

Interview with Mr. Chad Hutchison

Veteran – Dessert Sand; Iraq War

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Narrator: Today is March 2, 2005. This is the beginning of an interview with Chad Hutchison at the United Methodist Church, Kinsley, Kansas. Mr. Hutchison was born September 24, 1968. Mr. Hutchison served in the Army Reserve for the Gulf War and Operation Iraqi Freedom and is ranked Staff Sergeant.

Narrator: Were you drafted or did you volunteer to serve in Iraq?

Hutchison: I didn't get drafted. I enlisted in the military and my unit was called to go over to Iraq.

Narrator: You were in the Army Reserve?:

Hutchison: Right, yes.

Narrator: What was the date you were called up? do you remember?

Hutchison: They alerted us on February 14, 2003. That's the day they alerted us. We actually didn't start active duty until March 18.

Narrator: Why did you join the Army Reserve?

Hutchison: I wanted to go to college...a little bit of college money, plus I wanted to do something other than what I was doing. I looking in during high school to serve in the military, and some stuff went on, and I didn't want to do that at the time.

Narrator: When you were alerted that you had to go to Iraq, how did your family feel?

Hutchison: They weren't surprised. We knew it was coming; it was just a matter of time. I, that was the fourth time called up as a reservist to go somewhere; and we'd just been waiting. I mean they were...it...they took it pretty hard but they knew it was coming and it was something we didn't want to happen but we knew it was going to happen.

Narrator: You said it was your fourth time to be called?

Hutchison: We had gone to Dessert Shield, Desert Storm; we went to Bosnia in '95 and '96, and to Kosovo in 1999 and 2000.

Narrator: When you went over, what was your job?

Hutchison: Our job were firemen. We do crash fire rescue for all the helicopters and aircraft that come in, and we also do structure fires...like we took over an air base, an Iraq air base and they had buildings on there and that's what we were there for. Soldiers were living in those so we had to supply fire support for that also. We actually had three missions over there: Helicopters, fixed wing aircraft and structure.

Narrator: What was the closest you came to live combat?

Hutchison: I didn't have to shoot at anybody. We had people shooting at us. The night we came on, we were at Camp Anaconda, Iraq is what we were at; and the night we came on you could see tracer fire rounds being fired off around us. Nobody in our convoy was attacked. Right after we came through to gate, about 15 minutes later, another convoy came through and they attacked it. On base we had mortar hits all the time around our base that... I don't know, they, some of them landed a couple hundred yards away and some of them landed outside the wire, so you know, it was an everyday deal.

Narrator: So there weren't any casualties in your unit?

Hutchison: We didn't...we didn't lose anybody. We didn't have anybody get hurt from mortars or shot at or shot. We had...we had an incident where we were at a fire station one day, helping an Iraqi fire station get established, and we stayed too long, longer than what we were supposed to. Came outside...about the time we came out, they shot an RPG (*Rocket Propelled Grenade*) which ended up hitting a little kid, and the little kid lost his arm, but luckily we had a paramedic with us in the unit, and he was able to help, but other than that we didn't have. I didn't have to shoot at anybody, and nobody shot at me that I knew, could see.

Narrator: Was it difficult to stay in touch with your wife while you were over there?

Hutchison: At first, it was...at first, the first couple months it was pretty hard. I mean we had some old military phones we were able to make morale calls home on, and then it got better. We...they started letting us contact local contractors to come and put stuff in. We found one that sold...uh...satellite internet, and we all pitched in money and bought satellite internet, and we had that so we were actually able to e-mail. I mean it wasn't the greatest. You know you're in a Third World country, and you just hope some days it worked. Some days it didn't. That was nice. That was a bit plus, and then later down the road, the more established we got in the base, the better the communications got. They had an AT & T...I think it was AT& T phone...phone tent you could go use the phone, but they charged way too much. (Laughs)

Narrator: How was the food?

Hutchison: First couple months, you basically ate your MRE's, your "Meals Ready to Eat", and then...first, about first month in Iraq, I think that's what we pretty much lived off. And then they had what they call MKT's...they're...uh, the kitchen tent. Basically they get these...they call them T-rations, and they just...they come in a tin. They throw them in hot water and boil them. They take them out and open the tin up, and that's what you get out of that. And they served that. You got...T-rats for breakfast, MRE's for lunch, and then a T-rat for supper. That was for a couple months. Then they started opening up some dining facilities, which in the morning you still had your T-rat, then your MRE for lunch, but you got a hot egg for supper. By the time we left, we had been eating hot eggs three meals a day for several weeks. I mean months, probably a couple months.

Narrator: Did you ever have a shortage of food?

Hutchison: I would say no. I mean we had plenty of MRE's. I mean if you want to eat those all day. You...you had plenty of opportunity to eat those, but meal wise, I noticed at the end when more of the Iraqis became more organized, I...we had heard there were shortages. They were blowing up bridges and making it harder for the convoys to bring in supplies. But we were still getting our meals and stuff. and they hadn't rationed anything out yet.

Narrator: What was some of the entertainment you had?

Hutchison: Well, when I first got in, a lot of the guys brought in their own laptops. And you were able to watch DVD's on those. The units now have those large, we called them projection screens or whatever...proximas, the big overhead projector screen. We were able to hook those up to computers. In fact, that was one of the first things. I mean we didn't...didn't have anything else. We had a generator running our power. We were living outside, but in the firemen, where the bays, fire trucks were supposed to be parked where we were living, we used it as a screen to watch movies on at night and so, we had...we had movies.

The USO comes over. They bring over shows or there's another thing like the USO. I can't remember the name of it, but they would bring comedians. They would have a little stage and show, have comedians up there and stuff, so...We had a lot of actors – Robin Williams, Arnold Schwarzenegger, some race car drivers, wrestlers come over, so I mean they had entertainment available to use. The military has what they call MWR (Morale Welfare and Recreation). And they set up tents that they had pool tables, foosball in it, and stuff. But that didn't happen until several months into it. They started to bring stuff over to relieve some of the stress off the soldiers.

Narrator: You mentioned that you were living in the fire truck bays. Does that mean you weren't living in tents? Did you have a building.

Hutchison: When we first got there, we took over a firemen's building. It was an actual fire station on the airfield itself. It had a structure to the backside of it that we had dropped a bomb on before we got there. It wasn't livable. We ended up tearing it down. We dozed it down. But the firemen's bays, we just lived inside those, parked the trucks outside, but most of us, it was so hot, that you couldn't sleep indoors. You went outside and just hoped to catch a breeze or anything, just to sleep at night.

Narrator: Were you able to come during your tour?

Hutchison: No, I did not. I stayed over the whole year. I didn't take my leave. I didn't want to. The family didn't want me to. It was too hard to say goodbye the first time, let alone having me come home and go through that emotion and then have to say goodbye again. So I just stayed...there were a lot of guys that did take a leave, but I did not.

Narrator: Are there any particular events that stick out, pranks or entertainment. . .”

Hutchison: (Laughing) Probably some stuff we don't want to talk about...no...we had...we had a unit from, I want to say they are from South Dakota, I believe, a National Guard unit. They actually went in and they were a heavy combat engineering unit and they had heavy equipment and they were able to level some of the dust, and pack it down and soak it, and they built us a softball field. And they had a softball tournament on July 4th. So that was one thing that, I mean, and they even set up a softball league. We played softball a couple nights a week...and stuff. So that was one thing, and I mean, there was a lot but I thought that was pretty cool...130 degrees and we're playing softball.

Narrator: Did everybody, while you were in Iraq, pretty much get along. Were there any feuds

Hutchison: You have days, you know, you take, and you know, most people you work eight hours with somebody back in the States. You go home and you're away from them. Over there you work 24 hours, seven days a week. You live with them. They're constantly there. So, you are going to run into problems. And we did. We had guys that, you know, they'd have a little spat or whatever you want to call it, and then after a while, it just seemed to know of resolve itself.

Narrator: How did it work when you found out it was time to go home?

Hutchison: They alerted us, and told us that we got orders coming. We were supposed to be leaving on this date and this and this. Well, then our...we started trying to get flights out. We kept getting bumped by other people going home...like you have contractors who have a contract that if they want out they can leave at any given time and they bumped us. What we, what we did was jump on a flight as...as alternates. We were trying to get out before our flight

date because they said it was so hard to get a flight. So we had a lot of that. We had about three days of waiting to get out, but once we got the word to come home, everybody was...it was pretty, pretty awesome.

Narrator: Everybody was pretty happy?

Hutchison: Yea.

Narrator: Did you get any special treatment on the way home?

Hutchison: Yeh. We stopped in Dover, Delaware...is where we flew into, and we went out and ate. We paid for our own meals. There were people stopping by thanking us and stuff and the next morning at the hotel, there were these Air Force guys who were stationed over at Dover, Delaware; they heard we were at this motel and showed up with...some beer and were trying to give us all beer at nine in the morning to thank us for going over and doing what we did, and that was pretty neat. On the way home through the airports, we'd stop at little eating places or stuff, and you could have a beer in there or whatever, and there was people...I remember in Dallas. We stopped and me and one of the guys went in and had a beer, and they knew we were...had gone over there. Well, one...we were still in uniform; probably shouldn't have done that but we were still in uniform, and we stopped in and had a beer, and another guy came over and bought us one. Didn't say anything...the lady just showed up with it. We thanked him. The guy that I was with had gone home on leave and had the same deal happen to him on leave. Well, he got a whole bunch of Iraqi money. In return for the guy buying him a beer, he gave him an Iraqi dollar or whatever. That guy was like in awe. No, when we came home, the people were...I couldn't believe the reception that we got. I mean, they had a parade for us in Garden City, and everybody was out. There was TV news, and everything there. It was pretty neat to see how much support we had back here.

Narrator: So was that a pretty emotional return?

Hutchison: Yep! It really is. It's nice...because you don't know when you're over there other than the letters that you get from people who write to you. You never know what you're going to get. You know they're all...I have never received a letter that was negative towards what we were doing over there...always supportive. When you come home, you always see, you know...the news always reports what's the negative...people protesting the war and stuff like that, but when you come home, you don't see that. And being from a small community, everybody knows everybody so that helped out a lot.

Narrator: Where did your family meet you?

Hutchison: They met me...we flew into Kansas City and got on a bus and went to Fort Riley. They met me at Fort Riley at 4 o'clock in the morning.

Narrator: I am sure you made a lot of good friends in the service that don't live too close. Do you these friendships?

Hutchison: The military has what they call AKO, Army Knowledge On-line, and they have e-mail addresses all set up. I've been getting e-mails from a couple of guys...a couple that I haven't been able to get in contact with...but for the most part, I kept in contact with some of them. Some of the other guys kept in contact with some of the other guys that they've met. Every drill weekend that we have, we talk about whom they've talked to a stuff that we met over there.

Narrator: Have your thoughts about the military and the war changed any? An what are your views?

Hutchison: No. You want my beliefs on this? If we didn't do it now, your kids or my kids would be over there doing it. If we didn't do it right now, my belief is...we went over there in 1991; Saddam Hussein signed a peace treaty saying that he would abide by these rules. The UN did not back us. Nobody backed us. And the UN is the one that set forth, saying, "Hey, if you don't abide by these, we're going to come in. And we're going to take over." I'm not saying that we're taking over, but from what I saw over there, it needed to be done because in the future he would have had some stuff. You know, everybody says that they can't find the weapons of mass destruction. We have no reason to be there. Well, look what he has done to his own people. We basically stopped that in Bosnia and Kosovo. It wasn't ethnic cleansing. He had his own way. He didn't just wipe out the ethnic groups. He was wiping out whoever was against Saddam Hussein.

I met a local national over there, and his big question was this: "Are you guys going to stay?" I though, well, what do you mean? He said, "Are you going to finish?"

I said, "What are you talking about?"

He referred back to 1991 when we went into Iraq. They started an uprising, and we turned around and left Iraq, left all of those people out there. Saddam killed quite a few of them that upraised against him. That was this guy's biggest fear...are we going to finish the job? Then I happened to see him the day that we caught Saddam Hussein. The guy's 30 years old, sitting in our day room, watching the news, watching FOX news, and here they are with Saddam. He's crying. Right there made it well worth my whole trip over there, just to talk to him and see him...overwhelmed that we caught Saddam. He never thought that we would catch him. He thought that we would leave; Saddam would come back into power, and kill anybody who was against him.