

Stephen Wolf Oral History Interview

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Pylinski: I'm Aaron Pylinski here at the Pritzker Military Library with Mr. Stephen Wolf. We're doing Stories of Service for the Oral History program. First of all thank you for coming out, just wanted to get an idea, when and where were you born?

Wolf: I was born in Fort Hood Texas, October 11, 1985.

Pylinski: Did you grow up there?

Wolf: No my dad was stationed there for PL (Platoon Leader) time and then went to the Career Course then came back. So we just lived there for a few years.

Pylinski: You were an army brat?

Wolf: Yes.

Pylinski: How long was that?

Wolf: It was only three years of my life; my dad got commissioned in '82 and got out late '87. About two and a half years.

Pylinski: Where did you live after Fort Hood, then?

Wolf: We then moved to New Jersey. My mom's mother was living in Philadelphia so we were anchored to that area, and my dad ended up working in New York City.

Pylinski: What do your parents do then?

Wolf: My dad works in banking and my mom's a nurse.

Pylinski: Do you have any siblings?

Wolf: I do, I have an older brother who's a private equity guy in Denver, and a younger sister living with my parents.

Pylinski: What was it like growing up being a middle kid?

Wolf: It was great; I was on everyone's good side. I was the glue to the family in a way.

Pylinski: That's a very good way of looking at it. Some middle kids will be the complete opposite like, "The younger brother always got everything and nobody ever paid attention to the bigger brother because he was older."

Wolf: Yes. It's easy for the middle kids to complain about being left out or not getting something but that wasn't me, I was pretty fortunate.

Pylinski: What high school did you go to?

Wolf: West Windsor Plainsboro High School North - which is kind of a mouthful - it was two towns shared two high schools in Jersey; graduated in 2003.

Pylinski: Did you play any sports or belong to any clubs while you were in high school?

Wolf: I did, I was a wrestler. I was a wrestler my whole life. I played a little bit of lacrosse, row crew. Those were the three big ones for me.

Pylinski: No school programs like class president?

Wolf: Not in high school, but in college.

Pylinski: What did you do in college?

Wolf: I was Vice President of my class at Bucknell for one year, and then I was an ROTC guy and was in a fraternity.

Pylinski: What did you study?

Wolf: Accounting.

Pylinski: Was your fraternity all ROTC?

Wolf: No just me and one other guy, my pledge class was about 25 people. Bucknell's a pretty small ROTC program, only about eight or so guys and girls commissioned my senior year.

Pylinski: Did you graduate before you joined?

Wolf: Yes, I graduated in 2007 then had to show up to Benning 12 days later, so it was a pretty quick turnaround.

Pylinski: Where were you when the World Trade Centers were hit?

Wolf: I was in my high school human anatomy and physiology class and it hit pretty close to me because all of my friends and their parents were in New York. My dad worked a couple blocks from World Trade Center. We lost quite a few people in the community that day. Todd Beamer who helped bring down Flight 93 lived

about a mile down the road from us. Pretty impactful day, it was for everyone, but being so close to the epicenter made it a big deal. That's when the wheels started turning for me on the military route. I was pretty frustrated so I saw this as a way to channel my anger in a way.

Pylinski: All things considered you were close to Ground Zero, what was the atmosphere like in your neighborhood?

Wolf: It was pretty tough, pretty sad. My dad was driving to work that day and he was on the Versano when the second plane hit. At that point he was actually in Brooklyn that day and saw the towers fall from a balcony. My dad's a pretty tough guy but that day I could tell that he was really shaken from the events that transpired. It was impactful to all of us.

Pylinski: How soon after that did you realize that it was a terrorist attack?

Wolf: A lot of kids' parents were affected and they cut the cable to the school so we couldn't watch it. By the time it continued they made an announcement on the loud speaker to have all the kids whose parents work in World Trade Center to report to the front office. Not everybody had cell phones like today but some did so we were just trying to get as much information as we can. It was all pretty hazy. We got out then went to the gym and they had TV's at the gym, and by then it was pretty clear that it was a terrorist attack.

Pylinski: Did you remember seeing anyone go to the front office?

Wolf: No, just a few of them from my high school and there were stories of near misses.

Pylinski: There was a guy from my unit whose mom worked there and missed work that day so she was fine, I'm sure you know some stories like that.

Wolf: Yes, I've heard of some people who either missed work or showed up late, and it ended up saving them.

Pylinski: In college, what was ROTC like? Did you get a lot of attention?

Wolf: Yes, it was a pretty good amount, learned a lot about leadership. I thought about some of my possible routes to go after school that would have been a little more conventional, like investment banking or accounting. It didn't appeal to me that much at the time so the Army was great because it was a more adventurous route. The program was great, it was small, had some smart officers, they showed us how to lead and take control. One difference between us and regular students is that our learning was conducted through a lot of NCO's who I think were more impactful to me than the officers I worked with, it really drove my military career.

Pylinski: That's good to be able to merge the cherry officers with the NCO before you even swear in has to be a relief. Were your NCO's combat veterans?

Wolf: Yes they were combat veterans.

Pylinski: Officers Candidate School guys sometimes abuse lieutenant wannabe's, did you go through OCS?

Wolf: No, ROTC was primarily NCO driven.

Pylinski: You enlisted as a 19A, what made you want to be a scout?

Wolf: My dad was a tanker so there were pictures of me crawling around the living room so really since I was a toddler I felt like being a tanker was the way to go. I romanticized myself with armored warfare and Patton's battles across Sicily. The nice part about going armors is you can flex back and forth between traditional armor positions and cavalry positions so I thought that would be nice and there both looked at as pretty strong whereas the infantry is looked at as a step down. So I wanted to maintain that respectability of a career path.

Pylinski: Growing up in Fort Hood then, were you exposed to that?

Wolf: A little bit, my dad would take me to battlefields and museums and I saw all the cool toys.

Pylinski: Did you remember seeing any static displays? When I was a kid I got to see the Vulcans on display, did you see anything like that?

Wolf: No never got to do any demonstrations, but I went to my dad's armor school and we have a picture of me clawing around it was pretty cool.

Pylinski: Where did you go to 19A School?

Wolf: Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Pylinski: What was that like?

Wolf: I thought it was one of the best periods of education in my military career, my dad expected me to drop a few points in my handicap, but by the time I got there it was during the surge in Iraq in 2007 and we were losing PL's left and right. They had totally revamped the course and it was much more of a haze and much tougher, I remember the first day of the course a NCO comes in, a very seasoned combat vet, and he says, "Your whole life you've been told you can do whatever you want. Every opportunity there is available; I'm here to tell you that you will

never be any tank leaders." It was a pretty good wake up call for me, right to the point, and we were then proven that through our training some of us would turn out to be fit tank leaders, and others didn't have it in them and that became evident over training.

Pylinski: From your officers training course in Fort Knox did you go straight to Korea after that?

Wolf: Yes, I went to Korea and did my year hardship tour, 2 IE.

Pylinski: What did you get out of it?

Wolf: I got a lot out of it. Korea's a very polarizing place, but I got more perspective after being 4-5 years removed from it. At the time I was pretty frustrated and wasn't able to put things in perspective, but it was a great place to learn the craft. Korea was a place where they sent people who had already been on multiple tours to go take a knee. They were a hardship tour but it allowed people to focus on the basics of equipment and heavy warfare.

Pylinski: Did you guys have strikers or were you straight armor?

Wolf: My platoon was straight tanks, first platoon. I was at Camp Casey.

Pylinski: Did you work with the ROK Army at all?

Wolf: Yeah it was great. Korea's got this "KatUSA program" where you've got 1 or 2 Korean nationals assigned to your unit, and that was a great learning opportunity that paid dividends down the road having these guys who you could put your arms around and include them in the team. These guys are smart, one of my guys was a biomedical engineer at Seoul National University, he was a stud, he kicked ass when he needed to, we made him a Sgt. he was an outstanding NCO.

Pylinski: What was your daily schedule like?

Wolf: A ton of field ton, month on/ month off in the field which gave you time for perspective. I got to go through a tank gunnery, one of the most fun weeks of my life.

Pylinski: So, were you a tank commander then?

Wolf: I was a tank commander, I had a group of guys, 5 tanks and the tank that I was in I was the leader, overlooked 4 other guys then transferred to the Platoon gunnery.

Pylinski: That's awesome, man, a lot of firepower. I was in Fallujah in 03-04 and we had our M-1's on the cloverleaf, and I couldn't be happier to see those tanks. Being a light guy when you see those you think it's a rolling coffin but when the crap hits the fan and they're on your side, the 120's a pretty good vehicle to have on your side. So did you get any downtime in Korea?

Wolf: I did I got some four day weekends and my time commander was really cool about giving us some time off, so I learned to ski from one of my guys who was a ski instructor in northern Japan so we flew out and I did that from time to time. Also flew out to Thailand and Malaysia a few times.

Pylinski: Where were you at in Malaysia?

Wolf: Cota Kinapalu.

Pylinski: My mid-tour leave was Thailand, Malaysia and Japan, great experience in Malaysia, some really cool people. I also liked Thailand my wife and I rented a van and drove around touring the whole country, that was really cool. So, what would you say was your favorite experience in Korea, looking back at it?

Wolf: After the gunnery, my platoon's previous gunnery had a tough time in the field, some guys just weren't getting along with each other, so we had to re-tool the team in order to be an effective organization again, so we picked up the scout platoon and that's when I had a sign that things were going well in the career. It was exciting at the time, I really wanted to focus on the light side, I wasn't stupid, I knew that within a year or two of leaving Korea I would be in Iraq or Afghanistan and I was expecting Iraq because no one expected the fighting to pick up in Afghanistan, so I wanted to re-focus on being a great light fighter.

Pylinski: So what was it like being a scout in an armored unit?

Wolf: It was a lot of fun, big boy rules. You go from being a very structured unit in the tank and gunnery divisions, and then you become a foot soldier and it's just you, you're the guy. The Battalion commander calls you and gives you a direct order, it's interesting you develop a close relationship with your commander, and get somewhat of a say in the decision making process, it was kind of neat, definitely a nice feel.

Pylinski: Did you guys work with the S-2 a lot?

Wolf: Yeah.

Pylinski: What was that like?

Wolf: It was great, we were pretty close.

Pylinski: Yea, having been in infantry battalion we worked with scouts a lot and we had a perfect relationship.

Wolf: Yeah the intel and the scouts are usually really close together.

Pylinski: Intel drives maneuver, it starts with them. So when you got back from Korea you went to Fort Leahy?

Wolf: Fort Carson.

Pylinski: Fort Carson, Colorado, and what was that like?

Wolf: It was incredible, Colorado's a great place to be in the winter. I got to Carson in late January-early February, and the unit had just gotten back from JROTC, so guys were getting ready to go, we left in May I think, so during that time we had that gray area with them and I got put in the 3 shop with a bunch of officers, weekends we could go out and ski and go out a bit, and network with the lead decision makers and NCO's.

Pylinski: What was the unit you were in?

Wolf: 3rd squadron 61st cavalry, 361 Cav.

Pylinski: Were you guys ever on recall status? It seems pretty cut and dry as to when you're on and off, but did that ever change?

Wolf: We were given staff-duty ourselves, so no they were pretty laid back on it. At the time I didn't have the perspective, I was in shop doing a lot of training calendars, my S3 didn't want to do.

Pylinski: A lot of training meetings?

Wolf: A lot of training meetings, a lot of taskers, stuff I didn't want to do.

Pylinski: Did you have a lot of surplus officers?

Wolf: We had 4, and they're actually four of my best friends still.

Pylinski: Oh yeah, you probably stuck together in the train shop.

Wolf: Yeah we were all miserable together, and it was one of those things where at the time the training was standard, you're there til 7 at night, those days there were some of the most frustrating of my life, but about a month before I left I was told I was going to be the ANSF guy for the Afghan National Security Forces for the

squadron, which gave the time to re-tool and focus on my strategies with the Afghan Police, the Border Police and the National Army, understanding them and doing a deep dive on the IPP and their force structure, and who the main guys were in our area.

Pylinski: Yeah I was gonna ask how you prepared for your combat tour to Afghanistan?

Wolf: Well, I'm a pretty big reader so I think the majority of my pre-deployment knowledge was centered around cramming and reading as much as possible. We had a pretty good LDP, Leadership Development Program in Afghanistan, my squad commander, Col. Robert B. Brown, was a really smart guy, an academic, and did I think a really great job at focusing the force on getting people ready to understand what the demands would be like in northeastern Afghanistan

Pylinski: Right, and he probably had a few deployments under his belt already, or did he?

Wolf: He had two Iraq deployments under his belt, and back then that's where everybody was, nobody was experienced with Afghanistan, you see a lot of armor in Afghanistan, we were light cav so in theory we were ready, but I think out of the 350-400 people that we brought over only about 4 or 5 of them had been to Afghanistan already, so there was just no experience going in, it was crazy.

Pylinski: Sometimes it's like that, trial by fire, we didn't know much going in. You said you did a lot of reading in preparation, did you know where you were going to be, what your AO was going to be?

Wolf: I did, yeah. I had a pretty good relationship with the previous unit, we replaced 64 cav from 1st ID, so we pulled some info from them, we re-called the website. Before we got there there post was run so we figured out what we could.

Pylinski: Were there good AAR's from that?

Wolf: They were okay, a lot of haziness, kind of frustrating, a tough one, a good reality check going in for us. It was a reality check for us like, "hey, we're not going to a place where they like us very much."

Pylinski: Right, you're not gonna be shaking a whole lot of hands. So when were you deployed?

Wolf: May 26th, 2009. Going for a year.

Pylinski: What was it like before you left?

Wolf: It was a little surreal, you go through a lot of training but then it hits you right before you go out, so my family came out, my girlfriend at the time came out. A cute going away ceremony.

Pylinski: Did you take leave prior to going away?

Wolf: No I didn't really have a few leave built up, so I just went to Vail for a few days and skied. The whole family was out.

Pylinski: How did your folks take that news?

Wolf: My dad took it pretty fine, my mom was proud, hadn't really conceptualized it, not that happy about it but she was proud.

Pylinski: And your girlfriend at the time, how was she with the whole?

Wolf: She had a tough time with it, I mean no one likes it.

Pylinski: Yeah it's certainly never an easy moment when you know you're getting ready to leave. Then you got to Kunar, how did you get to the AO from the stateside?

Wolf: We flew in, had a layover in Mainz Bay, Germany, then flew to Manas, Kyrgyzstan, spent a few days in Manas, which was like a Star Wars city.

Pylinski: Yeah I was once there in January.

Wolf: Yeah, it's just gorgeous. Beautiful in the Summer, just like Colorado with the Tian Shan mountains overlooking , 67 degree weather, we weren't allowed to carry weapons, had to store them in the bays, there were people playing tennis, people running around in PT's, one of those places where you know you're heading to something bad, but the facts felt almost weird, like a dreamscape, my first introduction into the deployed defact was an incredible experience.

Pylinski: Was it KVR?

Wolf: Yeah.

Pylinski: A bunch of Indians running around, it was probably local nationals of some sort?

Wolf: Yeah a lot of relative locals, a few Pakistanis, it was great. I think we had maybe three days at Manas, you've got your bags, doing the shuffle every day, at that point you just wanna get settled. So we flew from there to Bagram, and spent another two days there, had some IED trainers and some "scare-me" briefs to prepare us for what it was really like.

Pylinski: Who was at Division HQ at Bagram at the time?

Wolf: They were transitioning from 101st to 82nd, so they were moving into 82nd, General Scaparotti took over.

Pylinski: So what was it like working with the 82nd?

Wolf: I think Gen. Scaparotti's one of the best officers I've ever worked for, incredible, incredible officer.

Pylinski: Did you get to do the salsa when you were at Bagram?

Wolf: No (laughs) I didn't get to do Bagram American Idol, or whatever they call it, spent two days there and then I think we got swung to Jaff, there for like 20 hours. We ended up getting an early morning blackhawk flight to headquarters at Faut Baustic.

Pylinski: What was that flight like?

Wolf: It was crazy, like the opening scene in Jurassic Park when they're flying in, you've got these huge peaks that you're going through, the most beautiful place I've ever seen, but it's very wild, you know you're not in Kansas anymore.

Pylinski: So, did you fall in on equipment or did someone drive in your equipment for you?

Wolf: We flew in with our equipment, and at that point I was still in the 3-point.

Pylinski: So then, what was it like being at Baustic?

Wolf: Baustic was pretty decent, were working alot, doing the traditional 3AS stuff, as well as working with the ANSF, really to advise them and be the conduit between Squadron 3 and those guys. When I started I was still a Junior Lt. It was interesting, I had frustrations because they recognized I was a conduit, tried to milk some advantages from me. When we went in the expectation was that I would go down to take an XO spot, so I was very eager to fight and I knew that I was performing a service, but it wasn't the sexiest service in the world. It was a necessary evil, but there were benefits to it, got to meet some staff, key players of the brigade, the fires guys, all of the guys who would make my life easier if I went down to a troop.

Pylinski: Yeah I guess it's one of those things where you get a really good overall idea of the battalion or squadron staff.

Wolf: Yeah, and you get to know the personality tactics of all the commanders, some of the soft-side relationships with them which is pivotal, and I got to stay in shape which was important at the time, important to stay in shape over there, and I got to go to the gym a lot.

Pylinski: Yeah I was gonna ask you what your downtime was like at Baustic.

Wolf: I was working a ton, like 20 on 4 off, but I cut out some time to go to the gym, play soccer, get to know the Afghans, but it was pretty manageable.

Pylinski: What was it like playing soccer with the Afghans?

Wolf: We were much better than them.

Pylinski: Nothing like beating them, if you're not first you're last. You came out of 3 shop, and I was reading on your LinkedIn that you were hand-selected based on prior leadership efficiency to take command of a 17 person Recon Unit after the previous leader was killed in action, did you know the PL that you replaced?

Wolf: Yeah, Tyler Barton, he was a good dude. I was on mid-tour leave at the time, so my girlfriend and I went to Tahiti, French Polynesia, hung out for a little bit, and Tyler was killed when I was on leave, and my leave was real early, like 2 1/2-3 months in, because they knew we would get switched down and get a new job, so our Squadron commander didn't want us to take a new job and then leave, so it was like taking an XO slot before I left, and then when Tyler got killed I was only of the surplus officers in the 3 shop with 2 platoons, and he was committed to someone who had been there before, we lost two other E6 (serious WIA) and a few others seriously wounded and the platoon sgt. had been shot, but it was return to duty, so a pretty serious number of casualties at the time.

Pylinski: Where was all of this happening at?

Wolf: This was all, a couple different agents, near Kunar, Cole Patrols, middle of fighting season, September/October 2009, it was pretty wild, definitely an aggressive offensive that the Taliban were on at the time?

Pylinski: And this was all during the Fa'khiti time?

Wolf: Previous Takiti.

Pylinski: Ok, and so you said the Platoon Sgt. was shot but returned to duty, then when you fell into platoon was he still there?

Wolf: Yeah, he was limping around, I made sure that he saw me eye-to-eye,

Pylinski: Yeah I can imagine, so what was the transition like for you and the guys at platoon?

Wolf: It was pretty tenuous because he was a really like guy, people had mixed feelings about it, people knew we needed a new PL, and he could no longer serve the purpose obviously, it was tough, a lot of feelings there, I knew him, he was a great guy, and I didn't want to change too much up front, but I also knew we needed to get the platoon back in line, have them ready to fight, morale was low and I think the perception amongst the men was that squadron was pushing too hard, so I had to hone in on everyone.

Pylinski: How did you do that?

Wolf: Relationships, that's where it all starts. I can go up during mission analysis and determine our patrols based on who were dealing with, make sure task and purpose aligned, I had to mend with leadership, and mitigate some measures which I think helped build credibility.

Pylinski: That's good, so after you took over your platoon, how did your AS3 transition to PL, how was the rest of the deployment?

Wolf: It was good, had a full 48 hours before my first engagement, so the leftsy-rightsy ride was straight rightsy, had aerosol, then 48 hours later, there's only one road that went down the Kunar river valley to do our re-supply routes, so it was a brigade effort every time we needed to re-supply, so we got picked up to oversee this, draw fire away from the road so the convoy could get past. We got picked up and went to this outpost, called Saul, mountain, nothing there, we were there for 36 hours until found us after about 12 hours, given my first baptism by fire. Was able to deal with it sufficiently enough to help the guys get through it.

Pylinski: Was it a joint effort, like, did you have ANF with you?

Wolf: No, at that point we wanted to maintain a certain level of tactical efficiency, and at that point our ANSF's weren't there, and we knew it was high-risk, so we went out held ground, about 20 guys according to intel. Lots of PKM and RPK, machine gun fire. After the initial wave there were a few more but they weren't able to get a good grip on us. Worked out pretty well.

Pylinski: Moving on from there, what was the rest of your deployment like?

Wolf: It was great, experience of a lifetime. We spent about 3 months in that role before moving up, we were supposed to go back to Keiting on October 5th, 2009 to help pull back Keiting we had been working on that the month or two before, but we needed the assets to pull it back. When Keiting happened on the 3rd, we were supposed to be the cure reps, so my guys were waiting to go up but we couldn't get dudes in. I was talking with Stony Portith, the leader in Keiting and Col.

Brown, all the decision makers waiting to get out there, but we couldn't go because of their anti-aircraft weapons.

Pylinski: Yeah a whole lot of stuff out there.

Wolf: Yeah so I sent a whole team out there the night of, essentially a PSD, Col. Brown wanted people there, so once the Keiting guys were there we went to Lulb, which was the campel, immediately the focal point for ISAF to get Lulb broken down, so we spent a few weeks breaking that down then went back to Baustic for two weeks, from there we spent the final six months out in Mase, which became the northern outpost on the border.

Pylinski: Did you have any interaction with the local sheer-leaders or any nationals?

Wolf: Yeah, a lot , most of it based on my time as the ANSF leader, but I had many positive relationships that I was able to maintain with the National Police, Hadji Jusef was the commander of the national police and he's like a legend, he had a whole book written about Northern Kunar, real close personal friend, outstanding local leader, not as positive of interactions with the National Army and Border Police but enough interaction.

Pylinski: That's good, I guess it's based on locations, some have better relations with different units where they are, and Afghanistan's such a mixed bag, never know if you're gonna get hard core cops, or if they're gonna turn around once the enemy comes in.

Wolf: Yeah if I could double the ANP it would have been much more effective, those guys were awesome.

Pylinski: Yeah I did a lot of, interrogations with an ODA before my last tour, and I can't count how many times I had to shoot at the ANP because the Taliban was paying them, it was scary, but you never know. Did you have any CIA, DEA or FBI guys rolling through your AO at all?

Wolf: Yeah we had a couple, a compound called Falcon Base between Mase and Baustic that we worked with occasionally, not enough at my level, intel was working together, but not much hands-on, my commander went there but we weren't allowed in, good food there though.

Pylinski: We had some soup cans that were double layered, about 8000 calories, it was disgusting. Did you work with a lot of NATO units as well?

Wolf: We had a Latvian unit assigned to us, they were phenomenal, infantry guys, very competent, huge guys also, very aggressive, like the bad guy from Rocky 4, not

great at the coin piece, not a lot of equipment, but good guys, I still have good relationships with them.

Pylinski: How did the locals interact with you and them?

Wolf: There was some skepticism towards them because they're accent sounded Soviet, which was an issue, so there was some resentment which was a challenge.

Pylinski: Yeah I worked with the Romanians in '02, and they might as well have been Russian, better off not even showing up, but they were solid, humongous. But what about special forces, any ODA's rolling around?

Wolf: They didn't wanna play with us.

Pylinski: Yeah that's another mixed bag, sometimes you get an ODA who really wants to help and other times you get SF dudes who are willing to work with mobility guys because it's good for them, but not with you guys?

Wolf: No, when we were pulling off the wall we had an ODA come up and assist us, they worked with their commandos and we had a team of about 120 guys, which was nice to bring more people to the fight. They were okay, not a positive set of interactions with them though. Had some good ones with the seals though, they were really small, only 2-3 guys together, best of intentions but it wasn't really a combat multiplier for us.

Pylinski: No I can imagine, 2 guys and a bunch of Afghans. Did you guys have the multicam uniforms?

Wolf: We were rocking a hybrid uniform at the time, the army was deciding between the multicam and the ACU, the ACU was brown as well.

Pylinski: What was that like?

Wolf: It was fine, you blend into rocks, which is all that they had out there. It was a pretty solid uniform.

Pylinski: Yeah I always thought the ACU's were pretty stupid, they only worked when you got them dirty.

Wolf: Yeah they were nice, good moral booster to have the top equipment.

Pylinski: Yeah I felt like a circus guy with those AC's, bright brown. I was the last guy in my platoon to transition from BDU to ACU, my first Sgt. pulled me over to tell me about it.

Wolf: We wore the same boots as the Solo's.

Pylinski: You wore those, no way?! They're like ski boots.

Wolf: Yeah they're awesome.

Pylinski: How were they, who makes them?

Wolf: Solo makes them. Had them and a pair of Skurpas, premium American hiking boots, awesome in the mountains, keep your feet dry. You also look cool. Worked well with crampons. Excellent chain of command they would decide on the best stuff for us given our situation, 6-8 months at a time, they kept us in better shape.

Pylinski: Yeah I rocked my Altima boots from 2001-07,08 when I got out. They were sturdy, then I sold them. So you said you went to Tahiti during your mid-tour, how was that, what'd you do?

Wolf: Oh it was great, went scuba diving and surfing. Enjoyed life on the beach, a nice quiet on the storm.

Pylinski: So, you did time in Iraq as well.

Wolf: I did.

Pylinski: And, who were you with when you went to Iraq?

Wolf: 3rd brigade, 1st Cav.

Pylinski: And that was?

Wolf: After Afghanistan.

Pylinski: Did you and Matt ever run into each other?

Wolf: No but we had a lot of the same friends, one of them sat next to me in Grad school.

Pylinski: So, I was gonna ask what was your mission when you went to Iraq?

Wolf: I had just been out of the career course and got to Iraq for the final four months of the war and at first I was an assistant battle captain, but the role shifted and I ended up taking the CHOP(Chief of Operations) spot, it was a different kind of fight, way less kinetic, logistics focused, much quieter. August 2011, the relationship dynamics with IP's and IA's was hard because they knew we were about to leave, it was tough they were gonna take whatever wasn't ours once we left, they played with the contractors, sometimes left them out, delayed the

process and there was nothing we could do to make it better. I had much less of an emotional relationship with my Iraq experience. I'm proud that I was able to contribute to the final bit of it

Pylinski: Yeah, it's just one of those jobs that you have to do. How much time did you have between Iraq and Afghanistan, back in the states?

Wolf: 14 months.

Pylinski: You did the career course at Fort Sill?

Wolf: No, Rutgers, the Aviators course at Fort Rucker, Airborne School, aviators course and sears school.

Pylinski: Holy cow, this is stuff I didn't know right off the bat, so walk me through all of that. So you came home from Afghanistan, probably had some re-deployment leave, couple weeks.

Wolf: Yeah I went down to Costa Rica to do some diving.

Pylinski: Good relief right?

Wolf: Yeah and then started to think about what I wanted to do afterwards, wasn't sure if I wanted to stay in but eventually I want to go teach at West Point, so I studied for graduate school exams and the standardized tests, took that summer and focused on hemmoring that out, then took the exams. Was able to get a slot in the career course, but got airborne, went to Airborne school.

Pylinski: How was airborne school?

Wolf: It was great, the captain's great.

Pylinski: What time of year were you there?

Wolf: October, it was a little chilly in the morning, but the instructors don't really mess with you, it's good because they know you've got experience. Went to the career course, it was an okay time.

Pylinski: So were you branch detail then? How did you end up in the aviator career force?

Wolf: No, so for common arms guys they let you go wherever because there was a huge backlog for all of the advanced courses, so if I wanted to go to infantry I would have had to wait a whole year, and the jobs back at Carson weren't that appealing because I was post my 3rd platoon and didn't really need to go to XO and I was

too old so I just needed to go to career course so I could just take command if I wanted to. Branch manager said he could get me into the career course at the air force and that got me qualified. I didn't get to fly anything but they focused on the ground, developing MDMP operations so they bring in a certain number of engineers, armor officers and infantry officers, so I got to be one of the ground guys.

Pylinski: What did you think of mother Rucker?

Wolf: I liked it, well it's one of the worst parts of the country, but it was good people, made a lot of good friends, got to meet some of the guys who flew over us in Afghanistan, I enjoyed that.

Pylinski: So what was Sears school like? That was one of the places that I tried to get into before I got out but it's one of those things that never falls into place.

Wolf: Best school. Came out real hungry and skinny.

Pylinski: I know you can't talk a lot about it, but what was your last day like, leaving Sears school?

Wolf: I think I had a little more perspective on it, many parts of it were not enjoyable, which they intended, but it was very professional, very well organized, learned a lot about yourself, it's tearful, there were good parts about it and there were worse parts about it.

Pylinski: Did you have any characters, any great, unique classmates? Some people do it for the exercise and take it as kind of a joke mentally, and go with that.

Wolf: Yeah they can, they say the key to Sears school is to not have a hippy face. Some people just have it, but I was fortunate to not have it.

Pylinski: I had a fellow platoon Sgt. at the MI Battalion in the 82nd who went on to be an instructor at Sears and just couldn't wait, I can only assume it was a great time. So you just did all kinds of cool guy schools before you went back into deployment mode, what was your PCS like leaving Rucker from the career course?

Wolf: I didn't take any leave, I went right to Hood, my unit was already there so I wanted to get moving so I had to go through the IRT process, done at Hood, so we got into Iraq through Fort Hood, it's a monstrous place. Went through that process, pretty quick, at Hood for maybe 2-3 weeks before I hopped onto a plane, it was about as painless as they could make it.

Pylinski: Did you see your family at all before you left?

Wolf: No.

Pylinski: How were they with you leaving?

Wolf: Afghanistan was tough on them, my dad was a West Point guy, Tyler was a West Point guy, so my mom had a lot of mixed feelings, so when I took my 3rd platoon she was kind of a wreck, it was tough too because we lost quite a few guys in the squadron, the last mission of our tour in Afghanistan, my friend lost his leg, he was hit by an IED, his name's Rothel Harpelein, he was at Walter Reed, so my parents visited him all the time, my mom's getting ready for me not to be deployed.

Pylinski: Yeah I can imagine, it would be rough on the family seeing guys from your unit get hurt and you're still over there.

Wolf: Yeah exactly, and they weren't too ecstatic about it, but they recognized Afghanistan wasn't quite as dangerous as it was years prior.

Pylinski: Did you write home a lot?

Wolf: Not as much as I should have, but I wrote a little.

Pylinski: How was conductivity being out there?

Wolf: So we were in a platoon-sized outpost on Tahfal mountain with two Americans and a platoon A and A, I swear we had the best conductivity in the mountain, we had a large fob-sized satellite that we protected heavily for 3 or 4 computers, so my guys, for being as remote as we were and not showering for six months, there were times when I wish we had less, because life didn't change much. You went to fight, eat lunch, very routine. Things at home are dynamic, it's different, and that caused some levels of frustration among the men. We dealt with the repercussions when we got home.

Pylinski: So then, did you ever have any interactions with any private military companies, like Blackwater, when you were over in Iraq?

Wolf: Not really, I was an advisor to my brigade commander, so that was pretty much my only connection.

Pylinski: So how long were you there before you went back?

Wolf: I was there, the last helicopter to leave pulled out of Khalil, there for the final border crossing, I think December 21st, 2011.

Pylinski: How did that feel?

Wolf: Pretty surreal, the final stage, Geraldo Riveros in my rapidos, shooting stuff. I didn't have the same experience as you did in Iraq, where it wasn't a formative part of my military experience, somewhat of a capspin exercise but I was recognizing all the people I had met in my military career who Iraq was such a big part of it to them, to be a part of that final piece was not just relief, which is a strong word, but when we touched down in Kuwait, we touched down in C2 birds, the boss and I had a JTEC with us, watching the convoy go, once we touched down on Camp Virginia in Kuwait it felt pretty big, felt like something a little bigger than us.

Pylinski: Then just closed the book?

Wolf: Yeah, that was it.

Pylinski: Awesome, so what did you do when you got back home to the states?

Wolf: We got home, we were in Kuwait only about 48 hours, got home for Christmas, had some Starbucks.

Pylinski: Yeah when I was in Kuwait I couldn't believe to see like Burger King, Starbucks, I think I was at the Crystal Palace, I was swimming every day, there for like a week, all of our flights got cancelled, because there was an influx of so many of them, so I just bought a pair of swim trunks and hung out on the beach.

Wolfe: The final month in Iraq, we were retraining everything, they pulled out all the defects, we ate emorys for like 38 days and I was training for a marathon, so we came back pretty emaciated and when we got to Kuwait we got to munch out and shower, got back to the states for Christmas, they were nice, they didn't make us go to re-integration training 'til after Christmas so I got to go home to my parent's house in New Jersey for a four day weekend, my girlfriend and I were living in Austin together, we had a place there while I was deployed, great town. At that point I had decided that I was going to get out of the Army I so I applied to graduate school and got accepted into a couple of programs, so at that point I just needed to decide where I wanted to go.

Pylinski: What made you choose Kellogg?

Wolf: Really like Chicago a lot, I've been here before. A couple of my fraternity brothers went to Kellogg, and for what I wanted to do it was really well respected,

really strong veterans group, I didn't want to go to a place that was all veterans, but it was a nice network to have going, made the most sense at the time.

Pylinski: Now you're working on what graduate degree?

Wolf: MBA in Business.

Pylinski: How is it?

Wolf: Good, good place to take a knee for two years.

Pylinski: How do you feel that the military prepared you for your future endeavors in the world?

Wolf: I don't know.

Pylinski: Still trying to put it all together.

Wolf: Yeah, I mean perspective is always a great thing to have, like when people get really stressed out about things, it's good to step back and listen to what's actually going on. I haven't been in a professional setting since being in the military so some of my analytical skills I'm still trying to shore up, I think it definitely humbles you a lot, and the ability to work with diverse groups of people and work with them closely and build alliances quickly is good, so I'm very happy with my experiences so far.

Pylinski: That's good, there's a lot of guys, even the perspective from the civilian populace that a lot of veterans come back from war severely damaged physically and mentally, people look at veterans as a liability instead of a multiplier, which is the furthest thing from the troop, so it's good to have that mentality and be able to project it onto the civilian world that were not all crazy, and all things considered, you've been through a lot, I mean, Kunar's not exactly a place you take the wife and kids for vacation, so it's good. I wanted to ask you more about your service, regarding your awards and decorations, what did you come home with?

Wolf: I came home with a Bronze Star from Afghanistan, a combat action badge for commendation medals, all the campaign stuff.

Pylinski: How do you think that those medals make you feel, do they evoke any memories, ever look back on any of them. I know some people who treat them like hoopla,

but me, being in the military for 12 years, I like do use them as a memory guidance, how do you see them?

Wolf: They tell a story for each one, each one's got a different story. Little tokens for a period of life, I'm very sentimental for all of them.

Pylinski: What's the story that you think of when you think of your combat action badge?

Wolf: My first fight. I was effectively suppressed for the first time, the guys were pretty strong shooters, I had strong pointed four sides of the sill-top, I had set up pretty effectively, I had two 40's on each of the four, they were able to simultaneously able to suppress all of our strong points so I was having a hard time gaining fire superiority, getting pelted in the face with rocks 'cuz the bullets were hitting above me, it was very frustrating because I just wanted to be able to look up and identify where it was coming from, when you're going through training you can still get a hold on where the fire's coming from because they're shooting blanks so I had to awkwardly position my body and regain initiative, I'm talking to my fort observer on the body, asking where to shoot, drawing grits down on my map, calling for three grits, two of them were good, called for JTECS to be dropped a 2,000 pounder, we were able to neutralize two of the attacking teams, then we got guys to put 240 the 762 range to get some fire superiority, then I had to figure out the war system, it was that decision process that sounds very simple but I was getting hit with rocks, it was very fearful, not knowing exactly what to do. I think that's what I think of when I see my

Pylinski: Was there ever that moment when you didn't think it would end the right way for you?

Wolf: All the time. I was pretty optimistic about surviving, but there were plenty of times when I was thinking one of my guys would get hit. There were so many times when we had problems with guys who would get shot in the pouches, lucky for them but we thought eventually someone would get hit, so it was hard knowing that we had to stay just as aggressive enough to get them to put their heads down.

Pylinski: Did you have any killed or wounded?

Wolf: No, not in my platoon when I took over. We were really fortunate.

Pylinski: In your two deployments, what was your free time like?

Wolf: Afghanistan, I got to know my people really well. The nice part about being on the mountaintop is that there's not a lot of places to hide. So, I developed really close relationships, the guy book in the military says that soldiers, and officers

and NCO's should be really distant, but I thought that was very strategically difficult, because it was so hard to get away, we had two platoons, no, the other platoon leader, Nate Paff and I were good friends, but his NCO's and mine and our soldiers mingled a lot, it was nice, you have some down time, kids are stressed, it was good to have some down time and maybe get a cup of coffee, I also did a lot of reading, I'm a big reader, when we get a hold of movies we watched movies, most of them on hard drives, because we were only re-supplied by 47, so we had to go back to Baustic to get movies. Spent a lot of time just talking to the guys, get to know them as human beings, try and get their minds off of where we were. We would go through sporadic periods with really intense fighting for a week or two, multiple ticks a day, then we go through a month where there's nothing, so it was tough to predict what would happen, which was better than constant fire, but when it was intense it was intense and when there wasn't any fighting we had to keep people's minds focused. No room for complacency.

Pylinski: What about in Iraq?

Wolf: I worked out a ton in Iraq. 2-3 days, came back in the best shape of my life. I was writing all of my essays and preparing my resume for Grad school, I was also running like 50 miles a week.

Pylinski: Which marathon did you run?

Wolf: I ran in Austin, it was nice. I also ran the Chicago Marathon.

Pylinski: Yeah, I ran the Chicago this year, it was my first marathon, won't even tell you my time it was terrible, but I did it after my training in the Appalachian trails, my body wasn't quite recovered yet. I can imagine Austin with all the hills, I go there every year for South by Southwest, I bring my bike, and it's a single speed commuter in that city, and I can't imagine running a marathon in that city. I'm comfortable with a half marathon. So, what about care packages while your deployed, did you get a lot of them from back home?

Wolf: Yeah, I was surprised, we got a decent amount, people you've never met before sending you stuff is incredible, a cool family kind of adopted me and sent me cool goodies. My mom sent me productive stuff, sometimes I would ask for stuff, and when you get it you overindulge. I don't remember really wanting anything, sometimes I would just make up stuff when my mom asked me, we didn't have a lot of food on the mountain, that was kind of frustrating because it was hard to cook and some meals would be interrupted by fighting. I remember sucking down

weight pretty bad, sometimes they'd be pulling bad plugs, the process going backwards were tough.

Pylinski: Yeah and it's not like you were in a field, you were concealed in the mountain, oh Lord. So when you got back to the states, you obviously decided you were going to transition into civilian life, what was the transition like for you.

Wolf: It was pretty good, I had built up a good amount of leave so I took the summer off and travelled around the world a bit.

Pylinski: What were some of your experiences there?

Wolf: I climbed Kilimanjaro,

Pylinski: Nice.

Wolf: Scuba diving off Zanzibar, went up to Europe on a Mediterranean cruise with my family, spent a week in Amsterdam. It was great, then we went back to the states and I went to graduate school, we did our pre-orientation abroad so I went down to Brazil, started school in September, pretty much doing that ever since.

Pylinski: So you and Matt are in school together, how often do you guys meet?

Wolf: He's my best friend at school, we meet up every day.

Pylinski: That's awesome. What about your other friends from the military, you keep up with them often?

Wolf: I've got a pretty tight group of guys that were PL's with me. A lot of the guys were in the 3 shot with me when I started in Carson at the 8th platoon around the time I took my platoon to Afghanistan, one's actually in Chicago, he's out and he's one of my best friends, another friend's at Columbia Law. My friend that lost his leg is back in Afghanistan now, taking command, 173rd Airborne, he's a stud. Those are probably my closest military friends, but then I've got some friends at Kellogg who are vets, which is nice to re-connect and vent.

Pylinski: Aside from the Kellogg Veteran Association you're also a part of IEVA, correct?

Wolf: Yeah.

Pylinski: And, are you a member of VFW or anything like that?

Wolf: No, not yet.

Pylinski: How do you feel, I'm a VFW member, this is more true from the Vietnam guys because they were treated so poorly when they came home, and so they've taken

all of these OAF guys under their wing, and like "hey man, look, this is how VA works, don't feel like you're alone," do you feel that at all, have you, from the veterans organizations that you've interacted with, what's it like?

Wolf: I think it's pretty accepting, everybody's been helpful, I haven't really been as proactive as I should be about it, I think I'm still in that adjustment phase going back, coming out of it, I'm also trying to focus on a new career field and getting to the next step and not dwelling on the past so I think it's easy for us to think about what happened and thinking about the experiences we had it's kind of hard to maintain that focus forward, so I'm just looking for that balance.

Pylinski: So, where do you see Steve Wolf in like 5 years?

Wolf: Finished grad school, I'm still trying to figure it out, I've got a couple different paths, all very exciting stuff, I think eventually I'll have a wife and kids. I really enjoy command, and creating opportunities, so eventually I'd like to maybe lead a small company, or start something and hopefully build it to something bigger. In the five year plan, there's a couple different directions I'm looking to go, so I'm still trying to figure it all out.

Pylinski: It's not like your being rushed with anything which is nice, so, in your own words, what do you think is the definition of a citizen soldier?

Wolf: That's a tough one, there's multiple ways of looking at it but from my impression I think that it's someone who recognizes a need from their country and helps fulfill that need, and then quietly goes back to where they came.

Pylinski: So just in and out.

Wolf: Yeah it just depends how long they're in.

Pylinski: Right, well, so, is there anything that you want to add to this interview, something I didn't hit on?

Wolf: I don't think so, thank you obviously we really appreciate what you guys are doing, and we hope we can help serve some sort of need.

Pylinski: Yeah you guys are doing exactly what we need, which is just to have veterans come in and share your story, so thank you more than anything for being here today and sharing your story to us. It means a lot to us and this library, Col. Pritzker was a military dude, he's got a lot of vested interest in this library and all of the veterans that come in and out of here, so it means a lot to us to have you

here, and if you know anybody else, bring them by. Excellent, well thank you again.

Wolf: Thanks a lot, appreciate it.