

Transcription: Hart Viges

Today is Friday, December 3, 2010. My name is James Crabtree and I'm interviewing Hart Viges. This interview is being done in person at the General Land Office, the Stephen F. Austin Building in Austin, Texas, and it's being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Thanks very much for taking time out of your day to come down here and do the interview.

Hart Viges: Thank you, James.

Yes sir. The first question we pretty much always start with is just tell us a little bit about your background and your life before you entered the service.

Hart Viges: Well, I was born in Phoenix, Arizona, and moved at an early age to San Angelo, Texas, in west Texas. There I went to elementary, junior high, and high school. I graduated high school from Central there. And then just went traveling a bit to Nashville, Tennessee, to live with my father in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and back to Prescott, Arizona, lived up in Seattle, Washington in that area for about three years. I was the manager of a restaurant at the time when 911 hit.

So I guess I'm taking it that 911 is what persuaded you to join the service?

Hart Viges: Yes. They called us 911 babies in basic.

Tell us a little bit then about that day and your thought process and how you ended up actually enlisting.

Hart Viges: It seemed surreal like some kind of a movie that really wasn't happening, but there it was on the TV and I just watched the TV all day long. I eventually went to work that night and just couldn't get my head around what was going on, and I asked for my dream of what I should do, and in my dream I dreamed of a gas station and there were people being mugged and attacked before coming into the gas station, and I yelled for them to stop and they refused. So then they attempted to attack me, and in my dreams I'm like Neo, so I fend them off, but it was through that and just like a huge, it was the influence of my dream and then also the patriotism that I felt. I've always felt that I was a patriot and if this country was ever attacked, I would go and defend it, and I've kept with my promise on that. The next day I was in the recruiting office, asked for Airborne, asked for Infantry.

So that was in Washington state?

Hart Viges: Mm-hmm, Washington state.

You walked in on 9/12, what was it like in that office that day? Were a lot of other people in there? What was going on?

Hart Viges: I was expecting a lot of other people, but there really wasn't. This was I guess in a more affluent neighborhood. There wasn't a big rush of people wanting to get out of their college rights and everything. They asked me why I wanted to join, and I was confused, like

have you not been watching the TV? They said oh, because of this? They pointed up at a newspaper. And I said yes because of this.

So you get signed up, you went into the Army?

Hart Viges: Mm-hmm, Army.

What made you choose the Army?

Hart Viges: Well I wanted to jump out of airplanes and they had an Airborne unit.

So you go in, you're kind of like the recruiter's dream I guess, they don't have to sell you, you're just like OK.

Hart Viges: No, yeah, I was easy.

How long was it before you were actually shipped off to basic training?

Hart Viges: November 1st is when I got shipped, yeah. I left Halloween night, yeah, so it was, because there was an influx of people joining, just not in that area. I was in reception for about a month, when I was only supposed to be in there for a couple of days because they were so backlogged. Then I did the first month of basic twice. The first month, we went to not an infantry training brigade, but a basic combat training brigade where all the drill sergeants weren't infantry, even though there was one drill sergeant who was infantry for each platoon, it was set up for the what we called POGs, non-infantry people to go, because infantry training brigade was so full, they eventually got us – I don't know, I had to do the first month of basic twice which sucked.

Where did they send you?

Hart Viges: Fort Benning, Georgia.

So you go to Fort Benning, is basic training like what you had envisioned?

Hart Viges: Well, no. It was, to tell you the truth I was expecting the worst, so it was easier than I had expected, but it was, you know, I was motivated so I was ready to take any type of punishment, I was ready to take any type of suffering. It was quite an experience.

So you get through that, how long was your training?

Hart Viges: Well, my basic training, I think it was about six months total because we had a regular basic training and then our AIT was basically just an extension of our basic training. We didn't really go anywhere else to be trained. We were infantry, so I got designated mortar man, so I went to Charlie school where all the other 11B's infantry men, they went off to regular infantry school.

What type of mortars?

Hart Viges: They trained us on mostly the 60's and 81's, they did test on the 81's. I wanted the 60's when I got to Bragg because I became very, very proficient in the 60 and I could spin it

around, I can shoot 180 degrees and get those bubbles level in under five seconds. And I was up with 81's headquarters company, battalion mortars, when I went to Fort Bragg.

So you get shipped to Fort Bragg. You'd wanted to go Airborne, right? Were you still going to get to go do that?

Hart Viges: Oh yes, I kind of skipped jump school.

Tell us about jump school.

Hart Viges: Jump school was easy. It was easy in that there was a bunch of us that just left basic training, so we were in pretty good shape. So we saw these other people coming in that were struggling with their 10 push-ups and their 10 pull-ups every time they left the yard and came back in. My first jump, because you do five jumps in jump school, they put all the big black hats and bird that day and everybody gets pushed out if you don't jump. Of course I froze out the door, I was like what am I doing again?

It was a good airplane ride.

Hart Viges: Yeah, it was like I froze. It wasn't like I was refusing because it was like I had to like reassess the situation of what I was doing, but I didn't have much time for that because the black hat pushed me out -

Are you on a static line?

Hart Viges: Static line jump, and instead of saying one thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand, I said oh my God, I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die, and when the parachute opened, it was oh my God, I'm gonna live. Everybody was yelling "airborne" - I yelled "Geronimo, mother f-er," I just wanted to be old school gangster. But the black hats were on the ground, "shut the f- up, airborne."

How long did it take you to hit the ground?

Hart Viges: I don't know. It seemed like forever. I mean it's such a feeling when at that altitude, and when you finally do hit the ground, it wasn't that bad. It gets much worse when you get to Fort Bragg because all that equipment and injuries. But when you land that first time and you look at that bird and you know that you jumped out of it, how could I be scared of anything else? But I found out what to be scared of after that.

So you go finish your airborne training, you don't have much trouble with that, where did they assign you for an active duty unit?

Hart Viges: Fort Bragg, 82nd Airborne Division, 1st of the 325, Red Falcons.

Tell me about your thoughts when you checked in there at 82nd Airborne, what you'd heard.

Hart Viges: I was waiting for like a major initiation, but it never happened. I don't know, maybe it was just my age or maybe I guess the culture changed where it just didn't happen. I mean the first day I was nervous as hell. I was just waiting for everybody to come busting in the door at night or something, but luckily they, well the PT test that they had me take before they

give you to the unit, every time you do a push-up, they always repeat the count, so you'll do 1, 1, 1, you're not doing it right, Airborne. And it's like you know you're doing it right, but what they want to do, they want to set you up to where you get smoked when you get to your unit. Smoked is PT until muscle failure. But the thing was, on the run I learned that they can never squelch on the run. So every time I ran my two miles, I ran so hard that I would literally hurt myself, go in hyperventilation at the end of the run, because it was like hell, I'm not letting them take anything away from me, I'm gonna run. So I had a smoking time on my run, so when I got to my unit, I didn't really get smoked when they saw my run time because I mean that impressed them. So it was what it was, and then -

So you got to your unit sometime in early 2002 timeframe, spring 2002?

Hart Viges: Yeah, I got there let's see, actually April Fools' Day 2002, April 1st.

What did your family and friends, what did they all think about you joining up?

Hart Viges: Well they all supported it. They were impressed by it, proud of it. At that time, 911, it was a bit war fever. Only one person pleaded I shouldn't join, a good old friend of mine, Michele Sadiskus, she was like no go. Maybe I should've listened to her, but I can't, that coulda - woulda - shoulda - that stuff can't creep in.

So you're there, you've gone through the training and you were getting into regular garrison life I guess, spend a lot of time in the field doing jumps and things -

Hart Viges: Well, not so much time in the field. There was a lot of mopping floors, picking weeks out of neighborhood sidewalks in Fort Bragg, picking up cigarette butts -

Working parties and stuff, yeah.

Hart Viges: And of course there was training which we enjoyed, getting out the mortars or Mark 19 grenade launchers, 50 caliber machine guns or rifles and clean 'em, and we'd take out the mortars on the field and just run tests to see who is the quickest on the guns to see who gets to be gunner and that kind of thing.

And you lived in the barracks there?

Hart Viges: Mm-hmm.

What were your thoughts on barracks life?

Hart Viges: Well, barracks life was pretty interesting. It was, I had a roommate and a small room. There was the mortars, the scouts, and the medics all on that one floor, and the water fountain was the boundary. Even though we were good with them, but there was always challenges to wrestle and if you got caught behind the enemy line you could get duck-taped and thrown in the shower, but it was all in good fun, good competition, so I mean it was just, it was almost unfair because it was the medics and the scouts versus the mortars, so every time a scout would be hey mortar, blah-blah-blah, cross this line, I'll cross it and they would give me another one, and I'll cross it, until I'm like right there in the middle of all of them and I just wasn't scared of them. I wasn't going to show them any of that. And of course they hemmed me up, but I would yell mortars, just like the scouts yelled scouts, we got a scout on our side, all the

scouts would come out. Well, the mortars, we got like 30 guys and like 4 or 5 guys would come out. I'm like we have more guys than that, and we were always outnumbered, but it garnered a respect and it was good times.

So you didn't mind living in the barracks, eating in the chow hall –

Hart Viges: No, well, I mean it was free food, free rent, and I wasn't, I don't think I was of a rank at the time. I was just a private, and I wasn't getting paid enough to -

And you weren't married, so –

Hart Viges: Yeah, I wasn't married and I wasn't getting paid enough to live off, I couldn't live off post.

Yeah, absolutely, because I know some guys love barracks life, and others just don't like it.

Hart Viges: I eventually got this huge speaker for my bass guitar because guys would bump their music at times I didn't want them to be bumping their music, I won't want to hear it, so I would just get this huge speaker out in the door and bang--- it was great.

So you've gone through all that, you obviously, you enlisted because of the 911 thing, were you eager to get deployed somewhere?

Hart Viges: I was actually thinking I was going to be deployed to Afghanistan, and it just didn't come out that way. That summer we went to NTC in southern California and trained in the desert for about a month and I had a great time. I was, even deciding I could go career Army at that time, because I just liked soldiering. I was a good paratrooper, motivated, and then we got all these orders to, we knew we were going to get deployed, but then this was all supposed to be hush-hush.

And this was summer of 2002?

Hart Viges: Yes, summer of 2002 I was in California training in the hot desert. Then the guys that went to drive the trucks because had trucks and Hum-Vee's, to the train station to go get deployed, and they write on the sticker Kuwait, so when we came back, hey, we're going to Iraq, don't tell anybody, but whenever we go. We go off to, we leave actually Valentine's Day, 2003, to Kuwait.

You flew out of southern California then?

Hart Viges: No, we were back home, Bragg at that time.

When you flew over there, did you fly military or commercial?

Hart Viges: Actually commercial.

What was that like?

Hart Viges: It was nice because I knew, more comfortable seats than a military plane, those were pretty comfortable seats when we left by military plane. At that time, anything was comfortable.

So you go over to Kuwait and I guess in your mind you feel like you are ready for it. How long did you spend in Kuwait before you went into Iraq?

Hart Viges: About a month. I was in the D-fact when I heard Georgie talk about he has 48 hours or else we're gonna go in, because the world UN is not doing its job, and I had the sinking feeling in my stomach like don't piss off the world, man. We'll be here fighting these guys, I don't need to be fighting everybody else. But training up, we were going to jump in the Baghdad airport, but without our trucks, but with our mortars of course, they were putting what we called coffins, and then we were supposed to like go and break out our mortars from our coffins and -

You just push those out on a pallet or something, or how do you - ?

Hart Viges: Yup, and it's outside of a bird you jump out, hope it doesn't land on you. I think they tried dropping it on a different bird. But I got lucky enough to get the base plate in the training because the base plate, even though that adds 35 pounds just like everything else, rucks were so heavy, it was somewhat balanced and I could maneuver a little bit easier with it.

Better than a bipod or the tube.

Hart Viges: I know, or the tube will slide, or the bipod is like what the f's this gonna go on? But my knee kind of blew up to the size of a cantaloupe from, because the way I would, to get it off I would just sit down, unload and then unstrap, but to get it back on I would be, start off in the same position, roll over, do a push-up, throw my knee up to kind of do a squat and go up. There was other guys that wanted help getting up, but I needed to do it on my own, and I was doing it on my own. It just kind of stressed my knee out so much it kind of blew up. So I was trying to hide it, my injury, but you can't really hide a bum knee. You are kind of limping too hard. Because I didn't want to get sent in the rear. I wasn't going to miss out on the jump. I was figuring I was just gonna break my leg on the jump and shoot anybody who didn't have nom's on their helmet and that was my plan, that was my thinking because I wasn't going to be left behind. Of course my platoon sergeant, Sergeant Stone, I love that guy, a good Texas man, he inquired into why I was walking funny and I told him the reason why I don't want to let anybody know, but he took me to the medics with no paperwork, gave me some pills, told me to rest up, and then I couldn't walk to the chow hall. That was the hardest part of that. I just loved going to the chow hall. There was female cooks there that were cute and infantry there, there are no girls, and this was getting a bit of deprivation. But then my knee gets better and the 3rd ID is ahead of schedule, so we get our jumps scratched. Then we heard 173rd out of Vicenza, Italy, jumped in northern Iraq, and we were super pissed. A lot of us wanted our mustard stain, little clover on our jump wings to indicate we had a combat jump. So we unpack everything that we prepared for the jump, and then we assembled our trucks and drove in March.

Tell us what that was like when you actually crossed the border and went into Iraq.

Hart Viges: It was getting ready for the great unknown, getting ready for a horror, or you just had no idea. You had maybe death over here or a loss of limb, a loss of your mind, burned to bits, see your brother that you love on your left and your right, anything happen to him. You had no idea what was going to happen. We cross over in the sand and there was this car over on the

right and bullethole riddled and there's a man in the passenger side with his head back, dead. That was the first Iraqi I ever saw. He was a dead man. So it was welcome to Iraq.

Where did your unit go to?

Hart Viges: We first went to Ossamowa because the supply route was getting hit pretty heavy from that town up north, so we surrounded the town, we had artillery with us, we had Bradley's with us, maybe some Abrams, I'm not sure, definitely armor, attack helicopters, specter gun ships, and we had Navy planes, F-18's flying over that town. This was at the time we had all our mop suits on for the chemical attacks that we were just like double suck. And eventually I think it was there that we got the call that we could take them off and that was a happy, happy day.

I'm sure, yeah.

Hart Viges: But we got positioned in a dump, so the flies were so heavy you couldn't when the sun was up, so I eventually had my meal right when the sun went down and right before the sun went up is when I would eat, which weird enough was how they fast during Ramadan. The flies were just oh my God, and we'd watch the line companies go out and hear all the firefights and then we'd get our fire mission and drop hell fire on those people in that town.

With the 60's?

Hart Viges: 81's. The 60's were -

That's what you trained with, so 81's.

Hart Viges: I was behind a 50-caliber machine gun. I was ammo bearer. My other ammo bearer was too slow so I had to come off the 50. I really didn't want to leave the 50, even though, I knew over on my right my 60's were there, I still did not want anything sneaking up on us. I was not going to let that happen. But I had to come off the 50 and help prep rounds, mortar rounds, that went down range. They asked me if I wanted to drop rounds, some switch out, but I said no. I felt in some weird honor way that that was not a proper way, like a warrior doesn't, you know, by knife or by bullet when you see the person or something weird, crazy, sadistic thought. But it is what it is. I helped prep the rounds. My D&A were on those rounds and went down range and killed people.

So how long were you there before you felt like it was pretty much going to be over in terms of the invasion itself and any question of victory over the Iraqi forces, that sort of thing?

Hart Viges: Well, I don't know.

Did you feel like the unit was moving up, did you ever feel like you were in any personal danger at a certain point, fire fights?

Hart Viges: Once we got into Ossamowa, we heard, this man without a ear came up to our unit, he lost an ear because he wouldn't fight for Saddam, and a lot of people were, yes Bush, no Saddam, happy to see us. It seemed what it did to that town, and then moving off to Fallujah where there was no fight to take Fallujah. We got put outside of Fallujah in this like resort with these big walls, and then we heard a major fight happened in town and one of the scouts who we usually duck-taped, or they duck-taped us came back. He was attached with Charlie Company

and he told us the story of a school that was taken by Charlie Company and the people came to protest them in their school, and celebratory fire on the Iraqi side, and Charlie Company fired upon the crowd killing 15 people, and they got us out of Fallujah real quick after that. Then we went to Baghdad and again, yes Bush – no Saddam, everybody's happy to see us, I mean it feels good. Then that just kind of slowly fades away.

So when was this timeframe, when did you get to Baghdad, was it late spring?

Hart Viges: Let's say, I'd say yeah, late spring. We only were in like Fallujah for two weeks, and it was a trip. On the highway you see the sign says Baghdad, 50 kilometers or something like that, I said hey, I read that, hey, how can I read that? It was in English. It was English and Arabic. Well, England had that territory for so long and exploring the hell out of there and I guess it's now our turn. But we get there, and they tell us we're there for six months, we're going to be there for six months. And then we're there for six months and they say OK, next week. And then they say OK, next week. And then they say OK, next week. Oh right, next month. All right, next month. And after that, it was, I didn't believe them. America went out of my mind. I didn't give a f- about it. It was I need to find my happy thoughts here, where I'm at, and it was puppy doggies, it was chocolate and banana milk, and Italian music videos, and those were the things that kept me going, that and Adriana Lima, Portuguese super model who was posted over my wall. But eventually those smiles faded. We started doing raids of houses in Baghdad, and we always hit the wrong house, and if we did, we'd take some people. All our detainees were curfew violators, people who were driving to work real early because that's when people go to work at that time, and we were dropping off these detainees by Baghdad airport, and these guys are like oh, you new batch of bad guys, we'll get information out of them, and like they were curfew violators, misdemeanor. Oh, I bet they know something. It was like I want to shoot you mother f-er, you are not gonna make this an easy trip for us. And seeing other troops, just the way they make extra caddy turns, you know the caddy turns, you roll out extra for it and hit this puddle which is basically sewage, smells like sewage onto these people because he can. My foot was about to go in the back of his head with stops. Any infraction like that, because they have their neighborhood parties. It's not just one person, you even mess with an entire neighborhood if you mess with one person, and instance after instance of this type of abuse brought on the resistance. Let me tell you, it was an amazing thing when they found out that the sons were killed. They found out at night, and when the sons were killed, I was up in the guard tower and 360 degrees celebratory fire, red tracers shooting up in the sky. It was one of the most amazing -

Talking about Saddam's sons?

Hart Viges: Yeah, about Saddam's sons, and it was absolutely amazing. I felt this was, that was one of the coolest shows I ever saw. When they found, Saddam got caught, I was up in the tower again, but it wasn't so cool. It was during the day so I couldn't see the tracer fire. Then I was thinking oh my gosh, these rounds come down and I didn't have, I don't know if I had sandbags on my top at that time, but I heard three round hit the ground at the base of my tower which I know that they weren't shooting at me because I had a couple of rounds shoot over my head at Ossamowa, and that makes you, you learn how to get real small real quick.

Or at least hope you are.

Hart Viges: I didn't know where, like there was a lot of brush there and I couldn't tell, so I just got low. I was behind a saw and my platoon was like way behind me and I was just gonna see if

they were gonna fire again. They never did. But to have a round go a couple of inches over your head would definitely make it very real for you.

When you were in Iraq and your unit was doing the house to house raids and that sort of thing, had IED's and land mines, had that become an issue for you yet or was that still something that was down the road?

Hart Viges: It was a bit of an issue, going off to bi-op or the Baghdad airport, dropping off detainees, it was nice and early on because that's where the best satellite phones and Internet was. So our Sergeant Melez who was the scout platoon sergeant said we'll stay, and take advantage of this stuff. So it was good hanging out in the airport, but when we left that night, a roadside bomb blew up next to my vehicle and lifted the vehicle up pretty good. It didn't flip us. I turned around so the flame and what not, and then it just receded. It didn't touch us. It scared the living shit out of us.

Sure. Were you traveling on that one kind of supposedly secured highway that runs out to the airport there?

Hart Viges: I wouldn't say it was that secure at that time.

Were you on that route?

Hart Viges: I was on the main route into and out of the airport. We were in the rear vehicle and Mendez, my Portuguese baby boy, driver, he like sped up ahead of the lead vehicle and they were like what happened? And Mendez was like they're shooting at us. And like all right, so we rolled up on the top of this bridge that was secured by Delta Company. Delta Company is crew serve weapons, a bunch of Hum-Vee's, hard shell Hum-Vee's with 50 cal's and Mark 19's. We had those guns but we were cargo Hum-Vee's, wide open. I rode the 50 damn near every day, I made it a point to. They stopped at this bridge and asked if I was hit, and I'm like oh, I'm good, and they were like well get down here and check, and I was like no, I'm good. Sergeant Velez's long arms pulls me off the gun and everybody starts patting me down. Because it's dark and they can't see if I'm hit, so they got to check for wetness, and then I started freaking out when I have all these hands on me, like am I hit? And they started, Sergeant Velez mentioned something about nine lives with me because I was in a pretty nasty car wreck the first day in Iraq, too. A couple of our guys fell asleep at the wheel. We were pretty sleep-depped out, hit a berm and nearly flipped the truck on me. That was the first day. Mendez and Blackman, they went, flew out the back. They miraculously had minor injuries, nobody really got hurt. We lost a truck, but that's about it.

When did you finally get to leave Iraq?

Hart Viges: We left, well we got back January 2004.

2004. So you spent, from when did you get there?

Hart Viges: I got there March 2003 to January 2004, late January.

So you had a good long stay in Iraq. Did you see a change while you were there in terms of the resistance or insurgency, whatever you called it, and the general population, and your unit's morale and all that sort of stuff?

Hart Viges: Well the general population became more and more sour to our presence over time. I didn't know when ___ bombers were gonna come, but I was hoping to get out of there before. When we'd get mortared, at first it was sporadic. It didn't seem like they knew what they were doing. At the very last week that they were there, they started walking the rounds, where it's like instead of just going crazy on a battleship, you just stick to a line, go with that line until you hit something.

It shows they knew what they were doing more.

Hart Viges: Mm-hmm, and it was just, I was disenchanted with the effectiveness of us. We'd escort contractors out to these places. It seemed to never really get fixed. We'd go there and get 'em money and mount, and just coming back it's like having two guys with RPG's across the road, right there in front of us, and these guys aren't professionals. These guys are freakin' farmers. It wasn't the enemy, they weren't the enemy.

So when you finally leave and you get back to the United States, what were your thoughts then? Obviously you're not thinking about staying in any longer, right?

Hart Viges: No, I'm applying for conscientious objection. I read the red words in the Bible and I know what love is, I know what Jesus was talking about, and I could not continue on being a soldier and being a Christian, so I had to remove myself.

Did you get a lot of flack from your unit when you said that?

Hart Viges: No, I had a good reputation. I didn't fall asleep on guard. I watched my sector. I rode the 50's as much as possible, so much that my face got so dirty. Someone had to tell me to clean it. So, no. Plus, well they didn't really think that I was sincere. They just knew I was wanting to get out, and I was OK with them.

How much time did you have left on your contract or your enlistment?

Hart Viges: About a year. I got out three years and two months.

How long did it take that paperwork process to get out?

Hart Viges: 10 months. I kind of had a nervous breakdown and they moved me from -

While you were at Fort Bragg?

Hart Viges: Fort Bragg, yeah. I was feeling this pain in my chest, sharp pain, and I couldn't breathe. My left arm was going numb, felt like I was having these heart attacks. Because I was really kind of suppressing my feelings. I mean over that two-week period in leave, I watched the Passion of Christ, I talked with this beautiful woman, Alejandra Muede, those two instances really kind of shook me, but I didn't want to know, I was refusing to accept this and I was, and I hear guys say like oh, I can't wait to f- up another Hodgi, and this pain would shoot to my chest and eventually I went into a hospital.

There at Bragg?

Hart Viges: Yeah, at Bragg, Womack, got chest x-ray, blood tests, EKG, the whole nine, and they found out that the protective sack around my heart was being inflamed and it was like choking my heart. So they gave me anti-inflammatory pills and said no, no PT for two weeks. So I go give my hey, no PT for two weeks to Sergeant Stone, and he was like well what's wrong with you? They say I'm stressed. So like are you stressed? And I couldn't lie to him. I couldn't. I had too much respect for him. I repeated they're gonna f- me sergeant, they're gonna f- me. He was like why? I was like I can't pull a trigger. And he was really good with me. He didn't jump down my throat. He calmed me down and told me that war affects people in different ways, told me to go talk to chaplain. So I go talk to the chaplain, well asked if I wanted to talk to chaplain. And I did and I told him everything, and he asked well are you a conscientious objector? I said that sounds about right. He said why don't you think about it for a couple of days. Well I go and Google it and find out about it, and during that time my platoon sergeant and my chaplain and my first sergeant go to bat for me and talk to Sergeant Major to move me from mortar platoon to chaplain assistant to see if that could help me out, justify war. It didn't. But they did move me and I spent the last 10 months, maybe 11 months in the Army as a chaplain assistant, which helped me out immensely. I mean I could get the chaplain's work done before lunch and I got a computer and started working on my packet, went to the Fayetteville Peace House there in North Carolina, and they got me the regulations for conscientious objection, showed me an attempt of Jeremy Hinsman's, he was another 82nd guy who applied. He went to Afghanistan. He was a Buddhist. They messed with him so much that he eventually went AWOL up in Canada. I went to Iraq. I'm Christian. So I was expecting the same thing. I got a storage unit off post with extra copies of all my paperwork. I had hidden paperwork in my room. I was waiting for the worst to happen, but it didn't. 10 months later my packet, well not 10 months later, it was approved. It took about a month to get out. There was a whole laundry list of things where you got paid more money when you turn in all your equipment. It's the last time the big green dick can pound you in the rear.

What was it like the day you finally got to leave Fort Bragg and you were done? Was it a bittersweet day or was it a day of relief?

Hart Viges: It was I'm never coming back here again. But I did. Next March I went back. There was -

March of '05?

Hart Viges: Mm-hmm. There was a protest and I went back and it was weird. I got to see all my guys again and I remember Hubner, we were all drinking beer and he was like why are you protesting us, man? I'm like I'm not protesting you, I'm protesting the order that sent you over there. Have another beer. It was like process to think it through, D-9. That's where I got involved with Iraqi Veterans Against the War and Veterans for Peace, and now I serve on the board of directors of a nonprofit called Veterans for Peace.

What brought you back to Austin when you left Fort Bragg?

Hart Viges: Fort Bragg? Alejandra. A girlfriend at the time. Yeah, we were together for four years, so I came back here, been loving Barton Springs and Alamo Drafthouse, work at Magnolia Café, go to school at ACC.

Do you still get the GI bill?

Hart Viges: Mm-hmm, honorable discharge as a conscientious objector, get the GI bill. I was just rated for my post traumatic stress, bags of trash, fireworks, crowds, they're not what they used to be.

How was that, describe that process to us going through the VA and how long does that take and what were your thoughts about how that went in terms of going in and saying look, I've got an issue, and then finally diagnosing it?

Hart Viges: It as a long process. Unfortunately I ran into a horrible human being who was working at the VA at the time. He found out of all my peace work and he said well there's too much good to bounce out the bad and you don't need help. Then I ended up at ASH, Austin State Hospital, I'm a suicide survivor. The cops took me there instead of jail.

When did that happen and how much longer after you got back from Iraq did that happen?

Hart Viges: I'd say like a year or two, I can't even remember. But you know, I eventually got help. I found a counselor outside the VA, then I eventually got into the vet center. I just reapplied for my benefits I guess, and then I needed new evidence because you have to appeal in two years or something, so luckily there was, I contacted all my fellow mortars. A couple of them wrote letters saying yeah, we saw this. It was like we were infantry. You think we were picking flowers? I love my brothers, love my brothers.

I guess it might be too personal to delve into, but when you had your suicide attempt, looking back on it now, do you feel like it was directly attributable to what you went through in Iraq?

Hart Viges: Yeah. I felt I was tainted. I felt that doing what I did, you just can't walk away from.

How was it you think you survived it?

Hart Viges: Cops didn't shoot.

Is that what it was?

Hart Viges: Mm-hmm.

So now you're here in Austin and you are active in the peace movement, working and you feel like is on a good plane for you?

Hart Viges: Yeah, well this is the year that "broken sandal" as I named it, a lot of, but I figure I got poison ivy, bike wreck, I mean there was a gamut, but I figure if it's sucking now, then I'm going to get better next year, and it is. I finally got rated 70 percent for my PTSD. I'll be going back to Iraq in February with Iraqi Health Now and Iraq Veterans Against the War. We're going to Bosra to deliver medical supplies and medical equipment to the hospitals in Bosra and toys for the kids.

What do you anticipate on that trip? Is that going to be difficult for you?

Hart Viges: It's going to be difficult because I'm going to be, I have a huge emotional connection to that place, so being there it's going to come back in a way that is, you can't ignore.

But I can't ignore it now. I know that it's still happening. But I feel the need, I need to make reparations for what we did, especially they told us, they pumped us, oh, they got weapons of mass destruction, and then you hear Bush say there's no weapons of mass destruction, integrity is shot, integrity. And when all that, the whole operation is f-ing bunk.

So you're gonna go there in February, how long are you gonna stay for?

Hart Viges: Two weeks. Can't wait. I'm learning Arabic right now in my ACC, and it's a process. I'm going to give myself 10 years to learn Arabic, slow and steady wins the race.

One of the things I don't know if I mentioned to you or not, but we have a lot of archives here at the Land Office that go back 300 some years. We've got Stephen F. Austin's original registro, we have the Land Grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at The Alamo, we have all those sort of things, and our goal in doing these interviews is to hopefully add all this to that so potentially hundreds of years from now people can listen to all these different interviews and kind of get individual pieces, kind of like a patchwork quilt, everybody's individual take of their time in the service from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, today. So with that in mind, is there anything you'd want to say for posterity to future generations that may be listening to your interview years from now after we're long gone?

Hart Viges: Oh man, I never even thought of something like that. I guess well, if we hadn't gotten you livable wage, affordable housing, free health care, free college education, and closed down all the foreign bases, then I'm sorry, I failed you.

And that's your final take?

Hart Viges: That's my final take. Well my little energy is going to fly on after this one, so who knows what other world I'm going to be experiencing after this, but I'm working my ass off to make your life a little bit easier, and I guess you got to do the same for the future generations of where you're going.

Well on behalf of everyone at the Land Office from Commissioner Patterson on down, thank you very much for your time and your service, however traumatic it was for you, for your service.

Hart Viges: I don't regret it. It opened my eyes.

It definitely changes your life one way or the other.

Hart Viges: Oh yeah.

It's probably hard to think back about what you've gone through and where you'd be without it for good or bad. But again, thank you, I appreciate it.

Hart Viges: All right.

[End of recording]