. I've got some of my best friends. Some I'm friends with are some of those same women that we went to OCS together the first time, we went to OCS the second time, we went to TBS together, we deployed together. Yeah. So they're some of my best friends.

Healey: Okay. We are running across a time crunch here, which I don't usually run across, but the library's gonna close in just, oh, probably five, ten minutes. Anything else that you'd like to add or address before we wrap this up? Something that we didn't cover? Something that I didn't ask you about?

Isensee: Um. I think I've shared just about everything that's everything to share. I mean deploying was a really amazing experience and I wouldn't wish it on anybody because war is a pretty terrible thing, but when I was over there I knew that I was the best person to be going over there. I chose it, I wanted it, I volunteered for it, it was my job. I was doing the work that I knew God wanted me to do and I was where I was supposed to be. And so that was just very satisfying. It was very satisfying. To be part of Marine Corps history is—my gosh. I mean the Marine Corps—I don't know—I just love the Marine Corps, and it's just an honor to have been a part of it, and to be a Marine. And again, to be able to lead Marines in war is a really phenomenal experience.

Healey: Don't regret your choice of changing from Army to Marine?

Isensee: [laughs] Nope. Not at all. Not at all. And actually, I kept that a secret for a long time. I did not tell anybody in the Marine Corps that I was served in the Army because there was no glory in that. [laughs] I don't regret it at all. No. The Marine Corps was where I needed to be, so.

Healey: Well, thank you, Natalie.

Isensee: Thank you.

Healey: I appreciate it.

[End of Isensee.OH1952\_file2][End of interview]