Interview with Scott Blomberg

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Monday, January 24, 2011. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the director of oral history here at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. And we are in the library today interviewing Scott Blomberg.

Blomberg: Hello, Mark.

DePue: Good morning.

Blomberg: Good morning. How are you today?

DePue: Now, let's start with this: Did I pronounce it right?

Blomberg: Blomberg, yeah.

DePue: Blomberg.

Blomberg: Just one *O*.

DePue: Okay. I'm sure that people are tempted to say Bloomberg all the time.

Blomberg: Very often, yeah.

DePue: Okay. Let's start off with when and where you were born?

Blomberg: I'm from Minnesota. I was born in 1974—June 22, 1974—in the city of Edina, Minnesota, and I grew up in a suburb of Minneapolis, just south of Minneapolis, called Burnsville, and lived there for my first eighteen years, which is where my family, my parents, still live.

DePue: We should have mentioned here to begin with that I'm interviewing you today because of your experience in the military, and you're a veteran both of Kosovo, which most people know very little about, and the Iraq war in 2003–2004. So that's why you're a little bit younger veteran than I normally am used to interviewing.

Blomberg: That's true, yeah.

DePue: That's good. Tell me a little bit more about your parents and what your parents did.

Blomberg: My father is Donald Ralph Blomberg, and he's a retired plumber now. He worked for the University of Minnesota. He was there for about thirty years, actually, at the same position, so we had a pretty stable family—didn't move and didn't change jobs much. Prior to his work at the university he did work some different jobs in plumbing as he worked his way up to get to that position. And he actually had a little military history himself. He was told when he was around twenty or so that he was going to be drafted for Vietnam, and so based on some recommendations, he joined the Air National Guard during the Vietnam War, somewhat out of self-preservation, I think, and yet at the same time I think he enjoyed that time, too. So that was my father. Then my mother is Kathleen Marie Wala was her maiden name. She was raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Stayed home with us, watched other kids as well; [that] was kind of her job when we were young, and then she became a legal secretary, which she did for many years. They both retired about a year or two ago.

DePue: How many other siblings do you have?

Blomberg: I have one older brother, David, and he's an engineer now. He lives in Minnesota.

DePue: So, you grew up in the late seventies and eighties. What was it like growing up in Burnsville, Minnesota at that time? What was your life like?

Blomberg: You know, at the time I didn't realize how good I had it, I think. From a standpoint of my growing up. If I could duplicate that for my family, I think it'd be great for my kids. We were in a neighborhood that my parents moved into when the neighborhood was being built up. We were on a circle, and all the other neighbors, same type of thing, where they moved in within a matter of a year of each other, for the most part. They all had young kids, so we grew up knowing all the kids, the same ages, playing in the yards. It seemed like none of the families moved, (laughs) so I still know most of those families. When we go back home, I know most of the surrounding neighbors and their kids and then now their grandkids. So it was wonderful. And we were real involved in our church growing up, so we had that - that made a lot of good friends there, too.

DePue: What was the denomination of the church?

Blomberg: Assembly of God is my parents' denomination. We're—my wife, which we'll get to, was Lutheran. Assembly of God, if you're familiar, is fairly evangelical, meaning very…boisterous with their worship, and my wife was raised Lutheran, and we found a happy medium with a Baptist church, (laughter) which is what we attend now.

DePue: Yeah, Lutherans aren't necessarily known for being boisterous in their services.

Blomberg: Right, right, (laughs) not so much. So anyway, it was wonderful. And you know what? I have a very independent spirit, and it's something to me, because growing up. I knew, I could have a deal with going to the University of Minnesota, which is a great school, and my dad being a plumber there. It would have been a really good setup to go to school there, but I pretty much only looked at schools that were far enough away for college that I would be on my own. And so.

DePue: Let's not get you quite to that point yet. Tell me a little bit about high school. Did you go to Burnsville High School?

Blomberg: Burnsville Senior High School, yep, yep.

DePue: What activities did you get involved with?

Blomberg: You know, I worked quite a bit during my senior—well, during senior high school. I was very involved in the band—marching band, jazz band, concert band. I played trumpet. And that was really my main outside activities besides school. Then I worked on a farm from probably about the age twelve or thirteen, which my brother had started working at. It was a produce farm, so we harvested corn, cabbage, tomatoes, basically—not feed corn but sweet corn—and so it was all vegetables and fruit—well, vegetables—that you

would bring to market. It was fairly labor-intensive. We did that during the summer, and then during the school year, I worked at a produce section at Cub Foods.

DePue: That's an interesting mixture you had.

Blomberg: Yeah, so I saw the harvesting of it, the delivery of it, and then the receiving of it. In fact, when I worked at Cub Foods, we often would receive shipments from the people I worked with at the farm, too.

DePue: Was Burnsville a suburb of Minneapolis, or was that more in the rural area?

Blomberg: It's a suburb. It's fairly well populated.

DePue: I would imagine not many of your buddies have the experience of working on the farm in the summer.

Blomberg: No, no. And it was hard work, too, but yeah, it was… But I made some good friends there. My brother got the job first, and he worked there for I think a year or two before I did. He's older than me. So he and I did almost everything together. He started at Cub Foods also prior to me, although at a different store. So in a lot of ways I followed in his footsteps; he and I were very close. We did almost everything growing up. We even went on some trips together to Boundary Waters [Minnesota] that he and I would put together. He was the main organizer for it, and we went up there probably about seven times, taking different friends with us, which, now when I look back, for a sixteen-year-old and a fourteen-year-old to up and take their friends on a trip to a remote area is remarkable. But we were pretty responsible, I think.

DePue: What was your brother's name, again?

Blomberg: David.

DePue: Okay. As you got close to graduating from high school, then, what were your intentions with your life? Did you know?

Blomberg: I did not. No. I knew I was going to go to college. I took my studies fairly seriously; it wasn't even an option or a consideration to do anything except go to college.

DePue: In whose mind, your parents or you, or both?

Blomberg: Probably both. And it was never something I would have even thought or debated. I think maybe working on the farm and working a labor job, maybe there was something within me that I knew, I never was going to want to do

that the rest of my life. I could have stayed there and stayed as a laborer or at Cub Foods and just worked my way up in the managerial track at Cub Foods, and it would have been something to do, but I knew that was never long-term. So anyway, I did not know what I was going to do, I just knew I was going to go to college. And similar to I guess looking back, some of the other things, my brother was going into engineering, and that was my declared major when I started college, because he and I were fairly similar in a lot of things, and so that was my initial thought. But it was not very well solidified at that point.

DePue: Tell me about picking a college to go to, then.

Blomberg: So I picked Bradley University, which is in Peoria, Illinois. And that was based on—well, one of the primary things was, I was [a] National Merit Scholar from my test performances, I guess, in high school, and they offered me a full ride scholarship, which was really attractive.

DePue: Didn't other places offer that as well?

Blomberg: There were a couple. That was the most attractive one to me, I thought.

DePue: Because…?

Blomberg: Well, the location was just about right. I had kind of in my mind a circumference of how far away I wanted to be from my family—

DePue: You mean at least that far away?

Blomberg: Within maybe like a donut area, where I didn't want to be too close, and not too far, and that fit within that scheme. The size of the school was very attractive. One of the schools I had looked at—Case Western was a very good engineering school and about the right size and location, but the ratio of males to females was a problem. (laughter) So there were several factors I looked at, I guess. I'm that type of person—I even would write down the pros and cons of each thing and, you know, kind of weigh it all out in writing. I'm very much visual on those things. So I remember going through that whole debate. I did apply to MIT. And that one, it's really interesting. I may have gone, but my guidance counselor, who had to write one of the recommendations for it, it just stayed on her desk and it didn't make it. It was a really frustrating thing to me at that point. But then, looking back, life would have gone much differently, because I met my wife at Bradley, and I didn't end up going to engineering anyway, and that was probably MIT's main forte at that point. Anyway, it is remarkable sometimes the pathways that life takes you on and how little things can change, have a reverberating effect throughout later on. But that's one thing I definitely remember.

DePue: Can you walk us through the progression from engineering to something else?

Blomberg: Sure. I was only in engineering as a major for one semester. So I did the first semester of classes with the declared engineering majors, mechanical engineering. And I did fine. I got A's in the classes. Math is definitely something I do fine at, but once I got into actual projects where you design something, like one of them was an egg launcher that would launch an egg over the wall, and it had to get over the wall, self-propelled. You'd use rubber bands or whatever to make it move. Everything had to be self-propelled. And when it would hit the wall, it had to get the egg over the wall and land without breaking the egg. We accomplished what we had to do. After going through that whole semester, I didn't want to do that my whole life, of just—

DePue: Making egg launchers?

Blomberg: (laughs) Well. You know, my brother is much more inclined to taking things apart and knowing how the mechanics of it all worked. So from that aspect, he and I are much different. I don't get as much of a kick out of those things as… Well, anyway, so I just really started to look inside, and what was the most interesting thing to me was the human body and how it came together and how it all works and all the parts of it. So I just chose biochemistry as my major. I still didn't know what I was going to do with it, but I just knew that if I'm going to study something, it's going to be something I really find interesting. So that's what I went into at that point, was biochemistry.

DePue: When did you make that change?

Blomberg: At the midpoint of my first year.

DePue: Okay. So early enough that you didn't waste too much of your academic time.

Blomberg: Yeah, it didn't really slow me down. I still graduated on time, and it was fine. So yeah. Although, to the engineering professor that was kind of my counselor at that point, it was a big deal, but really, looking back, it was not.

DePue: Mm-hmm. The scholarship you received, did that pay both room and board and tuition?

Blomberg: I think it was just tuition. I believe I paid room and board. Yeah, yeah, it was just tuition. I paid for books, so it was just a purely tuition scholarship.

DePue: Did you continue to work when you were in college?

Blomberg: I did, yeah. I'm a working maniac, I guess. (laughter) That first summer after my freshman year, I went back and worked again at the farm, and I don't know if I worked at Cub Foods then or not; I can't remember. Then I got a job in my sophomore year at U.S. Department of Agriculture, which is right across from Bradley University, so location is perfect. I worked with a

chemist named Gary Knoethe. I was pretty much his lab chemical worker. He was studying selenium. They did a lot of research in that building on different uses for soy and how you could break down the chemicals in farm products from that area and turn it into useful things. It's actually pretty interesting, the things that they were coming up with, although my main jobs were usually mixing, stirring, and running the chemicals through separating units, different machines that would separate out the ingredients of what came out. So mine was more just kind of do[ing] what he told me to do in the lab. But I enjoyed it, actually. It was fine.

DePue: Was this an internship for you?

Blomberg: No, it was a job, just a job. No credit or anything like that, but pay.

DePue: But it wasn't too far away from your major, it doesn't seem.

Blomberg: No, it was a good fit from what I was studying.

DePue: Is that what you were looking for? You were looking specifically for something that was a better fit for you?

Blomberg: I had enough energy and time to get a job, so I was looking for a job, (laughter) and it was a good fit. So I think it might have been posted as a job opportunity at the chemistry building. That's probably how I found it. Yeah, yeah. And again, research, it became clear to me, even though I was a biochemistry major, it became pretty clear from working that job that I wasn't going to go into research. So now I'm studying biochemistry, and if you go to grad school you're probably going to be either a teacher or a researcher or both, or you take that undergraduate major and then go on to some form of medical school would be the kind of most common tracks you were looking at.

DePue: What other things did you get involved in, in college? Or that's enough already.

Blomberg: No, there's a ministry called Campus Crusade for Christ, and it's a student organization, fairly challenging organization in that it's not just a club. They're very focused on—outward-focused on sharing your faith with others. In fact, my wife and I first met through this group, and she was not real involved in church growing up in the Lutheran church, but when she first got involved, her mom thought it might be a cult because it was, you know, very much more about living your faith outwardly and not being ashamed and making sure that those in your family and friends that may or may not be followers of Jesus understand how important it is to you. While I did go to church growing up and I had no doubt about my faith, in that organization, it became a no doubt about it to me, that this is more important to me than

anything else as far as what I do for a living or where I live, those type of things.

DePue: Did you find an Assembly of God church in Peoria to attend?

Blomberg: No. I looked. I did not. I did not. So actually I did go to a Baptist church there too. Their faiths are very similar. Baptists are maybe a little bit more tame, which is (DePue laughs) probably more like my own personality anyway. So there aren't major conflicts between those two faiths. And, you know you can't help but sometimes wonder, Why are there so many different divisions among…? But there are some differences in how they worship and those things, but I wouldn't have any issue going between them. But I was in a Baptist church.

DePue: You've already alluded to this a couple times. Tell me how you met your future wife.

Blomberg: That's my wife. We've been married almost fifteen years now. We met at the end of our sophomore year, so it was between sophomore year and junior year, and that's—

DePue: Her name?

Blomberg: Kimberly Ann Schoby would be her maiden name. She was a nursing major at Bradley, same year as me. One of her roommates had invited her to one of these summer Bible studies. There was a small contingent of students that were in Campus Crusade for Christ, the bigger organization, who stuck around and worked during the summer, which I did. I just stayed there in Peoria the second summer. So she came to one of these, and I noticed her. (laughter) And we hit it off. I've become a lot more outgoing later on as I've gotten older. I was pretty quiet and shy, so to me, to talk to a girl and call her—you know, I had a couple girlfriends in high school that were really brief. But I remained pretty shy. But with her, it was always really natural. It seemed like we could talk for hours. So we kind of struck up a friendship, and it grew. So that summer, she was going to go to Chicago and do a nursing training up there in Chicago. I can't remember exactly what they were going to train on, but we had talked about, oh, that'd be neat to go to the Brookfield Zoo. We were going to go with a group. She would go up to Chicago with this group, we would meet her after the end of their training and go to Brookfield Zoo. We weren't dating at the time, so it was going to be a group thing to do. Anyway, it all fell apart, where their training, the schedule didn't work or something, so she was real disappointed, and I was disappointed because I was looking forward to spending that time with her. And so completely contrary to my normal, conservative point of view, I just said, "How about you and I just go ourselves?" And she said sure. We weren't dating, we didn't know each other more than a few weeks, and we went to

Chicago. (laughs) But, you know, it was fine. While we were eating, I asked if she wanted to start dating, and we did. And so here we are (laughs) years later.

DePue: Was that one of those things where you look back and say, Well, I think that whole trip was supposed to come apart?

Blomberg: Yeah, I do. And looking back, I don't know if I would be real comfortable with my daughter going with some guy she met to Chicago, you know, (DePue laughs) on a road trip, but—

DePue: Or to the Boundary Waters.

Blomberg: How it all came together. Yeah. (laughs) So yeah. And we dated throughout the next two years of college, and the week we graduated, we got married.

DePue: Well, let's get towards that last year in college. What did you think you wanted to do with your life, other than get married, at the time?

Blomberg: I had decided to go to medical school at that point, while we were dating, and I was studying for the MCAT and all of that and didn't realize that my wife the nursing major was not okay with me going to medical school and even said that "I wouldn't marry a doctor because they're too much on call and their family life is all screwed up." I think she had maybe a skewed image from seeing the residents and their situations, but so it kind of put the brakes on it. We talked a lot about it because I knew I wanted to do something on that line. It came out that dental, that optometry, those fields were not quite so bothersome to her. I was fine with any of those and just kind of researched them and picked optometry. Again, it was one of those weigh the pros and cons and looked at the whole—

DePue: Does that mean you had a chart with veterinary school—

Blomberg: Almost, yeah. I may have. You know, I sound like a nerd when it comes to some of these things, but I may have. I definitely did a lot of research on it, and I think I made the right choice. I really like what I do now. But that's how I came to that decision.

DePue: Do you recall any of the specifics of what pulled you more towards optometry?

Blomberg: Yeah, it really came down to optometry or dental, and I think I probably would have been okay with either one. I don't know if I can think of anything particular between those. I think I'd be good doing either one of those. It wouldn't bother me. I do remember—there's one of those studies—I'm sure people have heard these before—that dentists have high suicide rates, (DePue laughs) so that's something that gives you pause, like, Why are they not

happy, but I don't know if that was any kind of a big sway. I really don't know anything more about how I came to that final conclusion.

DePue: Well, there's one other sticking point in here, Scott. You got to go to medical school, and that gets to be expensive.

Blomberg: Yes, it sure does. So I picked—optometry schools, they're fairly limited in the numbers. At the time there were twelve schools in the country.

DePue: This would have been—what year did you graduate from Bradley?

Blomberg: Ninety-six.

DePue: Okay, and got married when?

Blomberg: Ninety-six. So I graduated around May twentieth, and we got married May twenty-fifth that same week. In between the graduation and the wedding we moved our belongings to where we were going to [go], which was Columbus, Ohio. I ended up going to optometry school at Ohio State. So, you know, came back and got married.

DePue: Where'd you get married?

Blomberg: In Decatur. My wife is from Decatur, Illinois. At the Lutheran Church there, St. Paul's Lutheran. So yeah, when we were picking the schools—they really are pricey, you're right about that. And there's a school in Chicago, ICO or Illinois College of Optometry. There's one in St. Louis, UMSL or University of Missouri–St. Louis, is an optometry school.

DePue: What'd you call it?

Blomberg: UMSL, U-M-S-L, is one of them. ICO is one in Chicago. There's one in Indiana, Memphis, and Ohio State. And those would really be the main ones that would be within driving distance of here.

DePue: Were you a resident of Illinois at the time?

Blomberg: No, I was a Minnesota resident still, and she was an Illinois resident. So Ohio State, if you're married, considers you an in-state resident from the first day, which cuts your tuition into about a third, if your wife has a job. So she had to quick, get a job before school started, which she did. But she didn't have her nursing boards, all the results from that, so she ended up working as a temp just to get a job. She did temp work for a little while so we could get residency. Then she ended up working while we were in Columbus at the Red Cross and then a county health department in that area, which she really

enjoyed. And I went to optometry school. That's a four-year school, so it was from '96 to 2000 at Ohio State. Go Bucks. (DePue laughs)

DePue: And again, it's an expensive proposition, so how did you [manage]? [Did you] continue to work or [did you] build up some debts, or [was] your wife working?

Blomberg: Yes. I worked at Battelle that summer. And this is really remarkable to me, looking back. Battelle, they're kind of a contractor to the military. Battelle, west of Columbus, Ohio, does chemical warfare treatment and devices, so they developed or helped develop the gas mask, for example. One of my jobs that summer, having no military background at all, they gave me a gas mask, the complete, put-together gas mask, and they said, "We would like you to take this apart down to every individual piece and put it back together and do that enough times to where you can do it comfortably, and then write directions on how to do it so anyone can understand." Which I did, having no idea that I would ever go into the military or wear those in combat. But mainly my job that summer was—they had units of nerve gas and mustard gas and all the blister agents and all that, and you worked with those, so you had the butyl gloves and you're all donned with your protective equipment in the lab. You would basically see, Is this material penetrated by the different types of agents? You know, the whole area is protected by military people on the compound, and you have to go through security clearances. So it was kind of my first experience with the military, but for me it was just a job, it was something to do during the summer, going into optometry school.

DePue: Any question in your mind about working with a nerve agent, working in chemical warfare, versus your religious background?

Blomberg: Well, this is all protective, so it was never—at least what I was involved in was never developing agents. I don't know if they did there or not. It was not in my security level, I guess, to find that out. But it was all in the protective. I had to study and understand it, but it was always with the mindset of, We're coming up with ways to protect our soldiers. So definitely no problem with that at all.

DePue: Okay. Tell me a little bit about the Ohio State University and going to the optometry school there, then.

Blomberg: Yeah. It's a great school. I loved it. The class size was about sixty, so even though Ohio State would be one of the maybe five biggest schools in the country, it felt like a real small school to me because we knew everybody in my class. We did all those classes those four years together, the sixty of us, except for when you got into labs or clinic. It was pretty much together. We did a couple of classes with the medical school, like the anatomy and physiology type classes and pharmacology, but otherwise it was the sixty of

us. So we got to know each other pretty well, and so it had that small school feel within a big school. And of course I like sports, so we had season tickets to the football games, and being married you get two season tickets to the football games, which is great. So—

DePue: Was Ohio State winning at that time or Michigan?

Blomberg: (laughs) It was the John Cooper years. We had really good teams, and we could not beat Michigan to save our life. (laughs) You'd get to the game, and you'd be number one or number two in the country and you'd lose to Michigan (laughs) pretty consistently there. Frustrating. He was a great coach, he put together good teams, but I don't know, they just couldn't seem to beat Michigan, even when Michigan had a bad year. So (laughs) it was frustrating but…

DePue: Which, it says quite a bit. You remember that pretty well, it sounds like.

Blomberg: Ever since I've left, they've had really good years at beating Michigan, too, so we enjoy watching that. I didn't have any—if anything I was probably a Gophers fan, you know, growing up in Minnesota and my dad being the University of Minnesota. But that all switched pretty much right away at Ohio State. It's totally different with them, and it's at a different level with their sports and fans and all that from anywhere I'd ever been. You walk into the Horseshoe, which is their stadium. The first time you step through where the crowd is, you step through from the rotunda or whatever and into the stadium itself, it's an emotional thing you never forget. (laughter)

DePue: You can't be of mixed loyalties once you get there, huh?

Blomberg: No, not really.

DePue: Okay. How about the academics? You talked about that a little bit.

Blomberg: Ohio State, that was probably one of the main draws. Their optometry school, theirs and Berkeley, would be the two most competitive to get into, and their optometrists that graduate from there I think are top quality. It's fairly rigorous. It's a lot of intense studying. So once school started, I did not have the opportunity to work that first year at all. And you don't have summers off, so you go into school quite a bit, and a lot of studying. I did end up in my second year working as a technician at Ohio State's ophthalmology department, which is their eye surgeon [department]. I did that through the next two and a half years, until I graduated. That was a really good experience, but that would be somewhat related to what I was going to go into, too, which was wonderful.

DePue: At what point did you commit to optometry versus ophthalmology?

Blomberg: Yeah, those are two completely different tracks. To go into optometry school, at that point you're committed to optometry. Ophthalmology is one of the medical specialties for medical doctors. So it's kind of like dental school. Optometry school is four years of specific focus on optometry as your job, and when you're done, you will be an optometrist, assuming you pass the board exams. Medical school is the same four years with an open-ended (specialty choice)—you could be an OB, you could be a radiologist, you could be a dermatologist, or you could be an ophthalmologist. Medical doctors that go into ophthalmology started in medical school and then did a surgical residency in ophthalmology, where theirs would be eight years, whereas optometry would be four, after college. But yeah, actually going through optometry school, there were times in my life where I was feeling like there's two parallel ladders, and I wonder if I was on that other ladder, the medical school versus—I'm on this ladder that's going to optometry, and there's really no getting off that track. So I had moments—I think we all do—where the career you're in, once it's set in stone, and once you go to optometry school, it's pretty set in stone that you're going to be an optometrist. I hadn't really had that in my life before where I knew pretty much what I was going to do for the rest of my life or for many years to come. So you have those second thoughts. And especially working with the ophthalmologist, I really loved the disease part of it. And it turns out optometry has evolved into more and more disease treatment, so it's great now. But if you just did contact lenses and glasses, I think I'd probably be bored to tears. But my job, for example, I specialize in low vision, in treating glaucoma and macular degeneration. So there were times I didn't really know if this was the right thing for me, but it has gone really well.

DePue: Is there any part of the body that is more complex than the human eye?

Blomberg: (laughs) Well, it's all pretty—the brain probably would top it. But yeah, the eye is really amazing, how it works. Like I said, I don't regret ever studying the body, and I probably could never lose that fascination with how it all comes together.

DePue: But we still haven't talked about how you're managing to pay for all of this.

Blomberg: Right, you kept alluding to that. So it is expensive. I was taking out loans. So that first year I took out about twenty thousand or so in loans. Even though I was in-state, you still had books, tuition. It's expensive. And most of the students starting optometry school are already in debt from their undergraduate years, which I wasn't, although my wife had some from college. So we were taking out loans, we were living on my wife's income also, which was fairly limited but enough. We had little in and little out. (laughter) And we lived in what we called the slums of Westerville. Westerville is a suburb of Columbus. The apartment, including heat, water,

utilities, was four hundred a month. And it was a one-bedroom apartment. It wasn't anything… Looking back, it's remarkable we lived there for four years. We stayed there the whole time. so anyway, we were starting to accumulate some debt, and from my upbringing, working hard, always trying to stay out of debt - that was definitely a problem. I didn't want to go much into debt. We were on pace for probably being eighty to a hundred thousand in debt when I got out of school, which that's a lot. So yeah. This is when the military did come into play, and that was probably my main motivation. So the military is hungry for doctors, and they set up a program called Health Professions Scholarship Program, HPSP are the initials—everything is initialed in the military. It's for doctors, vets, optometrists, dental—the health professions. The deal is that they will pay for you being in school, they'll pay for your tuition, books, living expenses, monthly stipend, completely, and you'll pay back [an] equal number of active duty years. So it'd be either two years—and it had to be a minimum of three active-duty years, so if you did two years of school, you'd owe back three years; if you did three years of school paid, you'd owe back three years; and if you did four years of school paid, you'd owe them four years of active duty. Well, I wasn't aware of the program till I got to school, and midway through my first year got real interested in it and applied. I applied for the Navy [scholarship program]; [the] Air Force was not needing any optometrists at that point, so I applied for the Navy one and the Army one, and I was accepted for the Army one. It's fairly competitive, at least the Navy one was, and I didn't make that. You're competing against other optometry students who are very good students and all that. And some had prior military history, too. The Navy would have been really nice, looking back. (DePue laughs) Their locations are probably a little better. But I made the Army one and accepted. There was another classmate of mine, Aaron Betts that also was in the same boat as me, that did the Army scholarship. Neither one of us had any military draw other than the finances, for the most part, but both of us were patriotic and neither one of us had any problem with serving, either.

DePue: So you weren't the kid growing up who played Army with your buddies?

Blomberg: I did some of that, but certainly once I got into high school, college, it was never a thought of, I think I want to go into the military.

DePue: We haven't mentioned your parents for a while. What did your parents think about your career path and then your decision to have the Army help pay for it?

Blomberg: My parents are really great as far as letting my brother and I, from a very young age, make our own choices, both right and wrong, and they didn't meddle much in almost anything that we did. They're still like that, which is wonderful. There probably are times that I feel like, I wish they'd give me some advice, you know, but probably most people, if anything, would say their parents are too much on the meddling side than not enough, and if I was

to take one, my parents are great about that, where they don't get too involved in commenting except for usually support. But I've never heard them say anything like, that's a dumb thing to do, or, I wouldn't do that if I were you type of stuff. So I did not get anything other than, Good for you, I hope it goes well type of comments from them.

DePue: How about Kimberly? Did she have an opinion about it?

Blomberg: (laughs) Yes, she did. Well, the recruiter, of course, said that being an optometrist, you're going to treat soldiers and their families and retirees, which the bulk of those are stateside. If you go overseas, it would be to somewhere like Germany or Italy or Hawaii, and throwing out all these exciting places in the world, and that's where the bulk—

DePue: He didn't mention Korea?

Blomberg: No, that didn't come up. You go where the bulk of soldiers are. So, you know, we asked about, Well, what about deployments? What he said made perfect sense. Why would they need an optometrist in the middle of the fighting? They need you back in the back, back home, treating them when they get home and those things. Oh, yeah, yeah, it made sense.

DePue: This was what year now we're talking about?

Blomberg: Well, this would have been '97.

DePue: Mid-'97 sometime?

Blomberg: Yeah, I think so. I think towards the end of '97, I believe.

DePue: And putting it into some kind of a context, then, this is a peacetime army, essentially. There are occasional deployments. There had been a deployment for Desert Shield/Desert Storm back in '90–'91, and that's quite a few years beyond it.

Blomberg: He even did some research for me, you know, me being the book person, and found out that the last deployment of an optometrist was during Desert Shield, I guess it would have been? Which was true, that was accurate, I believe, at least. Clinton was in office at the time. We were in Bosnia, and that was pretty much it for what the military was really doing actively beyond just their routine training and exercises and all that. It had been a long time since the military really had done much significant, you know, what we would consider war. So, yeah, Clinton's in office. So we're thinking three years. I've got a guaranteed job; I know what I'll do. I have a lot of people I'll see. And you're busy. The optometrists are very busy in the military, and you're seeing healthy soldiers and healthy families, but you're also seeing VA retirees and all that.

So they're busy and it's an interesting job, and it's a good start to a career, but something that paying for the school—if you count the sixty thousand or so that I would get as a start up for paying for the school on top of those three years of being paid as a captain, the pay isn't bad. And I do have a strong draw to being debt-free, which we're still working on, but pretty close. So that helped a lot with that. That was probably the main thing, was that that deal was maybe too good to pass up.

And so anyway, you were asking about Kimberly. She was on board with it. I remember celebrating with her. She might think it was my idea. (laughs) No, maybe it was more my idea than hers, but she was supportive, and she's always been very supportive of the things I would have our family do, I guess, and she's there.

DePue: Well, essentially, then, what you received was a sixty-thousand-dollar scholarship?

Blomberg: Essentially, yes. Yeah, that's about right.

DePue: Tuition and room and board and books and lab fees?

Blomberg: Yes. So the room and board is in the form of a check, and I think it's about a nine hundred and fifty per month check, so how you do your room and board is up to you.

DePue: Did you move from that little apartment?

Blomberg: No. I think Aaron did. I think Aaron Betts moved to a little bit nicer place. (laughter) No, we stayed there. We were fairly content. We'd shop at Aldi and eat beans and rice, and it was okay with us.

DePue: What kind of military training, then, did you receive while you were still in medical school?

Blomberg: None. I was considered an inactive Reserve. I did a commissioning. So this would have been as I started my second year of optometry school. I did a commissioning, and so I raised my right hand and took an oath, but I did not have a uniform, had not fired a weapon, did not know how to salute, but I was considered a second lieutenant. After a year I got a letter saying, "You just got promoted to first lieutenant."

DePue: Congratulations.

Blomberg: Right, and not even knowing the whole structure of—I knew I was an officer, but not even really knowing what that looked like on the uniform or anything, so I was very unfamiliar with the fact that I was moving up in rank and how that all… Anyway, then I'd get to the graduation from optometry school in

2000, and now you're a captain, which now, looking back, that's an honor to have, but at the time it didn't mean much to me except that that kind of set your pay. At that point, [that] was probably the most important thing to me. So no, I did not do weekend duty. I didn't collect—it wasn't anything more than a scholarship to me, but I knew then that I was on the hook when I graduated.

DePue: Is your timeline that by the summer of 2003 your obligation is over?

Blomberg: Yeah, well, it's an eight-year total commitment, regardless of your active duty years, and the eight years could not be counted while you were in school. So the time starts ticking at June, and actually they said July sixth, because that was the start of the Officer Basic Course. And we'll get to that, I'm sure, but that was July sixth, I believe, of 2000, when I actually put on a uniform and started. It would have been July sixth, 2000, three years later, that I would be done with active duty commitment, and then at that point, 2008 would have been my final, You're now discharged from the Army. And during those five years after active duty, it could be either active duty or Reserve, and among the Reserve, you could do service, weekly—or the weekend duty—active reserve, or inactive. I chose inactive reserve.

DePue: Did you choose that right at the beginning of this process or after you were discharged from active duty?

Blomberg: You'd choose after your discharge, yeah.

DePue: Okay. Because they're hoping that you'll…

Blomberg: Oh, sure. They keep trying to change your mind when you get close to those decisions.

DePue: How about an internship in medical school?

Blomberg: Yeah, so they would take us to—you would serve at various places. I probably should mention, in my fourth year of optometry school, Kim got pregnant. Actually I guess she got pregnant right at the end of my third year, because we had Logan, our son, November of 1999, during my fourth year. And then your fourth year, you're doing rotations to specialty clinics, pediatric hospitals or VA hospitals, and various places. I knew my Officer Basic Course was going to be in San Antonio at Fort Sam Houston, and that was going to be three months right after I graduated. And lo and behold, one of the extern rotations was at Fort Sam Houston, in their hospital there. You'd kind of rotate, and there's also other military places there in San Antonio. So I picked that for my spring externship, to go to San Antonio, Texas, at Fort Sam Houston, part of school, still, and work as an extern student there.

DePue: An extern student?

Blomberg: Yeah, they call it an extern because it's outside of the school, so—

DePue: Oh.

Blomberg: Yeah, that's how optometry does it, anyway. Yeah, externship. That's just how they call it. I went on my extern site where I would end up going through Officer Basic Course also. My family came with me, so we moved down there for those few months, and we had relatives that we stayed with in San Antonio from March until graduation. I came up to graduate and went back down to Officer Basic Course. Kim did not come with me with Logan during the Officer Basic Course. It was just—you know, you're not going to be with your family, anyway. So she lived with my parents in Minnesota for those few months while I was in [basic].

That year was pretty much the year of moves. We were trying to count it all, the number of moves, and it's kind of hard to put it all together, but we were in Columbus. Logan was born in November. We were in Columbus. We moved to San Antonio in March. She went to Minnesota in June, and when I graduated in Ohio State, then she went to Minnesota; I went back down to San Antonio, to the barracks. Then we went back to pick up our household goods, which were in storage in Columbus, after I finished the Basic Course, and we moved to where I got assigned. Obviously we'll get to that—but I got assigned [to] Fort Campbell in September. So a lot of moving. We were together and apart and various things.

DePue: Welcome to the Army.

Blomberg: (laughs) Yeah. Little did I know that would be more of the same later.

DePue: When you did the externship, were you able to get to the point in your own mind that, Yeah, this was the right path for me to take, that this optometry is going to work?

Blomberg: Yeah, I liked it, I really did. Because at that point I was realizing how much more interesting it was than just doing the glasses part; it was a lot of disease treatment. At Fort Sam Houston—San Antonio, Texas has a really high volume of military retirees. There are several bases there, so it's good shopping for them, PX, and, you know, retirees like warm weather. So there're Air Force bases there as well as Army bases. So you saw a lot of elderly diseased eyes, which is interesting to me. And I liked it. I really did. Colonel Glenesk was in charge of the externship sites there, and a really good instructor, a really neat man. Excellent in the military as far as fitness, sharp [as] a whip, and really pleasant. So my initial experience brought me right in a way that I was starting to like the military, actually, at that point. And I continued to.

DePue: I want you to tell us, then, about your basic training, your Basic Officer Training experience, because you approached it quite differently than most people going into the military. So tell us about it.

Blomberg: So it was at Fort Sam Houston. They have a camp called Camp Bullis, which is where they do their basic, and this is all the military medical, or at least Army medical training Officer Basic Courses are done there, Camp Bullis. Fairly remote, kind of a deserty-type setting. We were quite a mix of people. People like myself that had absolutely no military experience at all. We had a West Point graduate who I became close friends with - Eli Lazquo, and he was going in to be a medical specialist, which means that he would be kind of in charge of medical platoons, you know, and very much a gung-ho military person, having been through West Point. He probably will be a general someday. He's a very, very remarkable individual. So we had people like that. We had Army Rangers that had been enlisted and then went green to gold, which means they went from enlisted to officer, and they were going in the medical side. So we had people that knew Army stuff as well as anybody, and then we had people that knew zippo [zip] about even handling a weapon or saluting. So it was quite a mix of individuals, but somehow it all came together where we forged some pretty good friendships.

They would separate all the people coming in by where they were going to. So everybody who was going to go to Fort Campbell formed their own squad at the Officer Basic Course. I remember every single one of those people in that squad—it was probably about twenty of us or so. We did night land navigation where you'd follow a compass and you had to go through the forested area and get to the right spots. We did, of course, the obstacle courses and firing nine-millimeters and M4s, and PT training, and that was all just brand-new. I did some Boy Scout-y type things with our church growing up, and of course the canoeing, and I was always fairly physically fit and never shied away from effort and pain or dirt or things like that, so I took to it pretty well, and I really liked a lot of that stuff. From the Army standpoint, I could do that stuff with pleasure, the whole rugged weapons and outdoor things and all that. That would be a joy to me. But for a lot of the individuals there—there was one nurse that it was not her thing at all. But we had fun. So that was probably about a month or so of that type of thing, and then there was a lot of paperwork that learning—you got tested on military protocol, military history, and all of the different things that go into rules and regulations of actually serving. You had to get it loaded up really quickly. So anyway, the Officer Basic Course was a total of three months, and…

DePue: That first day and the first few weeks, did they treat you all like ladies and gentlemen, or was this—how close was it to the standard mode that most of us have in our mind of the drill sergeant standing in your face screaming at you and calling you some kind of an idiotic name?

Blomberg: It was more of that than any of us were accustomed to but less of it than anyone else has to go through, I would say. (laughs) So looking back, they treated us with kid gloves, I'm sure. You know, and we had a lieutenant colonel. So if you came in with a lot of experience as a nurse or a doctor, they would credit that towards your rank. So we had an individual that came in as a lieutenant colonel, I believe. I know the nurse, she came in as a major. So we outranked pretty much everyone that was working with us, and yet there still was some of that, where, you know, it was during this period of time, your rank doesn't matter; we're in charge of you type stuff. So, you know, you would have to drop and do push-ups, and you'd do some of that, but the yelling was never—maybe it was kind of halfway with a grin at the same time. (laughter)

DePue: Did you sleep in open barracks, or did you have separate rooms?

Blomberg: Open barracks, yeah. Well, okay, it was a mix. Camp Bullis was open tent, I guess I should say. No air conditioning. I remember that really well. In the middle of summer in San Antonio, air conditioning wasn't working in that… But actually, when we went back to Fort Sam Houston, it was barracks which were closed, each separate room. That probably was a lot better than most of the other soldiers had, too.

DePue: Weapons training?

Blomberg: Weapons training. You had the tear gas chamber we went through, the confidence chamber, they call it. We had weapons training, take your weapon apart, clean it, all that.

DePue: M16s?

Blomberg: M4, which is an M16 that has a compressible butt, so it's the same thing as an M16, and nine-millimeter both. Yeah, and the PT [physical training] was probably the most eye-opening for a lot of the soldiers in that who had not kept themselves fit, because by the end of it, you had to pass your PT test. And so you're talking within three months, some of them have to go from being unfit completely to passing a military PT test.

DePue: One of the issues for a lot of soldiers is also meeting weight requirements. Was that an issue for some?

Blomberg: That was an issue for some, yeah. I've always worked out somewhat, and I'd always like to work out more, but it's always been part of what I do, so it wasn't—the running, I did not like to run. My knees have never really held up well, although lately I've somehow gotten back into it with better running shoes. (laughs) But up until that point I had not been a runner at all, so that was sort of the main difference. But it wasn't difficult to pass for me, the physical fitness test.

DePue: You've talked about a lot of the different things - the classes, the training, that the Army was putting you through to get you acclimated to being in the military. I'm not sure how I want to phrase this. But you're in the medical profession, and there's ethics, there's a code of conduct, there's expectations of what it means to be a physician, and also there is that same set of ethical code and traditions that goes along with being a military officer. Did you have some training in that? Did you begin—

Blomberg: Yes.

DePue: —as a group to wrestle with the ethical issues?

Blomberg: We definitely did, and that was even some of the classes that we took were specific scenarios, and there isn't always perfect answers to some of those questions. It was pretty well instilled in us, though, at that point, that you are a soldier first, and a doctor is what your job is within the military, but you're a soldier, and as a soldier, you will uphold the Constitution and you will support the president and your superiors. So that was the priority. But obviously there are gray areas. What if your superiors are asking you to do something that's contrary to your optometric [training], which, you know, is part of the Hippocratic Oath, do-no-harm type of stuff? So yeah, we did have to wrestle with some of those questions. And, you know, I think the military handles that pretty well as far as not being heavy-handed on… You know, our military, even though it's very much top-down hierarchy, each soldier is very much encouraged to be a thinker and thinking on their feet to do the right thing at that instant rather than, What command did I have? If there're gray areas, you're really trained to think rather than just do. So yeah.

DePue: Coming out of the basic training, then, had you rethought your decision to go into the military?

Blomberg: Too late. (laughter) No, but I knew when I got there where I was assigned, which was Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and I knew that at Fort Campbell was the 101st Airborne. So my luck of the draw is good and bad. Fort Campbell is not a bad part of the country. It's a pretty area, and it was from Decatur, from where my wife's family was, about six-hour drive, and probably the next closest would have been Fort Leonard Wood, which was not such a nice, beautiful area, or I guess maybe not—the city there wasn't anything to be…

DePue: Well, Fort Knox, Kentucky, as well.

Blomberg: Fort Knox, Kentucky. Yeah, there's a few that would be as close, but none much closer, and none really better as far as a city. Because we were close to Nashville, and it's a nice area. So I guess I felt like I got an okay draw, but I

also knew that it was a fairly active division. The 101st had enough reputation that I was aware of that.

DePue: Did that give you cause to think back to that recruiter who was telling you what kind of a career you're going to have?

Blomberg: (laughs) Well, yeah. But still, the military wasn't too many places, so I thought, Three years, I can make it. And it's probably going to just be three years, do my time at Fort Campbell, be with a bunch of hooah soldiers that are crazy, and I'll do my thing and we'll be done and I'll have my debts paid. So yeah.

DePue: At that point in life, you're going with the flow, it sounds like.

Blomberg: Sure. Yeah, you know, at that point—once I made the decision to join the Army, a lot of steps had been dictated for me the next several years as far as where I'd go and what I was going to do. But yeah. And a lot of our life was really wrapped up in our child. Fortunately he was great as a traveler, a very contented baby, one of the easiest kids to raise. He was just a contented kid for the most part.

DePue: How much choice did you have in picking Fort Campbell and/or the 101st?

Blomberg: Didn't. Those things were assigned. They did ask—I think all of us gave a preference on, Is there a certain region of the country you would like, those type of things, but it really comes down to the needs of the Army. So it was not very much of our input on any of that.

DePue: Okay. Tell us a little bit about the 101st Airborne Division, because I believe at that time it was still being referred to as the 101st Airborne, and then under parentheses behind that was Air Assault, right?

Blomberg: Very good, yes. Yeah. And I think that's still the case, I believe. I was not assigned to the 101st Airborne, I was assigned to the hospital at Fort Campbell at first. They had a division optometrist, Bob Jarrell, and he was a couple years older than me. He was the 101st Division optometrist. And then I was assigned to the hospital. So he was treating mostly soldiers at that point, getting them their BCGs ["Birth Control Glasses"]. They started Frame of Choice around that time, which is where they could pick their style of glasses, there's Special Forces and Special Ops—there's a lot of that at Fort Campbell, and you could fit them with contact lenses, so he did that.

Then I worked at a clinic which was attached to the hospital—not location-wise, but from [a] logistical standpoint, as far as control, it was part of the hospital, and [I] saw patients, both soldiers and non-soldiers there. I acted—even though I put on a uniform and everyday walked in and all that, I acted like I do today. I went into work, saw patients, and went home. PT was

on my own, I just had to pass a physical fitness test, oh, I think every…between four and six months, I'm not sure how often, and a weight test and urine test and some of those basic ones, to make sure I was within their standards. [I] did not really have any kind of assemblies or formations and all those other things. I did get rated by the hospital's administrative officers as, How are you doing? But it was always pretty much working as an optometrist for that first nine months or so I was there. Maybe not even quite that much, maybe six months. (laughs) It was fine. I guess that was what I envisioned all three years were going to be like for me.

Midway through I guess it would have been probably around December or January, somewhere in that timeframe, of 2001, Bob Jarrell approached me and said, "They would like us to switch jobs, and the reason for that is if you and I, who both have a house, want to stay at the same base longer, we can't stay at our same job for more than three years." He said, "I don't think you're going to be able to stay at your job"—and this was true—"I don't think you're going to be able to stay at your job for the entire three years as the hospital optometrist, and I'm definitely not." He needed to move on fairly soon, within the next year, I think. The military doesn't like you at the same job too long. So he said, "If you're interested, we can work this out where if I tell the staff and my commanding officers and the hospital administration that we'll swap, you can put on the Screaming Eagle patch, I'll be attached to the hospital, and we'll not have to move our houses and our families and all that." Okay, that sounds good. Then I'm assured I won't have to move during my three-year active duty commitment. I'll stay with the 101st, put on the eagle.

DePue: And so this occurred…?

Blomberg: This would have been early on in 2001. It would have been December of 2000, January of 2001, when we had that conversation. And that was fine. I said, "We can do that," you know. I hadn't completely given up the idea of even staying in the military, so having 101st experience was really good. If you're going to stay in long-term, that's something you could never lose, and it's good. We had an agreement that, Okay, we'll go ahead and do this swap. Well, it wasn't a lot later than that when the 101st got orders to go to Kosovo for a six-month tour. And Kosovo—it was a peacekeeping mission, and NATO had been there for I think, a few years already up until that point. So it was an established mission, and I'm just going to go and be there for a while. Well, the week I found out that the 101st was going there, we'd already agreed that we'll do the swap. It was looking like it was going to be me for the whole six months. Oh, that's not that cool. That week I found out that Kim's expecting our second child, which should be arriving August of 2001. So that was going to be right in the middle of the whole Kosovo thing. So now things are looking down on the military at that point. (DePue laughs) Like, oh, this isn't going quite so hot.

It was not anything that Dr. Jarrell contrived; it all kind of came together in the wrong way schedule-wise for me, but he was a wonderful man, and he still is. So anyway, he was very good about it. He said, "You know what? I'm still 101st Division. You got your orders to switch, but because of our switchover, we can have two division optometrists, and I'd like to go too. Why not just go for a few months, and we'll take the six-month tour, one of us do four months, the other one do four months or so, three and a half months, and we'll have a month overlap in the middle to make sure the other one's up to speed, and go home." And he said, "We can do that. What are a few months over there?" And I knew I was having a baby, and I told him, and he said, "Well, okay, so would you prefer the first half or the second half, then?" And I said, "Well…" The first half would have taken me up through August, looking right about close to our due date, and the second half would be leaving right before our baby would have came. So I said I'd rather do the first half, and that way if I do miss the birth, at least I'll be coming home shortly thereafter. And so that's what we did.

DePue: Was there any expectation that now that you're a divisional officer you have to get some training, some of the military training?

Blomberg: Mm-hmm. Yes, it all changes at that point. You're part of the 101st, so you've got to do PT with the unit and you've got to—if they call you in for formations, you're in. They'd do random things. You know the 101st; they'll do random things, just show up with all your battle rattle ready to go just to see if you were ready to do it. That was an eye-opener for me, probably as much of an eye-opener as being in the military in the first place.

DePue: Well, there may be somebody in the military who doesn't have a clue what you're talking about with "battle rattle"?

Blomberg: (laughs) The helmets, the flak jackets, or whatever those things that you have.

DePue: **web gear**?

Blomberg: Yeah, the **web gear**, all that stuff. Yeah, I remember Bob Jarrell walking me to the headquarters of the 801st. The 801st Main Support Battalion is a battalion attachment to the 101st Airborne, and they support; vehicle maintenance and medical, and it's a support, logistics for getting supplies. It's a support attachment to the 101st to make sure all the three brigades are ready for the battle or taken care of after the battle. I can remember walking over to the 801st to get introduced to the lieutenant colonel there, and Bob Jarrell walked me over, and we were kind of doing all the introductions and everything. Well, anyway, on the way over there, I got saluted by one of the enlisted, and he was a first sergeant, which first sergeants take things really seriously on military protocol and all that. And, you know, Air Assault, very crisp and sharp salute. Being at the hospital and the clinic, you walk in and

out, and you're with a group of people who are halfway soldiers. (laughter) So I responded with an "Air Assault," and it was not to his standard, so he called me on it and said, "What kind of salute is that?" Being called out by someone that you outrank, it's like a kid correcting you. Anyway, so he proceeded to teach me again, being a captain, how to salute properly. In his mind, a captain has been active duty for at least probably four years, and here's this captain who doesn't know how to salute right. I never saluted Air Assault before because I just had got the patch on just now, and you don't salute Air Assault if you're not 101st. So the whole thing was like it was my first time, and it was not a good experience, but (laughs) I learned they take it seriously, and I did rise to the standard, I think, or at least rise to the occasion that they don't accept less than proper military bearing on anything. And your uniform will be crisp. Over at the hospital, if it looks like you're wearing pajamas, it's fine; it's not okay if you're in the 101st. So a lot changed at that point, (laughs) what it was like.

DePue: Well, you anticipated my questions about your experience in dealing with the new hooah mentality that is the 101st Airborne.

Blomberg: Very hooah, yeah.

DePue: Did you have to go to either Airborne or Air Assault School?

Blomberg: I did. I went to Air Assault School, and it would have been about the month I got back from Kosovo, so right afterward I went to Air Assault School.

DePue: Okay, so we're a little ahead of the game.

Blomberg: Yeah, but I did do that, and that's the closest I ever came to what you would think of boot camp being like. You know, if you watched *Full Metal Jacket*, that was probably the closest I came to experiencing that type of humiliation. (laughter)

DePue: Okay. I know you've got a clock here that's working against us, since you are a practicing optometrist. How close are we to the time you need to…?

Blomberg: Yeah, we probably have about another ten minutes, but I can come back as many times as we need.

DePue: Well, should we get you into Kosovo, then?

Blomberg: Sure, if you want to start it out, we can. I don't know if we'll get all the way through it or not.

DePue: I don't think that we will; that's why I'm wondering if this might be a good time just to go ahead and break and then treat that as a separate subject the next time we get together.

Blomberg: Yeah, that'd be fine. I certainly am willing to come back anytime.

DePue: So let's finish with this. Now, what does Kimberly think about all these changes in your life?

Blomberg: Are you talking about the point that we were at?

DePue: Yes.

Blomberg: Okay. Things are going poorly for her and I from the standpoint of the recruiter's comments and what we thought we were getting into, no deployments, and being—we're both planners, I would say, and our plan seemed to be becoming unraveled. She was not excited about any of these things, and being pregnant, with a young child, was just one more reason that maybe… You know, and I'm gone a lot more because of being in the 101st. I had to leave—we went to Fort Polk—was it Fort Polk, Louisiana?

DePue: Yes.

Blomberg: JRTC [Joint Readiness Training Center] is what they call it, and you had to do joint readiness training before Kosovo, and they have a kind of whole area set up down there. At that point they set it up like Kosovo, so they had kind of some cities, like mini cities, like they pretended, and you had to do kind of like crowd control and those types of things. So I was gone for I think it was probably a week or two. And that was in anticipation of leaving. Things that we would think now were not probably a big deal at that point seemed to keep accumulating. She's always been really good and supportive-wise and taking things in stride, but yeah, it wasn't going quite as well as we had hoped.

DePue: There was a lot to take in stride all of a sudden.

Blomberg: It kept accumulating, yeah. Yeah. And I guess, maybe just leading up to the Kosovo thing, you know, leave it off here, but you ask about her. So she was pregnant, and by the time I left, I guess it would have been March—I forgot here.

DePue: Yeah, that's what you had mentioned before, March through July.

Blomberg: Anyway, at that time, so she's approximately six months along, and I had gotten called in—you know, the whole thing was a very scheduled deployment, knew the dates and everything, and the whole unit is going together, we're going with the 502 Brigade, which is one of the three brigades

in the 101st, and so a big group of people all going together. Well, she went into pre-term contractions and labor, and they brought her into the hospital. This is the night that I'm to leave the next day, and they brought her into the hospital, and I went in with her and everything, and she was having contractions, so they did medicate her and stop all that from happening so she doesn't have the baby too early, because it wasn't ready. And remember we got a baby, too—I guess he was an eighteen-month-old at that point, or less. The doctor put her on bed rest until the baby comes—and it was strict bed rest; you can't get up for the next three months, which coincided with when I would be gone, and leaving the next day. It was not considered enough reason for me to not get on the plane the next morning from those that decide. So that's when I left for Kosovo, when my wife was in the hospital. But she was stable in the hospital, but I knew it was not going to be a good following three months.

DePue: Who was going to take care of the son, then?

Blomberg: Ended up that she worked it out with her cousin, coming to spend the summer with her when she finished the school year, who was in high school. So she came, which was good. "If the military wanted you to have a family, they would have issued you one." (laughter) That was the quote I heard several times. (laughs)

DePue: Well, that's quite an awakening, isn't it?

Blomberg: It was quite a switch from what I was expecting, yeah.

DePue: That's probably a good place to end this conversation, and we can pick up with your actual deployment to Kosovo, then.

Blomberg: Okay.

DePue: Thank you very much, Scott.

Blomberg: My pleasure. Thank you.

(end of interview #1- continues #2)

Interview with Scott Blomberg
VRT-A-L-2011-003.02
Interview # 2: January 31, 2011
Interviewer: Mark DePue

A Note to the Reader

This transcript is based on an interview recorded by the ALPL Oral History Program. Readers are reminded that the interview of record is the original video or audio file, and are encouraged to listen to portions of the original recording to get a better sense of the interviewee's personality and state of mind. The interview has been transcribed in near-verbatim format, then edited for clarity and readability, and reviewed by the interviewee. For many interviews, the ALPL Oral History Program retains substantial files with further information about the interviewee and the interview itself. Please contact us for information about accessing these materials.

DePue: Today is Monday, January 31, 2011. My name is Mark DePue, the director of oral history with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I've got my second session with Scott Blomberg. Good morning, Scott.

Blomberg: Good morning, Mark. How are you?

DePue: Good. As we recall, and if you listen to the first session, the interview was all about Scott's involvement with what we would call the War on Terror. We'd just got done with the point of some interesting circumstances, as you're about ready to head out to Kosovo with a brigade from the 101st Infantry Division. The circumstances that you talked about is your wife was pregnant and she started to have some complications, and she was placed on bed rest. How many months left in the pregnancy?

Blomberg: So this was her second child, and she was twenty-seven weeks along, and the doctor wanted to make sure she made it to thirty-four weeks, I believe, between thirty-four and thirty-six, somewhere in there, before she would lift the restrictions. So I think once she got to thirty-four, a lot of the restrictions were less severe, less strict. So it was about seven weeks she had to go with bed rest while I was gone. Just to clarify, I had talked to her about that in between these two interviews to try to make sure I remember this all accurately. There's apparently a difference between pre-term contractions and pre-term labor, and when I was looking through my journals, too, she did not dilate, so it was considered pre-term contractions. But anyway, either way, she

was on bed rest while I was gone. She was not yet in what they call labor, though that was the concern, was that you didn't want her to go early. So actually when that all happened was the night that I was leaving for Kosovo with our unit. I went from the hospital where she was at, and they had given her some medication to stop the contractions, but she was still there, and her mother was in town with our son at home. So I went straight from the base hospital to where my unit was waiting in kind of a holding area. We didn't both have cell phones, and I couldn't have brought a cell phone with me anyway, so trying to get the communication on how things were going and all that was—it was just tense. And she was mad at the Army at that point because it was not—I think I mentioned to you—that was not considered enough reason for me not to leave with my unit that next morning.

DePue: She didn't understand that that wasn't enough reason?

Blomberg: She felt that should be enough reason for me [to stay]. And there are—they have specific reasons that they would bring someone back from a deployment for family emergencies or death in the family, things like that, but if I remember, I think pre-term labor might have been enough to have pulled me back. But anyway, (laughs) from their qualifications, it was not enough reason for me not to leave the next day.

DePue: How many other optometrists were assigned to the brigade that was deploying?

Blomberg: I was the only one.

DePue: If you had been let back, who would have gone in your stead?

Blomberg: I don't know the answer to that. Probably the other optometrist that took the second half of the rotation would have done it, I imagine.

DePue: Okay. Was that one of the reasons they were less willing to make some accommodations for you?

Blomberg: Maybe. I don't really see the inside details of how those decisions are made, but I think if you have a position that is less easily replaced, it probably does impact those decisions. I really don't know for sure.

DePue: Putting all of those complications aside, how did you personally feel about the validity of the mission?

Blomberg: You know, I learned more about Kosovo when I got there. It's kind of embarrassing to say, but it wasn't the most relevant thing to me going into it on why we were going or if this was a worthwhile place for American soldiers to even be. So there definitely is some truth to the [phrase], you know, "Ours

is not to question why; ours is just to do or die." And it wasn't the "do or die" thing, but it was, Here's your job, and you're going to do it, so it wasn't really any value in trying to determine, Is this a wise use of American resources or not, for us to be in Kosovo. So that was not part of our thinking. Now, when I was over there as well as over in Iraq, you have a lot more time away from family and away from your daily—at least for me, a lot less time with my daily requirements that I got to do this around the house or I've got to spend—you know, always spending time with the kids or my wife and different entertainment things, and so you have a lot more time on deployments to start thinking more the philosophical questions of, What's the point of being here? (laughs) So, I mean, I knew the geography of where I was going, I knew the background. They had given us some briefings on the different people groups, languages, and beyond that—and a little bit of the background of why it had gotten to the point where it was with Americans and NATO needing to be there.

DePue: Can you go into some of that, a little bit of background, history of it?

Blomberg: Yeah. So my understanding of it—with Kosovo, these conflicts ran really deep. They go back, you know, in the Turkish Empire, the Ottomans, and there's been this area close to Macedonia that's in disputed territory; Albania felt that it's part of their region and Serbia felt it was part of theirs, and neither side is willing to accept the other one being on their turf. There's definitely a religious component to it as well. Anyway, what I understood of it was that it had gotten to the point where the Serbians under Slobodan Milošević had kind of been the ruling party and were trying to maybe express their control over the Albanians, who outnumbered them. And the Albanians in turn were beginning to take over in government by—after Milosevic had been taken out, you know, NATO had come in, and I think Clinton had authorized bombing to try to stop—

DePue: Yeah, that was in March through June of 1991, the U.N. bombing of Serbia.

Blomberg: Right. So the goal was to try to make it more of a democratic society with elections, and this would really turn the tide to the Albanian side, because they outnumbered them I think it was like eight or nine to one.

DePue: Okay, you're talking about Albanians within Kosovo.

Blomberg: Right. There's the country Albania, but then there's the people group Albanians who are in Kosovo, and then the same thing with Serbia and Serbians. Well, to the south would be Albania and to the north would be Serbia. All this was a breakout from the Czech Republic, so Serbia's up on the top and Albania down here. Well, that region of Kosovo was definitely a disputed area.

DePue: You said it was a breakout of the Czech Republic. You mean Yugoslavia?

Blomberg: Yugoslavia. I'm sorry. Yeah, Yugoslavia. So anyway, they're moving towards trying to have general elections and making a government, and it was really tense because the Serbians felt that they were going to be—you know, because they're such a minority—that they were really going to be mistreated by whatever government took the place of Milosevic. And that's probably true. When I was there, I saw a lot of hatred from the people that lived there for each other.

DePue: In terms of how you guys were prepared—and this is a peculiar question—and your assumptions, who were the good guys and who were the bad guys?

Blomberg: You know, the natural bent that I have would be—and I really couldn't in this case, but if I were to say what my initial thought was, is that the Christian side would be the good side and the Muslim side would be the bad side, just from my own background and thinking. So the Albanians would be the Muslims and the Serbians would be the Christians.

DePue: Orthodox Christians.

Blomberg: Orthodox Christians, yeah. Eastern Orthodox, right, but Christian nonetheless. Yes. Very different—well, somewhat different from our own form of Christianity, although it's a lot of similarities.

DePue: Are you saying that because of your strong Christian faith at the time or because that's what the—

Blomberg: I think Americans in general would probably more tend to side with the Christian—if there's two sides, they would tend to side more with the Christian side than Muslim side. But the Muslims in Albania and Kosovo from all of my experience, which is fairly limited, were not the same type of militant terrorists that we think of like, aggressive—like Bin Laden's group. So it didn't really hold true that—I think both sides were just opposed to each other but neither side was necessarily into terrorism or using civilians as targets and those type of things. So, I don't really have a side on this one. (laughs)

DePue: Okay. And would that be the official Army position on it as well?

Blomberg: Definitely the official Army position. The Army, in their briefings, were very to the point of extreme in that whatever your religious belief is, don't let that play into your feelings on this one because this is not about religion. I think maybe for that reason, that they want to make sure that the soldiers that are, if anything, more likely to be Christian than Muslim, that they don't take sides.

DePue: Well, if it wasn't about religion, what did they tell you it was about?

Blomberg: Territory. And from all I know, I think that's true.

DePue: Yeah, this had been disputed territory—the Balkans had been fought over since the beginning of time, certainly since the rise of the Ottoman Empire and going back and forth, but even much deeper roots than that. So you have this ugly patchwork of different ethnic groups, different religions, different countries, and lots of traditions of atrocities that go back for centuries as well and especially got nasty during the First World War and into the Second World War when Tito created this nation out of this disparate group of ethnic groups and religions called Yugoslavia. But that all came unraveled about ten years before you got there, I think.

Blomberg: Right. So, Russia—or the USSR—had, I think, just kind of kept those battles within their Eastern Bloc countries at bay because of their control. Once the Eastern European countries broke free from the Soviet Union, then some of those tribal disputes that had been simmering beneath the surface, at that point, the central government wasn't able to keep these tribes from conflict. I think more than likely, whenever the U.N. would leave, probably this would all flare up again. I don't know that there is enough time for the U.N. to actually accomplish getting them to like each other, so it seems pretty open-ended.

DePue: It's significant that you mentioned U.N. Was the United States—did you understand you're part of a U.N. peacekeeping mission?

Blomberg: Yes. There's a very important badge that we got when we got to Macedonia. We flew into the city of Scopje Macedonia. There's a camp called Camp Able Sentry [in Macedonia] where they would receive you. And anyway, the second–most important thing that you held as far as sensitive items, the first would be your weapon—you know, armed weapon—but the second thing would be this badge. It was a KFOR badge, which is a Kosovo Force badge that every country that had soldiers there all had these badges—it was like a passport in Kosovo, that you could go to any of the regions in Kosovo. Each region was controlled by a certain country or group of countries. So we were in the American region of Kosovo. There was a Soviet region—a Russian region—there was a French area, British, and that might have been it. There were several other different countries that were represented within those. So anyway, we could travel with that badge to the various regions, and it was understood that the overall mission of the entire thing was under U.N. control, not American.

DePue: I've mentioned already when the bombing occurred; that's March through June of 1991—1999. Right after that, U.N. forces began to enter Kosovo, and by August 2000—this is almost a year later—101st Airborne sent its first

deployment. What was your expectations about how much combat you were likely to see?

Blomberg: I didn't think I was going to see any. When we did our training at Fort Polk, the JRTC kind of prep training ahead of time, it was all about crowd control and, if a mob would organize in a certain area, how to maintain peace. Using force would be the last option, and even with force, it was really drilled into us that it was non-deadly force that we should use if at all possible. And it was basically presented that you are not the enemy or the target; both sides in this dispute liked America being there because it was dangerous without—or they liked the U.N. being there because it was dangerous without that central control. It was not something I was expecting to see any kind of danger or—personal danger. Now, it was pretty clear that these people may harm each other.

DePue: What part of Kosovo did the United States control?

Blomberg: The southeast area. So our camp was called Camp Bondsteel, and I think the city it was closest to was Gnjilane, and it went up almost to Pristina.

DePue: But not including Pristina.

Blomberg: But not including Pristina. That's true.

DePue: What was the name of the town, again?

Blomberg: Gnjilane, I believe, was the closest city to where we were. Our camp was called Camp Bondsteel.

DePue: G-n-j-i-l?

Blomberg: Yeah. We pronounced it jee-LAN.

DePue: What was the language there?

Blomberg: (laughs) You have to ask me that, huh? I think it was Serbian, but I can't really say for sure. I should know better than that. I should have studied this better. (laughs)

DePue: Well, that's okay. There's no wrong answers when you're answering this stuff. So did you get any kind of language training at all going in?

Blomberg: None, none at all.

DePue: I want you to tell us, then, about your deployment overseas and arrival in [the] country in as much detail as you can recall, especially your first impressions of getting to Kosovo.

Blomberg: Okay. So we flew into Macedonia, Camp Able Sentry, and this was about—

DePue: Direct military flight from the U.S.?

Blomberg: No, it was a surprise. They kind of prepared us for that it would be in a military flight, sitting on kind of strapped seats and all that, and out on the runway was a nice 747 with, you know, plush seats just like in a civilian plane, that they chartered, and they had movies and all that. That probably was a pretty good picture of how things went. It was much more "cush" than what you would expect a deployment to be. There was a couple points. So when I got to Macedonia, you know, they gave us our ammo. We had our weapons already, but they gave us our ammo at that point. We took a bus, and it was about a four- or five-hour bus ride, to get to Camp Bondsteel from there as a group, and that was probably the least pleasant part, those rough roads and all that. We got to Camp Bondsteel, and there had already been Americans there. They have an established camp, these SEA Huts, I think Southeast Asia is the name of these—S-E-A Huts that you stay in, which were built by Brown & Root. You know, it's a civilian company that built these buildings that you'd sleep in, like barracks, almost. The hospital there at Camp Bondsteel is a tent hospital, but you'd almost consider it a permanent structure. You've got heating, air conditioning. These aren't tents that are going to be taken down regularly. And the optometry tent was part of that. So that was already all there. The equipment was permanent to the location, so they have [an] optometry clinic already set up, and then the previous rotation of soldiers—I think they were from Fort Stewart, but I'm not sure—but anyway, they had a group of soldiers that then were leaving within the next couple weeks, and we would just take their spots.

So there was an optometrist there that—they call this right seat ride, left seat ride, which is where you take one week and basically follow them in all the things that they do. And for me, the main thing was learning the MEDEVAC routines and the emergency procedures for when something happens to make sure that all the protocols are followed right. Right-seat ride is when he's doing it for a week and I'm observing; left-seat ride is where we switch, where I'm the doc in charge and he's observing and kind of giving some advice. And that's his last week there, and then he's one his way out. So they have a little overlap to make sure that the transition goes smooth. And he was really nice. It was a really good transition.

Besides learning the emergency procedures, the other thing that was unique to that trip would be the Opt CAPs. They had Med CAPs and Opt CAPS, opt being optometry, med being medical, and C-A-P would be Civilian Assistance Program. And that was probably, from my standpoint, the main purpose besides seeing soldiers, was going on these civilian assistance trips. It

was kind of like what you'd consider a short-term mission trip almost being, except [it was] part of the military. We'd go and see people. Anyway, we did one of those together, and there's a lot of paperwork and a lot of procedures that have to be followed for safety and all that as well. But that was that initial couple weeks and it was really good. We had a really smooth transition. For being fairly fresh as a division soldier, the transition actually on that part was really well done, I think, so I jumped right in with both feet running, I guess.

DePue: What was your initial impression of the countryside, what you could assess out of the economy, and the people.

Blomberg: It's beautiful. It's really a pretty country, and where we were was close to some mountains, so you could see Big Duke, a mountain that's really close by, you could see [it] from Camp Bondsteel. And it's gorgeous. The people look much like we do, you know, fair skinned—well, maybe a little bit more, a little bit darker, but, I mean, very, very—like their ladies were very pretty, their men too. They're very nice, friendly people.

DePue: Are you talking about the Albanians or the Serbians or—

Blomberg: You couldn't tell the difference by looking at them. They all looked the same. And they couldn't tell each other apart until they asked their names, and then they would know when you heard the last name, or even the first name. I think they would know, That's a Serbian name, or, That's an Albanian name. And then the—it's actually interesting. We'd go to villages for these Opt CAPs and we would bring a translator, and we would intentionally try to bring a translator from the opposite people group to interact with the villagers that we were serving, just to have some kind of positive interaction between an Albanian and a Serbian, however we could accomplish that. So, that was one of the things that we did. Well, you could see it in their faces when they would start talking to the person and it'd be all good, and [then] find out that they are not of the same group. Either side, when they'd find out the translator was from the opposite side, they'd get more icy, and you could sense it pretty quickly. But that's how they found out, was [from] the names. Anyway, the people very much looked like us except their teeth—(laughs) I do remember their teeth were all messed up. They don't apparently have good dental care. Other than that, real nice people.

I should mention, too, the first two weeks we were there—I had brought Sergeant Priest. He was my NCOIC, non-commissioned officer in charge of our optom—

DePue: What was his rank?

Blomberg: He was an E5, so just Sergeant Priest, and Specialist Himes. She was the optical fabricator, the one who would make the glasses. Sergeant Priest would kind of run the clinic from the patient side - appointments, scheduling and pre-

testing, what you'd consider the office manager, and then I'd be the doctor, and then Specialist Himes was the maker of the glasses. Well, Sergeant Priest was—we'd only been there for a couple weeks—he was on the phone with his wife back home, and while he was talking to her on the phone—we had phones. It was really easy for us to call home and all that.

DePue: Cell phones?

Blomberg: No, not cell phones, but it was land lines at the tents. Well, anyway, he was talking to Daisy, and she's driving home, and she said, "The road is blocked off." So he was talking to her while it's happening and all this. Well, she says, "There's a fire on our road." Turns out she realized it was their house [that] was on fire while he's talking to her on the phone, and so he's hearing all this. So that was considered enough reason to send someone home. He had only been there for a couple weeks. They lost everything in the fire, although no one got hurt. She was out with the kids and driving home, came home to that. Fort Campbell was really good about supporting them. They did not have renter's insurance, which was not smart, but they had a lot of support from the unit. There was some fundraiser efforts and all that. He stayed home for I think it was about three weeks or so and came back in the midst of all that. So that was really early on, and I wasn't sure if he was going to come back or not. I was only going to be there a little over three months myself, so I was kind of hoping that he didn't, because I knew he had a lot going on at home and I figured it'd probably be quicker to get a replacement than to have him come back. But they did, they sent him back. And that was fine; he did a great job when he came back.

So there was a good part, it was just myself and Specialist Himes doing the Opt CAP missions. Although whenever you'd go out on an Opt CAP you'd bring a whole group of people. You'd have some military police come; you'd have anybody you could round up, just bodies to help [with] signing in people for getting the glasses and all those things. So we would be the two main ones or the three main ones when he was with us, but then we had a lot of soldiers that would always want to come just because it was their chance to get off the base, see the countryside, and interact with the people as well for a reason.

DePue: I'd always heard that Albania, which is just across the border, was the poorest European country during this timeframe. Was Kosovo a really impoverished area as well?

Blomberg: Yes. You forgot about that; I forgot to answer. But yeah. It was destitute. There was really—nobody seemed to be working. (laughs) And the houses—you'd go into the cities. It amazes me that people can make it without seeming to have any kind of economy, but there really wasn't a whole lot.

DePue: What was the economy based on?

Blomberg: You know, there certainly was agriculture happening, so that probably was a big part of it. You did see some shepherds and those type of things, I guess. I don't know. I mean, I remember driving through the city and it seemed like everyone was just kind of outside their house, just kind of looking at us go by, and it seems like they ought to be working, but… Now, in one of our trips that we went out to one of the areas, we did go to a sugar plant, so there was a factory where they made sugar.

DePue: Sugar beet sugar, I'm sure.

Blomberg: I'm sure. There was some factories, but not a lot. It was a really pretty country, but yeah, it was pretty destitute, definitely [as] Third World as they come.

DePue: You got into it a little bit, but I want to hear more about what a typical Opt CAP mission would be.

Blomberg: This was a lot of fun for me. I really enjoyed that part the most. You would plan it out ahead of time, and that would all have to be coordinated with our superiors—we would say, Here's the number that we want to do per week, which was usually three trips, I believe, right in that range, sometimes more, sometimes less. They'd have the Special Forces and all kinds of places where soldiers were going out, and they'd say, here's a school that we think would work well to do a mission at, or an orphanage, and that was usually the type of things. Or if there was like a small health clinic somewhere, we would maybe go there. Then they would tell the local establishment that on such-and-such a day, we're going to have an optometrist, a dentist, and a primary care doctor come. That was usually the combination, along with their staff. And so the actual logistics of it, a lot of it was set up by people above me as far as making the arrangements on the time and location. They would go ahead of time and make sure that the area was secure and safe. My part of it was to make sure I was stocked sufficiently with glasses and medications. And so we made a lot of purchases of glasses that, were just straight reading glasses, because that's a pretty straightforward thing to get people, but we also had a lot of donated glasses that, kind of like the Lions Club type deal, where they had already been sorted, and then we would measure the people at that location and try to match up the closest pair of glasses that we had that would fit them appropriately and adjust it to them and get it to them. We'd see usually between fifty and a hundred in a day. So, it was not doing full exams; it's pretty much measuring their glasses and looking at them. Most of them had an eye concern. To get in line to see us was [because] they weren't seeing something right.

DePue: There had to be a lot of people who already had glasses, though, weren't there?

Blomberg: Some of them, but not a lot. Not a lot. (laughs) There were a lot that needed them, but of the kids, for example—that was what we did the most, was going to the schools. Nobody had glasses that I saw, and a lot of them needed them, just like in America. So yeah, going to the schools. And there are those moments. I don't know if you remember the first time you put on glasses, but there were those moments of, like the first time that kids had seen the world in some ways, and I saw a lot of that. I think anyone that's been on a Third World medical mission trip, they've experienced those moments, like, Wow. As simple as it is to us, it probably changed that kid's life, or at least for a little while got them so they could see, you know. That's amazing to think that there are kids out there that just flat-out can't see, but glasses would do it for them. But there's a lot that fit that category.

DePue: Any other optometry-related issues that you encountered quite a bit?

Blomberg: Well, on my other days at Camp Bondsteel, I saw soldiers pretty much. I was the only optometrist in our region, the American region, so Camp Bondsteel was the main hospital. There were other camps in the American area but no other optometrists or eye doctors at all

DePue: So this brigade from the 101st is not the only American unit there.

Blomberg: I don't know the answer to that. The 101st, that 502, once they got there, they weren't all at Camp Bondsteel; they went to various places. And then there were several other countries represented in the American region, too. So I think they were the main brigade there, and I think they covered most of the American sector, but there were also others that were there. But I don't know if there were many other Americans in that area besides the 502.

DePue: Does that mean you saw some U.N. troops as well?

Blomberg: Yeah, that's what I was going to say. So, at the hospital, it was like a melting pot of different countries that were staffing the hospital, and it seemed like the medical part of it especially was very diverse in the countries represented there, which was really neat. We had UAE, which is the United Arab Emirates, we had British, and we had French. Those are the main ones I can think of. They were all part of the hospital and so interacted with each other. And they all spoke English, so English was the language, but you had walkie talkies talking to each other saying, I need you to show up here, there, whatever—you can tell by their speaking what country they're coming from but they're all speaking English pretty well.

I saw soldiers mostly. Pretty early on we had a U.N. police officer that was there in our region, and she had broken glass that had ruptured her eye. She had thrown away some glass and a shard from the throwing it away had shot up and penetrated her eye. To have a full thickness penetration is really

dangerous, and the cornea is really pretty solid, so it had to take quite a hit to get all the way through, but they—

DePue: So what portion of the eyeball did it hit?

Blomberg: That's the front surface, so you look at the dark part of your eye, there's actually a clear coating that goes over your iris, and that's called your cornea.

DePue: That's where it had penetrated?

Blomberg: It had penetrated all the way through, and it was leaking aqueous, which is kind of the water that fills the front of your eye. It was leaking out. So when they had gotten her to our hospital, we put dye in there and you can actually see the fluid leaking out of the wound, so you know it's a full-thickness wound, and the eye was filling with blood on the inside. It's just beyond my expertise or my training to fix that. It needed surgery, and I'm not an eye surgeon. So we patched her eye, we covered it up, put medication on it, antibiotics, and then just covered it, and then I went through the process of trying to get her to MEDEVAC. Landstuhl, Germany was where you would take MEDEVAC soldiers. I probably MEDEVACed five or six during those few months I was there, not a lot. Most things, you could handle, and very few that are emergencies. Well, anyway, she had bad luck, because that night the airbase in Skopje, Macedonia, was under mortar attack, so they had shut down all flights in and out of Skopje. They had no other means of getting her to Landstuhl, and they didn't know how long it was going to be shut down. This is one that you don't want to just sit on because if it gets infected in the inside, she loses her eye. Well, she had a PA Physician Assistant that kind of was her medical representative, so the U.N. Military—UNMIK, U.N. Mission in Kosovo is what she was part of, they had a PA that kind of represented them for their general medical care. Anyway, he came with her.

Well, I said that she needed surgery and we need to get her to a surgeon. The major from Britain that was in her hospital, said, "I was in Pristina and I met a Russian surgeon, an eye surgeon, that's in Pristina," and Pristina would be under the Russian control. And I said, "Well, that's great. If he's an eye surgeon, let's go, and I'll go with her." The PA said, "No, we don't want a Russian to take care of her." "Well," I said, "someone's got to, and it's not going to be—I'm not going to sew her eye up." So eventually he relented, and we got her to Pristina, and I went with her on that MEDEVAC flight, which was neat. So, I got to meet a Russian doctor, Dr. Dmitri was his name, and he actually teaches at a medical school in Leningrad, eye surgery, so he was a very qualified individual and a really nice guy. It was in the middle of the night, and he met us and just put a couple sutures on her cornea—this was no big deal to him. The eye was filling with blood, so he agreed we needed to get her on for further care, but for the emergency part, he got her sewed closed. You know, he was just so excited to have us come

there, an American bringing someone to him, and it was a really good experience.

A couple days later, maybe the next week, he shows up down in our sector at my clinic, unannounced. We didn't know he was coming. He came with his contingent of his staff and checked out our hospital and everything. He made a couple more trips down to see us from Pristina, spent a day seeing patients with me, and we just kind of interacted together. He brought some Russian uniforms to me and things like that, and I gave him American things that he was real excited about, military things, uniform-type stuff. He told me if I ever get to Leningrad I need to look him up, which I have not done. (laughs)

DePue: But you've thought about?

Blomberg: I think it would be great. He was an older guy. I don't know, he may be retired by now, but I'm sure he's still there. Really a friendly, neat guy. So yeah, that would be kind of neat to go there sometime. I'm sure he'd show me around. So we only probably saw each other a total of five times, I'd say, but we definitely struck up a friendship in that short period.

DePue: What was the original reluctance to go to a Russian doctor?

Blomberg: I think the PA felt that it would be substandard care, which is very ridiculous. This guy was top quality. And yet—I don't know if he was concerned about the language barrier or the actual quality, but I think he was concerned thinking that, you know, Russia is maybe in his mind more dirty [unsanitary] or something like that? I don't know, but he was very opposed to it. It was a wrong choice to not let her go, but he changed his mind.

DePue: Well, how old was the PA?

Blomberg: He was young, probably between twenty-five and thirty.

DePue: The only reason I ask is because, of course, the Soviet Union had been our traditional enemy for a long, long time, and this wasn't that many years beyond that.

Blomberg: Sure, and that may have played into it a little bit as well. But, you know, medical is so different. Around the world I don't think there's any doctor that's a doctor-soldier that has any qualms about treating someone of the other side medically and doing a good job of it.

DePue: For the local population, were there some other vision issues that they had?

Blomberg: Well, there was a lot. Just like anywhere you go, there're vision problems, so you'd see all the same things that we see in America. More untreated things.

Glaucoma is one that's really frustrating, because glaucoma requires ongoing care. And you'd see it a lot, and yet to give them the medicine to help lower their eye pressure is not very beneficial if they're not going to be able to continue to get it. So, that's a very frustrating one. It's kind of like blood pressure, high blood pressure, that if you knew, someone has high blood pressure and could have a heart attack if it's not maintained, but you only have a two-month supply of the medicine, it's harder to make that decision on what do you do if you don't think they're going to be able to keep getting it. And we're dealing with large numbers of people and logistics of…

One thing that I was—probably my best thing that I was able to do over there; it seemed like it was important, but looking back I think it was probably the best thing that happened during that time was in I think it was Štrpce— Štrpce is the city— I met another surgeon, eye surgeon. One of our Opt CAPs was at a health clinic in Štrpce, and it was set up just like a primary care clinic, so they didn't really have anything except like a chair to sit on, an examination chair, and they would use flashlights and stuff for looking in people's eyes, and it was very primitive. Well, one of the doctors there had lost his position—he had been teaching at a hospital in Pristina, the capital. And again, very qualified. His name started with an *M*. I think it was Mitrovic or something like that. I should remember that. But anyway, I found out that he was an eye surgeon that taught at a university hospital in Pristina. So again, a really intelligent man. And, you know, when we came in and we were doing all of our stuff, you're like a celebrity there. He came in, just observing and talking with him and all that, and I realize that I'm talking to basically a guy that's qualified as a university professor in eye surgery, very gifted, and he's got no tools in that clinic. It's like having Picasso without any paint.

So, I got all their information. When we went back, I talked with our superiors and the people who were in charge of logistics about seeing if we could get him equipment. With some grants, we were able to supply him with a slit lamp exam, the chair, all that goes into running just a basic clinic. You already have someone that's local, that understands the language and is trained, he just didn't have the resources to do his job. I know the money all went through and it was all approved. I never got to go back, because it would have happened after I left as far as getting all that to him. But the last I knew was that everything was going through for him getting equipment to actually have that place outfitted and being able to do his job. And the need is endless, so his number of patients would be unlimited.

DePue: Before it just didn't exist at all, or it got—

Blomberg: It was just a building. He was with a couple other doctors there, and it was just a building, and because of all the unrest and everything, he just had to leave his position in Pristina. So they just were at this place. You know, he could prescribe medicine and he could do some just rudimentary things, but any doctor is going to be fairly handcuffed if they don't have equipment to do their job right, and so that was his situation, which was—I'm sure there's a lot

of others like that around Third World countries; there's people that are able to serve the population; they just don't have the resources. And, you know, looking back, I wish we had been able to hook up with more like that. The Opt CAPs are good; they're more feel-good at that point in time because you're doing an immediate hand-out and, Here you go, here's the glasses that will help you, which is nice, but it doesn't compare with getting a doctor that actually lives there and is going to stay up and running to see patients himself.

DePue: Were you allowed to make prescriptions?

Blomberg: Yes. (laughs) We made glasses for soldiers, and yes, there were some times that we made glasses, in rare cases, for the locals, that we would get their measurements and we had nothing close to it, and we'd go back and make them glasses and have one or two convoys go out and deliver them to the right place. And that was under the radar. That was not approved for government to actually make, or at least for the military to make glasses for them.

DePue: You weren't supposed to be doing that?

Blomberg: Weren't supposed to be doing that. Using that equipment and all that was all—because you'd give them frames that would belong to, you know, the BCGs that would belong to the military. So they weren't okay with that, but—

DePue: Who's they? You mean the…?

Blomberg: "They" meaning the rules in place.

DePue: But you're there for humanitarian purposes.

Blomberg: Yeah. I think maybe it's a slippery slope, though. You know, when you start talking about using military resources to make something for a civilian, there's that risk of trades or various things that maybe could happen that are beyond the government's control. So, they were okay with us purchasing or getting Lions-donated glasses or purchasing reading glasses and handing those out, but for some reason it crossed a line to make glasses custom for an individual person. But there were times that we just had to. You know, it was the right thing to do.

DePue: Did anybody up the chain of command challenge you in that?

Blomberg: No, no.

DePue: Did they wink and nod and say, Yeah, that's the right thing to do?

Blomberg: I don't even know if they were aware of it. We were very autonomous. And actually, everything I've done and did in the military, both in Iraq and in

Kosovo, I had a lot of freedom on those types of things, where there wasn't much oversight. As long as we didn't cause trouble, as long as we did our job, there wasn't a whole lot of someone looking over my shoulder saying, Why are you doing that? I think maybe partly being a doctor, maybe some people would feel like, I don't want to sound stupid to ask what's that piece of equipment for, what are you doing there, so [it was] just, He knows what he's doing, I'll let him do it. So there was definitely a lot of freedom for me, and maybe more so than most of the soldiers.

DePue: How about prescription of drugs?

Blomberg: We couldn't write a prescription, or we never did write a prescription for them to fill in a local pharmacy. I don't know, looking back, maybe that would have been a good way to do it. So we handed out. We had donations, like Pfizer would donate and then ship large amounts to us to hand out. You'd have to keep writing different grants and different companies and say, This is what I'm going through; can you keep us stocked? And they did. So that was a big part of what we did, getting all the donations sorted and in the right places and…

DePue: You're not writing prescriptions, but you have drugs available to distribute?

Blomberg: Mm-hmm.

DePue: I'm not sure, I'm making the connection there. So somebody comes in, they have a problem with glaucoma, then you hand them some medication?

Blomberg: Mm-hmm. But we did not write a prescription. See, I wasn't licensed as a Kosovo doctor, so maybe that's why, but I wouldn't write a prescription that they would hand-carry to their pharmacy. That wasn't part of what we did.

DePue: Did you have a lot of people who had no idea they had glaucoma, just as an example?

Blomberg: Oh, sure, yeah. Definitely. I know, there are probably much better ways that things can be done. I was there a few months, and you just do—this is how you do it. It kind of goes back to that right seat ride, left seat ride. This is the protocol, this is how we do it—

DePue: Those might be two different things.

Blomberg: Yes, they could be two different things. But I didn't rock the boat much on those type of things. This is the procedure. And, you know, as far as those things would go, I can bend the rules a little bit for certain things, but if this is how we're going to do it, then that's pretty much how I'm going to do it.

DePue: What were the rest of the troops in the 101st Airborne doing? I mean, the lion's share, we're talking about infantry troops. This is a different kind of mission than MCAPs [Medical Civilian Assistance Program] going on.

Blomberg: Yeah, it was mostly police-type work. It was going to areas and almost just watching over, like the police force, to make sure that unrest wasn't getting out of hand.

DePue: How about units that might have a better function for humanitarian purposes, like engineer units or supply…?

Blomberg: You know, I had forgotten about that. There were several that were working on… That was some of the main projects going on, was improving the power supplies, improving the roads. I know there were several that were working on water supplies and purification and making sure that they had those kind of infrastructure things up and running. So we really acted a lot like a government, in a lot of ways, with police control, the roads and infrastructure, those types of things. It was more like you were the Kosovo government in some ways, the NATO troops.

DePue: Were there Civil Affair units on the ground as well?

Blomberg: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Were they working with the local authorities to reestablish some kind of government?

Blomberg: Yeah, they were working with it. I didn't really have much eyes on that. I know that they were there, and I saw a lot of them. They had, I think, pretty important jobs to do. But I don't know how far they got, and I don't really even know where Kosovo is at this point as far as if they've made any progress on stability or not. My guess is they probably never will be able to get along well with each other while I'm alive.

DePue: Some of the things that led up to what was going on with the disintegration of Yugoslavia was ethnic cleansing. I'm sure you remember that phrase. A little bit of that going on in—well, it was Kosovo. You said the minority population were Serbs and the majority are Albanians. Was there ethnic cleansing? It [would] be simpler if all the Albanians would move one place and all the Serbs would move another.

Blomberg: It wasn't going to happen, though, and they just both feel deep inside that the other one needs to just leave. So that didn't really seem like it was a consideration —it's just all or nothing in their minds, it seems like. And it really runs deep. You know, going to the schools, you've been to schools where kids put the pictures that they've colored on the walls. And these are

elementary schools. It's striking. We saw this, where you walk into a school, and pretty much every picture—there was a few that were maybe like flowers or a countryside—over 90 percent of the colored pictures that these kids were drawing were of a soldier or a shooting gun, violence in these pictures that they're drawing, and it's just ingrained in them. I think the anger and the hatred is really ingrained in them. When I did these Opt CAPs, you know,—each time you'd go you'd get some random story that they're trying to convince you that the other side's the bad guys. I remember plainly—they got the interpreter there, and I asked, "How are your eyes?" And this lady who, I wasn't asking her life story, she says, "Ever since this all happened," and she tells me this long story about how she was with her family and that men came in with weapons and actually killed her husband, and terrible story, all this, right in front of her with her kids. Well, that wasn't what I was asking, but you would get that where they would try to convince you that they're just the innocents in all this battle and the other side are the evil ones … And you get it on either side. This was so rooted into their stories that they tell their families and all these things, how bad they are: We're just trying to protect ourselves and they're out trying to kill us, and all they want is us to be dead. And yet the other side feels the same way: We're just trying to live our lives, and they're trying to kill us. So you'd get these messages from either side, and there's I'm sure half-truths to all of it. So, I don't know.

DePue: Having encountered that, then, what's your opinion about why we're here? Does that cause you to question it at all?

Blomberg: Yeah. Well, I definitely felt that no matter what we do, we're not going to be able to change the hatred. I mean, you know, it's hard to know. I'm sure people would have thought that about blacks and whites in America, that we can never get past the hatred. And I would dispute that now. I mean, you go back in the sixties and earlier, and you would think that there's never going to be a neighborhood where you'd have black-white-black-white houses back and forth next to each other and people get along. I know there's still racism, but it's different and not nearly at the level it used to be. I think the majority of people that were raised in the seventies or later in America don't have much of that at all. Maybe some lingering from their families, but mostly I think we've gotten past a lot of that in America. So I guess maybe it is possible, but boy, it's…

DePue: Now, you might not be in a position to answer this question, but where do you think the hatred is coming from? Is it something that is just immersed in the culture, or is it something that even at the grade school level that the kids are learning from their teachers, or is a factor of what they hear in the churches and mosques?

Blomberg: My own opinion is just throughout the whole culture. Everything. Just everything about them is really anti- the other side. So I think it's really deep.

I did not get the impression that it was coming from the religious organizations, and that's kind of what I was halfway expecting. But I don't think that's the case, that anger and hatred is necessarily being preached from the religious leaders, which I do think is the case a lot of times in Middle Eastern, Muslim churches, I guess, or temples, that I think it is being preached religiously. But I did not get that impression in Kosovo.

DePue: Do you have any other incidents that kind of illustrate this tension that existed, this hatred that existed between the groups?

Blomberg: Hm… (pause) You know, I guess I don't, Mark. I think that probably those are the ones I can think of the most. And I wasn't there for very long, too. You know, I was only there for a few months or so.

DePue: When you were out on the MCAP missions, I guess you called it Opt CAP missions, did you have a chance where they would bring you in and feed you a meal or get exposed to some of the culture and traditions that they had?

Blomberg: Definitely. They treated us like celebrities, and yeah, they definitely wanted us to join in to whatever they had going on at the time. Usually after we were done with the kids we'd play soccer with them or things like that. And they did feed us.

DePue: What was the menu?

Blomberg: (laughs) It was good. There was like flatbread usually and some kind of sloppy meat. I don't know, I like almost any kind of food. It was fine. I thought it was pretty neat. We went to some restaurants when we were out on the missions, which we weren't supposed to, so I did break a few rules. But we would go and say, Okay, well, let's stop there, and we would pull up all of our convoy and eat there at the restaurant just to experience it. It always felt so safe, and we were so well-armed, and we were never—no one ever would even yell at us. I mean, everywhere you would go, you were kind of a celebrity. It almost felt like, if you were maybe like a famous person here in America. Like everywhere you go, people are waving and smiling. I did not sense the tensions unless if you actually get to talk to people one-on-one, and then you would sense the tension. But [I] did not witness violence against each other, anything like that.

DePue: So stopping by and going into a restaurant, how would they treat you? How would the proprietors treat you?

Blomberg: Great. They treat you really nicely, yeah.

DePue: Did they let you pay?

Blomberg: We did pay. Yeah, we did. But, you know, I think every culture has some of that where they [would say], No, no, no, no, but no, we always would. I think Americans and probably all of the countries there understood that you're there to kind of somehow just promote happiness, (laughs) if that's possible. And so, you know what, if you go into a restaurant or playing soccer, any of these things, they want you there and they want you to be happy. And Camp Bondsteel in itself is so nice. To call it a deployment—there's a movie theater, the workout center is really well set up, they had a Burger King. I don't know if they had a Taco Bell. Their DFAC or the dining facility is, you know, like what you'd think of maybe Golden Corral. It's a buffet, and it's really nice setup as far as all the fruit and—cut fruit and meats and salad bars. And it was not anything difficult as far as the living setup.

DePue: You were in Kosovo, which is predominantly Muslim. Was there any restrictions on alcohol or on practicing your religious faith?

Blomberg: Well, you cannot drink alcohol as a soldier when you're deployed, so that wasn't even an option.

DePue: So there was no alcohol in the PX, and did they have an officers' club or…?

Blomberg: They did not have an officers' club, and they did have a PX, and there was no alcohol in the PX. The only alcohol would be if somehow someone went out to the city and got some. It's not—

DePue: So the local communities had alcohol?

Blomberg: Oh, for sure. Yeah, it's a big part of their culture, yeah. Or if someone—

DePue: The Albanians as well as the Serbs?

Blomberg: I don't really remember it being an issue. I didn't look for it. I'm not—I mean, I'll drink a little, but it was never something that was a big deal to me anyway. But sure, there were some soldiers that their wives would re-label things that were sent to them, those types of things too. But yeah, anyway, alcohol was not an option. Practicing your religion—we had chapel there on Camp Bondsteel where we'd worship. We even went to a Serbian Catholic—I guess an Orthodox church a couple times, and that was really neat, too, and worshiped with them.

DePue: What struck you about the Orthodox service?

Blomberg: I mean, it was what I expected for the most part. Any Catholic or traditional worship to me is very formal and very regimented, and it's in that same vein. They did have the incense and all that, and those things are not really

important to my faith or part of what we believe, but I don't really have a problem with that being part of the worship service either. So it was fine.

DePue: Did you ever sense any resentment from either the Serbs or Albanians about the United States or the U.N. forces being there?

Blomberg: Did not, not at all. Never sensed that.

DePue: Did that surprise you?

Blomberg: Well, they told me that's how it was going to be. I guess I kind of thought maybe the Serbs would be the only ones that would want us there because they're so outnumbered, and the Albanians, I thought, would probably want us to leave so they could go ahead and wipe out the Serbs. But I did not sense that. I think they both liked the peace, but they were (laughs) willing to break the peace if we were gone, too.

DePue: It sounds like neither side was anxious to have the U.N. forces leave.

Blomberg: True. I don't think either one wants us to leave, no. They just want the other side to leave. (laughs)

DePue: I understand President Bush came to visit while you were there.

Blomberg: Mm-hmm. That was a surprise. We didn't really know until, like, a couple days ahead of time he was coming. And that was the only time that we had to go around unarmed. That was kind of strange, after having had weapons. We couldn't have our ammo with us at that point. Basically what they said was the president's own security detail would handle [it] if something happened. (laughs) They didn't trust American soldiers enough to be armed in the presence of the president. So, being soldiers, we had to go through a checkpoint and all that just to go to see him. But yeah, it was pretty neat. He came and he talked and gave a little motivational talk, and he ran—I think he did a run with a group of soldiers. Yeah, definitely kind of brightened the mood.

DePue: Did you get to shake his hand or get close to him?

Blomberg: I was in the audience, halfway close. I mean, I could see him, but there were a lot of people that came out for that, and no, I did not shake his hand.

DePue: Were the soldiers pretty pumped that the commander in chief was there?

Blomberg: Yeah. Yeah. He definitely had a connection with the soldiers. I think the physical fitness part of it. He's kind of a rah-rah type of guy. You could see him being comfortable with a weapon in his hand and it wouldn't be a

surprise. So, it was all positive as far as people having him out there. There were very few soldiers that at that point were not fans of his. And that was early on. He had just been elected, so things hadn't started to go sour with the media and all that as far as—

DePue: Well, we'll get to that in a little later chapter.

Blomberg: (laughs) Yeah. He was pretty well accepted at that point.

DePue: Well, I wanted to spend some time having you discuss keeping in touch with home, with the home front, with what's going on at home? Because you had to be torn in that respect with what's going on with the situation you left.

Blomberg: Yeah. There's no doubt that Kim had—you know, we think of deployments and how hard it is being soldiers and [being] gone, [but] it wasn't for me. I mean, from the standpoint of my life, it was kind of doing fun things, going out in the countryside, doing these missions, and then when I got back, I'd work out, watch a movie, go to the DFAC. And we'd play cards and we'd play videogames. So it was more like a vacation. And it was a beautiful area. So I kind of felt guilty about it because Kim was at home. She had her cousin that was in high school that as soon as she finished up the school year came and lived with her, and my mom had been [there] to help out, too, I think, for a week or so. We talked to each other on the phone a lot. I had phone access, so I could call at any time, which was really neat. And so she's telling me about when she'd go shopping, that her cousin Nikki is pushing her in a wheelchair, and then she's pushing Logan in an a stroller, and then, you know, somehow in all of that they're gathering up their groceries, so they're like a train going through the grocery store.

DePue: How long after you left did she give birth, then?

Blomberg: I left at beginning of May and—

DePue: This is 2001.

Blomberg: Two thousand one. And Faith's birthday is July twenty-sixth. So May, June, July—almost three months.

DePue: What's her name again?

Blomberg: Faith is our daughter. And Kim was on bed rest for the first, I guess, almost two months of my absence, and then towards the end, it was fine. And of course, once she got off bed rest and they said, now it's fine if the baby comes, the baby didn't come that quickly. (laughs) So who knows if it was really necessary to be on bed rest the whole time or not. But anyway, she was okay. Right before I left, we did an ultrasound—we wanted to find out

together if it was going to be a boy or girl so we could name it and all that, name our child. With our son, we had waited till he was born, the excitement, you know, It's a boy, It's a girl. Well, since we were pretty sure I was not going to be there when this one came, we decided to find out together. So we found out ahead of time this was going to be a girl. This was before all that had gone down with her early contractions. So we'd already named her and everything ahead of time.

Anyway, during the summer, she was kind of cooped up inside, and our son, who was pretty active, was maybe a little bit stifled because I had been always the roughhouser with him, and Nikki wasn't much into those things and Kim couldn't. So his life changed a lot, and of course his life changed a lot more when his sister came around too.

DePue: How old was he at the time?

Blomberg: He was almost two, I believe. Yeah, he was—

DePue: Almost to the terrible twos.

Blomberg: Yeah. He was a good kid, and he still is a good kid. He became a lot harder to handle for her around that time, and some of it was due to me being gone, some of it was due I think to the excitement about the new baby coming and all of that, and just his age. He definitely became much more effort for her, and yet…anyway. So—

DePue: How did you keep in touch?

Blomberg: Mostly by phone. We emailed back and forth quite a bit. They were just working on—they just set up this video teleconferencing thing, which was really neat. Nowadays it doesn't seem so amazing with phones that have video and all that, but back then that was really amazing. They scheduled a time for a soldier to sit in a room, and they would then get the family at that same time in America and hook it up through satellite somehow so that you could have a video teleconference with each other. So, I did that twice, and she brought Logan with her. It was really hard for—he did not really quite understand that I wasn't there close by, because he was real excited about it all. But then when it was over, he kept walking around behind the TV looking for me. But it was pretty neat to be able to kind of see each other and talk rather than just over the phone and talk. And it's not like we were short on communication, because of the phone stuff, the email. There was really no limit on how much I could communicate with her, unlike when I got to Iraq, where that got all different. But…

DePue: Tell me about the actual getting the news or the process of Faith being born.

Blomberg: Ah. So, I knew that she had gone to the hospital and that it was okay now to have the baby as far as she was far enough along. A friend of ours, Angie Clark, had been her birth coach, I guess, so [she] went with her to the hospital. Angie's husband is Kelly, and we'll probably get to him later, but he's a dentist that was in the military with me at the same time. And so I knew they were there. It was kind of a one-way communication as far as the phone goes; they couldn't just call us. So, I'd try to call and see what was going on. And I think—I should remember this better—but I think I found out by email when Faith came. That still wasn't enough reason to go home, but I was going to be going home within I think it was two or three weeks. So it was the end of July, and I was supposed to be home, I think by August twentieth.

So, we got the news, she's healthy and born and everything was good. They had gone home two or three days after Faith was born, and Faith got a fever. She was like 102 fever within a week of the birth. So they ended up going back to the hospital. They called it a fever of unknown origin and they never really knew what caused the fever. But at that age with a baby having that high of a fever, they were concerned—I guess meningitis was the big concern. So, I knew they were back at the hospital, and I knew it was a fever, and Kim had mentioned meningitis as a possibility. Keith Baxter, the internist, was my roommate in Kosovo. Well, he had some inside connections where he was able to talk to the actual doctors at Fort Campbell's hospital to get the reports as they were happening, kind of. It was really good to have him at that point because he was able to get the information to me about as quick as Kim got the information on how the tests were and how things were and if she was going to be okay and everything. It turned out she was fine. But it was maybe a little tense during that time. And again, Kim felt that that was enough reason for me to just come home, too.

DePue: We're getting pretty close to the time when you need to have to pull the plug, but let's get you home.

Blomberg: Okay. So, Dr. Jarrell was the other optometrist with the 101st. He was going to take the second half of that tour that the 502 had to cover with the 101st. So he came. There was some hang-ups with him coming into Kosovo, some with his orders weren't written properly, so we didn't get to do the right seat ride, left seat ride with him. But it didn't matter because Sergeant Priest and Specialist Himes, who ran my clinic, they were staying the whole time. So bringing a new doctor in is just basically taking out one piece of the puzzle and putting a new piece in, but we had a staff that had the continuity. So I didn't see him in country I don't believe at all. We left and arrived about the same time, rather than having that planned two week overlap. But it was fine. Flying back through Germany, I was the only one— I mentioned when I was going down to Macedonia and Kosovo, it was part of a huge group. I was the only one going back home at that time. The rest of the 502 and everyone were staying. So I took a civilian flight, surrounded by international people, and—

DePue: How did you get out of Kosovo? Where'd you stop first?

Blomberg: Camp Able Sentry, so I went back down to Macedonia and then caught a flight there. That's a major airport, and I went from there, I believe, to Germany—it might have been Landstuhl—and then flew back to—it might have been Detroit. I can't remember where I landed in America, and then from there back to Nashville. But it was all civilian flights, all along the way, so it was kind of nice, actually.

DePue: Well, how much do you remember about the actual moment of meeting the family?

Blomberg: Oh, you know, seeing the family… They came to the airport and they were there at the hangar. Kim was—she was amazing. I mean, in spite of having all the stuff to worry about at home, they had signs and all kinds of video cameras running and all that stuff. I wasn't gone all that long, but it was really neat, actually. Seeing my daughter for the first time, and then Logan too, and he was just all smiles. It was pretty neat. And it was the same way when I came back from Iraq, too; there's people that don't even know you that are clapping at the airport, and that was pretty cool.

DePue: Well, we're at the point here where we can either stop here, or the next subject—it's not too much longer after you get back—you're back in August of 2001?

Blomberg: Mm-hmm.

DePue: And September eleventh is just down the road. So, do we want to pick up with this at the next time we start?

Blomberg: Yeah, we probably should. We'll just get to that next time.

DePue: Okay. Another teaser. (Blomberg laughs)

Blomberg: Thank you very much, Scott.

DePue: Yeah, thank you, Mark. Appreciate it.

(end of interview #2- continues #3)

VRT-A-L-2011-003.03
Interview # 3: April 11, 2011
Interviewer: Mark DePue

A Note to the Reader

This transcript is based on an interview recorded by the ALPL Oral History Program. Readers are reminded that the interview of record is the original video or audio file, and are encouraged to listen to portions of the original recording to get a better sense of the interviewee's personality and state of mind. The interview has been transcribed in near-verbatim format, then edited for clarity and readability, and reviewed by the interviewee. For many interviews, the ALPL Oral History Program retains substantial files with further information about the interviewee and the interview itself. Please contact us for information about accessing these materials.

DePue: Today is Monday, it's April 11, 2011. My name is Mark DePue, the director of oral history with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. And I'm here again for our third session with Scott Blomberg. Good morning, Scott.

Blomberg: Good morning, Mark.

DePue: How are you today?

Blomberg: Doing great, doing great. Thank you.

DePue: It's been a little while since we last talked, and I believe where we finished off last time, you had been in Kosovo, you told us a lot about that experience, and we were just getting you home. So where I wanted to start today is, shortly after you got home, the world changed, and 9/11. So tell us about what it was like at Fort Campbell on 9/11.

Blomberg: Sure. I had been back for about two months or so, got back in August, and 9/11 happened. It's probably one of those events where everyone that's of age would remember the moment at which they heard about it. I was doing an eye

exam at the time on a soldier at Fort Campbell, so I was back home, and the 101st Division optometrist at that time, the individual that I had just replaced at his spot as the 101st Division optometrist was in my place in Kosovo for the remainder of that three-month tour. So anyway, I was seeing soldiers, and another soldier came into our exam room and said that an airplane flew into the World Trade Center in New York. And, you know, it's funny looking back on it that I would have even thought this, but I thought he was not being serious, that it wasn't even true. And why someone would make that up, now, looking back, it seems ridiculous. But that was just a world-changer for us and, obviously for America in general.

But everything changed from being business-as-usual to all of a sudden it felt from that point on at Fort Campbell like we were already at war, and we didn't even know who we were at war with, but we felt like it. Getting on base turned from what had been previously a wave as you drive past the gates to stop, into having your vehicle inspected, open up the doors, have a pat-down. Everyone that came on the post was inspected. So, in that first week, it was ridiculous. Just to get on base was a three-hour process because you were waiting for all the other vehicles doing the same thing. Everything was much different from that point on. My military experience was just much more tense. Everything about what we did became serious and mattered instead of just training.

DePue: Did you remember watching any of the coverage?

Blomberg: Yeah, I'll never forget it. I remember watching it and watching it with my wife. We knew at that moment that things could be a whole lot different as far as if America goes to war, the 101st will be there. So it pretty much changed our mindset from that moment. We watched the news completely differently than if we weren't in the military. It's almost like we were watching a Pearl Harbor–type thing, that now we know that we are not just in these little peacekeeping things, America, and it felt like we're at war right at that point. Listening to President Bush maybe even amped that up, that sense of almost like a coach talking to a team before they were going out to play a big game. It almost had that sense of listening to him, and whether that was right or wrong, as a commander in chief, he definitely had that ability to rally the troops sensation. So, when we watched the news or watched him, it's almost like, Tell me where to go, and we're going. I felt that way. I was still a long ways away from getting out of my commitment or being done with my time, so I was very willing to do what was asked.

DePue: When you were watching the footage, especially from the World Trade Center bombings, and seeing these huge clouds of smoke and debris, and you're an optometrist, is that part of your brain kicking in as well?

Blomberg: The…?

DePue: Optometrist side in seeing what these people were experiencing?

Blomberg: Yeah. That's probably the biggest thing from my side is thinking about the medical part of it, what people are inhaling. But there's just the human side, that I probably felt more than anything, just, you know, what these firemen and policemen were going through. I think, everyone wonders a little bit, What would I do in that situation? And I don't know. You can't say for sure, but I'd like to think that I have the makeup to where I'd be willing to sacrifice myself for someone I didn't know in a situation to try to rescue [them]. So, you're thinking of all those things. We stayed up with everybody, watching the news as it's all coming in, and [it's] just remarkable. I was really inspired later on, hearing the stories about Todd Beamer, who was the individual on the plane who basically turned it around and attacked the terrorists on the plane. And things like that, you know, we were just very patriotic and very inspired by seeing America come together at that point.

DePue: How soon was it before you started to hear, once you got on post, rumors about the brigades or even the entire division going over to Afghanistan?

Blomberg: Well, rumors in the military are… (laughter) It's unbelievable how quickly they spread, and only a small fraction of military rumors are true. Once someone says one thing, it's gospel. But it was pretty soon that we thought the 101st was going to be going. Everything changed, like I said. So from day one, it went to, Your bags better be packed, you better have everything in order in case we go tomorrow type mentality. And that was good.

You know, as a division optometrist, that meant seeing division soldiers. You just work in a clinic that sees division soldiers, and, oh, by the way, sometimes you have to go through these SRPs or readiness things to make sure you're ready in case there's ever a deployment, and those were always less intense than they should have been, I would say. So what we did at that point is, we did a lot of work to actually put together a setup so we would be ready for making glasses in whatever foreign land that we're at. We had a generator that would make glasses and we had lenses, but they were in bags, just all these loose, blank lenses, that were not—you know, just here's your pile of stuff. We took probably half of our time out of the clinic—I had an optician and a technician that were part of the division with me, and I just pulled them out of the clinic, even though there was a backlog of patients, and we worked on getting our Conex or ISU 90, they called it, a big box that would lock up, getting it ready for how we would pack it if we went. We put in a drawer system that sorted all the lenses by their powers and then you could just pull it out and cut someone's lenses. We really did a lot of organization for a long time. It was good that we didn't deploy right then, because we would have been a mess. But it was the fire under our rears to get things in order, which it had never been—the 101st had never deployed in that fashion to where the optometrist needed to be making glasses in a remote land,. You'd have to go back probably to Vietnam to have that.

DePue: What was involved with having to cut the lenses in the remote location?

Blomberg: There's a method of taking a pattern, a plastic pattern that matches up for a particular frame. Soldiers have gas masks which need inserts in them, they have their BCGs, birth control glasses, rape prevention glasses, RPGs whatever you want to call them, the brown big ones, and then they have what we call Frame of Choice, which had just come out around that time. So there are about ten different frames they could choose from. They'd have patterns for them, and you'd stick the pattern in the machine, it would trace the pattern, and while it's tracing the pattern, it's cutting with a grinding wheel the lens. They're parallel with each other, and basically they're moving in tandem with each other, and—

DePue: They're—

Blomberg: This machine—

DePue: Is it just the exterior of it, or is it the grinding down the lens itself?

Blomberg: Just the exterior. So right, a good question. A finished lens means that it's a circle, like a hockey puck, that has the power, so if someone had power, they could look through that big circle hockey puck and see their vision sharpen. Edging the finished lens means that you cut the shape so it will fit into the glasses. That's the final step of making glasses, taking a finished lens and edging it so it matches their frame. Well, to actually make the power is a really involved process and involves big equipment that you're not going to bring with you in the field. We have an inventory of thousands of lenses, everyone's power, in some kind of an organized fashion so you can find the finished lens and then stick it in the edger and cut it so it fits in their frame. Well, that was the part that we had all of these bulk of lenses but not in any kind of organization at all. So if you came in with broken glasses, we would have had to be digging to find your lens. So, it was so time-consuming but well worth it, because it turned out, two years later, that that would get used a lot, and it was really beneficial that we had been forced or scared into working ahead of time.

I did get some grief from my superiors about us not being in the clinic, because, You're an optometrist and now you've just cut your schedule in half, and you're missing a lot of clinic days, and we are already backed up, and all these soldiers need to get their eye exam so they have what they need to deploy and all that. So, there was definitely some tension on both sides and all the sudden I was really being pulled in a lot of ways. But we did. I was in charge of the division of optometry; I just had hospital commanders that were over us. But I started listening more to the division commander side of command rather than the hospital commander side of command at that point, which was a really good decision. But there was—

DePue: Were there a lot of soldiers who you found out were non-deployable after you…?

Blomberg: Soldiers are told that if they wear contact lenses, they cannot bring them with them on a deployment, and they have to have two pairs of standard glasses, the brown glasses, and a set of mask inserts with their prescription, and without that, they would be non-deployable and would be penalized. So there were a lot of soldiers that needed that stuff because they just had been going through wearing contact lenses and saying, I would never put those glasses on anyway and that type of thing, and in their mind, I would just wear contact lenses no matter where it is. I don't care what someone tells me; they don't have to know I have contact lenses in. Well, if you're going into a chemical environment, that's a problem, to have contact lenses on. So, yeah, there were a lot of soldiers. And of course we even learned as we got over there that there were a lot of soldiers that in spite of every checklist along the way somehow—either they didn't bring them, they didn't pack them, or they never had them in the first place, "I was never told," and that type of garbage.

DePue: Did you encounter soldiers who looked to you like they were trying to avoid being deployed?

Blomberg: Oh, I see what you're saying. Yes. But that didn't come until we actually were getting our orders. No, it came towards the end of… You know, and we didn't go until another year and a half later. So yes. Now, the first wave after 9/11 was—it was around February of 2002. The 187th, or what we call the Rakkasans[1], went to Afghanistan. They're kind of the high-speed brigade, and one third of the 101st Division. They decided just to take one brigade, which was really fortunate to me, because had they taken two brigades, I would have gone too. The division optometrist stays with the majority of the division is the norm, and so, I did not go on that one. I had a good friend that went to Afghanistan. They get back, and then the entire division leaves, and of course he went again into Iraq following that.

DePue: How long was that other brigade—you posted to Kosovo. How long did they stay in Kosovo?

Blomberg: Six months, and they were not the brigade to go to—that was the 502—they were not the brigade to go to Afghanistan.

[1] The **187th Infantry Regiment** (**Rakkasans**) is a regiment of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) of the United States Army. The nickname "Rakkasans" is derived from the Japanese word for umbrella. The name was given to the 187th during its tour in occupied Japan following World War II. When a translator dealing with local Japanese dignitaries was trying to explain what their unit was trained to do (and not knowing the Japanese word for "airborne soldiers") he used the phrase "falling down umbrella men", or *rakkasan*. Amused by the clumsy word, the locals began to call the troopers by that nickname; it soon stuck and became a point of pride for the unit. *Wikipedia*, January 11, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/187th_Infantry_Regiment_(United_States)

DePue: They did not pull them back early for that.

Blomberg: They did not, no. They completed their time.

DePue: What unit were you assigned to at the time?

Blomberg: It's the 801st Main Support Battalion. It's not part of any of the brigades. Actually, our commander of the support battalion would answer directly to the division commander. I was Echo Company. Our company was comprised of the medical staff—you know, dentists, internists, psychiatry—and also we had logistics would be part of it, so our company would be ordering up supplies for the brigades. We had mechanics also, and I think that was probably the main body of who we were. Ours is support the force, keep the fighting force fighting.

DePue: Okay. I want to fast-forward into middle and then later into 2002, because that's about the time that there is an extensive amount of discussion in the Bush administration and United Nations about whether or not we need to go into Iraq. Before we dive into all of that, let me ask about your family situation at that time and your wife's reaction to all of this.

Blomberg: Well, just to lay it out, our family is—we're very much on the conservative side of politics, so it probably will be a little bit of maybe my bias coming through on some of these discussions. So there's that. We're also very patriotic, so there's that. But we were very sure that the country should be unified in whatever we do, and so we were going to be supportive of all of it. From a personal side of it, we had just had our second child, so she was pretty young at the time. And I was biding my time because my time is up June of 2003. So I'm holding my breath that things don't go down until at that point, because it seemed like things are going to go down; the question is, is it going to be delayed enough to where I won't be the one to go down with it? (laughs) Or go with it, I guess. At that point I'm already starting to look at practices, where I'm going to work and where we're going to live afterward, and those type of things. So yeah, that was also a big part of what was going on in our mind, and of course just taking care of the kids and family. We watched the news, and that was all interesting. My personal, at that point, feeling was that since we knew Saddam had used chemical weapons on his own civilians before, and that was pretty well documented, that it seemed unlikely that he wouldn't still have a program. And so I felt like it probably was the right thing to do.

DePue: That was justification? The thought that he had a weapons of mass destruction program of some type was justification to go in?

Blomberg: In my mind, it was. I had really mixed feelings on it because of how it affected me personally, too. I think had I not been a soldier, I would have been even more gung-ho about it, that America needs to be there and we need to wipe them out. I did have that part of me that, I don't know, because it seems like every time we're involved in conflict—you know, at that point it had been knowing about how Kosovo and Croatia and Bosnia had gone, that it seemed like, Ah, just one more place that America's going to end up being for a long time. So, there was that part that I felt like—and I had mixed feelings that this was going to be a quick, you know, in and out type thing. There was a little bit that it was presented that maybe we're just going to go in, we're going to get him out, and then we'll leave. And I didn't really believe that part of it either.

DePue: Is that what you were being told?

Blomberg: Oh, I wasn't told anything. I got the same news you did. (laughter) No, I really wasn't. All we were really told was, You better be ready to leave tomorrow, and that was repeated a lot. So it was no—again, you get rumors, but nothing official.

DePue: Did the pace of training exercises increase?

Blomberg: Yeah, a lot more. And we should have already been, and we were—maybe it's just from my own standpoint that it increased, because that was around the time I joined the division, too. Prior to going to Kosovo I was the medac or part of the hospital unit, and going to Kosovo, that was my transition into the 101st. So I come back, and all the sudden, doing PT with everybody, you're with the soldiers a lot more, you're not seeing the families as patients anymore, you're doing road marches where you're told to come in and be here at three o'clock—and I also signed up—while I was in Kosovo, I signed up that when, I came back I would do Air Assault School, which is rappelling from a helicopter. So, I come back and I do that, and that's pretty intense.

DePue: What timeframe was that?

Blomberg: Oh, boy.

DePue: Still in late 2001 or…?

Blomberg: No, if I remember right—and I really shouldn't say for sure—but I think it was after 9/11, but I can't really tell you for sure. I should know that. But anyway, that's two weeks of pretty intense training, learning to rappel from a helicopter. That was probably as close as I ever came to what you think of with basic training, because your rank counts for nothing in Air Assault School, so I know the sergeants and the first sergeants, they got a real joy out of being able to kick a captain around. (laughs)

DePue: Was that something that a lot of optometrists were expected to do in the 101st, that you're going to rappel into combat situations?

Blomberg: (laughs) No. I don't think so. I like that stuff. In fact, it was competitive to even sign up for a slot, so I had to really push for it, to be in the slot. But, I guess if I was going to do something I wanted to do, so I did it all. Our family still rappels sometimes and rock climbing, so I get a little bit of adrenaline rush out of those things. (laughs)

DePue: Well, this is a peculiar question, but explain in the best way you can the hooah mentality that you find in a lot of the 101st soldiers.

Blomberg: Yeah. It's contagious, too. How do you explain it? Probably the 82nd has the same thing. But when you get assigned to a unit, it's random, a lot of it's random, but once you're there, there's a culture that you either jump on board with the culture or you're going counterculture. And so the culture there is, We're gung-ho, we're doing everything 110 percent, we're ready to leave at a drop of a hat, and we love what we do. So, if you're not one of those with that same spirit, you stick out. Whereas I know from speaking with other soldiers that that's not the case at every division, that a lot of places it's more, Yeah, I'm here because it's a job, I'm here for the paycheck, or I got my school paid for. That was kind of why I even got into it in the first place, was, I'm just here because it's a pretty good deal. And yet when you get in and you're part of that culture, it's pretty contagious and becomes your own way of thinking, too. I don't know, how do you put a finger on it? Because if you could duplicate that at every location, and maybe even with businesses the same thing—how do you get the culture right? But they have a good culture there for soldiers.

DePue: So we're talking about November or December timeframe of 2002, slipping into 2003. It's looking more and more likely that the division is going to go.

Blomberg: Yes.

DePue: And you're due to rotate out of the service entirely in you said June of 2003?

Blomberg: It's actually March. So, my done with everything day is June four, and I've hardly taken any leave because the 101st, as hard as they train, they have a lot of days off, and every holiday, you get an extra day with it. So I didn't take a lot of days off, so I have accumulated close to ninety days of what they call terminal leave or just leave. You can only carry over sixty days per year, but if you let it build up, sixty at the turn of the year, you can get it up to ninety when you're done. So terminal leave, you are done, and you don't have to do any checking in or anything. Once you're checked out on terminal leave, you're just paid for those vacation days … So thinking, really, timeframe is March or so that I'm done, maybe we'll take a vacation and I'll have a job

lined up to start April. That was kind of the thinking. So as we're looking at how this is all going, yeah, it's become very apparent that we're going. And it's January, and I'm doing the calculations in my head that, Okay, if I go, even if you guys don't give me terminal leave—and these are discussions I'm having with the company commander—even if I don't get my terminal leave approved as leave time but I just get paid it as a lump sum, I still need to be back before the start of June, you know, because you've got to out-process, turn all your gear back in and everything before your last day, and it doesn't seem likely that any of this is going to work out quite the way I'm hoping. So I'm talking to him about it, and at that point, there's no stop-loss in effect, so I'm saying, "You guys have to figure out who's going to take my place, because that has not been figured out yet, who's going to take my place when I leave, because I've put in for exit." Well—

DePue: You need to explain what stop-loss is.

Blomberg: Stop-loss is one of those little-mentioned clauses (laughter) when you sign on that you are committing to *x* amount of time active duty service, and then you have your *x* amount of time reserve time, and those are your minimum requirements. Usually it's eight years total, and mine was three years active duty and then five years of Reserve. But these dates can be adjusted at the needs of the Army. Which is what happened. So, it's almost like a backdoor draft, you could say. You're now in past what you volunteered to do time. So, that was especially frustrating to me because the main thing that drew me in, in the first place was the years of your active duty would be equal to the years of your school being paid for, which was a large amount of money. And so my feeling was, Okay, if you're going to keep me past the three years, let's talk about maybe paying off my first year of school, too. So in my mind, let's keep it fair. Well, that's not their thinking, of course. Anyway, I was extended not because I was in the military and not because I was an optometrist, but because the 101st had orders to deploy. The stop-loss only applied to those that had orders to deploy. My buddies that came in as optometrists at the same time were exiting and I was not. So there's a lot of that in your mind, if you're being treated unfairly, [it] can turn into some bitterness. And looking back, I try not to be negative, but I definitely had those points at the end where while I was doing everything as a soldier really well, in my mind I was getting the grumbles for sure (laughs) about why-me type stuff.

DePue: You were talking about the culture of the 101st Airborne before, and now this whole issue about stop-loss kind of tugs you in a couple different directions, it looks like.

Blomberg: Absolutely, absolutely, yeah, yeah.

DePue: Was there any sense, Well, you know, the Army has trained me, they spend all this money on me (Blomberg laughs) to do a job, and I need to go to the show?

Blomberg: (laughs) Yeah, yeah. No, I had both feelings at the same time. Yeah.

DePue: What were you hearing when you went home?

Blomberg: Oh, my wife was definitely on the, You've done your time (laughter) frame of thinking.

DePue: Okay. What was your expectation and the expectation that you were being told about the nature of the enemy that you were going to face?

Blomberg: We did get a lot of briefings about it, and we were told, and a lot of things with what we did while we were over there matched up with that belief, but we were told that, like a cornered animal, if he's seeing the end of it, he can be pretty irrational, and that we would expect that he would try to hit us with chemicals. And that was really the big concern, that we—and so a lot of the training was MOPP gear, which is the personal protective—I'm not sure what the MOPP stood for [Mission Oriented Protective Posture]. But there are different levels of MOPP protection. MOPP 4 would be the highest level, where you have everything on, all of these butyl rubber items, including your mask. And so we were trained on MOPP one through four and how to mask up without inhaling, and keeping your eyes closed, and being able to put all of the items on without contaminating your skin or anything like that. So that became a big part of our training. And that was probably the main thing that we were taught to expect.

The other stuff was, we were aware of how suicide bombers and just those type of small-scale, appearing to be civilians, can pose a threat, and how to handle that. The aiming your weapons and warning and all that, as far as trying to defuse situations before it turned into a shot being fired at an individual. So it was different probably than the Vietnam and World War II–type stuff in that our main thing was as little damage to the enemy as possible; we're just trying to get the regime changed over, and we want to inflict as little damage on their populace and their infrastructure as we could. And so for that reason, that's why it was going to be a ground assault, was really about you can't pinpoint it well enough with a bombing to…

DePue: Did you expect that once you got there that the civilian population would treat you as liberators or as invaders?

Blomberg: I really didn't know. I had no idea what to expect with that part.

DePue: When you were attending the briefings—again, another kind of peculiar question—you're attending the briefings, and these things are being discussed

from the military standpoint. Were they presenting this as an invasion of Iraq, an occupation of Iraq, a liberation of Iraq? What word was used?

Blomberg: "Liberation" was the word used, and so me and my other optometrist—we ended up taking on another optometrist when we went—instead of Operation Iraqi Freedom, we called it Operation Iraqi Liberation for oil, OIL. (laughter) But we didn't really think it was because of the oil, either, we just thought that was funny. And we're getting a little bit ahead of it, because we weren't told where we were going when we left. We knew, but we were not told in official briefings, at least at my low level of command, what we were going to be doing or where we were going.

DePue: You mean where as in going to Iraq?

Blomberg: Going to Iraq. I'm sorry. We knew we were going to Kuwait, that that's our destination, and that is where we went. And, you know, it's convenient that Kuwait is right next to Iraq. But we were not told we were going into Iraq; that order came while we were waiting in Kuwait.

DePue: Was the 101st part of this whole discussion about a possible unit coming through Turkey instead of from the south?

Blomberg: Mm-hmm. Well, we were not going to be the unit to come through Turkey. That was 1st ID, I believe, 1st Infantry Division. Yeah, so while we were in Kuwait, we did get the orders on how it was all going to go. The initial plan was that we would come from the south with 3rd ID, so 101st and 3rd ID, and then a Marine unit from the south, and that the 1st ID would come from the north, from Turkey, and that we would meet at Baghdad, almost like a race, who gets to Baghdad first type thing. And it just didn't happen with Turkey opening up the door, so everything had to come from the south.

DePue: When did the unit actually deploy to Kuwait?

Blomberg: It was the very end of February when we deployed. And that week when we deployed was when the stop-loss came down. So I'm thinking, up until that point, knowing that we're going somewhere, fine, take me, I'm still going to leave soon, so you can do what you want with me for a few months; I'm still going to leave. I had a job lined up there in Tennessee, and right when the stop-loss hit, then it all changed, because it went from being able to tell people, Okay, I can start working for you at this point to, I don't know when I can come. You know, it's all up to the military at this point. And that job, it kind of fell through. I don't know if it would have worked out or not. Both sides, I just had to tell them, "I don't know what to tell you," and they were like, "Oh, man, that stinks, because we need somebody" and that type of thing. So again, that added a little bit to my frustration at that point or bitterness. But it worked out fine. Anyway, I had to look for a job while I was

deployed, and my wife really was the one that kind of made all that happen for me. Sso we went at the end of February. We went through Italy, stopped in Italy, and then went to Kuwait. And those were really nice flights. They were civilian flights, and they took care of us on that.

DePue: How'd the unit's equipment go?

Blomberg: That went by ship, I believe.

DePue: To include all your supplies?

Blomberg: I believe, yeah. It took a long time to get there, so yeah. We were waiting for our gear. We were just like in holding without any gear except for the bags that we carried, to arrive much later. It was a couple weeks for all that to get there and catch up to us.

DePue: How did this deployment feel different from when you went to Kosovo?

Blomberg: Kosovo, that's almost like going to another station that's all set up and waiting for you. Here, you're bringing everything with you. When you showed up, you set up your tents and that's where you're staying. Kosovo is air conditioned in these SEA Huts or these buildings, DFAC with dining food and all that. Well, Kuwait didn't have the facilities for all these soldiers to show up in a tight quarters. I mean, they had two entire divisions plus the Marines, all that, in a pretty small, confined part of the desert, although the desert feels open. But it's like setting up these forty, fifty thousand, more than that, troops, all out of nowhere. So you put up your tent, and they would put up a dining tent, but it's not the type of food that you would want, necessarily. So everything was much more—it felt like camping, where going to Kosovo was more like going to a hotel, you know, (laughs) as far as comparing the two trips.

DePue: Do you recall your impression when the airplane lands and the doors open and you walk out the door, your first impression of Kuwait, of the desert?

Blomberg: It's like in the movies, I guess. Kuwait is definitely flat, hot, sandy, and the sand is blowing all the time. It's always in your face, and it's always on your skin, and it's in your teeth, and—yeah. I can't imagine living there. The sand is just everywhere, and it's all the time. Kuwait has pretty good support for America I think because of how we liberated them in the previous Gulf War, so there are some permanent sites for the military in Kuwait that are nice, and I did actually have to make a trip back later to Kuwait, after things had settled down, to straighten out some equipment issues. Kuwait was our logistical center of where things would get shipped in and out for a long time. So there are, I guess, nice parts of Kuwait, and there's obviously a lot of money there with oil business, so there's nice houses and places, but where we were, we

ended up just setting up camp pretty close to the border of Kuwait and Iraq, and out of nowhere. There was Camp Pennsylvania, Camp New Jersey, Camp New York, and various states got their names on camps that we just set up by the border. I was in Camp Pennsylvania. And it was just dusty and sandy all the time.

DePue: Up to this point—now, jumping back a little bit—before you deployed, and even while you were in theater, how much cultural training did you get about what you were going to face?

Blomberg: They taught us about the different [groups]—the Sunnis, the Shia, the Kurds, and we kind of learned a little bit about how there is somewhat of a tribal setup even though they're a country, that it's very fragmented as far as their loyalties. Learned some of that, but not a lot. We didn't get any language training at all, not much on their customs. You asked about whether we were a liberating force or an invasion force. We were told we could not fly any American flags at all, so inside of tents or inside of trucks would be American flags, but they could not be flown. We're not here to make this a colony of America. But I don't know. There probably wasn't much of that. I got more culture training on Kosovo than I did on Iraq, by far.

DePue: I guess that surprises me.

Blomberg: I think it's the time that we had to get ready for it from when we knew what we were doing.

DePue: How about the religious aspects? Did you get do and don't lists in terms of the religion?

Blomberg: (laughs) No, no, we didn't. We got a few things, I remember, on what could be considered insulting. You know, the whole—and you've heard all this, too—like shoes apparently are just an insulting thing to them, to have a shoe [sole] up in the air. And I can't remember all those. But there are certain things that would be considered enough to trigger someone's anger that wouldn't necessarily in America. But I don't know. We were so much more focused on the actual task at hand on this than we were on making friends with the locals.

DePue: The task at hand being?

Blomberg: Get rid of Saddam. We are there to wipe him out, whether he surrenders or whether we just take him out. That's our job; we don't want him in charge anymore. That was really the mission. We'll get to that later, but once he was out of the picture, I was thinking, Okay, time for me to go home, (laughs) and again, that didn't happen at that point. But that was really the mindset, doing our job as the Division Support Battalion, keeping our soldiers effective so

they are ready and able to fight, healthy, [and] equipped. It was all focused on doing the soldier job much more than how are you going to interact with the locals. We didn't really interact with the locals much for quite a while.

DePue: Okay. I'm enticed to jump way ahead and ask about that transition from an Army defeating another Army to becoming an occupation, but I'll fight the temptation, and we'll get to that later.

Blomberg: Sure.

DePue: Talk about the launching, then, the actual attack itself, movement into Iraq.

Blomberg: Mm-hmm. So, at that point, we got our orders. It was kind of exciting to me to actually be part of that, seeing what was going to happen ahead of time. That was really the first experience I've ever had of being in on [the beginning], We're going to do something, this is what it's going to look like, and the news [media] doesn't know about it yet. That was around the time that I guess President Bush gave Saddam seventy-two hours to give up, and he didn't. Right around that time, we're right there at the border, and we met with our commanders, and, All right, here's what we're going to do, here's the map of how it's all going to go. I guess from my standpoint that did convey some trust in us, that we trust you to not pass this on, although who are we going to pass it on to at that point? We were pretty well cordoned off as a unit, and no real communications. I didn't mention [this earlier], but in Kuwait, we just didn't have phones where we were, we didn't have mail, those things set up, because there just weren't the facilities and place for it.

They had one location in Camp Pennsylvania that you could go that was connected to the Internet. Each unit or each portion of the 801st had a laptop, which was really nice. It got used for very important purposes, but what we figured out we could do is. you could type up all your e-mails as a team, and then—because you would only get a little bit of time to plug into that Internet connection, and then you had to leave - plug it into the computer when we got down there, and it would send them all out in a mass. It would receive what people had sent to us [too], and then we'd go back to our tent, and a few days later we could go back and do the same thing. So, that's kind of how they kept it, so this limited connection could be working. That was one means of communication, and then I was able to send letters out, and I got maybe two or three letters during that time to—

DePue: You've got a couple letters here. Is there anything that you would like to read into the record, things that would have been sent before the actual launch of the attack?

Blomberg: Let me look and see the date on this. (pause) No, these are all from after we actually went in, so we'll get to them in a little bit here, but yeah, I would like to read them in, at least a few of them.

DePue: Okay.

Blomberg: I'm sorry, you asked about the actual war orders and going in. So, this is what it's all about from our standpoint. We lined up in [what] they call GACs, ground assault convoys, and the line of vehicles is as long as you could see, row after row after row. So just like soldiers being lined up, vehicles were lined up like that, just straight rows, trucks, everything you could think of, Humvees, mortars. We didn't have tanks in our portion; they were with 3rd ID, I believe, which would have been in a different section. But just row after row after row of vehicles, and then your convoy departure time would be just scheduled, and everyone goes at the same time. Meanwhile, while we're in Kuwait, there are Scuds coming in. We saw several of these overhead shots, and our Patriot missiles were really good at taking out the Scuds I mean, just nothing really hindered us at that point. I should cut back before I get into the ground assault. I wasn't really aware of what my wife was dealing with, but right at the time we left Camp Pennsylvania, we go and line up in the convoys—and this is a long process, to get everyone lined up in a way that they can keep track of where everybody is and all of your equipment. You know where your Conex is, because our big box has to be on a flatbed truck, and so we need to keep track of, [it] we stay with our equipment, so when we sit down somewhere that—

DePue: It sounds like there's nobody jumping into Iraq.

Blomberg: Well, it happened pretty quick from the standpoint of looking [at] what had to really happen. There's some pretty smart logistics people that are putting all this together. But yeah, it's a process. We're not like Special Forces that (snaps) can just go here, there, you know, and they're there. We were a big moving system. So anyway, I left Camp Pennsylvania. Well, that day or the next, I'm not sure which it was, a soldier, one of the officers, apparently threw a grenade into one of the officer's tents and attacked his own fellow soldiers. It was a fratricide thing. He was Muslim and apparently trying to make some statement about us being there. It was on the news and my wife knew that I was in Camp Pennsylvania and so sees that it's an officer's tent, and really shook her a lot. I was already gone and not really aware about the location of where that had happened. Again, you hear rumors, but if you believe every rumor, you'd go nuts. It didn't even really strike me until later, and my wife was telling me about this and how that was the first time that she was really scared, like soldiers are dying already, and it turned out it wasn't even from the enemy, it was our enemy within at that one. So, for my wife, that was maybe a turning point in her mentality of the reality that the danger is legitimate. But it turned out, you know, there were very few casualties overall, which was so fortunate.

Anyway, we're lined up at the border, and the border's just desert, you know, so (laughs) it's just by your GPS units, okay, we're at the border now.

And we start going. I'm driving an LMTV, which is a light truck vehicle - it's about the size of a Ryder truck. I had a psychology technician and a dental technician in my truck with me. And—

DePue: How come the officer's driving?

Blomberg: Oh, we just take turns, so everyone's driving, everyone's taking turns. But I was driving at this moment. We drive in, and it's—there's really not roads, you're just driving over sand, and sand is like—I kid you not, it's like powdered sugar, it's just kicking up, just everywhere. Your goal is just to watch the vehicle in front of you, not really even seeing the road at all or whatever tracks they made. Well, we took a pretty good dip and popped the tire on the vehicle. So, we're in Iraq, we had just crossed over the border, probably five miles into Iraq at that point, flat tire. So, we radio up to my commander, company commander, and he takes his Humvee back to us and looks at it, shines his flashlight on it, because it's nighttime, and says, "Yeah, that's flat." He goes, "You guys see if you can change it and catch up to us," because it's a long convoy, "otherwise, catch the next convoy and go back." Okay. (laughs) We're in Iraq. We get out, and this tire is on so tight—I mean, they use impact wrenches—there's no way with our little cross wrench thing that we were going to get it with a dental tech, a psychology tech, and an optometrist. We ended up turning the vehicle back around, went against the grain with the convoy, back to the camp we had been at, the most recent place was Camp New Jersey. Fortunately, there were some mechanics there. And these guys, they did the same thing trying to get it, and they couldn't get it loose, and they didn't have any of the air tools with them. Well, what they ended up doing was they put [an extention], like big, long metal pipes right on the wrench itself, one guy on one side lifting and another guy standing on that pipe, jumping, and that's how they loosened up. So there was no way we were going to get it. Well, I had shredded up the tire really good from driving it back flat all that way, but they were able to trade it out, and so we joined their convoy.

DePue: Is this also the 101st?

Blomberg: Yeah, it was all 101st people. We joined them and ended up passing up not in the same place, because there's no roads, you're just trying to follow grid coordinates on your GPS, and, this grid coordinate's going to be our next meeting point. As you're going, your convoys are going to stop like every half-hour, and they make like a—they call it a herringbone stop, where everyone's kind of jagged, pointing outward, pull security all around, and they might stop for a few hours and, you know, have half the people on security and half the people sleeping. And those sleeping, they would actually dig a trench so they'd be underground.

And this was a really long process to not go very far. I look at it on the map, and like, man. We went from Kuwait to Iskandariyah, which I think was

like over by this Nasiriyah area. Our first stop was Shell, and they had these refueling places that they called by gas station names. They had Point Exxon, they had Point Shell. Anyway, the first one was Shell, and it was the most powdery, dusty sand ever right there. So anyway, we take all these convoys to Shell, at least that's where our unit went, and set up camp there. This took a long time. It probably took, oh, five days to get there, which isn't really that far, but just you're stopping, looking around, you're seeing fire, you're hearing things off in the distance. We didn't have to shoot back at anyone. There was one convoy next to us that took an RPG, but it was really pretty uneventful, all things considered. You know, just the food is—every once in a while you stop and open an MRE or those type of things. You're going to the bathroom and burying it in the sand, and if you had to pee while you're driving, you can't stop, so you'd just go into a bottle. So it was really primitive for a while there just because you're just living out of your vehicles and you can't just stop when you want to stop. So everyone tried to take some—

DePue: Was it the—

Blomberg: —Imodium or something ahead of time to kind of just try to slow things down. (laughs)

DePue: Was it the expectation the 101st was going to encounter a lot of combat, because you don't have any really heavy stuff in that kind of a division.

Blomberg: No, no. We didn't know. You're right, we didn't have—now, we weren't far from 3rd ID, and I think some of the convoy did take some of the 3rd ID tanks and kind of trade it out. But we didn't in our convoy. We were really light. But, I don't know. I guess what they were thinking. It seemed to me the biggest concern was chemicals. We weren't far from I think it was the Euphrates River where we were trying to kind of stay parallel with that. We drove in our MOPP gear a lot, which is, we were all masked up for a good part of that drive.

DePue: Do you know what the 101st specific objective was?

Blomberg: No. it was just basically go to Baghdad and these are our stops along the way. Whether they had a directive, I don't know. What we were going to do at Baghdad, I had not been given that. Anyway, we're drinking bottled water at that point. They did have quite a bit of that, although we went through those reserves pretty quickly. Really hot, you know, and it's March, it shouldn't be that hot, but it was just really hot and dry, and you're wearing all that gear, so it's just really uncomfortable.

DePue: I wanted to give some specific dates here, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, but when we met before, I think the movement to the border—and this is in Kuwait—was March thirteenth or thereabouts.

Blomberg: I think so.

DePue: The actual assault would have been March twenty-first, and then you would take a few days to get to Iskandariyah. And—

Blomberg: Yeah. And—

DePue: —somewhere around early April, then, April fourth, perhaps?

Blomberg: Yep. That's right. I have my journal, and I was looking at that yesterday. It was March eleventh we got our orders. We were all lined up in convoys on March twentieth, went in on March twenty-first. I wrote down in my journal March twenty-eighth, we were not far from Baghdad at that point. We were at Iskandariyah, I believe—**An Najaf**. We were at **An Najaf**, I think. That basically [came] from General Petraeus, who was our commanding general at the time, that we're going to wake up Baghdad and keep them up all night. And that was orders or the statement that came to our command chain, "Tonight's the night to wake up Baghdad." Most of the things that were done were done at night, just [because] we had a real advantage with our night vision goggles and tracer weapons and all that.

DePue: So, the movement would be occurring at night, and in the daytime you'd be hunkered down and getting some sleep?

Blomberg: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, a lot of that, yeah. It seemed like such a long time to me, but I guess a week or two, and that was the end of it. Probably to people back home it seemed like it went really fast; to me, those were long days. It's not like we were really fighting, but boy, we're doing a lot of digging and a lot of just looking around for security. It seemed like we drove forever, but really, didn't get very far.

DePue: As I recall, those early stages, there was one awesome sandstorm.

Blomberg: Oh, yeah. (laughs) Well, there were a lot of them. Probably the ones you saw were the ones where there was press—a lot of the units had press, and ours—

DePue: But it seemed like this shut everything down for a couple days.

Blomberg: Well, when I was in Kuwait we had one—you know, they spread anything out within that little base we made, so you have the concertina wire that's like this barbed wire around the outside perimeter. It's a pretty wide expanse, I guess, so we were waiting at Camp Pennsylvania. When we came back from the little

dining tent and headed back to our sleep tent, and they're quite a ways away from each other, you can't see from one to the other, maybe ten-minute walk or so. Well, I'm with the other optometrist and we're heading back from dinner and it's windy but not crazy. Well, it kicked up. You could hold your hand in front of your face and not see your hand - the wind with the sand was so thick. I had to mask up just because you couldn't hardly breathe. So, we were wearing our gas masks, which I'm sure wasn't good for them, but you had to do something to keep it out of your eyes. We had goggles, too, but anyway, to keep it out of our mouths. We looked at our compasses to try to keep our directions straight, walking through the sandstorm you couldn't see anything. This ten-minute walk, we were out there two hours. We made it to the barbed wire (laughs) and ran into some other people on the way, too, that were having the same problem, the orientation of it, with the wind the way it was going. I didn't feel unsafe—I mean, I was with a buddy, and who's going to attack us when it's like this, but yet it was surreal. Maybe almost like a science fiction situation where you just can't see anything. He and I could barely see each other, and you couldn't hear each other, you know, just kind of just point signals and all that. So, sandstorms can be pretty bad there. You can't accomplish much while those were going on.

DePue: I would think that brings a lot of business to an optometrist.

Blomberg: (laughs) Oh, yeah. That was a big part of what I did at the beginning, was pulling sand out of people's eyes. Yeah, there's no doubt. In fact, I was separated from the other optometrist for a while, where we would go in different locations, and I got some in my own eye. I put numbing drops in and took one of those cotton swabs flipping my eyelid and scooped it out. Because generally where it gets stuck would be under your upper eyelid. I did all that, and like, Ah, that feels so much better. Then the numbing drop wears off, and it's hurting even worse than before. I put the dye in my eye and look at myself in the mirror, and in the process of flipping my eyelid and getting it out, I scraped my cornea, (laughs) gave myself a pretty good abrasion. So, [I] fixed one problem and caused another. The sand could be really pretty uncomfortable. You heal up fine from that, but (laughs) [it's a] rough couple days.

DePue: Do you remember going into Baghdad, or did you go into Baghdad?

Blomberg: I did not go into Baghdad for the combat part of it. Our support battalion stayed in an airfield south of Baghdad, and like I said, I think it was Iskandariyah. No, I'm sorry, **An Najaf**_. That's where we were when Baghdad went to the good guys. So, we're there for a while, and seeing that things have settled down, after that—

DePue: "For a while"—a few days?

Blomberg: Yeah, it was probably even a couple weeks. [We were] figuring out, Okay, what are we going to do next type thing. And thinking that, Okay, the war is done, stop-loss shouldn't be applying anymore. It's still, what, end of April? About time to send this soldier home. Then our unit got orders to go to Mosul, which is quite a ways away, [in the] opposite direction from Kuwait. It's up in the north, close to Turkey. This would have been the area that 3rd ID would have been handling, but it just didn't work out for them because Turkey wasn't open to us coming through. At that point, all the sudden it feels like Kosovo to me, that, all right, now we're here as peacekeeping, trying to do good deeds, because we've won, the battle's over, there's no one else to fight now. Obviously things got much more violent after than before, looking back, but in my mind, Okay, we beat them, we're good, let's go home. I wasn't wanting to go to Mosul by any stretch. But yeah, we drove through Baghdad to get there. But that was my experience with Baghdad. And I did come back and flew over Baghdad on a sight-seeing trip with one of my patients, (laughs) which my wife wasn't excited that I'd be doing sight-seeing trips, but I like to see things that I won't see again. So, I did that. But I did not spend time in Baghdad like hanging out; we just went through.

DePue: What were you seeing, all the way on the—when you weren't in a sandstorm and you're looking at the terrain—you are driving through some villages, I'm sure you're seeing some civilization of some type, and then you go into Baghdad itself, which was a major metropolitan area.

Blomberg: Big city, yeah.

DePue: Yeah. Describe what you're seeing.

Blomberg: It's remarkable to me how people make it in southern Iraq, the nomads, I guess you could call them. You can be driving along—and the sandstorms weren't nonstop, don't get me wrong about that. When they kicked up, they were pretty bad, but it's like what we would consider how often we have storms here, just theirs are sandstorms, or if it's real severe wind. But a lot of time you're driving and it's just flat. And no water anywhere, it didn't seem like, nothing, just flat sand. Once in a while you'd see like a family out there just watching us drive by. The thing that would get me is, How do they live? How do they make this work? There's no source of water that I'm seeing. I mean, I guess we're not that far from the river, but there's no source of water that I'm seeing, there's very little vegetation if any. What do they do? it just didn't make sense. But there were those out there, and just out of nowhere you'd see some people that didn't have a vehicle with them at that time, so they're standing there looking at us as we drive by in our convoy. A lot of times they'd be giving us the signal that they're thirsty and they wanted us to throw them water. And they would give water sometimes from the back vehicle, but never from one of the front vehicles because of the concern that what if they jump in front of us type thing. So yeah, and then you're

absolutely right. Baghdad is a big city, and it's got buildings. It's not nearly as modernized as any American cities, but it's more modernized than Kosovo cities were by far that I saw in Kosovo too. And, [they] actually seemed to have somewhat of an economy. They had businesses there. I don't know how much business was happening at that point, but there were plenty of businesses with signs and all that looking like we've got a city that's running okay.

DePue: Did you see any signs of battle, any…?

Blomberg: Well, I did not personally witness any fires, any shots being fired. I heard a lot. There was quite a bit that you would hear going on. But no, I was not in the middle of any kind of gunfire, thankfully. But I witnessed a lot of aftereffects. And we treated both the Iraqis and the Americans. They would come in to us, and we were the main treatment center for our section for the 101st Division's area. A lot of soldiers would come for various reasons that were—you know, and at the beginning, there was a lot of stupid stuff, soldiers getting hurt. They'd burn their feces in big metal buckets and put some gasoline or diesel in with it to burn it, and sometimes they didn't handle that with the right amount of fuel, and there were some explosions that singed people's faces and got burned from those types of things, which is ridiculous.

DePue: That's a tough thing to write home about.

Blomberg: I remember talking to one of the guys about it and said, "Are you going to tell the people when you get back home what actually happened?" (laughter)

DePue: That doesn't fit into the hooah mentality.

Blomberg: No, no, you have to come up with a better story for all those burns. But we treated Iraqis, too, and there were probably as many of those that were severe; people who had just attacked our own soldiers, we were treating [the same] as our soldiers, [for] battle injuries and wounds.

DePue: I remember when we first met and we started to talk about the possibility of doing an interview, you mentioned Easter, and I think you were at Iskandariyah at that time.

Blomberg: Yep, and that was a really exciting time to me as a Christian, because we were close to the Euphrates River at that point, and so we petitioned our commanders to let us have our worship service on the banks of the Euphrates River, which in Biblical history is mentioned a lot and some [saying it's] the cradle of civilization area. So we did that. We wanted to do a baptism service in the river, but they were not okay with that, soldiers getting into the Euphrates River. So, they set up like a wood basin, lined it, filled it up, and they had a baptism right on the banks of the Euphrates. Two of my soldiers

got baptized at that point, which was really neat to see. We had a lot of downtime, so we did do a lot of talking. One of my soldiers is Mormon, and he was very outspoken in his faith, and I was pretty outspoken in mine. A lot of our downtime, we'd be playing cards and various things as things settled down, and so we did have a lot of spiritual discussions, too. I was talking to my wife and some friends, and, you know, sometimes you don't know why you were even—why was I there; what was the point? Because it's not like the war would have gone differently if I wasn't there, but maybe God wanted me there to talk to some people about my trust in him too. I don't know, but we'll see someday the bigger picture of why that would be. But yeah, that was really exciting. We brought a lot of soldiers there. We still, you know, pulled security and everything, but things were—we pretty much knew we were going to win at that point. We had met so much less resistance than we anticipated, so it wasn't such a big deal to go to the Euphrates.

Right after that, when Baghdad had fallen, and I told you, a couple weeks or so in [an] airfield south of Baghdad. Our unit had even set up to make a day trip to the ruins of Babylon, which was really close by. [But] we got our orders to go to Mosul, and that plan got nixed. That's probably one of my biggest regrets of being there, and I couldn't do anything about it, but I would have liked to have seen that. You know, that would have been really neat.

DePue: When you were talking about having an opportunity to evangelize, were you talking among American soldiers—

Blomberg: Yes.

DePue: —or among the population?

Blomberg: Absolutely no, just American soldiers. I wouldn't have dreamt of—

DePue: Why not?

Blomberg: (laughs) Okay, I shouldn't say I wouldn't have dreamt of it, but (pause) you know, as a Christian, there's points at which in my mind—and this, you can get into real philosophy—but where, yes, you answer to a higher power than man, and I feel that one of my jobs as a soldier in God's army is to represent him, but in representing him, I also need to be respectful of those I work for or those I'm with. So, if I knew someone was Muslim and they were not open to [hearing] or asking about my faith, carrying a weapon and being in their country, in my mind, would not have been appropriate, and it definitely would have been against what our policy as Americans being there was… I would have been in the wrong. And maybe some Christians would have said, I don't care if I'm in the wrong, you know, like Peter and John, I'm still going to do what God wants me to do, and I wouldn't argue with that, but I probably wouldn't have ever considered it.

DePue: So it sounds like the Army had issued some prohibitions against that?

Blomberg: Yeah, that's pretty standard, that we're not here to try to change their belief structure. That had been pretty clear. That would have been a wrong in my mind to do, although, like I said, a Christian could make the argument that it doesn't matter what man says, that God's rules are more important. It's that side of it, too.

DePue: Scott, this is probably the best time to put you on the spot here. The nature of the war in the first place—it was a huge debate, but most would say, I would think, certainly people in the military would say this is a war against fundamentalist, radical, extremist Muslims.

Blomberg: Right.

DePue: Your view on that scenario and on Islam as a religion.

Blomberg: So this will go into my bias that I've brought in at the very beginning, probably, that I do feel that—and I think most Americans do—that I think America's system is a very good structure of government, that we're overall people that are based on our Christian roots, which is, loving others and nonviolence for the most part. So you would think the military might kind of contradict that a little bit, although I did see it as this is a country that's ruled by a dictatorship, this dictator has attacked his own people, he's attacked Kuwait before, he has a history of aggression, and he's irrational in a lot of ways, and he's also been warned by the international community. So I felt like what we were doing there was not wrong. Again, I didn't think it was going to be as short as maybe some Americans felt it could be, I guess. I don't know. But no, I think Islam from a personal standpoint is fundamentally, at its core, a violent religion. I think there are portions of those that follow Islam that are—well, there's a large portion of those that are not violent at all. But I think their scriptures are fairly aggressive in their tone, and those that are not followers of Islam are referred to as infidels, and there's just a tone of aggression and violence that fosters—if someone is really as fired up about their faith in Islam as I am about Christianity, that it could become, in their mind, following the scripture is so important that I'd do anything to follow the scripture—and I can see how someone can get to that point—that then it could result in doing crazy things that we've seen happen. I do think that Islam and the Qur'an is a big part of the reason that we've got this problem. Obviously politicians can't just come out and say that, but that is how I feel.

DePue: Okay. I wanted to next turn to this whole idea of getting up to Mosul and then going from an army, the division, being in a combat role, to suddenly being occupiers and peacekeepers.

Blomberg: Yeah. All these letters are from before that, it was kind of during the convoy.

DePue: Great, let's go turn to that, then.

Blomberg: I'll read a couple of them, and you can stop me when you get bored. But I didn't write a lot of letters after—after the fighting was done, we got a lot better communication. During the time of the convoy, I wrote a lot of letters, but that was really our only means of trying to get some communication back home. And phone calls really never were very good while I was over there, but e-mail did become fairly reliable overall, so then it turned into more e-mails, which are not as interesting to read because they are usually written maybe with less time put into the writing of it. So anyway, I'll read a couple of these. This would be right after—this is during the convoy phase of things, written to my wife, like all these are, with some blurbs to my kids.

"Hi, sweetheart. I sure miss getting e-mail from you and corresponding with you every day. Hopefully we'll get that up again soon, but it seems like it will be a while. I've been typing some letters on that," which means on the laptop, "and will send them all as soon as we get connected. We're going to be moving in a day or two, and then they plan on moving us one more time, not long after that. Each time we move is a hassle, with packing up all our equipment and tents, and that's hard on our equipment, too. After the last move, our glasses edger, what we cut the lenses with, was broken. We still can do eye exams and take care of eye problems, but Castillo doesn't have much to do while that machine is broken.

"Today we had a big scare. There was a huge explosion less than a mile from us, and lots of powder came out from it. We all got our masks and all the protective gear on immediately. Everyone was a little on edge with how close that one was. Within a few minutes we found out it was American soldiers destroying enemy explosives, including land mines, and they didn't tell us ahead of time they were going to be doing that.

"Thank you so much for the package. I shared the food with the rest of our optometry section, and we will enjoy having the speakers for watching movies on the computer." So I got a package while I was in Kuwait, which was great. "I really appreciate those magazines and the MacArthur tapes. It's a little piece of normal life back home that I can have out here.

"Today I went to our wood Porta-John"—so they had set up a wood Porta-John there—"and we finally got something to go number two in rather than just drop it in a bag and bury it. But they were burning the contents at that time so I couldn't use it. Back to the old bag, squatting in the desert thing. (laughs)

"I'm hoping I can get this to you on e-mail sooner than this letter, but I have a couple things I would really like to have out here. The biggest one is oatmeal packets. All we have to eat is MREs, and that's not going to change for quite a while. I had one box of oatmeal in that wooden lockbox, but I'm going to be through with that soon, then it's back to MREs for breakfast again. Here's the other things I can think of: Cheez Whiz, stationery, Taco Bell

sauce, ketchup, barbecue sauce, Ziploc bags, and a camera case (I don't know why I didn't pack that, but this is hard on the camera) and some address labels for my address out here.

"I'm so curious as to how the news is reporting how the war is going compared to the news that we get. We just get operational news about planned strikes and enemy movement and that type of stuff, but we don't get any big-picture news stories. It seems like we've had few setbacks except for a few prisoners of war being taken, though I think they were hoping things would go faster. But from our perspective, things are happening about the way they expected. I'm also very curious how things went with Gailey?"(Gailey Eye Clinic)—that was one of the companies that we were looking at with applying—"and the contract. I hope that you were able to sign the contract and that I'll be free from the Army soon in time to start there. I'm also looking forward to moving back to Illinois. I know your parents are excited about it. I hope you had a good trip to Minnesota. It's tough not knowing what is up with you and the kids. I'm always wondering what things you're doing. Thanks again for your letters and e-mails and packages. It's so refreshing (chokes up) to have a picture of you, a piece of home out here, and I really appreciate you, and I always love you."

So that was one. (laughs) Maybe these will be tougher to read than I thought. Maybe I should do this part later. (laughs) This is tough.

DePue: Well, we're at the point in time you might need to be thinking about getting back to work as well.

Blomberg: Well, we can go a little bit longer. Yeah, it's up to you. Let's just maybe go back to the interview. I can come back and read it out of order; would that be all right?

DePue: Yeah.

Blomberg: Okay. I can go probably about till ten after one.

DePue: Okay. So do you want to do some more reading here, or…?

Blomberg: Sure. I'll read another one here, let me just… (laughs) Okay, here we go. This is after that:

"Hi, my sweet family. It's been a couple weeks for me. I've been driving across the desert for most of this time. We finally set down a camp in Iraq. They don't have a whole lot to offer here except sand and wind and sand mixed with wind. (laughs) Every morning when I wake up, there's a thick layer of dirt over everything in my tent. My sleeping bag starts out green when I go to bed, and magically it's brown when I wake up.

"Yesterday I got my wood box that I had packed back home"—and this was in that Conex. "It was like Christmas opening that up. I was especially glad to see the oatmeal was in there." I think this was before that

previous one, actually. "MREs are okay for lunch and dinner, but it's tough to eat one of those for breakfast. My favorite thing inside is the Christmas picture of our whole family that we had framed. I keep looking at each of you smiling so big in that picture and looking at you one by one, and that's one of my favorite things to do. It's really tough to be apart from all of you, and I miss you more than you could know. I love you Love, Daddy." Just one more, it looks like. Two more. Let's see if I get through these.

"Hey, sweetie. We made a move to a new camp a couple days ago, and in a couple days, we'll be moving again."

DePue: Do you have the date on that one?

Blomberg: April fourth. Friday, April fourth. And the other one, the previous one was March twenty-eighth. "Every time we've moved so far, one of our generators has broken for our company. We started out with five or six generators, and now we're down to none. Good thing I got a flashlight. We have a lot of D batteries, so I should be good with those. The weather here is hot. From about eleven to four o'clock, everyone tries to move as little as possible because it's so hot, but you can't sleep in that weather. I imagine it will be getting hotter, too. Yesterday it was over 100, and I think it was around 104. I wonder how high it's going to go. At night it's comfortable, though, even cool out. All the fighting goes on at night, which is good for weather, plus with the night goggles, we have an advantage. I'm hoping by the time we get this that the fighting will be about over. Every night we see a pretty good show over our heads of our guys attacking. I'm also very thankful for the Patriot missiles. They shot a Scud out of the sky two days ago that was directly over our heads. I saw the cloud from the explosion right after it occurred. And of course everyone went into their chemical protection right away.

"They set up this wood box in the desert near our camp where you can go and take a sponge bath. That was a nice feeling, to wash up and get some new skivvies on. I've been changing my inside layer of clothes every other day, but it had been close to two weeks since I had a shower.

"I got a package from your Grandma Giberson, which was very nice, and also from Dave and Stephanie. My roommates are all very jealous of me for getting so much mail, but they love it too because they always get a little bit of whatever comes. I think it will still be a while before we have any phones or Internet connection. We keep moving and aren't at one place long enough for them to establish communication lines to the rest of the world. I was thinking after this next move in a couple days we would settle down into one place, but then after talking with Chris David today, it sounded as if it will be more moves after that in the plans. We're starting to drink the local water. They ran it through a purifier so supposedly it's healthy enough, but it tastes like chlorine. Whenever you're sending another package, I certainly could use some drink mix to make the water taste better. Overall, though, I feel very blessed. I've had so much snack sent to me it's enough to eat in between meals and to share too. It's great. I still wonder how things are going with

Gailey? and looking for homes and things with our old house, and mops, and everything back home." And I said, "I got a letter from your Grandma Schoby that says she's having more trouble with her eyes. I love you very much, and I wish we were together now and all that."

I think this last letter was just basically what I told you about, getting the flat tire and all that, so pass on that, nothing really… It reminds me, though, one other thing. One of the camps, I think it was Camp Pennsylvania, when we were on guard duty, we all had to take guard duty, which meant basically a radio, just man the radio during the night, there was a point at which I was able to use a phone and try calling home. The phone was pretty unreliable. It was really hard to get through. I finally got a phone call through, and the way to do it, you had to call Fort Campbell's base, and then they would route it to your family that way. So, I got a hold of my wife, and the first I'd talked to her in a while. Anyway, we got a phone call that went through, and she said hi and I said hi and I said, "What are you doing?" and she said, "Getting a haircut," and we lost the signal. And I tried for an hour and a half to get back and couldn't get another connection. So from then on—and she said she just cried after that. But from then on, we started out saying goodbye before we started our phone call, (laughs) so saying, "I love you, goodbye," and all that, and "I miss you," and then, "Okay, so how are things going?" (laughs)

DePue: I can imagine the imagination on her side is running wild.

Blomberg: Yeah, absolutely.

DePue: What could possibly have happened over there that this gets cut off?

Blomberg: Right, right, right, yeah.

DePue: Do you have any letters from her?

Blomberg: I looked, and I'm sure I do. I couldn't dig them up, which is—unless I have them—yeah, no, I don't have them here. A lot of it turned into e-mail later. But, no, I don't have any with me. No, uh-uh.

DePue: What was the worst part about that separation? How old were your kids?

Blomberg: Well, they were pretty young. Faith was almost two, and then Logan would have been four, just turned four. And yeah, it was—that's the thing, it's just the separation, the being apart and not being able to tell them I'm okay, somehow getting word back to them that things are still fine. Because she's just watching the news, and she said at some point she just had to stop watching it because every little thing, you're kind of wondering, Well, is that where Scott is type thing, and she just didn't know, and I couldn't really tell her exactly where I was or what exactly we were doing. So, it was the

message to get home that things are going along okay was really delayed. I would always be hoping that before that letter would get home that there'd be another means, whether we'd be able to do an e-mail thing somehow or a phone call somehow. It was just that—there was definitely a delay on any kind of back-and-forth communication.

DePue: Was being at Fort Campbell with all of the other wives and the spouses important for her?

Blomberg: I think it was for others. For my wife, her support structure is definitely through the church. Some of that was because I had not been in the unit very long, so, she hadn't really been to any officers' wives functions or other family functions with the division soldiers. We were involved in our church, so that was really her support structure.

DePue: This is a civilian church?

Blomberg: Yes, a civilian church.

DePue: The name of the church?

Blomberg: Hillcrest. It's actually in Kentucky. We lived right on the border of Kentucky and Tennessee. And they were amazing. They were just amazing. The pastor came over and mulched our lawn. They basically took our kids under their wings. She had really good support through the church, which was just wonderful, but not really much with the fellow officers' families, wives. Although she'd stayed in touch with my soldiers' families. And in fact, Specialist Castillo, my glasses maker, had a baby. His wife was pregnant and they had a baby right after we left, and he was not able to go home just because of the timing of all that and everything. So later when things settled, I believe he did go home for like a week or two.

DePue: I don't think you've told us much about the team that you went with. Talk to us about the team, who they were.

Blomberg: I don't know if I mentioned. We started out with I guess—one, two, three, four—five of us, and we actually went on with four. So you're supposed to have two optometrists, two technicians, and one fabricating or optician. And the fabricator or the optician was Castillo, Specialist Castillo, Miller Castillo. He would be the one to make the glasses. He was from Hawaii, really funny guy, friendly guy, and he was the one that I said was [an] outspoken Mormon. And we had myself and Doctor Gregory, Andy Gregory, were the two optometrists. I was the division optometrist; he was the add-on, so he was newer to the Army than I was, a more recent grad. And he volunteered for that assignment. So, we had to add another optometrist from somewhere else, and the other military optometrist would then join us when we deployed the whole

division. He volunteered because he had just been through a messy divorce and just wanted to get away from things. He wanted to extend as long as it could, getting paid a little bit more, no family to go back home to that he was concerned with. And so that's Andy Gregory. Our two technicians were Sergeant Priest or Specialist Priest depending on the timing. Most the time I knew him he was Sergeant Priest. He was demoted for causes not to be named to Specialist Priest. But anyway, he was our main technician, and then we had a second technician, which was Specialist Jaramillo, with a *J*, and Toni Jaramillo. She was learned to be pregnant while we were in Kuwait, and so she went back home and we did not get a replacement for her. It was actually a fun team. I think it was a good group, [we] enjoyed each other. It was very close quarters for a long time, and fairly minimal problems with them.

DePue: Only one female in the group?

Blomberg: Yeah, and she didn't stay with us, so none.

DePue: Reflections on having the men and women together in combat situation on site, even though you weren't in combat, but you're pretty rugged conditions that you had all the time.

Blomberg: Yeah. You know, the women all ahead of time were given some sort of medication so they didn't have their period somehow, so that wasn't really an issue. Somehow—I still don't understand the logistics of it—but while we were traveling on our convoys and using the—you know, you keep on driving. If you're a passenger and you had to use the bathroom, you just go in a bottle somehow. They had like a funnel system where they could go to the bathroom sitting down and not get it all over the seat. I don't know how that worked. But they were not a hindrance at all, from what I saw. There were some personality things. We had a psychologist—or, I'm sorry, a psychiatrist—on our team that was not a good soldier from any measurement of it. She just did not belong in the military. Very prissy. But that could be a guy, too. So we had a lot of females that were gung-ho as you could imagine. I saw no issues with that at all. I guess prior to joining the Army I thought [there] shouldn't be females in combat, and I don't feel that way now.

DePue: But there's one issue here, that is you had a soldier who has to return to the States because of pregnancy. She had gotten pregnant before she was deployed?

Blomberg: Yeah. She was married. So yeah the pregnancy test came back positive while she was in Kuwait. So, she did deploy, but yes, that would have been…

DePue: Do you recall her emotions, and do you care to speak to what she was feeling when she had to be sent back home?

Blomberg: She didn't say a whole lot about it, just it was a matter-of-fact thing, Okay, well, you're going home, and good luck. And it's hard to say or speculate on whether it was intentional or not. I don't know. It very well could have been intentional that just, well, you just stay home then if you're pregnant, and maybe they were thinking in the next couple years and, well, now is as good a time as any. Who knows. I don't know. I did not get enough vibe from her. She and I were not close at all. I didn't work with her in the clinic normally, so I didn't really know her very well.

DePue: Let's get you to Mosul here. What was different about Mosul than Baghdad and the southern part of Iraq?

Blomberg: Yeah, so Mosul was more like America as far as the weather; [it] was very much more comfortable than the heat of the desert. There's greenery, there's plants, there's trees. If you're going to be stuck in Iraq, the north is a lot better than the south from the weather and the breathability and all that standpoint. They're more pro-American. The Kurds are up there in Mosul, and a large amount of them are Christian. I did not want to go at all—I think I mentioned that—but because it was a sign that, I'm getting further away from being home sooner. But as far as where we would be, we were at an airbase in Mosul, and it was okay. We actually didn't have to live in tents at that point. That was our first experience of living in a building with some beds. Fairly primitive airbase, but still, it was an airbase with buildings, which is nice.

DePue: Now, your own personal experience, you've been in Kosovo, you've done the peacekeeper thing, but did you find it was difficult for the unit to adjust from being war fighters to occupiers and peacekeepers?

Blomberg: Not my unit. I mean, my unit was not fighters in the first place; we're supporters. Like I said, we were treating Iraqis from day one. To be a peacekeeping force when you're a bunch of medical providers doesn't feel that strange at all. Probably to the infantry guys, they would have run into that, where they had just gotten done being on the aggressor side of things to now not being aggressive. Yeah, this is—actually, you're looking at pictures—it's interesting. When I first went to Mosul, that area had been bombed ahead of time, and in Iraq, as I think a lot of the Middle East, they spend time on their roofs. It's almost like a porch, the roof of a house. A six-year-old girl had been up on the roof in this family's house when a bomb hit the general area and she fell off the roof. She ended up with a palsy half, paralyzed half of her face, and so her eye wouldn't close, mouth wouldn't move on that side, her facial muscles—she couldn't smile with that side, and eye was turned, and muscles on that side of her face wouldn't work, almost like if you had a big stroke that affected half of your face. That was what it was like for her. As an emergency, your biggest concern at first was the exposure of her eye, that if you don't blink at all, your eye will dry out and end up just clouding over. So we got there to Mosul, and one of the soldiers

told us about her story and said, "We were patrolling, and the family came up to us and told us what happened to their daughter, and it was America that really caused it, and we need to see if we can do anything to help."

I went with the team to their house, the family's house, and just amazing to me—and I don't know if all the families were like theirs—but they were so thankful that America was there, they were embracing of us, they were warm, they were really nice people. We had a translator, and it was all positive about how we know this was an accident and blah-di-blah. And yet the whole story made sense. I mean, if it had happened more than a couple weeks ago, her eye would have already been clouding over. So everything matched up with the story that, America was to blame or, at least partly to blame for this accident that happened, and yet there was no bitterness there. They wanted to feed us and everything.

So, we did take a look at her, and we did surgery with an ENT doctor also at the MASH that wasn't far away. We were able to come together and do surgery to temporarily, at least, just sew her eyelids closed. And then we coordinated, actually, with a volunteer surgeon and set up over in America to ship her back to the University of Michigan, I believe it was, to have her worked on. That was quite a process to get all that going, and I never heard the follow-up on what came of the situation. I hope it turned out okay. But, some of that, it depends on how the muscles come back, too.

DePue: Was the reason she went back to the States strictly for the eyesight issue for other issues as well?

Blomberg: The other issues, too. It was a multitude of… She couldn't walk very well. I mean, she was paralyzed mostly on one side, so, she was crawling around and one half her body was just… The eye issue was kind of just the initial, We've got to do something right now to save her eye.

DePue: Did you set up clinics in the area where you invited the local population to come?

Blomberg: No, we didn't. That was kind of not happening at that point while I was there. The preliminary movement was towards, setting up with some kind of procedure in place to go to the local population and do clinics like what we did in Kosovo, but none of that was happening while I was there. It was too early. We did go to the cities and interacted with people, interviewed people, kind of talked about where those things could happen and how it could look and those things, but not while I was there. I don't think it was probably long afterward where those things were getting going. I went to Dohuk, which is a city north of Mosul, and that's all Kurds up there, pretty much. That was the area that did get attacked with chemicals, so there were people that showed me their skin all blistered up and curled up that lived in Dohuk that had been—you know, basically a blister agent had hit them.

DePue: You were saying that had been attacked, but that would have been years and years before?

Blomberg: Yeah, so this was the aftereffects of years later on; what Saddam had done to his own people. But they were kind of not fans of Saddam, so it was mutual, but…

DePue: I know you've got to get back to work here pretty soon, and we're getting towards the end of the story. I wonder if you have just one or two more anecdotes of your relationship with the local population while you were up in Mosul that would really help illustrate your experience.

Blomberg: I don't know how you feel—we might be able to wrap it up—but I can probably stay about—what time is it? One? Fifteen minutes? You think we could wrap it up, or you got quite a bit more?

DePue: Well, you tell me. We're about ready to send you home, aren't we?

Blomberg: Yeah. Well, I feel like I'm close to the end. I mean, things really settled down a lot at that point. I think I could probably wrap it up here. Things really did settle down a lot, so we started to get into a rhythm in Mosul of doing the day in and day out of like—it became more and more like Kosovo gradually, and I think now it's probably even more so like Kosovo, where they've got facilities and dining facilities and those type of things. You could just see the wheels in motion of this is—America's going to be here a while, and we're making this more and more comfortable for us here. So, the day in and day out is starting to see—and actually I saw more patients at the end, because at the beginning, when we were moving every few days, we'd set down camp, I'd radio out our grid coordinates, "If you need—any eye emergencies, bring your soldiers to this grid coordinate." And I'd see a couple people a day sometimes even though I know there's more that would have needed it while we were in those movement phase, but they couldn't logistically get to us or find us or whatever. The more we stabilized, the more I got busy again. But—

DePue: Was it the occasion where you'd have soldiers who would run across a civilian who had a serious eye problem who would bring them into your facility?

Blomberg: Yeah, there were those, and those were brought in. Like I say, I probably saw as many Iraqis for quite a while as Americans. But at the end, it was mostly back to seeing soldiers again that, Okay, I broke my glasses, I need some more or whatever, I got an eye thing going on. It felt more like a regular clinic again. I think it was August, July or August—I think July actually, end of July, that the stop-loss was lifted. It was put back into effect later again, once they realized, we're keeping people for a year over there. But anyway, end of July, the stop-loss is lifted. So, that becomes my whole focus, is, All

right, if the stop-loss is lifted, when do I get to go home? Well, they had to give everyone a new here's the end of your military commitment date, and mine was given as November fourth instead of June fourth. So everything got extended back five, six months.

DePue: But I would assume that's because now you've got more than ninety days.

Blomberg: No, no, the most I could really get would be ninety, because it just—

DePue: So part of that, though, was part of that.

Blomberg: I had ninety days of terminal leave, so for me, it caught in back, I'm like, All right, we're almost here to the—because they said they're going to give you fifteen days, I believe it was, to out-process when you get back home, to get all of your stuff in order, so we're looking at ninety plus fifteen, 105 days, and we were almost there already now. So we have to start the wheels in motion on getting me home, and we do. The date for me to leave I think was—I think it was mid-August. I wonder if I've got that here. (pause)

DePue: August second.

Blomberg: Yeah, okay, early August, okay. Early August. So anyway, fly back—or the plan is to fly back from Mosul to Kuwait on a C-130 and then from Kuwait back, through Europe and to America. Well, get on the plane in Mosul Airfield, and we're on the runway, we're moving, ready to take off, and it's going pretty quickly, and *dut-dut-dut-dut-dut*, and we get a flat tire. (laughs) I thought it was so fitting that I got a flat tire going in and I got a flat tire going out. We get out of the plane and we all look at this flat tire, and [it's] completely flat. They don't have at Mosul a big C-130 tire to replace it. So that delayed [us]—and maybe that wasn't August second, because if it was August second we left, I think it was two days earlier that we had the flat tire. So we sat there at the base, airbase. My unit had made with me a kind of a couple memorials. I had a little rock that was about the size of two fists put together that one of our creative people painted 101st Airborne Screaming Eagle on it, and then we markered optometry, all signed our names on it. It was an Iraq rock. They wouldn't even let me bring that home. You couldn't bring anything home that was a memorial or a piece of Iraq. So, I don't have anything, really, as far as my stuff from when I was over there. I have things from Kosovo, you know, different people that I met and stuff like that. But anyway, I did make it back, of course. It was unbelievable coming back home. And I hope they still do this today. But the first place in America that we landed was Maine.

DePue: Dover?

Blomberg: Bangor, I think, but I'm not sure. I think it was Bangor. And, you know, there weren't even a lot of us soldiers on that flight because it was a civilian flight. I'm sitting on the plane, and you probably saw the pictures, but sitting there on that plane going back from Kuwait, I was wrapped up in a blanket, shivering, and it's summer, and it was warm. But I had been so adapted to the heat at that point that, everyone's wearing shorts on the plane and comfortable, and I was so adapted to the heat at that point that I was shivering, wrapped up, and just it was amazing that part of it. But anyway, we come back and get on the plane, and I wasn't the only soldier, but there weren't a lot of us. I think, I'm remembering my story right, hopefully this wasn't the Kosovo thing, but I'm pretty sure it was coming back from Iraq. Anyway, the crowd of people that welcomed us, it was just amazing, the support, and all these signs. They didn't know us; we weren't from around there. And then we went back to Nashville, flew to Nashville, and then took a bus to Fort Campbell, and my family was waiting for me. It was really neat.

DePue: You remember that?

Blomberg: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I sure do. Yeah, I do. And there's a lot of emotions wrapped up in that, and yet you had to also still be serious because I hadn't been out-processed from my deployment part, so we couldn't quite, do the full come together right away, but still, all the hugs and everything, you know. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

DePue: Well, the rest of the story, we know you eventually land in Springfield, Illinois, in a practice here, and it looks like a very successful practice. Let's ask just a couple wrap-up questions for you. You got into the military. You weren't shy about the reasons you got in: hopefully helping to pay for all these medical bills you're accumulating. You glad you did?

Blomberg: Yeah. If you asked me that right when I got home, I'd say, No, this was a big mistake. Probably if you asked my wife, she'd still say no, we shouldn't have done it. I'm not sure, (laughs) because it's over now. But yeah, I am now. I mean, it didn't really disrupt our lives to the point where it caused any permanent problems. It was a real disruption in our life, but I'm glad I did it.

DePue: Are you a different person because you did it?

Blomberg: Yeah. There's no question; there's no question. The main one would be my appreciation for what soldiers do and how hard it really is. You know, from having been there, it's—obviously they all are there as volunteers, but they're fairly poorly compensated. There's parades and things, the appreciation, but there isn't a lot of really day-to-day appreciation. Most of the day-to-day for most of the average soldiers that are not officers is getting yelled at. And yet they do it without much complaining. I guess the other thing from what I come out of that that I wouldn't have had before is I feel like I maybe have—

from just those couple weeks that we were really doing Army stuff, in the combat period, pretty short—just a little bit of an appreciation for just how hard it had to be for Korea, Vietnam, World War II, without even being able to touch how bad it was for them, because the danger was not nearly at their level, but just more the poor communication and living out of just what you have in your bag, and understanding a little bit more, I guess, what that's really all about. And, I don't know, I mean, I guess as a doctor, I see a lot of people, obviously, who have been in the military, and there's just some kind of a bond that, you've done it type mentality that you can't really replace that, and you can't fake it either. Either you have or you haven't. And I feel like if I had not deployed, I wouldn't really even have had that sense, because, I was just acting as an optometrist for the most part and not really doing much different, just I wore a uniform. But once I deployed, I got at least maybe in the brotherhood a little bit of those that have really lived it.

DePue: Two thousand and three, that's when you were there. It's 2011 as we sit here today. We're still in Iraq, we're still in Afghanistan. Any reflections on how the war's going, and are we doing the right thing there?

Blomberg: Yeah, oh, boy. (laughs) I'm not really strongly opinionated one way or another, I guess, on that. I still to this day think that there were weapons of mass destruction there. I think, probably it was either destroyed or hidden or shipped somewhere else. I don't think that's a legitimate reason for people to say that it was a lie to go there in the first place, but, you know, that's just my opinion. As far as why we're there now and what would happen if we left and how things would go down if we left, it's—if you are one to believe in the Bible, the events of the end times are going to be in the Middle East, and Iran is part of that, and Iran is no friend of ours. Egypt—so many things are going down in the last six months, since we started these interviews, even, and maybe America having a presence in Iraq is very strategic, even if that wasn't our initial statement of why we're going. So I don't know.

DePue: Are you proud to be able to call yourself a veteran of that war?

Blomberg: Yes. Yeah. I am. Not necessarily because I think the war was the right thing to do, but I'm proud to have done what I was asked to do, and I felt like I did it honorably, so from that part.

DePue: Well, we've been at this for a while here.

Blomberg: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: I really appreciate it. It's been fun, and I think it's also been important for other people down the road to listen to these and to understand it from your perspective. So any final comments for us?

Blomberg: No, I think that's it. I really appreciate you inviting me. I mentioned this to you off the air, but I'll say it to you now, too. You've brought back more memories than I think I could have brought myself, too, so I really appreciate you doing this.

DePue: Thank you very much.

Blomberg: Thank you.

(end of interview)