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Veteran**

**Allison King
SUNY Plattsburgh
Interviewer**

**Interviewed on
December 3rd 2008, 3:00pm
Plattsburg New York**

Q: Name, branch of service, and the dates?

NWH: First name is Nathan, last name Haag. I was in the Army National Guard and I still am.

Q: Still in present day?

NWH: Yes.

Q: We are in the conference room in Macomb Hall. It's December 3rd, it's about 3pm. My name is Allison King. When and where were you born?

NWH: I was born in Sharon Connecticut, March 29, 1985.

Q: What was your pre-conflict education?

NWH: High school diploma.

Q: Now, you're in SUNY (State University of New York)?

NWH: Yes

Q: Did you work before you went into the service?

NWH: Yes, I did. I worked at the Ace Hardware's retail support center in Saratoga.

Q: Are you working now or are you just going to school?

NWH: Just going to school.

Q: When did you enter the service?

NWH: 20 August 2002.

Q: Was it something that you always wanted to do?

NWH: I think so, I did my last year in high school [unclear]. I just did it looking for something to do.

Q: Something before college?

NWH: Yes

Q: You obviously enlisted, right?

NWH: Yes

Q: You said it was the National Guard?

NWH: Yes.

Q: Was there a reason you picked the National Guard over something else?

NWH: It was something I could do while I was still in high school, so that why I picked that. I could have joined active duty but the National Guard sets you right up. They start you ready to enlist, well back then they did. So, I could actually go out to a range and shoot things.

Q: It was an immediate thing? Right into the action pretty much?

NWH: Yes.

Q: Did they work with your school? Did they want to work with you going to college and doing the national guard, or is it more like dive into that and deal with school after?

NWH: I was still going to high school. They have a whole office that sets you up with college.

Q: Where did you receive your basic training?

NWH: I went to Fort Benning, Georgia for fifteen weeks or so.

Q: Can you tell us about your experiences there, like what type of things happen in basic?

NWH: Before I went there, I heard so much about it and I thought I would be awesome there. I thought nobody could touch me. I was invincible. Then you go there and you just get shocked. You don't know anybody there, it's a whole new environment. There are people screaming at you; everybody is being screamed at. It was so much fun. Now that I can look back on it, I would love to go back. But when you're there, your obviously scared ...not scared but nervous. I had a good time. It was fun.

Q: Would you say that the basic training experience gave you a lot of camaraderie ship that you'd get while you're in a military service? Would you say it helped you bond to people that are going through the same thing?

NWH: I would say that you learn how to bond. I haven't seen anybody that I went to basic training with since I got out of basic, but you learn how to bond with other people. You learn how to build a team and work as part of the team.

Q: Was it people from all over the country?

NWH: All over the country.

Q: So, you had to deal with a lot of different types of people?

NWH: Yes, people from [unclear].

Q: Was that interesting; dealing with people from a lot of different backgrounds?

NWH: Absolutely. I got to meet people from different parts of the country and see their point of view, that was fun.

Q: Let's go a little more into the actual service. You're still in it. What was the date that you began it again?

NWH: It was 20 August 2002.

Q: Did you have any specific training that you went through?

NWH: I went to basic training which was nine weeks. Then I went to infantry training, which was another six weeks. All of that happened at Fort Benning, Georgia. Just back-to-back.

Q: For the infantry training, how was it different than the basic training? What were you learning there?

NWH: It's more focused on weapons and tactics such as; how a squad moves and different drills that a squad does. It's more focuses on fighting. I mean, if I had picked a commo (communications) job I would have learned how to talk on a radio or, learned how to deal with a radio during that time. But instead, I learned different weapons systems. It was more focused on that aspect of training.

Q: Was it your own choice to go into what you decided to go in to? Could you do different things?

NWH: Actually, I wanted to be a helicopter pilot first, so the path would have been to be a mechanic first and then later on, go to another school to become a pilot. I didn't get talked out of it at all, I just decided to do infantry starting out. I saw the guys that were there before me and they were going to Fort Drum on the weekends and just blowing things up during that time. Being in high school in twelfth grade, that sounded like fun. Who gets to do that? Blow some things up, right? My first drill weekend, I was shooting at this old school bus that they had on top of a hill. I sat there for maybe ten minutes just shooting. Then going to school on Monday morning; being in high school, was weird.

Q: That's an interesting experience. Do you think that matured you a little bit more than your other classmates who weren't going through these things on the weekend?

NWH: I hope so. One of the first things that my first squad leader ever said to me was "don't go postal when you go back to school". They were definitely looking out, making sure that nothing bad was going to happen. After Iraq, I definitely had a higher level of maturity than some of my friends, but that was later. After basic training I don't think my maturity level was too much higher as opposed to when I got back from Iraq; how much higher it was.

Q: What was your unit? Did you have a unit or a ship assignment?

NWH: Yes, I was part of Charlie Company, Second Battalion, 108th Infantry Regiment.

Q: How did you feel about combat before going into war? What were your views on it?

NWH: Well, Iraq wasn't even on anybody's minds. We thought we were going to Kosovo for a peacekeeping mission in 2004. That's really what we were training for...how to search cars, and just real peacekeeping type missions. Iraq and Afghanistan were going on in the background, but we didn't think that we were ever going to have a part in those missions.

Q: So, at the time you entered, you didn't think Iraq would turn into the conflict that it has turned into?

NWH: Right, absolutely. We didn't think we were going to have a part in that either, and we were really just focusing on being deployed for a peacekeeping mission. That was the big training (how we were being trained). Being, eighteen, seventeen, I didn't think too much about what combat would be like. There wasn't really anybody older than me that had been in combat before, so you didn't really get that experience from them either.

Q: While you were out there, did you get any medals or citations? Did you receive anything of the sort?

NWH: Nothing special towards me. But I got the Common Infantryman's badge.

Q: What is that exactly?

NWH: It's a badge that we wear above our name tape, and it's basically just a rifle with a big wreath around it. It symbolizes that you're an infantryman, you were in an infantry slot, and that you've shot and received fire. Before I got to Iraq, if I saw somebody with them, they were like God. Nobody had that. Even the people that trained me down in Fort Benning didn't have that. So, if somebody had that, it meant that they had been in combat before. You looked at them a lot differently.

Q: Was it a big deal for you when you received it? Did you feel more accomplished in your military life?

NWH: Not really, because you got it as a group of 30 people [unclear]. It didn't mean anything.

Q: Once you had it, it held a little bit less prestige to you?

NWH: Right.

Q: When you were over there, you were in Iraq right?

NWH: Yes.

Q: So how did you keep in touch with people at home?

NWH: My brother was actually there with me.

Q: That was another question I had...

NWH: My parents had three sons, and two of us were living together. He [my brother] actually had gone there a couple of months before I did. He was right there all the time.

NWH cont.: He had gone to [unclear] for a month and Baghdad for a month, but most of the time he was right there with me. I don't remember it being very hard to communicate back home with my parents. That wasn't really hard. But, at the same time, I was eighteen and just left home. I really liked the experience in this whole thing, being alone. I think I enjoyed it a little bit; not having to be around my parents or anything.

Q: Do you think that the experience would have been more intense or different if your brother hadn't been there with you?

NWH: It probably would have been, yes. It's hard to say, I guess.

Q: How often were you guys able to make phone calls home or write letters?

NWH: Pretty much as much as we wanted. The only time we couldn't was if we were out on a mission or if there had been a casualty. They shut down the phone lines and the computers until they could tell that soldier's next of kin what had happened. For instance; if one of my friends was hurt, the army at that small patrol base would shut down the computers and phones so that the army could go tell the parents, or wife, or girlfriend what had happened first before they got word from another soldier. It's more of an official way of doing it. The blackouts would only be a few hours, maybe a day.

Q: So, it didn't last very long?

NWH: No.

Q: Do you agree with the way of shutting it down?

NWH: Yes.

Q: What was the food like? How was the (unclear) over there?

NWH: At the bigger bases, which I wasn't at (I was only at the bigger bases as I was coming in late or leaving, and that was for maybe two or three days) the food there was great. At our smaller patrol bases, it was okay.

Q: Did you get MRE's (meal ready-to-eat) when you were there?

NWH: Yes, I actually got so sick of MRE's so I stopped bringing them and just brought Pop-Tarts and Slim Jims out with me. Eventually, I got sick from that, so that turned out to be fun. But we had MRE's. I guess the food was good. We had it, so it was good.

Q: I read in this thing; you said you guys had some really good supplies other than transportation, was that what it was?

NWH: Yes.

Q: What was the transportation? How was that?

NWH: This was like the second year of the Iraq war and Up-Armored Humvees (M1109 HMMWV), they didn't have enough for everybody. It seemed like our unit didn't have any of them. I think we had three at one point. We were supposed to have twelve, and we NWH cont.: were supposed to get ten later on, and we just didn't have them. A few months before I had gotten there (pretty much why I was sent as a replacement) the person who I was replacing was part of the five soldiers that got hurt because they were driving around in a five-ton truck without any armor, or very minimal armor. It created the controversy over these Up Armored Humvees. These five-ton trucks, they were from the late 1950's, I think. They were actually very good on the highways, but inside the city that we were stationed by, they weren't very good at all because they could be shot down inside. The armor, the amount of metal it had protecting its bottom, was very good. So, on the highways it's good but inside the cities it's not good.

Q: Do you think that transportation has probably changed since you've left?

NWH: Oh definitely.

Q: What would you say was probably one of your most memorable experiences or conflict?

NWH: That I would remember most; I would say October 1st, 2004. At the time, it was the biggest offensive operation since the invasion. It happened in Samara (that's where I was at). It involved 5,000 Iraqi and United States troops. My unit was right at the tip, and my platoon was right in front. It was definitely where I first saw a combat, where I earned my CIB (Combat Infantryman Badge). It was just this big, big, big operation going on and being at the front, seeing all the work that we put into it the months prior, I really think that was the biggest memory that I'm going to have from my [unclear], was that day and the next few days.

Q: What type of feelings were going through you in the first experience with combat that you had? Was it mostly fear? Was it excitement?

NWH: It was fear, definitely fear. I can only compare it to having a PlayStation controller in your hand and just wanting to press that pause button, just to stop everything around you. I know that's how I felt during it. I just wanted to press the pause button and get out of there because I hated it. Once you overcome the fact that you can't get out of it, you just gotta go through it, then it's a lot better.

Q: The people you listed (your brother and your mentor), did they have a lot of influence on when you first got into combat, of you getting over hitting the pause button and just getting done what you had to?

NWH: Definitely. Caster and all the other guys from my platoon; you could just look around and see that they were calm and they were good. I wouldn't say that my outside emotions were showing at all, but I'm sure that everybody inside was definitely scared just as much as I was. But because you can look around and see everybody else is calm, then you're going to be calm too. I think that helped a lot. I think if somebody's freaking out, the more people will freak out too.

Q: Okay, one question I really wanted to ask; the unusual duties or service. You said you had to burn feces. I've seen it actually in a couple of popular movies and stuff. It seems like punishment, to go burn. Was it more of a punishment thing?

NWH: No, it just had to be done. I was the lowest-ranking guy in my platoon and the youngest too. That just happened to be my duty, to do it. I did it just about every day for a whole month. It wasn't punishment or anything like that. I think usually around three o'clock I did it. It's funny, I get a lot of soldiers that also went to Iraq or that might have been in Baghdad, when they hear that I had burned feces, they have a whole new respect for me. It's pretty funny, but it's got me a lot of beers too. It was definitely a different thing to do. I don't ever think I was going to burn feces. A few times, the highest-ranking guy would do it too.

Q: What do you mean ... One of the responses to your survey said that there was a large amount of esprit de corps.

NWH: Esprit de corps?

Q: Yes, I'm not familiar with the term.

NWH: Esprit de corps is how well your unit is. How well they get together, how well they fight together. The higher the esprit de corps, the better. If you have a unit with a lower esprit de corps, that's not good. It's a unit that can't work together, that can't achieve the same thing. But our unit, because it's a National Guard unit we were all from the same small area, the same area in the state. There are guys that played baseball with each other when they were five. We got along really good together. Because of that, we knew each other. I think we could do more for each other because we knew each other from before. We fought a lot better that way and just absolutely got along so much better. It made being in Iraq so much easier because we knew each other from before.

Q: You think it was easier knowing the people before being in combat with them, possibly seeing them get hurt? It's easier than maybe being there with a bunch of strangers and seeing a stranger get hurt?

NWH: Absolutely. I don't think I'd ever want to go to Iraq with anybody else than the group of guys I went there with.

Q: And I remember you said that you guys seemed like you were superior in your training, but the simple techniques that your enemies were using were still effective?

NWH: Right.

Q: Would you say it was because of the poor equipment that you were using or just pure homeland advantage?

NWH: I think it was in more of a broader sense, but I think you're right on the homeland advantage there. I'm trying to remember certain ways ... They (the enemy) always seemed to be one step ahead, or they were right behind us. Something just didn't seem right. It was hard having all of this good technology and still suffering casualties and wondering how, why? Like the AK-47 is a great rifle, it was a very old rifle, and our

rifles were so much better but they were still able to shoot us in an effective way. It was NWH cont.: the mosques. We don't ever want to use bombs by mosques, so we can't call in air strikes against the mosques. A very simple thing they could do is to use the mosques to fight from, or to keep their weapons in, making it hard to defeat them. They were using such a simple thing; to stay in the mosques because they know we were not going to bomb the mosques.

Q: Did you see them using children? For example, using children to throw bombs?

NWH: No.

Q: Never saw anything like that?

NWH: No, it was definitely a fear though.

Q: It was definitely a fear that you'd have to? What do you think you would have done if you had seen a child attacking them?

NWH: One of the bad fears I had was that a kid would have a bag and would have a bomb inside the bag, and he would drop the bag by us or something. That was always a big fear that I think we had because we'd always let kids mingle around us. We figured the parents would be watching out for the kids. If they knew bad guys were around, they'd bring the kids inside. We figured if the kids were around us we'd probably be okay. They (the kids) were always great to hand out candy and stuff to give to.

Q: Do you think you're lucky for being there earlier in the conflict rather than in the last year or two where it's gotten really ugly on both sides of it? There's less support for the troops?

NWH: I really don't know. It seems like worse times are definitely in 2006, 2007. It seems like things may be getting better, I hope anyway. I went to a course over the summer where they were explaining how these IED's (Improvised Explosive Device) are becoming more complicated and harder to defeat. I learned about things that were crazy, that I never had to deal with there. The explosive shaped charge was coming out when we were there. Well, when we were leaving. Then there's things like motion activated IED's and just all sorts of crazy things that I never had to deal with. I was definitely happy about that. That I made it back from 2004.

Q: You did sustain an injury, right?

NWH: It was very, very minimal.

Q: Do you want to explain what happened?

NWH: I was actually in the back of the five-ton truck that I explained before. We had been doing this raid, this series of searches throughout the whole day. It was ten hours probably, and just extremely tiring. Our trucks were parked along this farm road. One side of the road is canal and the other side is a small village they were searching. They (our trucks) were parked there all day. And we finally got back inside those trucks and went down about 100 meters, turned around and came back. At some point there was an

IED there. It hadn't been there all night, and they (the enemy) must have been there the NWH cont.: day before. The IED exploded and we all put our heads down. There was enough armor in front of us to stop shrapnel, but shrapnel created all these sparks that showered down on our backs. When we put our heads down, it created space between the plate and our backs and our skin. So, all these sparks went down in between our plates. When we put our heads back up, that's when the plate and skin came back together and it burned, really bad. The dog tags are what really hurt the most. Right after that we just dumped water down our backs and it was fine.

Q: Would you say that that instilled more fear in you or made you mad and want to go out and fight harder?

NWH: Yeah, it just made me madder.

Q: Was there anyone that you were ...if you don't mind me asking and if you're going to feel comfortable answering (you don't have to) ...anyone that you were with in your unit that got seriously injured or any casualties?

NWH: Not in my platoon, but in the other platoon; the 2nd platoon. I was in 3rd platoon. The 2nd platoon, they had twelve or so casualties. Actually, the day before the IED on me, there was an IED on this other guy that sent him home with part of his skull missing. There are definitely casualties all around, and we reacted to them. It seemed like every month two or three of us were getting hurt.

Q: I see. What was it like when you found out that you were going home? You had a certain date when you knew that you were going to go there?

NWH: I don't think we ever had a certain date. It was actually funny; Christmas Eve they told us to stand by, be prepared to leave. Because we were a small patrol base, it wasn't like we could just jump on a plane and leave, they had to come pick us up in helicopters. We were waiting to find out if we were going to leave that night but nobody wanted to get their hopes up. We were at a talent show, and apparently the helicopters came and left without us so it wasn't for another two or three days that we actually got on the helicopters and left. I remember being in a small patrol base and thinking to myself, "don't get your hopes up, it's still a helicopter ride". Something could happen on the helicopter ride.

Q: Still a certain amount of fear?

NWH: Right. Everybody always jokes around about, "well what's going to happen"? "We are going to get to Kuwait and somethings going to happen". "We're going to have to go back to Iraq, so we are going to be extended". I remember a plane leaving from Kuwait and everybody started clapping and then eight hours later we were back in Fort Drum. So yeah, it was weird.

Q: Do you think your experience in Iraq, or your experience in the National Guard in general, did it influence you at all about the election that just happened or your ideas on politics in general?

NWH: No. In 2004, I voted when I was in Iraq. It's hard to get all of the information but just looking back then, it was John Kerry and George Bush. Looking at Kerry's record made everybody want to vote for Bush because it seemed like Bush supported the military more. Being in Iraq, you wanted that support behind you. I don't think it really influenced my decision at all in 2004. I realized that either one would probably do okay.

Q: In this past election with McCain and Obama, there are policies on pulling out in Iraq or getting the troops home as soon as possible. The policy is different [unclear] did that influence you at all? Just thinking about what you would have done in that position, what people there now might be going through?

NWH: I could see how they might be ...I don't really know. I never believed in the idea of having a slated time when to pull out. I think Obama's policy is that sixteen months. I would hate to see all the hard work that's been done wasted. People have died. I wouldn't say they did it for the people of Iraq or anything but it would be such a big waste if you come this far just to pull out without it working out for everybody.

Q: When you came home, did you have any regrets about anything that happened back there? Did you regret going at all?

NWH: No absolutely not. Within two weeks I started college and that was a whole other experience. I don't think I had any regrets at all. I knew I still wanted to be in the army. I still wanted to stay in the army and try to become something more than just a private.

Q: What was the first thing you did when you got off the plane, got out of Fort Drum, and you were back in your own home?

NWH: First thing I did ...Well I remember getting really drunk in the hotel and that was fun. Within a week; week or two weeks, I was starting school. That was really the first thing that I did, is start college.

Q: Was it important for you to get right back to a normal life? Did anyone try to treat you a little bit differently than they may have if you hadn't have gone?

NWH: One of my old managers at the place I worked at; I went right back there within three weeks or so, they treated me great. They were like "hey do you want to go home?" because there was a warehouse and boxes fall and there is a lot of noises all the time. The first night I was on edge and something would drop, or a lot of noise would happen and I'd get startled by it. I was allowed to go home a couple of those times because it would have been stressful trying to readjust.

Q: Was it just the first couple of weeks after being home, or does it still affect you now, just hearing loud bangs? Is it still with you?

NWH: I know some of my friends feel it a lot more, but I just put it through my head enough times that I'm home, I'm safe, nothing bad is going to happen. I don't think I'm bothered as much as other people are.

Q: Do you attend any reunions or see people that you were over in Iraq with and hung out with them since you guys have been back?

NWH: Yeah, it's actually pretty sad because the only time we see each other is when somebody dies. We are trying to change that whole thing. We try to get together but everybody has got something going on. It seems like the only time we are getting together is when someone dies.

Q: When you're done with school and your bachelor's degree, would you ever think about going back over in any type of conflict or combat zone ever again?

NWH: I don't think I would be as worried about it. I'm training right now to be platoon leader, so I'll be in charge of 35 people. I have to kind of be ready for it. I guess if I came up, I wouldn't have a problem with it.

Q: How would you say your military experience has changed or influenced your life? How are you different now than you were before you even started your basic training?

NWH: I think I'm more mature. When I see a goal, I'm more able to get it or achieve it. I think older people also look at me like I'm older than some of my peers, or that I'm more mature than my peers or more experienced. I guess because of that, I've been able to do a little bit more. But I think it's only changed me for the good.

Q: Would you say you get more respect from people that had known you before or even people that you just mentioned, that you went to Iraq with? Do you think it just gives you a certain amount of respect without knowing anything else about it?

NWH: Yes, definitely. At the same time, I don't really like that either because there's a lot of people that go to Iraq, and they're not all the best qualified people. Being judged on that fact, I don't really like that. If I was going to go to a job using my degree, I would want to be hired because my degree made me qualified for it, not because I've been to Iraq in 2004.

Q: Is there anything else that you want to say that I didn't cover?

NWH: No