

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

JOE DREES

Leading Petty Officer, Navy, Operation Iraqi Freedom

2016

**OH
2065**

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2065

Drees, Joe (b. 1956) Oral History Interview, 2016

Approximate length: 2 hours 21 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Joe Drees, a resident of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, talks about his career in the Navy and the Navy Reserves from 1980 until 2006, including a deployment to Iraq in 2006 as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Drees discusses his early life growing up near Sheboygan, Wisconsin and his education at a Catholic school. He talks about training in the Merchant Navy before leaving after two years due to an injury that occurred while onboard a ship. He then worked various jobs before joining the Navy in 1980 where he specialized in nuclear power, undertaking his classroom training at the Orlando Naval Training Center in Florida. From there, Drees did further training on a prototype reactor near Ballston Spa, New York before being stationed onboard USS Enterprise, USS Nimitz, and USS Carl Vinson. Drees talks at length about day-to-day life onboard ship and the practical aspects of his job. He describes shore duty at Bremerton, Washington and San Diego, California.

After 14 years' service, he left the Navy in 1995 and moved back to Wisconsin with his wife. Drees was employed by Kohler Company and continues to work there today. In 1997, he joined the Navy Reserves and describes the work and training as a Seabee, a member of the Naval Construction Forces. In 2005, Drees' unit was called up and despite having put in paperwork to retire, he decided to go with them. He discusses the various construction projects he was in charge of, including building forward operating bases for Special Forces. Drees mentions his daily life in Iraq and the challenges of working with much younger recruits. He talks about the stress the deployment put on himself and his family, and the difficulties of adjusting back to civilian life. Lastly he talks about other family members' military service and reflections on his military career.

Subjects and topics also covered include: drinking culture in the Navy, Operational Reactor Safeguards exam, women entering the Navy, and port time in Australia and the Philippines.

Biographical Sketch:

Drees (b. 1956) served on the USS Enterprise, USS Nimitz, and USS Carl Vinson as part of the Navy and Navy Reserve from 1980 to 2006. He served one tour in Iraq in 2006 during Operation Iraqi Freedom as a member of the Seabees Naval Construction Battalion before retiring later in 2006.

Archivist's Note:

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

Interviewed by Helen Gibb, 2016.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2017.

Reviewed by Matthew Scharpf, 2017.

Abstract Written by Helen Gibb, 2016.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH.2065.Drees_user_file1]

- Gibb: Today is Monday, February 29th, 2016. This is an interview with Joe Drees, who served with the Navy and the Navy Reserves from 1980 to 2006. Mr. Drees—this interview is being conducted—
- Drees: [Door opening] Hello. This is my wife.
- F1: Hi. Sorry.
- Gibb: Hi.
- Drees: It's okay.
- Gibb: So this interview is being conducted at Mr. Drees's home in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Helen Gibb, and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum oral history program. Okay, so, should we begin with where and when you were born?
- Drees: I was born in Red Lake Falls, Minnesota. It's way up north. And, 1956. And we moved to Wisconsin when I was maybe a month old. So I'm not really a Wisconsin native, but I don't tell people that.
- Gibb: And so how come your family moved down here?
- Drees: My father got a better job offer. He was working in a dairy in the town of Brooks, Minnesota. It's about fifty people. He was a farm kid and grew up in the Depression. Basically a self-taught man. He learned enough from working around the dairy that he got his boiler's license, and he moved to Milwaukee to—where there were actually better paying jobs. My family was living in basically a one-room house in Brooks, Minnesota that he had built. And so we got to go to the big city, and better jobs, and more opportunity.
- Gibb: And how many—were there siblings?
- Drees: I have six sisters and two brothers. And I'm the—I have three older sisters and three younger sisters and two younger brothers.
- Gibb: What was it like growing up with that many children around?
- Drees: Well, it was a lot of fun. There was a lot of fighting. My parents separated. When I was young my older sisters raised us pretty much. My mother worked two full-time jobs. She worked at Sears in the daytime, and she waitressed at night. So we

never went hungry, but we didn't eat a whole lot of steak when I was growing up. But it was so different than from today. A lot of families had a lot of kids.

Gibb: Were there any siblings you particularly got on well with?

Drees: Not really, because most of them my age were girls. And we were always fighting. They had their lives, and I had my friends that I hung out with in town. And some of those people I am still in touch with. My best friend Jeff I've known since third grade, and he is my daughter's Godfather.

Gibb: What was day-to-day life like?

Drees: Well, I lived in Pewaukee, and we had—we lived in a little farmhouse, one bathroom. And we had a barn. And we had all open fields in the back. And we were pretty much free to do whatever we wanted. We would build rafts and go out on Pewaukee Lake. Played softball in the backyard. Got into all sorts of trouble. But basically just had a blast. I went to a Catholic school, grade school. And so the nuns kept you in line, or tried to. And then my older sisters would take care of us. You know, did the cooking and that. But it was basically—we were pretty free to do whatever we wanted. There was—literally thrown out of the house at seven in the morning, and they unlocked the doors at night so you could come and eat supper. It was—all the kids were like that. Had a blast.

Gibb: And school?

Drees: School? It was a typical Catholic school in the sixties. You know, the old knuckles to the—erasers to the—excuse me, rulers to the knuckles, if you misbehaved. Very strict, very regimented. But they really taught you well, or tried to.

Gibb: So were you a good student? Or—

Drees: No. No, I was a troublemaker, and I was a class clown. And I didn't really study at all. And that was pretty much all through high school. We moved to Elkhart Lake in 1970 when my mother remarried. And that was quite an adjustment. Because Pewaukee was the big town of 6,000 or so. And moving to a little town of 700, it was—I never liked it there, and I couldn't wait to leave.

Gibb: And so did you have an idea of what you were going to do after high school?

[00:05:00]

Drees: Well, I had intended to go to college, go to Oshkosh and become a teacher. And I had also applied, on the advice of my career counselor, to the Merchant Marine academy. And I was accepted to the Merchant Marine Academy. And so I went there for two years, and—before I dropped out. And I kind of drifted around the

oil fields and that. I worked odd jobs. And then I ended up going in the Navy. I was almost twenty-four when I went in the navy, so I was one of the old guys when I first went in.

Gibb: So what did the Merchant Marine entail?

Drees: Well, it's an academy. You know, like the Air Force academy, or West Point, or whatever. Only this is for the Merchant Marine. And I got on the ships here. You spend six months of your second and third year on a ship, on a merchant ship, traveling around the world. And one thing I—I loved to travel. I loved being on the ships. I really enjoyed that. But the other thing was I was considered an officer, but I worked with the deck hands and all that. And I kind of enjoyed being with the deck hands more than being with the officers. I was pretty much a blue-collar guy my whole life, so. After I—I had an accident on the ship my first year and never really recovered from that physically. I fell behind, a year behind my class and didn't—things kind of soured for me there. And so I left. One of those decisions that you make that seems to be the right thing, and I think probably was a good—was the best decision for me, looking back on it, though my mother may disagree [laughs].

Gibb: What was the training like?

Drees: It was a military academy. I mean, it was, "Yes sir. No sir." Memorizing a lot of useless information. I was a plebe and pretty much, but there was a strong undercurrent of anti-authoritarian culture in there. You tried to get away with whatever you could. Drinking was really big back then. And that's where I really—I really started drinking at that college. And those were some of the best to learn from. I mean, it was—actually almost encouraged to drink there. It was a really macho environment. In fact, they only had women there the year before I got there. So there were only a handful of women there. So it was pretty—it was pretty wild. I enjoy that part of it [laughs]. The academic part, not so much.

Gibb: What were the academics, or things done?

Drees: Well, it was very heavy on math and the sciences. And I was a—they only had two majors there, engineering or deck. And I took deck. So I learned navigation, celestial navigation, cargo handling, ship construction. Anything there was to learn about being a deck officer. Those classes that were specific to the ships, I really enjoyed. The other subjects, not so much.

Gibb: And where was this?

Drees: That was in Kings Point, New York.

Gibb: And what was the—was that a big move going from halfway across the country [laughs]?

Drees: Oh yeah. It was—well, yes and no. Because you were stuck on the school. It's not a very big academy. So you had your little—tight little circle of friends that you hung with, and you're all in the class. And there was absolutely zero—you couldn't socialize with the other classes. That was called fraternization. And they were really big on that. You didn't do it. So you were kind of restricted to just your class, and then your friends. And then you had the engineering and deck, so you hung out with the deckies and that sort of thing. But it was—the dirty work of the school, I enjoyed. The academic section, not so much.

Gibb: And where did you get to go on—?

Drees: Went everywhere. I went to—first ship I was on was the Delta Mexico. And we loaded up—we went all over the Gulf and loaded up cargo. We went to Brazil, hit four ports in Brazil. Then we went to West Africa for three months and came back.

[00:09:42]

And then I went to the—which ship was it—oh, *S.S. Defiance*, I think. No, not the *Defiance*. The—it was a Lykes Brothers ship. And that's where I had the accident. I fell about thirty feet into a cargo hold, and broke some ribs, and had a hip injury, and spent six months recovering from that. They took me off the ship in Palermo, Sicily. And I spent two weeks in there before they could transport me to—actually stay with the Naval attaché in Rome for a few days before they flew me home, which was kind of fun. Flying first class in the 747 and with the uniform I was wearing. It had blood on it and everything else. It was an experience. That was back in 1976 that the accident happened. So I stuck—I studied at the academy for another year, and then I left.

Gibb: What was the reason for that decision?

Drees: To leave?

Gibb: Yeah.

Drees: I—well, part of it was I had fallen behind. I was now set back a year because I missed school. My sea project disappeared. While you're out at sea—you're out at sea for six months, and you have a huge stack of problems and qualifications to do. And that all disappeared in the transition from getting off this ship to—so basically had to do my third class year again. And that didn't sit well to me. And I was hitting the bottle pretty good then. And I fell behind academically. And then I was like, To hell with this. The next year they had sent me to go out to sea again, and I just—basically I—after six months of being out at sea, Ah, this isn't going to work. I don't want to do this. I don't want to go back to that school. So I just signed off the ship in Texas and came home.

Gibb: Did you come back to Wisconsin?

Drees: Yeah, I came back, and I stayed with my father for a while. And I lived with him for about a year. And then I—just doing odd jobs. And then I got on my motorcycle, and I went down to Louisiana, and I worked in the—on the boats taking supplies out to the oil rights. Did that for a while. And when I got back from that, I had about, I don't know, \$8- or \$9,000 saved up. Which, back then, was enough to go pay for college. And I was going to go back to school. But I drank all that up in three months. And I thought, What the hell. I joined the Navy [laughs]. Back in 1980. So that's how I got in the Navy.

Gibb: So your intention hadn't been to go sort of into military—

Drees: No, not really. It was a—I had screwed my life up so much. What am I going to do now? You know? So I thought, Well, I'll get some experience in the Navy as a boatswain's mate. I wanted to try that. And I took the exams, and I scored high enough that my recruiter says, "You don't want to be a boatswain's mate. I was a boatswain's mate. You want to be a nuclear power plant operator." I said, "Why do I want to do that?" And he says, "Well, I'll get my gold recruiter's badge if I sign you up. And if it doesn't work out for you, you can always be a boatswain's mate." I said, "Oh, okay." I had pictured these guys in white lab coats and a clipboard. And no [laughs] that's not what it was. But I ended up going in the nuclear power program. And I went through power school in Orlando for six months. And that was classes for forty hours a week. And you took thermodynamics, and physics, and nuclear physics, and electrical theory, and everything. Just solid classroom. And then, after that, I went to upstate New York, and I went to prototype for six months there. Not many people realize that the Navy has nuclear power plants in upstate New York.

Gibb: No. What—

Drees: Ballston Spa, New York, which is near—I can't think of it now. I'm losing it. What is that—actually—

Gibb: We can come back to it.

Drees: Well, we can come back there. But that was—there was one of the famous Revolutionary War battles there in 1778 or whatever. But, sorry—

Gibb: I probably should know.

Drees: That was the one where—who was the traitor—Ben—not Ben Franklin. It'll come back to me. Was it George something? It was near—south of Lake George. We'll get back to that. It's in the middle of the woods in the middle of nowhere. And we—I was in prototype there for six months. And after completing my training

there, you filled out what we called a dream sheet, where you want to go. And I said I wanted to be on a fast attack out of Hawaii, fast attack submarine. Or I wanted to be on a fast attack submarine out of Norfolk. And then I said, "If you send me to a surface ship, I don't want to go on an aircraft carrier." So obviously they sent me to the *USS Enterprise*. So they got a good laugh out of that.

[00:15:15]

So I spent four years on the *USS Enterprise* working in the engine room there, and had a lot of fun there. I did that for—I did three deployments in four years. And after that I got out of the Navy in 1986, and basically just goofed off for a year. And I went back in a year later, and I went to the *USS Nimitz*. And the *USS Nimitz* was an east coast ship that had just transferred to the west coast. The *Enterprise* was a west coast ship. And in the Navy, they have an expression, "East pack, no slack. West pack, kick back." And I went from the *Enterprise*, which was, "Just go out and do your job, and we won't mess with you," to the spit-and-polish east coast Navy of the *USS Nimitz*. And that was a real hard transition to make. Because, What is with these guys?

So I was there on the *Nimitz* for four years. And then I cross-decked over to the *Carl Vinson*. And I was there for two-plus years. And then I went to my first shore duty billet. And I went to San Diego, to the nuclear repair facility. I was with the initial crew. They set up a shop there. A nuclear repair shop. There were no ships there. So I basically played golf for two years on the Navy's dime and the taxpayers' money. And I met my wife when I was there. So in 1995, I left active duty Navy. And I had fourteen years. And people said, "Why do you stay and get your twenty?" "Oh, you go live on a ship." I had just gotten married, and there's no way I'm going to do another six years sea time. And especially if you're in the nuclear navy, you're stuck on that ship. That's a twenty-four-seven job. And when you come into port, that's when you catch up on all your work and all your training.

So my wife and I moved out here in '95. And we had everything that we owned in a pickup truck. And we settled in the area. And then four years later, I went in the Navy Reserve. And I tried to get in as a machinist mate, but they want—there were no openings. And they gave me the choice. I could be a legalman, or I could be a Seabee. Legalmen—I was TAD to the legal office at Great Lakes for a couple weeks. And it was the absolute worst job in the world. You get all these phone calls from people. "My husband's been out at sea for six months, and I haven't got a paycheck yet from him." "The toilets are plugged up in Navy housing." And, oh God, you know? And they want all this legal advice. "I'm just answering the phone. I'm sorry." So I didn't want to do a legal—and then Seabees, I knew—all I knew is they were in the dirt Navy. And, well, it's got to be better than a legalman.

So I—because I had worked with the air compressors, and water purification plants, and that sort of thing, I was able to squeak by. And they kind of bent the rules a little bit to fit me in the Seabees. So I joined the Seabees in 1998. And at that time, it was just a big country club. It was just a social organization. Most of the Seabees were in their forties or fifties. And they were all professionals. You know, master carpenters, master plumbers, contractors. Extremely good at their jobs. And then I come in with really no experience whatsoever in construction. So I did the jobs that I thought that nobody else wanted to do. The admin jobs, the career counselor, and things like that. And so I did what I could. And I went on projects and I learned watching and carrying a lot of heavy stuff. And learned from these guys who were all—they're just the greatest guys in the world, the Seabees were. And so I—technically I was a plumber. I did one plumbing job in eight years.

So I did that. And then I got enough—got my twenty years in. And then, it was, “Well, there's nothing on the horizon.” And my civilian job, I work a lot of weekends and holidays. And the drilling— with the Seabees, I would go to Fort McCoy a lot, or down to Milwaukee. Well, that's where I make my money is on the weekends. It was the time-and-a-half and the double time. And was costing me about \$8 to \$10,000 a year to be in the Reserves. So I retired.

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And then a few months later, we got—the battalion got its orders to activate. And it's—I've been with these guys for eight years. These are my buddies, you know. I don't want to leave them behind. So I went through the process of un-retiring. And by the time I caught up with them, they—the battalion had to send so many bodies to what they called “Task Force Sierra” which was a joint active duty reserve command. And someone had this great idea, “Well, you take these highly-experienced reservists and put them in charge of these active-duty—eighteen years old.” And we'd supply the brains, and they'd supply the brawn. And it did not work at all. It was just a really bad idea. Because reservists and active duty never got a long anyways. And I'm—I turned fifty right after I came back. And I'm with a bunch of eighteen-year-olds and nineteen-year-olds. And it just—it was crazy. I mean, we go the job done, but it was a hard way to do it.

I did my deployment. Did my—I was gone for close to a year and came back. And then put my paperwork into retire, and I retired. And had my retirement ceremony at Miller Park. And basically, instead of those formal formations, and standing in a line, and at ease-ing, and—which I had sat through I don't know how many of them. Pain in the butt. I'm going to go to the ballgame and eat some brats and drink some beer. So we did that. And it was pretty good.

And that was pretty much my career in a nutshell. Enjoyed it. Probably the best jobs I ever had. What can I say?

Gibb: Well, I'm going to take you all the way back to your nuclear school.

Drees: Okay.

Gibb: And ask you about that [laughs].

Drees: Sure.

Gibb: We got an overview. That does help, actually. But yeah. Let's take you back there and maybe how that was similar or different to some of the stuff you'd been doing—

Drees: Well, nuclear power school was—it was all classroom. And it was made intentionally hard to weed people out. They wanted to train you to do it exactly the way—this way, here, and no deviation. If you got caught walking on the grass, you were gone from the program. If you got a ticket, a parking ticket, you were gone from the program. Any deviation or disciplinary action, you were gone from the program. And I think something like of a hundred people that applied for the nuclear program, only three percent made it through. It was tougher to get through than the Navy SEALs. You had to be really, really smart. And you also had to be disciplined enough to follow the rules. Or, actually, how to get around the rules. Because there were a lot of people like that there.

And so you're with—there were a lot of college dropouts or people who had done college and were bored, or wanted to try something different. And so you went to class in your dress uniform for—it was basically Monday through Friday. And then you were on mandatory study hours, or suggested study hours the whole time you were there. And it was just classroom. That's all it was. That's all we did was go to school. There were no—there was no PT, there were no—there's no anything. But class started at seven and it was done at four or five o'clock at night. And just a grind. There was no breaks. But they were—I was with the last class that—when Admiral Rickover was there. And he was Big Daddy Nuke. He was the one that started the nuclear program, and he was there forever. And so we were still commanded by people who had all gone through his program. And very, very different then than it is today.

But, like I said, the Orlando part was just classroom. And then I went to New York, and basically they had nuclear reactors. I went through a submarine prototype. And it was actually in a big tube, just like a submarine. And you had an airlock to go in, and you learned how to be a nuclear plant operator. And that was an eight-hour shift, plus four hours mandatory study either before or after. So it was twelve hours. And you—it was a rotating shift. So every cycle you got four days off or three days off. And generally you finished at midnight, and we would party all night, and have a cookout until eight in the morning. And then we'd go golfing or something like that and then pass out. That was part of that drinking heritage back then, which—you know, if you didn't drink, you weren't a man.

You weren't a real Navy guy. So things have changed quite a bit. And that was also the pre-urinalysis Navy. So there was a lot of dope smoking back then, too.

[00:25:23]

But that was pretty much it for prototype. You actually learned how to qualify on an operating reactor. So you've got to turn the valves, and do all the paperwork, and start the reactor up, and all that. It was a lot of fun. It was hard. It was a lot of studying. And it was—I don't know what other word for it. The nuclear Navy is very chickenshit. I mean, it's very—cross the t's, and dot the i's, and exactly, exactly this way. And that's what you learned. You learned how to do it. And you were tested every year, something called ORSE, when you were on the ship. Which was the Operational Reactor Safeguards Exam. And they always said—you know, you spent—ORSE was the one day off that you got off from ORSE preps. Because as soon as you passed the exam, you start training again for the next one. And this was the whole reactor department. And if you didn't do good on an ORSE, they kept the ship in port and no one left the ship until you were ready to retest a month, or two, or three later.

So I was lucky that we always did well. I was—*Enterprise* had a very good department. And the *Nimitz* had a good department. And when I went to *Carl Vinson*, they had a lot of problems. *Carl Vinson* was always known as a lower-tier ship. They were not really professional or anything like that. And I was actually talked into crossing-over to the *Carl Vinson*. So I ended up having to retrain the whole crew there, or the whole engine room anyway. And a lot of resistance at first. But at the end we had people from the other plant—there were two plants. I was the leading petty officer in number one main machinery room. We had people from the other plant wanted to come, transfer into mine. My plant was cleaner, and people were better-trained, and higher efficiency. The equipment always worked. People got in less trouble. I got them more time off than anybody else. That was—the Navy has a way of—no one leaves the ship until the job is done. And I thought, That's stupid. We need three people to do this job. Why keep thirty people here? So you guys go take off. I'll cover you, don't worry. And that loyalty was a two-way street, and it worked very well.

It didn't get me in good—I had my problems with the Navy. And I got a few disciplinary problems. But for the most part, they liked me. I mean, my command did, because they didn't have to worry about that engine room. That was my spot. Just come down, take a look, admire it, and then get out. So that was my turf. And I really enjoyed it. It was very demanding, and a lot of long hours. But you really had a lot of pride in that plant. I mean that thing just sparkled. I mean it was clean, and it ran good. And when you're out at sea, and they crank up, head flank, and opening up the steam valves, and the screws are turning faster, and it's just rumping and thrumping, it's like, "Yeah! Come on, let's go baby, yeah!"

You just got a thrill out of that. And it's something you just don't get in the civilian world. And I work in a boiler room now, and it's just God-awful boring, compared to how it was in the Fleet. Though it could get really boring out in the Fleet, too. But we had our ways around that. We'd play softball in the engine room on the *Nimitz* with a duct-tape ball and a two-by-four bat. And we were always playing tricks on each other. And actually one of the best tricks I ever saw, they pulled on me. I mean, you have a coffee cup—and I don't know if you know about coffee in the navy, but it's a big thing. I had my ship's coffee cup, and it was plastic. And I had all these sayings with a label maker on there. And that was my cup. And I would come down on watch, and I would get my coffee cup out of the locker, and I would go get myself a cup of coffee.

[00:29:54]

Well, I come down on the three to seven watch, three o'clock in the morning. And I come down, and I open my locker, and I grab my coffee cup. And instead of being this tall, it's this tall. And I'd just been woken up fifteen minutes before. I'm looking at my coffee cup, and I—Did I set that on the turbine? Did that thing melt? And then I look, and I can see teeth marks on there. Somebody put that in a vice and crushed it. I thought, You son of a bitch. I'm going to kill somebody. And I—and my buddy comes up to me, he's, "Oh man, sorry, we can't do this anymore." They had found one just like mine, and made it look like it. And I turn around and look, and there's the entire offgoing and oncoming crew. They're all sitting and hiding, looking from behind every nook and cranny. They're laughing. And I look on—"Well, you got me." So I thought that was—that was just absolutely fricking hilarious. And it was kind of fun. I mean, I look at [inaudible], but boy did they have me. Because, I mean, I was absolutely just stunned. Just—I wish I had a picture of that [laughs].

We had our—you know, the engine room, we were a tight, close bunch. It was a restricted space, so nobody could come down there except for people in the department. And we tried what we could to make it our home. And, like I said, we're very close. I still stay in touch with a lot of these guys, even though I haven't seen them for thirty years. Send emails once in a while and go on with life.

Gibb: Tell me more about your day-to-day life. You said you were onboard for—

Drees: Oh, on the ship?

Gibb: —Twenty-four-seven, and—

Drees: On the *Enterprise*, it was the first nuclear aircraft carrier. It was a very hot engine room. It was made for operations in the North Atlantic, so of course we were sent to the Persian Gulf. And it would—our berthing compartment was—would get over a hundred degrees. So the engine rooms were like 125, 130. And that kind of

heat—they couldn't work you all day down there. And we basically were just four on, four off. And your off days, you were in the berthing compartment. Three hundred people in a little space and three-high bunks. Played a lot of cards, did a lot of reading, and basically slept a lot. Or you stood half your career in the chow line waiting to eat. There's 6,000 people on an aircraft carrier. And at that time, they only had one chow hall open. And so you're—you know, an hour and a half wait in line wasn't unusual, especially spaghetti night or pizza night.

Later on they put air conditioning in the berthings. And they also opened another chow hall up. And they basically served twenty-four-seven. So that cut the lines down quite a bit, which was fantastic. You could just go and grab a sandwich or whatever. But I went to the *Nimitz*, and the *Nimitz* was, like I say, a completely different ship. It was more modern. The engine rooms—they get in the nineties, but very bear—like I say, it was hotter in our berthing than it was—on the *Enterprise* than in the engine room on the *Nimitz*. And it was a totally different design. The *Nimitz* only had two reactors. *Enterprise* had eight. And there were only two engine rooms on the *Nimitz*. You had two main engines in each engine room.

And so we worked from seven until five. And you also stood a watch. We called five-and-dimes. Five hours on, ten hours off. But it worked out that you got to sleep every three days, because you're standing either ten o'clock at night until three in the morning, or three in the morning until seven in the morning. And then we ran our ORSE drills usually after flight ops, which ended around ten, eleven o'clock at night. And if you were—so if you got off watch at nine-thirty or ten o'clock at night, you had to be the—you were on the casualty assistance teams. So you had to show up for the drills. So they managed to mess that up. So you basically—you hardly had any chance to sleep at all. But you're young, and full of energy, and you could do that.

So it was mainly—it was mainly routine when you're out at sea. It was—you stand your watches, do your training, do your cleaning. Of course we did all the maintenance, too. We were kept busy. And, you know, the Navy was—if you're working, you can't get in trouble, so. You got into a routine. And we still had time. Of course, the big thing was going out—was going into port. And in those days, you got a lot—you got to go ashore and visit the ports. Now, they just go straight to the Gulf and back, and these poor kids, they don't get any time to have any fun. We went to Australia, and Japan, and Singapore, Hong Kong, Philippines. Went to Africa.

[00:35:10]

I actually went to Pakistan when I was on one cruise. I didn't leave the ship. I understand some people had a good time there, but we had a problem with the oil system, so I wanted to shut down the engines, and tear it apart, and find the problem, and get that done. Because we had to have an extra watch down there

to—when the oil pressure dropped to a certain point, if it didn't—if the emergency pump didn't come on, the guy had to manually turn it on, because of a relief valve that we had that was malfunctioning. So I tore the system apart, and found the problem, fixed it, and put it back up. And I did that all—I did this, you know. And it's working now, and don't ask how.

And at the end of my career in the Navy, they were so much into quality control, and everything was micromanaged that no way you could have gotten away with—I would have been busted out of the nuclear Navy. Probably restricted to the ship for sixty days. Like I say, those days are gone. That won't ever come around again. At least I think so. It's hard to get through the PR that the Navy gives out these days. But I don't know anybody in the nuclear program anymore. And—who knows. Maybe things are better. But I doubt it [laughs].

Gibb: Were any of the—your stops in port, were any of those particularly memorable?

Drees: Australia was fantastic. We had finished almost three months in the Gulf. And we hadn't even seen daylight, hardly. Working in the engine room you don't see it. And suddenly we've got a pocketful of money, and the—they had something called a dial-a-sailor program there, where if Australian girls wanted to meet an American guy, they just called this number and they posted their phone numbers. You know, "I want to meet a guy." And so I lived with a family for five days. And I was only supposed to be there for two, but it stretched into five. And I had an absolute blast there. I mean, it was hard to beat Australia. And the Philippines at that time was another great place to go. That was Dodge City. I mean, it was just wild there. You went there and there was nothing but bars down there. And I think a beer cost about a nickel with the exchange rate there. Wild times there, absolutely wild times. I don't talk about that now anymore.

So it was a different world back then. I mean, you just—you know. Nothing was politically correct back then. I mean, that word didn't exist back then. We just went out and had a blast, and partied hardy, and whatever. When we—my last deployment on the *Enterprise*, they came up with this great idea to have this big party on the beach so we could decompress there. And it was at the officers' beach in the Philippines. And they had free beer, and free steaks, and all that stuff. Great. They didn't want you going on the town. So, well, of course we went there, we ate our steaks, and we drank our beer. Then we went out on the town. So that plan kind of backfired. But they hired six hundred hostesses at that party. And—that was something else. I won't go into details there. It was just crazy. Crazy. A bunch of hyped-up eighteen-, nineteen-, twenty-year-olds going out and having a blast. And I can't say the officers weren't any different. They did the same thing, too. They tried to keep a lower profile than what we did. But kind of what happened in PI stays in PI, or something.

Yeah, I would say that Australia and the Philippines were the two great, great destinations. Although Hong Kong was good, too. In 1986, when they had the

run-in with Gaddafi, we actually went to the Suez Canal. And we went into the east coast Navy, which was kind of fun. Because they said you couldn't leave the ship without a button-down shirt and long pants. And we didn't have that because we were the West Coast Navy going to Tropical ports. And we had t-shirts and cutoffs and that was it. And flip-flops. So our captain says, "Ah, just go ahead and have fun." But I went out—we went to Italy. And I went on food tours there, or a couple of tours there. That was fun, going to try the different cuisines. And I got to go to Pompeii. And that was an absolute blast. Oh, you could spend a month there, it was so neat. And we had a very good tour guide there. So I really liked Italy. I'd like to go back there sometime.

[00:40:14]

And we went to the south of France after Italy. And it was kind of funny, because we just hung out in the Arab district, because they were a lot more friendly than the French people were. But I think we were in Italy for three weeks, and two weeks in France. And that was our expo—This east coast Navy's nothing. These guys have got it made. Here we were going three months between ports, and now only a few days in between. And now, of course, they don't even do that. But I enjoyed my port time, for sure. In fact, I would have guys take my duty so I could spend all my time on the shore. And then when we came back to the States, I would fill in for them. Of course, they were married and got their kids there. And so I would—we'd get back to the States, I wouldn't leave the ship for the month, because I was still standing duty for everybody. But I lived on the ship, so really, what difference did it make?

Gibb: Were there any particular challenges that you had while on board?

Drees: It was mainly routine. I think—back then we had no internet. And you had—I think dealing with people's personal problems was the hardest thing. Because—well, I was single most of the time I was in the Navy. But guys would get Dear John'd on there. And the depression would really hit you. I remember my first deployment on the *Enterprise*, we spent Christmas there. And it was real depressing. I mean, we're in the Indian Ocean, and everyone's just kind of moping around. And somebody—they're playing music over the PA system. And somebody played *I'll Be Home for Christmas*. And there was not—it almost caused a riot. But then a few days later, the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders came on board and did a show. And, wow, you talk about morale going through the roof. And it was a real, real neat experience. Because their—they had Marines with shotguns escorting them around the ship. Because there were no women on the ship at that time. Not like today. And so they were there for a reason, those Marines. And I remember that.

But I think just being the isolation—I mean, you get a letter from home and it's three, four, five weeks old. You get packages that were three months old. You open it up, and ugh. And all the food in there's all kind of bad. You ate it

anyways, really. But I think just the isolation. And I didn't really understand that until I went to Iraq. And, of course, I was married and had a little kid. And I didn't realize how hard that was on the people.

But we had our—like I say, you hung out with your buddies in there. Being single, it was great. I mean, really, I lived the life. I loved being a sailor. I loved that. Being in an engine room, being with a good—called us Hole Snipes. I loved it. I really liked my job, and we were—I was with a good group. And we were really good. That was the other thing. We were—we were always one of the top engineering ships. And we took a lot of pride in that, even though we wouldn't say it, because that was a lifer thing to do. But we were real good, and we knew it, and we were real cocky. And it was a lot of hard work, but it was very rewarding, too. When I look at my job, civilian job now, it just doesn't seem to matter. It's just like, meh. So what? You leave, someone else takes the spot. So what. I never got that feeling from the civilian world that I got from being in the military.

Gibb: Did you have contact with home? Were you writing?

Drees: I was a horrible letter-writer. My mom would write me once in a while. And she told me she worried about me all the time. But mail-calls were the—they had a plane called a COD, which was a cargo plane. That was the one with the mail. And it would come in, and they'd blow the—you know, "Mail call, mail call." And you had a guy from each department would go get the mail for that department. And people would just be there waiting, waiting for that mail. And then you get a letter that was three, four, five weeks old, or the newspaper from home. Really, like I say, I wasn't much of a letter-writer. It wasn't really that hard for me when I was single. Married guys, that was—mail was manna from heaven. And, like I say, no internet then. No communications. We would pull into Hong Kong, a lot of guys would call home. Like, man, it was like five bucks a minute to do that. And, "Really?" I never did that. [Inaudible]. So I would just basically disappear for nine months. And I'd come back. I'd call home. "Hi, ma, how's it going?" "Well, it's about time you got back!"

[00:45:33]

But it really wasn't hard from that point of view for me. The married guys had—that was a different thing. And when the ship pulled in, the guys whose wives had given birth while they were gone, they were the first—they got—they were first ones off the ship. Which, you know, great little bit of payback, but not much. But really it was just a lot of fun. I really enjoyed it.

Gibb: And what did you do in those months you had—months back Stateside?

Drees: Well, you had a—what'd they call it? A slowdown, or—basically you got a thirty-day cooldown period. It was just, everybody took leave and went home, and whatever. So that was pretty easy. I lived—I was single. I lived on the ship year-

round. And—which kind of stunk, because as soon as you got in, that’s when you fixed everything that broke from the three previous months. And a lot of times they took steam off the ship, so you had no showers. The needle guns are going twenty-four-seven, so you couldn’t sleep. And it was really tough being single on there. There was a lot of tension between the married guys, and the sing—because the Navy paid them for living off the ship. And single guys didn’t get that. And I had a storage shed that I rented with about four or five other guys. We kept our motorcycles there. And we had some old car seats and stereos. And we would go there, and take a case of beer and a cooler, and just sit there and watch the world go by. That was my home away from home.

But when I—on the *Enterprise*, I was in Alameda, California. And when I went to the *Nimitz* in ’87, that was in Bremerton, Washington. And it was cheap enough there that you could afford to live off-base. And I—a buddy of mine from the *Enterprise* had a—he was on shore duty up there. And I lived with him in a trailer and paid like \$100 a month rent, something like that. But it was nice getting off the ship. So that—when you’re in port—I did a lot of drinking in Alameda. I know that. And we took the bus into Barton, whatever, and we’d just go out and just get hammered, and come back, and go to baseball games, and whatever. And when I was in Bremerton, I—it’s beautiful out there. I almost moved to Washington when I got out. And there was so much to do out there. I love Seattle. I love the mountains, like I say, and the rainforests and all that. And I had my motorcycle, and I would go everywhere right around there. So very active off the ship. It was something to do off the ship.

Whereas in Alameda, what you have out there—I mean, it’s right next to Oakland, and not a very good neighborhood. And when we were in dry dock for a while, we were actually at Hunters Point, which was one of the roughest neighborhoods in the country. In fact, they wouldn’t let you off base there. You had to take a ferry back to Alameda. So that was kind of tough. It was almost like a jail sentence there. Because you had to live on the ship, and no two ways about it. It was always cold. You know, they talk about—Mark Twain said the coldest winter he ever spent was a summer in San Francisco. That’s pretty much true. It’s always in the fifties and foggy. And you just couldn’t get warm. And try finding long underwear out in California. You just can’t find it. No Fleet Farms out there.

Gibb: Not even being used to Wisconsin winter?

Drees: Oh, this is an easy one, this one here. This is a piece of cake. A couple of years ago it was rough. This one was pretty easy. Not much snow either.

Gibb: So where are we up to now. You’ve had—you’ve been on board a couple of—a few different ships.

Drees: I was on—yeah, I did nine years sea duty. And then I went to my shore duty in San Diego. Which was, like I say, basically two years of playing golf. And I was

extremely upset, because I had re-enlisted for orders for shore duty in Bremerton area. They sent me to San Diego. And I said, “Well, I”—“Too bad. Go get a lawyer and sue.” So I was very upset at the Navy at that. And I had—I was kind of burned out, too. It’s a lot of work. I was the LPO on the *Nimitz* and the *Carl Vin*—

[00:50:00]

Gibb: What is that?

Drees: Leading Petty Officer. That was my engine room. I was the top blue shirt. And I took my job very seriously. And when I went to the *Carl Vinson*, the people there—it was a long—almost two years in the yards. And these people had never seen steam. They’d never steamed an engine room. And I had to get these guys qualified. And I was worried about having enough people getting qualified. So I would be on the deck plates at five in the morning. And I was there until six, seven, eight o’clock at night. And then day, after day, after day. Get these guys up to speed. And it took its toll on me. I got just burnt out. I love my job, but you got to—social life, what’s that? Other than hitting the bar on the way home. And it really got old. Then I went to San Diego, and I went there with a big chip on my shoulder, because I was set up for—I had a place to stay in Bremerton, and I had a girlfriend there, and—nope. You’re going away and, pow. Wasn’t happy at all.

And I got to San Diego and went to check in, and they didn’t have a place for me to stay. So I was in—literally, was in a closet. They cleaned out a closet for me and put a mattress in there. I stayed there for a week until they got a room opened for me in the barracks. So I wasn’t real happy about going to San Diego. And here I’m going from the fleet to shore duty. And I had my interview with the Command Master Chief, and she says to me, “You’re never going to make chief. All you’ve ever done is work in an engine room.” Well, I’m a machinist. [Inaudible] we supposed to do? Well, I should have been a career—I should have been a recruiter. I should have been an instructor somewhere. We used to call the people that worked in the office, “office skirts.” And I wasn’t a—they didn’t fit the macho image of a machinist mate.

I mean, on a ship of macho guys, you got the deckhands, who—we call them “deck apes.” Boatswain’s mates. And you had the machinist mates in the engine room. And those were like the most macho guys that were out there. So you had an image to uphold. And being in an office in an air conditioned area and doing typing, that didn’t fit in with that at all. So I stayed away from there. So everybody knows the path to make promotion. And—ah. I never looked at the Navy as a career. Which kind of explains how I bounced around, in and out, and all that. But I definitely had my ways of—this is what you—it should be like. And it conflicted quite a bit with the Navy’s way of what you should do. So I just followed my own path, and did my own thing, and did it my way. And they didn’t look too close. They were happy. We always did well on our exams. And they just

let me alone. It just wasn't good for my career. And then I got fantastic evaluations, but I didn't have the background behind it. You know, the admin background.

But, again, I wouldn't have changed it. I enjoyed my time there. But when I—I met my wife, and we got married three weeks before I got out. And I said, "There's no way I'm going back on a ship." So we came to Wisconsin in '95. And that was a terrific choice there. That was by far the smartest thing I ever did, was come here, leave the Navy. It was the right time. And Clinton was president back then, and the Navy shrunk, and there were—no one was getting promoted anyways. So I know guys that waited seven, eight years to get a promotion. And they were—like I say, they were shrinking the fleet. A buddy of mine reenlisted for orders to Bremerton, and they decided to—he went to the *USS Texas*. They were supposed to go for an overhaul, and they just said no. And they cut the ship up instead. So he was a little upset about that. But it was not a good time to be in the Navy. And things were right, and—"Ah, let's go." Walk away from it.

Gibb: So it was '95 you said you got—

[00:54:31]

Drees: I left the active duty Navy, yeah. And then in 2000—or 1997—'98 was when I went in the Reserves. Not quite four years later. And, I say, I went in the Seabees. And that was a whole different world. The mental attitude was the same. The blue-collar thing was the same. I think the macho image was kind of the same there, too. And that macho image even—that was my first experience with women in the unit. We had women in the Seabees. And those gals were just as equal or better than the guys were. Which kind of really—you know, I was—there were no women on the ships. And there was a lot of, "Ah, you don't want women on the ship and all that." But once I saw them in the Fleet, or in the Seabees, and saw what they could do, it was like, wow. It really changed my opinion quite a bit. And I didn't see any problem with that. I think the young guys coming in, I think they're more affected than the people that—who had been there a while.

We had gals that—man, they had the big Seabee tattoo on their shoulder. Our master chief—the command master chief, she joined the Seabees and the reserves because her husband was and wanted to spend time with her. Well, the husband got out. She stayed in. She ended up getting divorced. And she was like—she was one of the most macho people I ever met. I mean, she was tough as nails. And there was another gal that—she was the head of maintenance at a quarry. And she was one of our—she was one of our top Alpha Company people. She could handle any piece of equipment, any construction equipment, anything. Or repair it. So she was a huge asset to the battalion.

And the Seabees was kind of neat because it didn't matter what your job did, everybody was cross-trained. I mean, you'd go on a project—I was a plumber,

and I did a lot of framing, a lot of carpentry work. I pulled cables for the electricians. When I was in Iraq, like I say, I did everything but plumbing. I was a—we needed a crane. And so our bosses got us a crane. The—God knows who they were. CIA or FBI or whatever they were, I don't know. They got us a crane. And there was a little book in there. You—oh, it's—okay, you pull this lever and this happens, and—all right. So if you were in the active duty Seabees, you had to go to school for six months. And even then, they wouldn't let you play with it. Here, well, we had to get this done and we did it. That was part of that being in that Special Forces thing. We were separate from the command. We were out in the field. All they wanted was, "Build us a base." And we built it. They didn't care how you did it. Get it done.

And that was—that was something, that whole Seabees thing in Iraq. It was—you train, and train, and train for war. And now you got the opportunity to—okay, it's the big game. It's time to play for real. And to actually go out there and perform and do what you did, it was really a fulfillment of a career. I was very, very pleased with how things went, as far as being able to get the job done and overcoming the obstacles. I mean, we get thrown in with those eighteen year olds—well, the first thing when I went to Iraq was they put me in charge of camp maintenance. Which I had trained before. And I assigned to this Task Force Sierra, which was Special—we were support for Special Forces. And I was in the headquarters up in Balad. So with General McChrystal and all these guys, all these—they were SEALs. The—he was in charge of all the SEALs and all the Army Rangers and all the cloak-and-dagger guys, and all that. They were—nobody wore uniforms. You didn't know who they were. Except us. Our idiot command made us wear uniforms.

Anyway, I was in charge of camp maintenance there. And I would get a call at three o'clock in the morning. The doorbell squeaks. I mean, it's all these generals and admirals there. And they were a bunch of prima donnas. My doorknob squeaks. Three o'clock in the morning? Really? Okay. Go over there and put a little oil on it, or straighten the frame, or whatever. Oh, God, I just hated that. I mean, here I'm a—from the engine room. And I hated office—I didn't want to be around officers, and I'm up to my—you can't swing a dead cat without hitting an admiral or a general.

So after doing that for two weeks at the headquarters, they said, We need someone to go put some air conditioning units at a forward base. I said, "I'll do it." And my command didn't like me, and I didn't like them. So they said, "You sure you want to do it?" "Yeah, I'll do it." So I go out there with these twelve eighteen-year-olds who were going there for this project, whatever. And instead of installing air conditioning, I get there, and here's a single strand of barbed wire around this big open area. And there's a pile of lumber. And, "Oh, you're the guys here that are going to build the base?" I went, "What? I'm here to put in air conditioning." There wasn't—how are you going to hang an air conditioner when

there's not a building to put it on. There are a few tents there. And holy crap. I'm in way over my head.

[01:00:20]

And so I called—I was able to contact the command. I said, “We need somebody here who knows construction.” And so they sent my chief, Chief Ebel [sp??]. And he'd been in the unit for twenty years. And he was fifty-five years old, I think, at the time. Fifty-six. He'd been doing construction since he was sixteen years old. But he'd never been active duty Navy. And he was a real nice guy. And he did not want to offend anybody. And he kept very much under control. And basically ended up—he provided all the technical knowledge and leadership and all that. And I was the whipping boy. I was—he was the good cop. I was the bad cop with these eighteen-year-olds. We had to unlearn them everything that they had learned and train them.

And we built this base, basically, from scratch. And it—what it was, was—it was a detention center. I can say that now, because my thing is up. It was where they took people and they interrogated them. And there were—I don't know. I'm only guessing now if they were FBI or CIA or whatever doing the interrogation. But we built the—it was basically a prison. And they went there. They—when they took the prisoners, they were—we built the cells. We also built the combat information center. We built living—and a rec room and all that stuff. And I lived in a tent the whole time we were there. And we finished that. And we had these dozen Seabees that we had trained, these young kids. And we went to—back to the headquarters. And I was there for like two days. And they said, “Well, we're going to send you on this other project.”

So I went on the other project. They sent us as a group because we had done such a good job that we were specifically sent to go to the other place. And it was an old Iraqi military base. And it was mainly warehouses. And the Army had a transport company there, a battalion or whatever the Army stuff is. And they were—we kicked them out, basically. And so, I was there with the initial—with my boss. And we did a survey and all that, what we were going to do and everything. And we basically gutted all the buildings, and we built inside those these warehouses. We built living quarters and command information center. We built the helicopter landing field. And we started out with twelve Seabees, and we ended up with over 150 people working on this project.

And it was basically my—the same chief that I worked for before. He was in charge. And I was the—officially, I was the ops officer, which was kind of funny because I was an E-6 enlisted. But I ran the day-to-day operations and coordinated all that. And we finished that place on time. And—or, actually, ahead of time. And they were very, very—it as kind of funny, because our command were these active-duty clowns. And I don't say clowns lightly. They were—I have a very low opinion of them. They wanted training reports. They wanted midterm evaluations.

They wanted—I mean, I had a guy. He cut his thumb, okay. Yeah, it happens. The Army medic sewed up his thumb, and he was good to go. Just grab the hammer like that. And they found out about it. And they just hammered me. “Where’s the accident report? Where’s this? Where’s that? What are you doing? Blah, blah, blah. Where are all your training records?”

And we had a liaison guy from the Army, or I think he was from the Army. But he says, “You know”—or they would come down, and the whole command, “Where’s this? Where’s that? Where’s that? Why don’t you guys got your hard hats on? Blah, blah, blah, blah.” And he says, “You know what? Get out of there.” And they—he did not allow them to come onto our project site from then on. And we didn’t have—and he cut communications with us, so they couldn’t call us, and, “Where are the reports?” and all that.

It didn’t bother me any, because I knew I was going to retire when I got done. I was worried about my boss because he was really going to catch it when we got done. And we thought, Boy, they’re going to nail him good. Well, the admirals and generals or whatever that had—that were stopping by, and Special Forces, they saw what we were doing, and they were happy as hell. They wrote us a commendation and all this stuff. So they couldn’t dump on this guy. And he ended up getting promoted because of that to senior chief. He retired a few years later, but he—we—as things worked out, it couldn’t have been any better. I wasn’t happy to be there, but it just worked out good. I mean, we go to play the game our way, and build it our way, and throw the rules right out the window.

[01:05:16]

I mean, we—when we got there, there was—I don’t know if you know what a t-barrier is? That’s those concrete walls. They’re kind of inverted t-shaped. These were fourteen-foot-high concrete. And there were two metal eyes on the top. So we had to put this t-bar—[yawns] excuse me—put these t-barriers around there. And we had this giant excavator that one of our guys drove. And what he did was he put a guy in the bucket and just lowered him there. And he hooked up the cables to the eyes. And we picked it up, moved it over. Put the guy in the bucket and set it down. And this is an eighteen-year-old kid. And we got it done.

Like I say, I was playing crane operator. I had never been trained on a crane. Our medic that was assigned to us, he was a dump truck driver. And I forget how many people there were. There were like thirty or forty active-duty Seabees that—in this big Task Force Sierra. We were spread all over the country. And There was a SEAL base about fifteen miles away. And we would go there once in a while and trade supplies and stuff. And the Seabees there, the active duty guys, hated it there. And the battal—the active duty guys there, the—that were in charge over there, they hated the reservists. So we ended up getting all these reservists. “Yeah, we’ll take them off your hands for you.” And they were just so happy to be there. They loved it.

But we got that project done. And they actually—it was supposed to have been done in October, or Septem—or November, something like that. We were running operations out of there in August already. And we were support for these operations. I mean, the helicopters would land at night, and we'd take supplies off. We housed the troops. Sometimes they'd be there for a night before. And give them meals and stuff like that. And it was a—I hate to say it, but I enjoyed the hell out of myself in Iraq. I really—and my boss, we just meshed perfectly. And we both had a great time. And we laughed at the active duty—we didn't like the command. We didn't like the active duty people. And we got along great. And we got the job done. And we got it done fast and completely contrary to all the rules of safety in normal—we didn't have plans. We didn't have anything. And some of these active duty groups were over there the whole time, never got a thing done.

I mean there was—one of the welders that we stole from them, in his spare time he was putting armor on the Humvees for the SEALs and that. And the command said, "You're going to do that, you got to do that on your own time. You can't do that during the daytime." But it worked out great. It was hard, hard, hard work, and the stress was unbelievable. Get this stuff done. Get this stuff done. But we got it done, and it was very—wow. You look back, and go, Holy crap. I can't believe we did that. But it was neat. It was fun. And I don't remember all the nasty stuff, but it was an experience. From a professional point of view, I was very happy with what we had done. And, of course, everything's all blown up or burnt down or whatever now. But it was—a really—really a good accomplishment. I'm very proud of what we were able to do there. Kind of keeping the tradition of the Seabees open.

Gibb: Well, let me just take you back. So kind of sort of go through that [inaudible], the buildup to Iraq as well. So what was your reasoning behind joining the reserves back in [inaudible]?

Drees: Well, I had fourteen years active duty. Okay, well you can—if you get six more, then you get twenty year service. You can retire as a reservist and you get benefits. You get health insurance, and little bit of a pay, and all that stuff. That was the one thing. But the other thing was I really missed being with the guys. And the funny thing about going into the Seabees, there were a lot of ex-nukes in the Seabees. So it was like old—it was like a reunion almost. And I didn't know any of them from active duty, but I knew a lot of people that knew friends of mine. And they had all mainly shared experiences.

[01:09:52]

It was—like I say, when I first went in, it was like a social club. You know, before September 11th. After that, the training took on a whole different—rifle? Guns? What's that? I had never fired a weapon in my Navy time. And then, all of a sudden, I got to learn how to shoot. Which they didn't do very well teaching

people. So I kind of joined a gun club around here and got involved with shooting. And I ended up being an instructor, firearms instructor in the reserves. That was kind of fun.

Gibb: What kind of training were you doing sort of pre—

Drees: Oh, we went on projects, mainly. It was—Wood Cemetery in Milwaukee, we did a few projects down there. We built walls. So there was a brick wall that was falling down. And we tore the old wall down, and we took the ground out, and we put proper drainage in there, and built the wall back up again. And we would do—we would go over to some guy's house and build a patio [laughs]. Well, it was training, you know? I mean, really, if you look at it. As opposed to active duty guys, where you're sitting through a PowerPoint presentation. Yeah, you're going to learn a lot from that. It was all—I mean, I did deployments—or three weeks or whatever active duty a year. I went to Guam twice. I—a lot of times we went to California, and we just played Army. We had to learn how to dig a hole, and string communications. And I took a machine gun course one time.

But it was—you had your formal training and your informal training. And our informal training was all projects. And there were a lot of guys in construction, like I say, the Seabees. And a lot of times, construction—the economy would turn down. They'd do—they would sign up for these projects that the active duty guys were doing, or reserve guys were doing, and they'd go off for three months, and do whatever. There were guys that went to Alaska, which—they spent most of their time fishing up there. But it was in rate and knowledgeable training.

I spent two weeks in Louisiana in New Orleans going to career counselor school, which was fun. They didn't have a place in the base for me to live, so I—they put me up in a hotel room, gave me a government vehicle, and the class was like from nine o'clock until noon, usually. I had a lot of free time down there. And I had been in Louisiana years before. So I took advantage of it. It was just basically a two week vacation. What the hell, you know? The Reserves was the best-kept secret. And I don't—I still don't understand why people don't go in. It's a lot of—you get a lot of bang for your buck, let me put it that way.

Gibb: What was your civilian job at the time?

Drees: I was—when I got out in '95, I worked at Borden Chemical. I made formaldehyde. Did that for eighteen months, and I got hired by Kohler company and work in the power house there. And I've been at Kohler since '97. So pretty straightforward, all automated, boring work.

Gibb: I'm assuming there isn't really an equivalent of the things you were doing.

Drees: Well, when I was in the—I learned all—the nuclear Navy, I worked—it was all steam plants, and turbines, and pumps, and valves, and systems. And that's all

directly translatable into Kohler. Only it's—you know the job at Kohler is insignificant compared to what I—I mean, the training doesn't really exist. And you can—we actually take people off the street and train them. And they hire through the union. And they learn it at anywhere from three to five years. When I went there, I was basically filling in for supervision after three months. So it was basically a step down knowledge-wise and all that.

I mean, Kohler isn't going to be attacked by another plumbing company. Whereas in the Navy, you have to learn damage control and fires, firefighting and all that stuff. Everything's critical. If it's broke at Kohler, you fix it. You couldn't—you couldn't shut things down. You had to go fast through the water, land planes. If you can't land planes, you're not any good. So you get upset when the aircraft carrier's out of commission. But Kohler, yeah it's just easy. We used to—I describe it as a—basically you—an in-port steaming. We have boilers, but you don't really do anything. It's just providing steam for heat. The water systems are all automatic. You just monitor and take care of problems as they show up. Pretty boring. Plus you can sit down over there, too. In the Navy, you could never sit down on watch. Just a—you go there, hang your hat, and collect a paycheck. Do what you got to do. Not real stressful.

[01:15:00]

Gibb: So the Reserves is a good opportunity to—

Drees: Yeah, it was an escape. And you get to be with your buddies. Because the military has a whole different mindset from the civilian world. And I still consider myself a—I still look kind of down on civilians. And, Civilian, what do you know? And it's funny, because half the guys I work with are prior service at Kohler. Most of them only did one tour, but still. The guy I work with now, he was an Army guy. And it's funny, because he was a military policeman. And he was stationed in Korea when my ship came in. So I said, "Yeah, I was out in the bars drinking in Korea, and you were one of the guys trying to chase me down." Small world kind of thing. So you can relate to that. It's kind of a—the military, if you're a veteran, it's kind of a big—you can kind of relate to any other veteran. And I can relate to the Army guys. But then I can relate more to the Navy guys. And then I can relate more to the Seabees or the Hole Snipes. So it's all kind of like one of those Russian dolls. You've got your rings of togetherness or whatever.

Gibb: So what was the training like post-9/11? What were you—

Drees: We got much more into—less into construction and more into the military aspect of it. And the training was so—well, we trained a lot on convoys. And that sort of thing. And I actually was trained as a convoy commander. And that's what I was going to do. When I retired, put my paperwork in, they pulled me out the slot, and so they didn't really know what to do with me. So when that other thing opened up. But we—yeah it was all—we trained on the, like I say, the military aspect of

it. We got into weapons training. And instead of doing one two-week [inaudible], we started doing two or even three two-week or three-week ATs a year. And there was less emphasis on construction then. It was get you up to speed with the military. So we learned about radio communications. And none of that was applicable to what I did in Iraq. That was the other thing. None of it. Not for me, anyways. And for the vast majority of people.

I didn't go out and—I only went out past the wire a few times. That was doing security details and things like that. That was a little—very strange. Walking around with a loaded rifle. I'd been shooting in the civilian rifle leagues, and that sort of thing. You didn't load your—until you were ready to fire on a range. Everything was down—all of a sudden, you've got this rifle slung around you and with a magazine in. It was like, Holy crap. That was one of the few times that I think the reality really hit home, what you were doing and that sort of thing.

But mainly it was just—and that was the other thing. The active duty Seabees, they wanted to do all the military stuff. None of them wanted to do construction. It's like, Well, that's what you're here for. I mean, we had our—we even put it on a bulletin board on a big banner down there. When we start our day, we have our pre—our briefing at the start of the day. And we had it right on there in big letters, “You are here for one reason. To build shit.” And that was it. That was our—we were—our mission is to build this place. And these guys, these kids, they were like, “Are we going to get any medals for doing this? What kind of medals—how am I—how's this going to help me get promoted?” All the wanted was the office job. All the wanted to do was as far away from construction as they could. I was—all I could think of was, “Why'd you get in the Seabees then?”

But it was—our training prior to Iraq—we had a convoy team that trained. And we had a convoy security team that trained. And those were the guys that took all the casualties in Iraq from my unit. And so maybe getting off the convoys was a good thing for me. But lost two good friends over there. Next question?

Gibb: Well, I was going to ask—so you actually—you left the Reserves prior to the deployment?

[01:19:38]

Drees: Yeah, I put my paperwork in in July. They—see, they changed the rules. When I went in the Reserves, they said, “You need eight years in the Reserves to retire as a Reservist.” In 2005, they changed that. You only had to do six. Well, I had my six years in. It was costing me money to be a Reservist. And as much as I loved being in there—I got a wife, and I got a little girl, and I got all this stuff. It's costing me too much money. And so I put my paperwork in. And I didn't even have to drill then. So I was going to retire officially January 2006. And, like I say, I didn't go to the monthlies anymore. And then in October, we got—you know, “Hey, we're going to Iraq.” I said, “Really?” I said, well—I didn't have to go.

They told me, “You don’t have to go. You’re already being processed to get out.” I was just like, “Man, I can’t stay behind. These guys are my”—I had known these guys for six years. Very close to these guys. We had a—they know your kids and your wife and all that stuff. It’s like, man, I couldn’t sit there and watch those guys go.

So I went through the process of getting activated and getting back in the TAO and all that. By the time I caught up to them, they went on over to California a week or two before me. And by the time I got up there, then they got hit with the—we’ve got to send somebody to this other unit. And, “Oh, Drees is here now.” He’s not on our organization table anymore. So I got—I was one of the lucky few that got sent. And you know what they say, No good deed ever goes unpunished. And I was really, really angry about that for a long time. But looking back on it, the way things worked out, and getting sent, having my boss, and hooking up with the other reservists and all that. It worked out very well. Like I say, I’m more or less over that anger. More or less [laughs].

Gibb: So did you—I assume you had conversations about your decision to deploy, given that you—yeah [laughs]. Don’t know how much you can say, but—

Drees: It was—you know, looking back on it now, I shouldn’t have done it. It—to me, it was a no-brainer to go over there. I mean, to go over there. I mean, you have your loyalty to your friends and to your unit and all that. And that’s something that I don’t know if civilians can really relate to. But looking back on it, it was very, very stressful to my wife and daughter. And it hurt my daughter a lot. I didn’t find out about that until later. But she would cry at night all the time. “Where’s daddy?” And that was—that separation. When I was with that active duty unit, or with that—and Task Force Sierra, we could call home. During the last three months there we got communications. And I could call home any night or anytime. But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t talk on the phone and say goodbye. I mean, it was—to hear your girl, “Daddy, I miss you daddy.” Oh God. So I limited myself to a long call every two weeks. It was—oh God, that was hard. So looking back on it now, I should have never gone. I mean, it was—put my family through that. That was just pure selfishness. Just so I could go out there and have fun.

So that—you know, it’s kind of like, I wish I’d have known. I wouldn’t have done it. And looking back on it from ten years now, it was all a waste anyways. Everything I built is gone. ISIS is over there where I worked now. And what good did it do? It was a total waste. All those people killed, all that money spent. What a damn shame. And we knew it there, too. When we were over there. We knew it was a—you could see it in the people. They didn’t want us there. We’re—we had always painted ourselves as the good guys. We’re the guys with the white hats. We’re here to help you. They didn’t want us there. You could get through that—guys on the ground knew that. I mean, the guys that—politicians. They thought it was World War II or something, getting liberated from Hitler. Oh, they’ll

welcome us. Uh, not really. No, they hated our guts. I kind of don't—really don't blame them. So—I don't know.

[01:24:33]

I don't regret it. At the time it was—I think it was the right decision. There are things I've done in my life that I regret. I didn't want this to be one of them, not going. But then seeing the toll it took on my family, I shouldn't have done it. There's no way I should have done that. If I knew it—but, you know, you're in a rock and hard place kind of situation. So I think I did the right thing. And I don't know what would have happened if I would have stayed behind. I would have felt that guilt of not going over there, especially when you lose friends over there. “Why did you stay home when you could have gone?” That sort of thing. And there were people that declined to go over there. And I don't have a whole lot of respect for them.

I work with a guy at—he's been in the Reserves and active duty. I think he just retired. And he never went over there. “Why didn't you go over there?” “Well, I didn't have to.” And I think he's the only guy in the whole military that never went over there. He was—the whole time he was there. It's like—so I don't have a whole lot of respect for the guy. So I don't know. It's everyone decision to make. To me, you're—I looked at it—fun and games aside, you're a professional. That's your job. What's what you're supposed to do, go over there. You train for war. You train for this. Do it. So I did it.

Like I say, I'm proud of what I did, but you paid a hell of a price. My family paid a hell of a price for me to get my ego stroked or whatever. But it's done. It's done. It's over with. I just hope the—I wish our politicians would realize what exactly the kind of toll it takes. Even just peacetime is hard enough. But going over to a war and all that—I don't know. Those people have been killing each other over thousands of years. Our—us being over there isn't going to change anything.

Gibb: So I think it sounds like it's a lot of loyalty to both family and [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]—

Drees: Oh yeah. I mean, you have—the Reserves. You know, when I—when you're active duty, you're constantly transferring around. You're there for two years or three years, and you transfer. You're in the Reserves, you're there for the whole time. And there were guys that were in that unit for twenty-five, thirty years. And you look forward to the weekends and talking, catching up, and all that. And joking with each other, and people—like in—I drilled out of Milwaukee. A lot of those guys, they worked on civilian projects with each other, or—they socialized a lot because they're close down there. And you don't get that in the active duty. I mean, you still stay in touch with them. I mean, on the—in the Fleet, you're literally living with these guys right above you. You know, your three-high bunks

and all that stuff. So you get—you form those bonds, and they stand the test of time. Same thing with the Reservists. It's the same idea, just slightly different.

But yeah, those are—there are some really good people. I mean there's some people that you just absolutely cannot stand. And the—you know, it wasn't all everybody's best buds. You had your enemies and all that stuff, too. And there are jerks, and thieves, and creeps, and whatever in the military. But you tend to meld with guys of your own like. So yeah, I like it. That part of that life, I miss a lot.

When I got out, I thought I'd go in the VFW and hang out with those—they're a bunch of old farts, so [laughs]. Maybe in a few years when they've died off, I'll start going to the meetings again.

Gibb: So you went to California to train to go to Iraq did you say?

Drees: Yeah, we were there for two, three months. I left in January. And I think I set foot in Iraq April 1st. So January, February, March, three months. And—well, you had to go over there—you had combat first aid course. That was two weeks. And I took a weapons course. It was mainly just waiting around, getting processed. Getting your shots, getting this, getting that. And there were some guys—like the convoy guys were training all the time. Well, I got assigned to that active duty unit, I start going—I had to be with them. And we—oh God, you know?

Gibb: Do tell.

Drees: Well, you—okay. You have your big formation in the morning. And they're all into this oorah stuff. And then, "Let's go run and sing songs." And, [singing] "C130 sitting on the strip." Like, get out of here, you know? These eighteen-year-olds running. I'm forty-nine years old, 240 pounds, trying to keep up with these guys. And then we got done with all that garbage about eight or nine in the morning. And we were done the rest of the day. And I—you got a whole month to wait around. We're in Port Hueneme and there's nothing outside the base there. It was really nothing—you have no transportation. And we were pretty much restricted to the area. And my nephew graduated from the Marines Corps when I was over there. They wouldn't let me go down to San Diego and visit him. "You've got to stay twenty miles from the base."

[01:30:24]

There's nothing there. It's—that part of California, you get out there, it's all agricultural areas. Flat as a billiard table. There's nothing there. So a lot of waiting around. A lot of reading. And a lot of cellphone calls to mom—to my wife, rather. And that was about it. Just God-awful boring and that stupid oorah crap in the morning. I never did fit in with that whole military—I spent twenty-two years in the military. But I always said, if I wanted to be in the military, I would join the Army. The Navy's—we didn't go along with that stuff. The shiny

shoe stuff. When I was in the Fleet, we called them top-siders or shiny shoe Navy, or—all that stuff. Leave us alone.

Same thing with the Seabees, the Reservists, you know. We're here to build stuff. We're not here to play those stupid games. And that's what their life was, was nothing but stupid games. They—a lot of those guys had never held a hammer before. And so we had to teach them from—with my limited knowledge I was a God to them as far as construction knowledge. Which—and I knew practically nothing.

So it was—California was just basically, like I said, waiting around, getting shots. You had to do a bunch of online courses. I wish I had the certificates here. I've got them somewhere. Some of them were about why you shouldn't pick up prostitutes and stuff like—what you talking about? You go to Iraq—yeah, you're going to go out, go to a bar and a nightclub and try and pick up some girl there? What are you, nuts? I mean [laughs], what is your view of this country? You know, it's like—that's stupid stuff like that. And then—so you got to get all these computer courses done. And of course the computer terminals in the Navy were so, so slow. I think that was—it was the Navy's version of busywork to keep you out of trouble or whatever.

And when we first got over there, our whole battalion, we all lived in a warehouse. And it was all just—it was just one huge room with double bunks, and everybody had a—you had both bunks. The top bunk, you threw all your stuff on. So there was nothing locked up. And of course, we were all Reservists. You ain't going to steal—we all—no, there was no stealing or anything like that. So we lived in that damn warehouse for two months. And they—when I got assigned to that active duty unit, they put me in a—one of the barracks rooms over there. But I would have rather been in the warehouse.

But yeah. The training was—for me, was—like I said, it was waiting around, really. We had lecturers, and different generals, and Marines, and all that would come around and talk to us about how things were. But very little that was applicable to us. So you didn't really—you know, you always trained for the last war. They say that. That's kind of how it was. I mean, they didn't tell us about—you learned when you get up in the morning, you had to shake your boots out, get all the critters that might crawl in there. Or sleeping with—we had to carry our firearm with us the whole time, our weapon with us the whole time. So I slept with my rifle. And you went to the bathroom with your rifle. You took a shower with your rifle. And keeping that thing clean. You had to clean it twice a day, and even then it was full of dirt. It was a nasty mess. But—yeah, just—California was just hanging around doing nothing.

Gibb: Your deployment.

Drees: Deployment? Was—like I say, I was with Task Force Sierra. We flew to Kuwait. And there was a little Seabee base there that was just for Seabees coming in and out. And, again, weapons training. Again, it was two weeks of waiting for—waiting for a flight into Iraq. And we were low-priority, I guess. And just busywork, mainly. I don't know. Just hanging around.

[01:34:41]

And we finally got our call. I was advance party for our group. So I was with the first group that went into Balad, which was where the headquarters was. And I got up there for the turnover and all that. And, like I said, I hopped out of there as soon as I could. It was just—for a guy like me, was pure hell. It was all—all these active duty people were just nuts. Absolutely nuts. I mean, you—the old TV show M*A*S*H, you get—kind of get a feel for the active duty by watching that show. It was just—didn't make any sense. They were just all concerned about their forms, and training reports, and all. It was like they were still Stateside. “Man, these people are shooting at us. They're trying to kill us, man! I don't want to be filling out any forms.”

So, like I say, I got out of there, and I went to that first project. And it was mainly—we worked—we were on the site before sunrise, and we worked until it got dark. We were under light restrictions. Couldn't show a light, because we were wide open. They'd take a potshot at you. And so we actually got—you know, got plenty of time to sleep. We—it was just mainly—we worked seven days a week. Started—like I say, we were up at around four-thirty or so. And get to the project about half an hour before light. And then work all day. Take a lunch break, and we get back. We work until dusk. Got in our Humvees, went back to our quarters, and—work, work, work, work, work.

That first place where we built a detention camp, like I say, it was from scratch. We were working with this God-awful lumber. And the electricity was different from what we had. It was fifty hertz. Ours, sixty hertz, so nothing worked. Had to hammer everything together. And, well, grab a hammer and go at it, you know? Slow going at first, but we got things done when that—when my chief showed up, and we got things turned around. We got things done. And, like I said, I went back to headquarters for a whole couple days. Then I went back out to the other project.

That was another build—it wasn't a build from scratch. It was a modify from scratch. But we—like I say, we gutted, basically, the old base. And we built a Special Forces base. These warehouses were about a hundred yards long. And I think they were sixty four-man little huts we put in each one. And then we built the communication center. We built the rec areas. We had a swimming pool over there, believe it or not. And we got the filters. We filled it up with water. And—this we did on our side. And we—you can't keep a secret about stuff like this. So we ended up having people coming into—they had heard about the swimming

pool. And the guy that was our liaison officer, whatever. He ended up—he would be bringing these Air Force nurses over there and her personnel. And we had our pool parties there once in a while. So it wasn't all work.

We got to the point where—kids—they're eighteen, nineteen years old. And they were just exhausted. And they—people that age are still growing. And we finally got to the point where, okay, we're going to get a half a day off on Sunday. And then we're going to take all of Sunday off. And those guys would sleep until noon, one o'clock in the afternoon. And I said, "That was your time—that's the time where you do your uniform repair. And we're going to inspect your weapons and all this other stuff." And basically it was give them some time off. And it helped a great deal. Productivity went up through the roof after that. Because that gets to be just—I mean, my day started at four a.m. And I would—I had my own little coffee pot, and I'd drink my coffee. Then I'd go meet—go meet with my boss. And we'd kind of go over what we were going to do for the day, and what people were going to work where, and all that. And then we had our formal get-together at six a.m., and broke the people up into groups. And, "You do this. You do that. This is what we want done." Blah, blah, blah. And then it was basically going from one hotspot to another.

[01:39:33]

And so sometimes I—I wasn't the guy that was doing paperwork, I was the guy that was hammering. I was driving equipment. I was doing whatever I could. And I did that until I hurt my back. And then our boss said, "You're not doing any more work. You're just supervising. You're too valuable to be hammering things." I hurt my back so bad that they were going to send me back—they were going to send me to Germany. But I took a few magic pills, and I ended up going to a chiropractor. I don't know if that helped or not, but—it was funny, because you had to convoy over to the—to see the doc. And that was more dangerous than doing the work. I mean, "I'll just stay here in the camp. It's safe." Because we had an Army unit with us that was our security. And, in fact, we grabbed those guys when they weren't up in the towers or whatever, or doing patrols. And we had them doing construction, too.

They also gave us an entire Army company of engineers. And we gave them a project to do. And there were like forty or fifty of them. And twelve of our Seabees, even the active duty ones, the eighteen-year-olds, we were out producing them three or four to one. Because they had their own little officer in charge, and all that. And they had to work with helmets on and flak jacks. And like, "Get out of"—because we were—we'd take fire now and then. But I'll take a chance. I mean, it was hot. The heat over there was incredible. And you're doing construction, and it was mainly by hand. Hammering, and hauling lumber, and all that stuff.

But we got her done, and we got it done before time. And in addition to doing all this work, like I say, we were supporting the—it was an active base before. That was the buildup for the surge. And the Special Forces guys were expanding leaps and bounds. And they were kind of a cool crew, though, to work for. I mean, “Do you want to go on a helicopter flight?” No. Well, they’d take these other kids, of course. Eighteen years old. And they took them out on these little—what do they call them, loaches? Little observation, four-man helicopters. And they would fly over Iraq at about ten feet above the ground, and around the buildings, or between the buildings or whatever. And banking and all that stuff. And they’d come back, and they’d have thrown up and everything. But they would say it was the greatest thing. “You guys have that. Go ahead.”

Or we got—one time we went weapons testing. We got to shoot all the AK-47s, and machine guns, and mortars, and whatever the hell else we wanted with the Special Forces guys. And we got to shoot their weapons. Just as a kind of a recreational thing. But I—like I say, we worked until dark. And then I taught the Seabee combat warfare specialist classes after that. I was one of the few people that had my pin before I went over there. And so I could teach the courses. And my chief, he was also qualified. So we held boards there and got people—that was a big thing in the Seabees. In the Reserves, I think I was like the fifth or sixth person to get their pin. And that was one of the hardest things I’ve ever—it took me two years to get my pin. It wasn’t mandatory or anything like that. Whereas now it’s mandatory, and they have classes and all that stuff.

So I taught classes until ten o’clock at night. And then from ten until eleven was my time. And then I’d go to bed at eleven o’clock and, like I say, get up at four. And that was a long day. And every day was different. And every day had it’s challenges, from the lumber, to running out of resources, to—I mean, we had some Special Forces guys seal lumber from the Air Force, when ran out and couldn’t get any. These guys would have suitcases full of cash in \$100 bills and would go—we need something, they would go off, and they’d come back with whatever we needed. They gave me a—I had access to a BMW 740i car with about 1000 pounds of Kevlar armor on it. So I got to ride that thing around. That was sweet [laughs].

So that was my—when I’d go into base or whatever. We’d go in like once—when we started getting our Sundays off towards the end there, we’d cruise into the big Army base. I think it was Fort Liberty or something like that. We called it the Walmart. They had a big PX there. And that was a—you couldn’t—you were always running out of shaving stuff, or whatever. I kept my hair really, really, really short when I was over there.

It was kind of weird because your shaving cans would explode from the heat, stuff like that. Deodorant stick would melt. And it was just—the heat was something else to deal with. But I mean, you got used to it though. I think it was—132 was the highest I saw in the shade. Most of the time it was 125, 127. I

was there the whole summer. I got there in the spring and left in the fall, and spent the whole summer there. It's actually better than the winter, because when I got there, it was rainy. And the mud would just stick to your—just a mess. Nothing drained. It was just puddles everywhere.

[01:45:04]

But, like I say, it was just mainly construction with a few—a couple rockets would come in and make things exciting, or small arms fire, or—at night sometimes we'd sit there, and the guys would be smoking, and you'd watch the tracers going overhead from the incoming—they were trying to hit—I don't know what they hell they were shooting. It could have been a wedding for all I know. The people over there were nuts.

But just did our job, got her done. We were supposed—then when we left, I think—it took us two days to leave Iraq. We spent—that damn airport in Baghdad in a quarantine area. And you're searched, because they don't want you taking anything home that you're not supposed to, like rifles or pistols or whatever. So you're basically in an area, like an airport terminal. There's no place to sit, no place to lay down. Nothing for two days. Little box lunches they'd bring in once in a while. And then we went to Kuwait and waited for our two-week decompression time. And so we were there while the other group was coming in. So we were there with big holes in our—those of us that had uniforms left. You have big holes in the pockets and stuff. And we're all salty, and just walking all hunched-over. You get the—you learn to walk slow in Iraq [laughs]. And these guys would look at us with their big [inaudible]. “Oh, wow.” And, “What's it like over there?” “You'll find out.” [Laughs] We just played it to the hilt. Hey, what the heck, you only get to be a salty dog once. Enjoy.

But after I got back, we landed in—we got back in California. And I was there for three, four, five days, processing. And took the flight home, and—the happiest day of my life. My little girl, my wife there, and my mom. And they had a big banner, “Welcome home.” So I was a hero for a few days. But I just dreamt about that, coming home. That was what kept me going. And that was it. And then when I got back, I put my—first we deprocessed. Got all our paperwork done. When we got back to Milwaukee we set up all our appointments to get all our outreach fixed and everything. And I came back with a broken tooth, and two hernias, and a bad back. And got it all documented and everything. And then I mustered out of the Reserves. That was it. I had my retirement in—I basically left in January. But I officially retired in June of '07. So that was it. From 1980 to 2007.

And when I left the Navy, there were ships built and scrapped while I was in. The planes on the aircraft carrier, those types are all gone. And of course everybody I knew in the active duty, they're all retired. And that Fleet—that Navy is gone, you know. Not coming back. So it was a fun career. It was a—like I say, I never looked at it as a career. I always said I was too lazy to work and too honest to

steal, something like that. I enjoyed it. And I kind of wish my daughter would maybe think about joining the Reserves, but I'm not going to push her towards it. If she wants to go, she'll go. But I don't think she wants to. I think she heard me cursing too much about it. She's living with the aftermath of it. But all in all, fun time.

Gibb: I just have a few more questions about Iraq actually.

Drees: Sure, certainly.

Gibb: Were you—was it—it wasn't an urban area. You were further out?

Drees: I was in the middle of nowhere, okay. The Special Forces guys, they didn't want—they want—you had to have a place where you could land hilos. So you didn't want people shooting at you. And shooting from a building is the best place to do it. So we were out in the middle of nowhere. The second base I built was surrounded by fields. We were close to one. I don't know if it was the Euphrates, or whatever. But they had—they had irrigation there. So it was actually one of the few green areas in Iraq. The first place I was at, near Tikrit, was just dust as far as you could see. It was just nothing there. Didn't have much interaction with the Iraqi civilians there—just the truck drivers that would come in. I think I saw one female Iraqi when I was there, and that was it. No interaction with the people at all, except that we always gave the truck drivers bottled water and a Gatorade or whatever. They loved that.

[01:50:22]

Gibb: These were local truck drivers? They were locals?

Drees: Oh yeah. Yeah. The—when I—we stood security on them, too. Because you didn't know—are these guys going to have suicide vests on or anything like that? That was one of the big things was unloading. Because we bought our lumber from the Iraqis. Was when you unloaded that from the truck, was there going to be a 500 pound bomb inside there? So that was a little nerve wracking, that sort of thing. But generally we stayed away. And, like I say, we didn't draw much fire. There were a lot of explosions. You could hear them in the—it carries a long ways. Small arms fire. Sometimes they'd come out there and shoot at you from a mile away. And you just here the splatt-splatt-splatt, bullets coming down. But typically we were pretty safe. Really not too much—probably safer than people living in Milwaukee.

Gibb: And the young guys you were—and women that you were working with, what sort of changes did you see in them over the time?

Drees: Well, we really ruined them for the active duty guys. Because we taught them the Seabee—or the Reservist way of doing things. We don't care about all that stuff.

We don't care—"You guys want to shave? I don't care if you shave or not. I don't care—I don't want to hear about this oorah stuff." And they—basically they grew up. I mean, they had—we made them good Seabees. We taught them how to build. We taught them how to operate equipment. I think we showed them what they could do. I mean they were in the habit of—when they needed a hammer, there were two guys that would go get the hammer. "No, no, no. Just one of you guys go. Time is money. This is—let's get this done."

When we got there, they had these concrete pylons about this high. I don't know. About yea. But they were used for holding up—where they fixed the trucks. So they held up the roof—

Gibb: How many feet is that, about? Just sort of—

Drees: Pardon?

Gibb: How many feet, would you say?

Drees: Oh, they were about—I don't know, four foot high. And maybe a foot and a half—or two and a half foot at the base, kind of pyramid-shaped. Well, that was right in the middle—that was where we were putting our helicopter landing field. And they decided to do these ops in August. And it wasn't supposed to be ready until October. The only way we had to get rid of those things—we didn't have that heavy equipment at the time—was take a sledge and pound them down to nothing. And when you got to the—at the end of—they're just a little—it's all rebar metal inside. You know, the rods. Take a torch and cut them off. And my boss—"Here, you guys all got to do one of these." And he went up there, and in twenty minutes he had the thing reduced to nothing. Then I went up there, and it took me about thirty minutes. I said, "Each of you guys got to do one of these. And it's got to be done in forty-eight hours. I don't care when you do it, but it's got to get done." And they were like, "We can't." "Yeah, you can. You just saw it done."

So I think we—we pushed these guys hard. And I think you don't really know what you can do until you're pushed. And I think these guys—I mean, they learned like, holy crap, you know? And they kind of walked with—those that survived—because we got rid of a bunch of them. There were some of the petty officers there that were absolutely worthless, and they got rid of them. One threw a temper tantrum. I got rid of him. I just called the boss, and they put him on a helicopter and got him out of there. And we put people in charge according to ability. And we had some eighteen-year-olds that we put in charge of twenty-one-year-olds that was maybe a third class petty officer. I don't give a shit. He knows how to do it. He's in charge. And they didn't like that. If they didn't like it, they were on a helicopter out of there. And there were—we were very lax about certain things, but here's the line. You cross it at your own peril. You're here to build stuff. You build your stuff, you do your job, we ain't going to mess with you. But

we didn't have these damn room inspections that they—oh God, they had room inspections up at the headquarters. I couldn't believe that. And parade formations, and all this. And oorah, and come to attention and salute the flag, and—oh, get out of here, you know?

[01:54:53]

Yeah, we got that pounded out of them, pretty much. You conserve your energy for the project. And that was hard enough to do, so we didn't mess with them. We never checked—later on, we each had our own room, or they had a roommate. We never checked their rooms, although we probably should have, because some of those were pigsties when we finally did. But when we first got there, we were all in these—this little—it was an office inside the warehouse. It was probably, oh, the size of this part over here. But all fourteen of us lived in there. And you could feel the rats crawling over you at night, stuff like that. It was pretty nasty. And the camel spiders and all that.

So we built our—the first thing we did was we built our place for us to sleep. And then we built the place for the—our security team. And so once we had that done, well, then they started doing ops out of there. So we got kicked out again. So then we built another building, and on, and on. And we ended up building—man, I think we had built berthing for 600 people total. But until it was fully manned—like I say, there was just two to a room, and it was luxury. We had our own air conditioner. And it was—I installed so many damn air conditioners, it wasn't even funny. But we had it pretty good. I mean, we didn't have any of the chickenshit that those guys had. Like I say, we probably warped them for the active duty.

I think a lot of those guys got out after—when their tour was up because—I didn't keep in touch with the kids, because I was the bad cop, and they didn't like me at all, but they kept in touch with my boss. And he told me about a lot of the guys that got out. And he still keeps in touch with them. I think they kind of—when they got back, and they start swapping stories with each other, I think they were—they had a little bit of that swagger with them, too. So I think—for the active duty guys, the guys that were going to stay in as a career, we messed with them pretty bad. But as far as—if they did stay in, they learned construction. And they learned how to do things. And they'll take—if you run into a problem, overcome it. Don't just sit there and cry or wait there. “What do I do?” Fix it. Do it. Use your head.

I mean, we broke the rules. We did everything. It was dangerous. There's a war on. You take chances. I'm not going to wait three days. I'm not going to have a—do a safety analysis or whatever of this job. Do it. So we did. Like I say, I had a boss who—we cooperated fully. And we were a real good team. Like I say, we got the job done, and our—we had these—it's funny because you see them on CNN now. They're advisors. Or Fox. They're advisors for the Special Forces, whatever. They had those stories. “I know that guy. I know that guy.” You know?

But they showed up. They were in uniform. But they never wore rank, any insignia, anything like that.

But I know General McChrystal. He'd—he was kind of a regular guy. He'd just sit down and talk to you, you know? He'd eat lunch—we all ate together in the same—there was no officers, enlisted chow hall. So, they were—they saw what we were doing, and they were very happy with us. And so it was a real good feeling walking away from there when we left.

Gibb: Did you know much about what was going on back here?

Drees: I had no communications with what was going on, no. We had no internet service to speak of. And they had places—like by the Walmart, we called it—that you could go there, and—but we never had time for that. One of the guys would post the football scores, the baseball scores, but that was it. I never got any mail when I was there, because we were isolated. Like I said, we cut our cord with our command. So my mail would go to the command. And the only time I'd get it, was when we got a guy that transferred from the command to us, would bring the mail. I've got a box full of letters downstairs that my family wrote. But I wrote maybe three or four letters the whole time I was there. And then when I got the phone, I would call, "Yeah, I'm okay. Everything's fine." And then once I got back to Kuwait, where we had our cooldown, I was on the phone every day, a couple hours a day. But when I was there, no. We had no idea what was going on. I think you got a Stars and Stripes once in a while, maybe. But you couldn't—I mean, there's no TV. There's no radio. There's nothing. So pretty just isolated.

[01:59:54]

A good thing, too, I think, because these kids—they all had their girlfriends, and they were getting Dear John'd, and all this. One guy signed over power of attorney to his girlfriend. It was like, "You don't do that!" So she spent all his money and sold his car and all this. "You moron." So I wasted a whole day taking that guy to a lawyer and trying to—you can't change a power of attorney just like that. So, ugh, was I mad. I mean they had these lectures—"Don't sign over power of attorney. Don't sign. Unless it's your wife. Don't do it to a girlfriend. Only do limited power of attorney." But what are you going to do? When you're eighteen, you know everything, right? You can't be told anything.

Gibb: So after you returned home?

Drees: Yeah?

Gibb: What was life like after that?

Drees: It was like getting out of the sauna and jumping into a hole in the ice in the lake [both laugh]. I couldn't sleep hardly at all when I got back. Because I was on

that—used to working that—nineteen hour days, you know. I couldn't sleep without a—I had my rifle there. I ended up keeping a pistol by me all the time so I could sleep. I was supposed to have sixty days off when I got back. And when I got back I poked my head in at work. "Hey, I'm back from Iraq." "Oh, you're starting work next week." "No, I"—"No, you're starting work next week." So I got like three or four days off, because I was going to Reserve center, too, with my family before I had to go back to work at Kohler. That pissed me off a lot. I'm still angry about that. Because my father passed away a few months later. I didn't get to spend hardly any time with him.

But yeah, it was a huge adjustment. I mean, I—you come in and—I remember going to a grocery store and just having like a panic attack. It's like, Look at all this stuff! [Laughs]. And I didn't remember where anything was. It took a long time to slow down, get used to the—people aren't shooting at you or trying to shoot at you. Well, at least in Sheboygan. It did take a while to get adapted. It took a while to get used to my wife and my daughter again. And it was a tough time. I mean, I was—my wife will tell you. We—I was—we had some good screaming contests there for a while coming back. And it—very—it was a little hard to adjust. Ten years now, and I'm still having a little problem. But, you know. Pretty much fit in now. Still don't like civilians.

Gibb: Was the—I don't take it personally [laughs].

Drees: Don't take it personally.

Gibb: Was there much support at that time for re-integration and that?

Drees: It was hard because—well, I mean, you come back—at first you're the big hero, right? "Oh, I want to hear about this. I want to hear about that." And then that got real old real quick, and let's move on. But there were things that you wanted to talk about that you couldn't talk to anybody. If I wanted to talk about things with my wife, she didn't want to hear it. And you didn't want to talk about certain things to the other veterans, because it was kind of like a sign of weakness, or you didn't want to talk about that. I talked a little bit about my boss. Some of the things I said, I was so—they call it hypervigilant when you get back. And he says, "Yeah. I had my best season ever deer hunting, because I could hear everything." [Laughs] But I mean, it was—there was no one to talk to. No one wanted to hear it. No one wanted to talk about it. And if you started talking about some of the strange stuff that you saw or weird—they just all kind of shied—they didn't—they felt uncomfortable around you. So you learned real fast don't talk to people about certain things and some of the stuff you saw or—

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Drees: —whatever.

Gibb: Were there any examples of that that come to mind?

Drees: Well, you had to deal with—I—you know. Some of the things I saw over there, I just—I have never told my wife, and I won't tell my wife. And there's some things I just won't—there's some things you saw were pretty nasty over there. You just don't—you just avoid talking about it. And people—like I say, you talk to civilians, and they say, "I don't want to"—they feel uncomfortable around you. But I think dealing with people, friends who passed away over there, it's hard. And how you get on with that, because you've still got the thing to do. You've still got to work.

And there's some—like I say, there were some gruesome things. And I saw things that I—you just—you know. And then when you try and talk about this sort of thing to other people, they just can't relate to it. I think just the—being under stress for so long—I mean, it was very—no two ways about it. I say I had fun, but the stress was unbelievable. You've got this project you've got to build with these idiot eighteen-year-olds, with this crooked Iraqi lumber, with no electricity. And it's 130 degrees out. And on top of that, people are trying to kill you. Not to mention the eighteen-year-olds who are dangerous as hell with nail guns. I got whacked in the head with a fourteen-foot two-by-twelve and got knocked silly from that.

But, I mean—and you go from there—everything's super-fast, super pace—to the real world. And it's just—you're like this, you know? What the hell's going on? And it just—it just took a long time to decompress. And it was stressful—a little stressful with my marriage. Maybe more than a little. And I was losing my temper and things like that. It wasn't—it was a tough time coming back and adjusting.

I don't know about support now and support then. If you notice now—well, you weren't here, but ten years ago, everybody had these little yellow stickers on the back of their car. "We support the troops. We support the troops." And I got pretty cynical about that. "Yeah, you support the troops unless you have to actually do something." I think you get—there's a lot of things that aren't said between veterans, but you understand. And, like I say, I talk to—there's a counselor up at the VA. I actually just came from him this morning. And that helps a lot. I could tell him things. He's like the only person I will say. Because it's confidential, and he's heard it from other people. And he mainly just listens. And that's, I think, ninety percent of it, getting it out.

I had a very limited experience over there. And I was only there for one tour. And what these guys who are combat guys that did four, five, six tours over there, I just can't imagine that. I mean. There was lot of broken people came back. I got a bruise, maybe. But I just—those guys just got to be going through hell. I just symp—I can't put myself in their position. And I worked with these—the first project I was at, they were running missions every night. You see these guys coming back and just—I don't know how you could be any more tired. And they

were just—they were all wore out. And we did everything we could for them. Though, basically, we never talked to them. But, like I say, we got the air—we worked our asses off so they could have a place to—we built that little air conditioned room for them. They could sit and write letters, or play games, or whatever. They even had a big flat screen TV in there for them, to watch video ga—or watch DV—or movies or whatever. But you didn't talk to them. You didn't—that was—those were the combat guys. You were just a—you were nothing compared to what those guys were doing. So all the respect in the world for those guys. And, like I said, I can't see—you saw guys that were burn out. I mean just—I don't know how they're going—they would adapt. But—I don't know. You say it's done and over with, and you say it's ten years. Ten years ago for me. A lot of times it seems like yesterday. Time flies when you're having fun, I guess.

[00:05:12]

Gibb: How have things changed over those ten years? With you or just, you know—

Drees: Boy. You should ask my wife that. I think I—I don't lose my temper as much. I still lose my temper. I think I'm still a little emotionally—it doesn't take me much to cry anymore, and stuff like that. But I don't know if it's just from being stretched like that, that you don't snap back into shape. You stay stretched a little bit, I think is what happens. But I'm—compared to where I was when I came back, I'm leaps and bounds beyond. And I've seen the doctor and talked to him. And I don't know if it does any good or not, or if it's just time, or what. But use the resources available to you. Listen to his advice, try it. Move on. Don't know if you ever saw the movie *Cast Away*?

Gibb: Yeah.

Drees: What does he say in that little speech at the end? Just live one more day. Keep on just—you knew that sun was going to come up. Keep on going one more day, one more day. That's all it is sometimes. You just feel like it—you've got your bad days, and tomorrow's another day. Just get through it. You'll get through it. It's been working okay so far.

Gibb: You said you went to the VFW?

Drees: Yeah.

Gibb: [Laughs] Not stuck around there, or—

Drees: No, I couldn't relate to those guys at all. I mean they're—I'm sure they're plenty nice guys. And they're all mostly Vietnam vets. And there were a few guys coming in from the '91 Gulf War. But I went to one or two meetings and that was

it. I just—I'm not ready to assume the mantle of the old farts in the VFW. I'll wait a few more—maybe when I retire from my day job I'll go over there and get more involved. But I just couldn't—I don't know. You know, they were a generation ahead of me. And I've been around old farts all my life. I don't—that's enough for me.

Gibb: Any other groups or any other veterans'—

Drees: No, I stay in touch with my friends in the Reserves. And they have a Seabee ball every year. I might go to that one other time. But stay in touch with people. Send an email once in a while. And the one—my chief that I was with, he just sent me a Christmas card. We write once in a while. I send him my emails. I've been down to visit him. And, like I say, we talk about old times, and the nicknames we had for people and groups, and flipping rocks and stuff like that. But, yeah, generally—I've got—three of my sister's kids joined the Marine Corps because of me. The oldest one would—the first one that went in was going to join the Navy. And he was kind of a—I didn't want anybody to get stuck with him. So, "You might want to think about joining the Marine Corps instead." So he joined the Marines. And his younger brother did, then the other brother. And they all went over to Iraq. Or one guy went to Afghanistan.

The one just got out. He did a couple tours over there. And he was a Marine. And he—they all saw combat. And they all—they had a much tougher time than I did. Some—one went before. The other two went after I did. So we got stuff to talk about. Like they say, we pissed in the same dirt over there. But, again, we talk about certain things. And every now and then, they'll let their guard down. Say something that happened. And just—then they, "shouldn't have said that." But I think it's part of a shared experience. You can relate to them a little bit. I know my nephew had a lot of trouble. He drank like hell when he came back. I think he's finally got that out of his system. The other one had a blast over there. Like I say, the one that went over—the first one that went over there, he was messed up before he went. So it's hard to say with him. I shouldn't say that. He's a good kid.

[00:09:46]

Gibb: [Inaudible]. So did they—they actually spoke to you about the fact that you were influencing their decision to—

Drees: Oh yeah. There's no doubt. My—those guys looked at me as—because my sister's divorce. It's a—one said that, "I always thought of you—you were like a father to me." I went, "Really? I should have probably been nicer then, huh?" But, you know, I—they grew up when I was a—when I came here. They were just little kids. And apparently I was a big influence on them. So I used to spend a lot of time over there. Yeah, they joined the—well, talked the first one into joining the Marines, and the other ones just followed. They went right out of high school, eighteen years old.

I don't know. I think it did them good. But they're brainwashed by the Marines. You know, the Corps. They're proud. Once a Marine always a Marine. They did pretty good. They're doing good for themselves. The one got 100 percent disability because of a hip injury. It actually wasn't a hip injury. They broke his jaw to—he had an under bite. So they broke his jaw to fix the under bite. And they took some of the bone out of his hip. Well, his hip got infected. And he's basically a cripple now. And he had ten years in the Marines, and they medically discharged him. So he's getting a full disability. His wife he met in the Marines. He's happy as hell now. He loves what he's doing. He got a—his enjoyment out of it. He did—he was in intelligence in the Marines. So he went out there with the infantry guys—actually, the guy he was supposed to relieve got killed a month into his mission—onto his tour. So he went over there first. So he basically did back-to-back tours over there. And he went to intelligence school. It was—there were three enlisted. The rest were officers. And he graduated number one in the class. And he was a kid that didn't graduate high school. He failed out, because he didn't apply himself mainly. He was a smart kid, you know. But he picked up the language like nothing.

And he got—he was really into that. Originally, in the Marines he was a jet mechanic. And while everyone else is going over there, he wasn't—they weren't going to send him. They didn't have any place for him over there. So he—the only way you can go is if you go to a higher job. So he got into intelligence. And, like I say, be careful what you wish for. But he loved the hell out of it. He loved his job. And unfortunately the medical caught up to him. But he was teaching survival. He was at the Marine Corps mountain survival school. He was an instructor there. And he loved that. So he's still out there in Nevada, living in the mountains. He's my namesake.

Gibb: That's very nice to hear. So I don't know if I've got any more questions. I just wondered if you—if there was anything else that we haven't touched on, or just some things you wanted to say to sort of—I know this is—you probably want to go see your daughter and your family.

Drees: Oh, I can talk—I can talk—tell you sea stories forever. I did a lot of crazy stuff. I enjoyed it. The military's mostly boredom, routine. And getting in trouble, and having fun. Like I say, those days are gone. You couldn't do—I mean, I drank like hell, and I was in the—I quit drinking when I was in the Service. I kind of got into a little bit of trouble. And they said, "Well, you can drink, and you can stay in the Navy, but you can't do both." So I quit drinking. And, funny, but after that my social life improved tremendously. People didn't see me as a falling-down drunk anymore. And I met my wife, and it was a big turning point. I don't know if I would have straightened out like that on the outside. Because I drank a lot before I went in. But been pretty much sober since then.

But I enjoyed the military. And, like I say, there's the—the camaraderie that you had with those guys, there's nothing that exists in the civilian world, as far as I—maybe police officers and firefighters have that sort of thing. But boiler operators at Kohler sure don't. But, like I say, it—people going in the Service, it's great. It's just—I just wish we didn't have go to that particular war. I don't think it did any good. Like I say—it messed a lot of people up, and it was a total waste of money. And we're paying the price. We're going to pay the price for that for years. Just wish our politicians could get their nose over there once and see what the hell it's like. I don't think there'd be as many wars as what they've got now. So that's about it.

[00:15:05]

Gibb: Is there anything else that you would want somebody listening to this, your family further down the line, to know about the service that you [overlapping dialogue; inaudible].

Drees: Well, just that I'm very proud of what I did. It was a very, very difficult job. I don't think that many people could do it. I don't—it's a great job for a single guy. For married guys, it's very tough. And I think you should appreciate your guys—your people that you see who are in the military, and the veterans, and—my daughter's got friends going into the military. I think you should be very proud of them. They've got a tough, tough job to do. And I wouldn't even want to do it today. It's too chickenshit today with all that shiny shoe marching stuff. But that's it. Just I hope the sacrifices and the time away and all that was worth it for the future. About it.

Gibb: Great. Okay to turn this off? Unless there's anything else you'd like to—

Drees: No that's about it.

Gibb: I'm okay to turn—

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