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Narrator

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Interviewer

Thayer Hotel
West Point, New York

WC: [Date cut off], 2010. We're at the Thayer Hotel in West Point. My name is Wayne Clark, I'm with the New York State Military Museum. My assistant is Mark Merrick. Sir, for the record would you please state your full name and date and place of birth?

MA: Michael Joseph Ariano. I was born on the sixteenth of October, 1980, in the Bronx, New York.

WC: Did you attend school in the Bronx?

MA: No- my family, we grew up in Rockland County. I attended high school at St. Joseph's Regional High School in Montvale, New Jersey, right across the border. I went to college at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida.

WC: At Embry-Riddle did you pursue an aviation career?

MA: Yes, I was interested in becoming an airline pilot at the time. But I was always interested in the "ground pounding" that the Army does so I pursued the aviation degree but also got linked up with the Army ROTC down there.

WC: Did you get a pilot's license?

MA: Yes.

WC: Commercial?

MA: Yes, commercial multi-engine instrument rated. Still current with a pilot's license, not instrument current but I still fly recreationally.

WC: While we're on that subject, did you consider becoming a rotary plane pilot?

MA: I did, but you know, there was something about the ground pounding that I really liked. I had read about doing the whole Ranger infantry, and that really interested me a lot more so I decided to go that route.

WC: So you graduated from Embry-Riddle, got your degree, and were in an ROTC program through them. You went to Fort Benning, Georgia. Did you attend basic at Fort Benning?

MA: Yes, that was the infantry officer basic course at Fort Benning Georgia. That was in January, 2004.

WC: Did you ever do jump school at Fort Benning?

MA: I did. I went as a cadet in 2001. Then right after the infantry officer basic course I went right into the Ranger school. Entered Ranger school in June of 2004- it was awfully hot down there- graduated August 6 of 2004. And shortly after that reported to Fort Drum, New York.

WC: So at Drum you were with the 10th Mountain [Division]?

MA: That's correct, 1st Brigade, 10th Mountain.

WC: How long were you there?

MA: I was there for four and a half years. I got there in September 2004 and left in March of 2009.

WC: What'd you think of Fort Drum?

MA: I liked it. I mean I'm from the Northeast, it gets awfully cold up there, and a lot of people don't like it because it's so cold- you get all that snow- but I didn't mind it that much. We did a lot of training. The 10th Mountain happens to be- I was told this- the most deployed unit since the end of the First Gulf War. So not including Operation Desert Storm, that unit went to Haiti, to Somalia, Bosnia, they deployed during Hurricane Andrew in 1992. First Brigade was actually the first- I was told, don't quote me on this- we were the first conventional Army unit to deploy to Afghanistan for Operation Anaconda.

WC: When were you deployed overseas?

MA: I left August 4, 2005, to Baghdad and came back just a year later, on July 30 of 2006.

WC: Did you go over with your whole unit?

MA: With 1st Brigade, 10th Mountain, the whole unit.

WC: What was your job over in Iraq?

MA: At that time I was a company executive officer of the headquarters company for the brigade. So the headquarters company was there and I was the executive officer so I would track maintenance- I wasn't supposed to do a lot of fighting, unfortunately- but like I said, tracking maintenance, making sure all classes of supply were there, plan ranges once in a while. When people would come and visit- when high Dick and Terrys would come to visit- if the brigade commander wanted to have a session with lower-ranking soldiers like privates or sergeants to get feedback directly from them, they would have a meal; I was the guy to make sure that would happen. Little jobs that didn't have a whole lot of work, I would make sure those would happen. And also, quickly, for a short time I was the acting PSD platoon leader. What that is is Personal Security Detail, it's a platoon that makes sure the high-ranking officers and NCOs in the brigade are safe when they go out on a mission.

WC: So you spent some time outside the wire?

MA: Yeah, I went on I'd say 25 to 30 patrols.

WC: Any contact with the enemy?

MA: The first and only time was February 11, 2006, it was in the evening. I'll elaborate a little bit on that, it's pretty much my only war story. We were coming back from a range. Our headquarters was on Camp Liberty in Baghdad, that's the main camp there. We also had other units on some outlying bases and camps. We were coming back from a place called Camp Justice. We had just done a range there, making sure our weapons were still zeroed and we could shoot straight- we have to keep up those skills. It was in the evening around five o'clock, and at that time of year the sun is kind of low on the horizon so it was in your eyes. We were coming back and usually nothing would happen when you were on patrols, but all of a sudden my squad leader yelled out someone just shot at us on a bicycle. We kept on moving and as the officer, I had to make a decision quickly; these things jump up really fast. So I asked if everyone was okay and they were. Someone was suggesting, "Should we go back and try and get this guy?" After a quick thought I said absolutely let's go get him, it was probably the most confident decision I've ever made. So we found a turnaround point, started to go back, kept our spacing; every one of the gunners had eyes open, looking for where this guy was. We got to the place where we thought this fellow shot at us. My squad leader yelled there was a guy on a bike, and he took off after the guy. We're only talking a lane's worth of traffic; we only traveled a hundred feet between the time when we saw the guy.

WC: What was he chasing him with, a humvee?

MA: A humvee, yes. He did a pull and *boom*, he got him. He was on a bicycle, so we all went- this was on the corner of a building. There was a break of about several hundred feet of just open area, it wasn't like there were buildings all around us. Anyway, we're at a corner of this building with all four of our humvees and he took off- this guy was immediately startled. He started to

take off on the bike, my squad leader fired two warning shots. I noticed immediately this guy did not have a weapon on him. Immediately in a split second I thought of a story that my old battalion commander told us where there was a Ranger unit that shot an unarmed civilian who was running away. The Ranger unit didn't know who he was, they thought he was the enemy but he was just scared. So when I saw he didn't have a weapon I yelled at my squad leader, "Stop, let's go and detain him." We had humvees, we could easily outrun this guy. So one humvee took off down the street, my squad leader got back in his humvee and just put the gas to the metal, traveled about fifty feet or so- not very far but we got in front of the guy. A couple of guys got out and we grabbed him.

At that point, that's when the shooting started to take place. We had an interpreter there, he started asking questions, like *Hey this guy shot at us, what happened?* This young boy started to scream and cry and yell, "Allah, Allah, Allah!" He was petrified. He said, "I didn't shoot at you but I know who did, these guys are in this building." This building was right next to us. My squad leader and I looked at each other and we both thought the same thing, that we don't have the guys to go and try to clear this building. We decided we'd stay here and call in QRF[1]. So we spread our humvees out so we have 360 degree security. As the officer, my two really important jobs- among others- is to give an order…

[Pause for background noise to stop]

MA: Like I said, we had established security where we had detained this guy in his late teens on a bicycle. We detained him, put a blindfold over him and put him in one of the humvees with an interpreter. We set up a 360 degree security on the corner of this building; that's when we started getting shot at. At this point, my squad is saying what's happening on the radio, and like I said before, my job as an officer is to make a decision and also communicate with higher. So I'm calling my higher brigade headquarters saying, "This is where we are, can we get a QRF out here to help us?" As we're getting shot at, that's the only time in my life I've heard my heart pound. But I'm trying to keep as cool as I can, telling the guys if you see a target shoot at it, and also communicating with higher, saying "This is where we are, we're taking some fire, we need some QRF out here, etc." Just trying to keep as cool as possible.

[Tape skips]

WC: You had this building surrounded?

MA: We were staged on the corner of the building because this was a big complex, we couldn't surround the whole thing. We had 360 degree security with all our vehicles. We had the detainee in one of the vehicles, and that's when we started to take some fire. My squad leader was saying

[1] Quick Reaction Force. Ariano explains this on the next page.

on the radio that we were taking fire. I distinctly remember seeing a bullet impact on a puddle about fifty meters ahead of my vehicle and seeing the big geyser of water come up in the air; I don't know how high it was but it seemed pretty high. One RPG was fired at us. I remember a squad leader or somebody screaming on the radio to me, "RPG!" just like in the movies you hear. But we stayed there; weren't able to fire any of our weapons unfortunately, I guess these guys just were able to get up in the building. I didn't see anyone firing at us. We were all in the vehicles and I was communicating with higher. There was a point my gunner- we had something called a Swanson Shield. What this shield was is three pieces of glass on top of the outside of the turret. If you stand up in the turret at neck level, one of our mechanics had put pieces of glass that would be just above your head level, but you could still obviously look out because it was glass. It was the same kind of glass they use on the fronts of humvees so it could still deflect a bullet or shrapnel. There was a bullet that ricocheted off the ground or a vehicle and hit my gunner right where his head would have been, but the shield protected him. That was pretty amazing.

Then at that point- I'm not sure how long, probably only a few minutes but a lot of things had happened- some QRF vehicles arrived, another four vehicles from Camp Justice. QRF- Quick Reaction Force- those are the guys that are in their vehicles ready to go at a moment's notice. After that, we were told to leave. This is where the story had a big lesson learned for anyone listening, especially if you're an officer or someone in charge: if you're the guy on the ground, you're the guy that makes the decision. Anyone that knows me knows that I'm a shy person, I have a passive personality. Unfortunately some in the military would take advantage of that. There was a major in our brigade who knew who I was on the radio, and after a discussion on the radio with him using a lot of condescending words, we told him we had a detainee. He basically told us to let the guy go. That's a decision I'm always going to regret, because even though it was an order from higher, he should not have ordered us to do that. This is someone who was probably a little jealous of the fact that this fresh new lieutenant was getting combat and he was a major in the Army for a long time and had not really seen any combat.

What happened after we unfortunately let the guy go, we drove back to our base at Camp Liberty. We were only going about ten miles an hour because the RPG that was fired took out the back wheel of the vehicle that was behind me- not my vehicle, the vehicle behind, his right back tire. So we got back to base and a bunch of people were coming over to me. Don't forget, I was one of the lowest ranking persons where I worked, there were a lot of majors- this was brigade talk, so our colonel worked there, a lot of majors and everyone were telling me that I made the wrong decision pursuing this guy, etc. Again, if anyone's listening, if you're on the ground, you make the decision, don't worry about getting an ass-chewing. A lot of people are jealous of what might happen. Later on in the chow hall, the same major that told us to let this guy go came up to me and all of my soldiers- everyone that had been in this small contact, we sat and had dinner together and started talking about it- he came up to us and said that I made the

wrong decision and everyone shouldn't have done that, blah blah blah. Unfortunately, being the person I am I did not disrespect him. I should have challenged the guy but again he was a major, I was a lieutenant. If I could do it all over again I would have acted a little bit differently, but when he left, all the privates and the NCOs were shaking their heads at this major. So what happened happened, but I was happy that with my first taste of combat I didn't freeze up, and the soldiers that were with me- especially the NCOs who had seen some combat- they felt comfortable going out with me again on some missions. So that's my war story there, from my first deployment.

WC: So you did two deployments, you did another one in 2008. Were things pretty much the same?

MA: Things were different. When I came home from my first one in 2006, if anyone will remember…

WC: Now how long were you over the first time?

MA: It was a year. Second time was fifteen months, so just a couple months over a year. If people remember, late 2006, early 2007- especially late 2006- there was a lot of violence erupting in Baghdad. People were saying withdrawal. I remember John McCain, he was the one saying, "Look guys, we need more troops. Let's do the surge." So of course what the surge meant was don't send more guys over, you just extend the deployments of guys who are already over there, maybe if some units are going to deploy you move their deployments up. So at any one time you have more soldiers there. We were extended this time. We left for a second deployment in late August- I believe it was August 25- 2007. We knew it was going to be fifteen months. I had a buddy there and two months away from thinking he was going to redeploy, he gets the word he was going to be there for another three months, so in that respect I consider myself lucky.

We were up in the Kirkuk area. I can't really tell you how much the same it was because it was a different part of Iraq. A lot of people don't understand, Iraq is really three countries in one because there are three ethnic groups there, in the south, the central part, and in the north where the Kurdish people are. Kirkuk is kind of the border between the Sunni Arabs and the Kurdish people. I was up there on something called a MIT team, a Military Transition Team, and our job was to help train the Iraqis so we could obviously get out of there and they could sustain themselves. So my job was to act as a logistical advisor to a brigade S-4, which in the Army is a supply and logistical person. So I was supposed to advise him, and basically help him out, help him try to get things, help him establish any continuity he needed. So we got there after doing some training in Kuwait, we got there late September. Our FOB[2] was FOB Gaines Mill, just

[2] Forward Operating Base

outside Kirkuk. The main base at Kirkuk was called FOB Warrior, and the Air Force calls it Kirkuk Air Base. We were just southwest of FOB Warrior. FOB Gaines Mill by the way happened to be- if anyone's ever heard of "Chemical" Ali[3]- happened to be one of his getaways. So it was funny, there were all these buildings there and a pool there- no one ever used it, it was dried up. There was about a football field-sized depression in the middle of the place, and that was apparently a fishing spot that "Chemical" Ali used, but of course it was dried up too.

I was there for about a year, just under a year on that base. We went out on just over 150 patrols with the Iraqis. Every time we went out the Iraqis were in the lead: they did a lot of the missions, they did a lot of the work. One big thing I was definitely proud of- in the Iraqi brigade there were six battalions- they didn't have any system of tracking supply or tracking what they had requested for. So after being with these people for close to three months, myself and my NCO that worked with me, we had figured out what we needed to improve upon. Just so everyone knows, when you're on this MIT team, you don't meet with these people every day. Sometimes the Iraqi officers would take leave for a week, sometimes you'll go on a mission and you'll be gone all day, so it's not like you're meeting with the guys every single day. What I was most proud of was we established a solid line of communication with them requesting what they needed, requesting everything on paper. It went from the battalions to the brigade, and I would take a look at it and see if it was something I could get them. Basically I made them accountable. If there were things that they requested I would send it back through the brigade chain of command using their supply system and making them do the work. I remember one thing- we had to get them a six or seven ton jack press to lift up vehicle.

WC: A hydraulic press?

MA: Yeah a hydraulic, thanks. I remember painting that, making a mark to make sure this got to them. We all know that a lot of the Iraqi officers and some of the ones in the Iraqi military, some are corrupt and they might take things and sell it to whoever. So after I gave it to the brigade officer, about a week later we visited an Iraqi brigade that I knew should've gotten this thing, and that's where the hydraulic press was. That's what I was most proud of.

Another good thing- what people might not understand initially, but a lot of the ones in the Iraqi military, they know the insurgents; they know where they are and things like that. I'm sure in America if you want to go out and buy some drugs, you know who to go to. The team that we replaced had a very bad reputation with the Iraqis, they treated them very poorly. They hardly talked to them. A lot of things were pretty shameful from what I understood. After a couple weeks of being there, after this team had left, one of the Iraqis said to my major- his name was Major Hislab- he said, "Major Hislab good, Major, the other guy that left, Major Levert very

[3] Ali Hassan Abd al-Majid, a member of Saddam Hussein's government. He gained his nickname because of chemical weapons attacks on Iraq's Kurdish population. Executed for war crimes in 2010.

bad." There was not surprisingly a difference in IED attacks on the road my brigade used and had to secure. I don't think that's a coincidence. When we started to talk to these guys in this Iraqi brigade and get to know them and go on patrols with them, the IED strikes on this road- which was just called Route Cherry- they decreased by an awful lot. So these interpersonal skills in today's military are a big thing, you can't just kill everyone you see. It's just the way the world is. Things like a video camera can have a huge impact on a war today. That's something our team was very proud of. We knew we left that Iraqi brigade a lot better off than when we came.

About once a month there would be a few mortar attacks on our FOB. None of the mortars landed close to where we were. But April of 2008 was the last attack we had on our FOB. Three mortars came and landed wherever. We said, "Okay" because this happened a lot. After that, again, no more mortar attacks for the rest of the time we were there, until late August. A good four or five months of no attacks on our FOB I don't think is a coincidence. The fact that we were patrolling with the Iraqis and had more security really helped out with what we were doing.

WC: All right, thanks for your interview.