

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Gulf War - Desert Storm

Personal Experience

O H 1405

JOHN A GIANNINI

Interviewed

by

Angela Cellio

on

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C. This is an interview with John Giannini for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Gulf War, by Angela Cellio, on October 15, 1991, at Maag Library, at 9:00 a m

To get started, how about you tell me something about your family

G: We are from the North side of Youngstown. I went to St Anthony School. I have four sisters We moved to Liberty in, probably, the 1970's sometime

C What about your parents?

G: My parents? My mom worked at Jewel Mart for a number of years, and my dad works for Superior Beverage.

C: Okay. You mentioned part of your education was at St Anthony's School What about high school and college?

G: I went to Liberty. Four years at Liberty, and then I went to YSU around 1984, 1985

C: What year did you graduate high school?

G: 1983

C: Okay So following high school, you went to college, and you are currently enrolled. What branch of the service are you in?

G. In 1983 I joined the Army Reserve

C: What led you to join?

G Basically it came down to the point where, putting yourself through college, you had no real choice about the matter, you know? Financially, I had to be self-supporting I could not get the money from my parents, so I had to put myself through school And at that time it was a good way to earn college money. It was something I always thought I was going to do, too, a little out-door activity deal And so I joined

C: Did you have to sign up for a certain length of years?

G I had to sign a six year contract in the medical unit, the current medical unit I am with now And I went to their X-ray school They made us field medics and gave us specialized training

C So do you have a particular rank, then, or title?

- G I am a staff sergeant.
- C In the Army Reserves And you are still in there now?
- G That is correct
- C. What year did you join? It was before college?
- G 1983.
- C Describe, then, what you have to do in the Reserves. I know you do not go away for a certain period of time
- G. Well, basically, it is one weekend a month, mostly a Saturday and a Sunday, where we start around 7 30 in the morning and we normally end anywhere between five and six-thirty at night, at the latest Some weekends, like two weekends per year, you will come in Friday night and we will do other things. We have other training sites we go to My unit is out in Canton, Ohio. It is about seventy miles from here Some weekends we go on Fridays, then we will go Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and we will get done Sunday at like 4:00 or 5 00. That is it
- C. One weekend per month
- G Normally. There have been, like before the Gulf War, we doubled up a few weekends, you know, in preparation.
- C. Did your family have any particular reaction to you joining?
- G They did not really have a reaction Well, you are in the Army Reserve, now I think they were more happy because of the motives for joining the Army I was putting myself through college and I was self-supportive So they were, I am not going to say happy that I joined, but they were kind of proud that I joined.
- C Did you or they -- I do not know how they feel -- ever think that you would be faced with a war-time situation?
- G Well, we are volunteers To join the military without thinking that you will ever go to war, you would have to be a fool You can just look back in history for just the last ten years and what, there were three different conflicts, even if limited conflicts There is always a chance of war And us being the medical unit, there is always the chance of sending out on a natural disaster, too It is the risk you take when you sign the contract. Somebody sent me a newspaper in the fall from YSU where they had that Marine deserter appear at YSU talking, I was just wondering if he got paid to talk on the lecture series, or something They had

this Marine deserter there. He signed, and when it came time for him to go he said, "No. I do not believe it is just." But all those years, he sucked up all the money and wore the uniform, and he abandoned his team when they needed him.

C So you think he was a deserter?

G Sure, he is a deserter. When you get to work with a bunch of people long enough to create teams, you know how you act, you know how this one acts, you kind of know everybody's strength and weaknesses. You kind of know how the team will operate, kind of know what you have to do to keep it running smoothly. When you throw a new person in there, you do not know their strengths and weaknesses as well. It could really hurt. Or, it could be the opposite, it could be a good replacement, but that guy abandoned his team. Now those guys are short one guy. Sure, they get a new guy, and he will probably work fairly well, but they will never know him as well. And in his job, that could put somebody else's life in jeopardy. He was a deserter.

C Would you rather no one had sent you that, about that Marine deserter? How did it make you feel while you were over there?

G. We passed it around, we laughed and said, "What a deserter. Serves him right."

C. So then, joining the reserves is different than enlisting.

G When I enlisted I was gone for a year, just for my training.

C. The training took one year?

G. Well, just a little short of.

C And that was where?

G I went to different forts. Fort Dix, New Jersey, I went to Fort Sam Houston, and I went to Fort Campbell Kentucky.

C So then you had the experience of being away. Did you enjoy the experience of being away, or was it something that was hard for you to do, to leave your family?

G At eighteen, nineteen years old, you adjust. You are getting into those kind of programs and training in the military, your day is regimented. You are always doing something, you are keeping busy the whole time.

C Kind of a routine. You get into a routine and it is hard to break after awhile.

- G Well, yeah You get into a routine and you do it You know, you are sad, you are away from home But I went to some nice places, saw a lot of nice cities
- C So it was a good experience, for traveling
- G I had a lot of fun.
- C You have a girlfriend now, correct?
- G Yes.
- C When you left for that year, did you have a girlfriend then that you left?
- G No
- C. So that was not a problem?
- G Not a problem
- C So what is the title for your reserve regiment?
- G. It is the 350th Evacuation Hospital
- C Let us talk about the Gulf now When did you receive orders that you were going to leave?
- G The official order dates were November 21, 1990 However, in the months before that -- the Gulf Conflict started in August, the first week in August -- as soon as they started activating units, they started putting units on alert, your status [changed] Right now we are in a down mode, kind of a laid back, resting status. As soon as anything like that happens, on that scale, your status keeps going up. They will not tell you officially Here you are preparing yourself, getting your stuff together and getting over-seas packets together and over-seas equipment "Hmm. Where are we going?" "Well, we are not going anywhere yet. It is not official." You kind of see the storm rising Probably around October we had a really strong feeling They do not want to let loose or break down or name a unit that is preparing You know, terrorist activities and stuff Probably around October we had a real strong feeling we were going
- C You were still in Youngstown, though, at the time.
- G Yes
- C Serving approximately one weekend per month?

- G Yes
- C So after all this preparation and you found out you were going to go, what did you feel like?
- G We have a phone system We had a phone chain And each individual section, you start off like, you know, you can call this guy, you call these three guys, and it kind of breaks off We have some codes that go with the phone, to know that this is not a joke, or whatever I got the call at like 6 30 in the morning, on a Saturday morning I thought somebody was calling me to go fishing or something I was like, what is this call for? I said, "You are kidding " He said, "Hey, are you up?" I said, "No, I am still sleeping. What is going on?" The guy who was calling me, I thought he was calling me to maybe go do something He said, "No, this is it. Are you ready for this?" He told me it and I said, "You are serious." He said, "Yeah, I am serious " I said, "You are not shitting me?" He said, "No, I am serious. That is the code " I said, "Ah, man." He said, "Orders will follow. Be down at the center tomorrow morning "
- C One day notice.
- G. You got a call. That is it Twelve hours Went down to the center, got the official order, the agenda, what is going to happen. I went back It was kind of harder for me because I lived with my family still and that was about seventy miles from my house So I had to get up at five in the morning to drive there, start the day around seven fifteen down there, then do the whole thing down there, where there is so much to do Then driving back home to Youngstown And then getting up at four in the morning, five in the morning, to get packing I did that three days in a row The third day we left.
- C That was on a Monday?
- G Yeah, it was like a Monday or a Tuesday.
- C After that call came, what did you do? What did you feel like?
- G. It was kind of funny I was doing a research project for one class I had a stack of notes about two inches thick, I was kind of working on the research the night before and stuff. It was about the four and a half week mark of school. I was like, "Wow, [I] do not have to do this project now I can shelve this forever, maybe." Being in the reserve, you just kind of keep your stuff together. You have what you call a war chest. All the stuff you have ever gotten. You should just be able to pick up your stuff and go. The minute-man concept two hundred years later. It is still part of the concept Basically, what you did was you dropped everything We dropped everything we were doing, I called my boss, called a few teachers and said, "Hey, you know that test? I am not going to take it I will mail it to you I will give a copy of my orders to my girlfriend " You know,

give them a copy for my files

We were gone Yeah, you go through the emotional highs and lows, you know you are going to an expected deal Here today, just like this, sitting down here like this, [I] do not have to go to work. I think I came down here for two hours and I said, "Wow, I have got to go " At first they did not believe me About three or four days before, I talked to someone and said, "You know, chances are looking really strong that I am going " I was just telling these people a couple of days before I got the official notice, "I will probably be going The odds are I will probably be going " I was kind of getting prepared, in that sense, let them know as soon as I could, when it was official, so we could work out little plans like that, and kind of get my stuff together We picked up our stuff and that was it.

- C: So it seems like you were pretty well physically prepared How about emotionally prepared?
- G: How do you get prepared emotionally? How do you prepare? I cannot think of any ways. You just go through the highs and lows. A lot of waiting. It is pretty serious For all of these years, you have been going on training exercises, you have fun. Afterward, everyone goes to a bar and, you know, trades stories and you have parties and stuff like that You had to have fun, you know, "Hey, training is over. Let us go have fun." And even out there doing the training we would have fun All of a sudden that is over, the fun is over This is it. You see highs and lows.
- C: How about your family? Did they experience the same highs and lows?
- G: I would say they did It would have been a lot harder on them if we had left right away. What happened was, the way our system works, we have loads and loads of equipment that have to be there, so they do not want to send us there too easy because of the logistics of keeping a unit, just being able to feed them and clothe them. It is just a very hard system. So they did not want to send us over there too early But they want to send us over as early as they can to make sure we get our equipment and inventory ready. So we got held up at Fort Benning for twenty days before we had to go We were supposed to ship out before Christmas, but they had such a back log that they could not get our equipment. We thought we were going to have Christmas in Indiana, but at the last minute we got to go home for like three days.
- C: For Christmas
- G: Yeah Then after that we got back and we stayed two days there and flew out. We went to Arabia.
- C: Is that where you stayed, then, in Saudi Arabia?

- G If you know where the neutral zone is at, we were probably, at one time, anywhere between thirty miles from Kuwait, if not nearer
- C Were your duties strictly medical duties?
- G Well, we pull our own security We do that stuff, too In those kind of environments, it is like, okay, you are a clerk, typist or something like that It is kind of limited to, "Well, you are just going to type " When you get out there, there are just so many things to keep a unit going. Jobs that everybody does, they call them duties
- C I know that at this point in time, you did have a girlfriend that you loved
- G: Yeah.
- C How long had you been dating her before you left?
- G Good question A couple months Five, four months.
- C How was that, knowing you had to leave her for a period of time?
- G: Well, I made a commitment to this unit [When it is] Time to go, you go It is sad that you have to leave, you are not happy that you have to go, it is not going on a vacation CNN News shows all these little things We had edited versions of the news out there. CNN News, I saw tapes of what they were showing, you know, people laying out in the sun and stuff, you know, the luxury-type deals like that, the people in Iran. Where we were at, we were a couple hundred miles north of that There was nothing. It was kind of disturbing, some of the real pictures
- C The area you were at there was nothing, just sand.
- G Sand It is desolate out there. There is nothing like that
- C: Did you know about how long you were going to be there? Did they tell you in advance that you were going for any length of time?
- G No, you never knew anything like that. Everything was subject to change.
- C: So you just went and whenever you got home, you got home
- G. Just about They cut us orders for one hundred and eighty days, then they cut us orders on top of that for one hundred and eighty days
- C Did you ever think you might not come home?
- G: As in our unit getting taken out or getting lost, there were some times you would



think that. We had a scud blow about three or four hundred yards from our compound. When we were in Kabaro, we had a scud blow up overhead and rain wreckage into a compound where we were at. It is a war. Where we were at, when they brought that armored group through, we could see the stuff going over, the planes, see the flashes on the horizon, battle. We were a medical, but the medical units could kill, too.

People are fanatical. I think we were kind of lucky that we wore down their will as much as we did, because all those Arabs were just weird, fanatics.

C Did you have to come in contact with many?

G Sure. Toward February, after the ground war, we took our casualties, they would fly them into us or bring them in on a ground ambulance. Then they took our casualties. And then all the prisoners that came in, we ended up taking in hundred of prisoners. Hundreds of them. In April, we ended up taking refugees. We had to take hundreds of refugees, too. So we were a basic unit.

C. You became more of a refugee camp than a medical unit?

G No. Everybody there needed medical attention. The way they ran things out there was, if they had one spot open on an ambulance, they used these big buses as ambulances, but if they had one spot open they fit like, they never refused anybody, whoever they were, medical attention. The POW's we had under guard. We had, at times, two or three hundred POW's in the hospital. They would be under guard.

C While you were there, were you able to contact home, your family and your girlfriend?

G. There was a phone center. A phone center is kind of like, it has a dish and probably has forty phones. The phone center was about a twenty minute ride. If you were able to get a vehicle, for one, not have any work to do, get a vehicle, and be able to get out there and be able to wait, three, four, or five hours for a phone. Some days you would wait four or five hours for a phone. They limited the calls to fifteen minutes. They tell you when you could start and when you could end. We were lucky that the phone center was there, that we were that close to one. I am saying close in the sense of twenty minutes. Where as other units would not be near one for hours. A lot of the infantry guys from the field, that is where, toward the end, they got one call before the ground war started. I was able to make a few phone calls. I tried to get a call in once every three weeks, once a month.

C How about incoming calls. Were there any from your family?

G. Zero. It would be impossible.

- C Just by mail
- G Mail three, four, and five weeks late I am still getting letters now, I think I am serious I get Christmas cards in April I went out to one of the mail centers, picked up mail, and you got to picture an area maybe five, six football fields big, with pallets on top of pallets, stacked two or three high, everywhere, and it was mail Those mail units, their job was to sort everything. We are talking millions of pounds of mail. It was a lot of mail. It was getting to the point where people, it is real nice somebody from Iowa is sending me this letter, saying keep up the good work They did not want to discourage people doing supportive things like that, but what happens is that that sort of mail gets in the way of important mail The mail that we feel is more important than some letter that has no meaning to it. There was a lot of, I am not going to call it junk mail, it was good supportive mail, too But that mail kind of got in the way of the other
- C Did you feel that your whole country was really behind you? That there was a lot of support
- G Yeah, we felt that there was a lot of support We did. The Girl Scouts sent us cookies, and stuff
- C. I remember seeing on a lot of the news reports here, they showed a lot of footage showing more support, I guess, than demonstrations against Did you see any of that over there?
- G: We had no access to a television or CNN or anything like that Now they ended up finding a television for the unit, finding a VCR somewhere later on. The Saudi government bought it for us But we did not watch anything like that
- C So you really did not know if there were people not supporting you
- G Well, I would get newspaper articles, like I said, a lot of my friends sent my newspaper clippings
- C Did you have a lot of time on your hands over there before the POW's and refugees?
- G No, we put together a hospital with four hundred beds, so we were constantly busy. Even though the ground war was not officially started, people were still getting hurt by accidents. Everyday we had people being flown in because they were injured Vehicle accidents Out there there is like mines We even had one helicopter wreck they brought to us We took in the Egyptian Where we were at, we had the British and the French forces up there, and the Egyptian forces up in front of us We took their casualties, also

C Did you feel like the United States was taking most of the brunt of the war then?

G. We did have the most troops there, but the British and the France, they were always pretty supportive in the war, in what they did. I think in Schwarzkopf's position, who is he going to trust more, his own men or people who have been attached to him? Not that he did not give those people, like the British army units, gave them responsibilities also. That is part of how it is. It is kind of hard to say that we took the brunt of it, but I think he kind of trusted more commands with his own troops than foreign troops. But he did give the French and British huge responsibilities out there, too. The Egyptian unit was out there.

C. How were they?

G I do not trust them. [Laughter] They kept on wrecking their vehicles. They drove like the rest of the Saudi's. They do not know the laws of the road, they just drive and smash. The road out there killed probably more people than the enemy in the beginning. We probably had a hundred and fifty die on the supply route. Just the US, it was about a two lane road, maybe one and a half lanes. The bigger armored vehicle has the right of way. That is where you get all of your supplies.

C: Were you able to communicate with the other troops around you?

G We had a few interpreters assigned to us. One time we had like three interpreters assigned to us. Some of them spoke some English. We had one who came to our unit who spoke some French.

C. That did not cause a major problem, then?

G. No. I do not think so. With some of the prisoners, we would have interpreters with them, too, to try and instruct them.

C. When were you finally allowed to leave, to come home?

G Let us see. I left June 1st.

C. So you were there over six months.

G January to June.

C You left for home on June 1st.

G Yes.

C When you left Saudi Arabia, did you have a certain path to take? Did you have to go from Saudi Arabia to here, then to here?

- G. Well, I was with the rear detachment unit, re-deployment, getting our stuff back. We had to clean our vehicles up, make sure our equipment was put together, inventoried, so that we could take it out in an orderly fashion.
- C. So leaving there, did you arrive in the United States from there?
- G. Yes. I think we arrived in Philadelphia, if my memory recalls. Then from Philadelphia we flew into Indianapolis Airport. See, at this time, we were the rear detachment unit, there were only twenty-two of us, from a regular unit. A full unit is four hundred people. So we were the last twenty-two to leave. At Indianapolis Airport they had a van for us, a brass band was there.
- C. Did that make you feel good? Did you feel that was a good homecoming?
- G. Yes. It was a pretty good homecoming.
- C. Then after that, were you finally able to come back to Youngstown?
- G. I spent six or seven days out processing, getting physicals and stuff like that. The following week we came home.
- C. That was about the middle of June?
- G. Yes.
- C. What kind of homecoming did you receive here?
- G. My friends and picked me up in a limousine. I was with another group of people when they drove up, from Indianapolis with all my buddies and stuff. I kind of called them in Cleveland from somewhere and said, "Pick me up here." I was just laying on my duffle bag somewhere out in Kent, somewhere off of seventy-six in Kent, and they came and picked me up in a limousine.
- C. How about your family?
- G. My family had a homecoming-type deal.
- C. A lot of emotions?
- G. They were happy to have me back. Somebody to cut the grass, I guess.
- C. And your girlfriend?
- G. She was happy to have me back.

C Looking back now on the war, what are your feelings now that you have the time to think about it? Do you have any different reaction than you had then?

G Well, if we have to go again, we will go again. I think we had a ninety-nine percent turn-out rate for the reserves and guards, besides the few Marine deserters. That is pretty good. If we have to go again, we will go again. After talking to the refugees and finding out some of their stories, the atrocities, I do not know if the atrocities will ever stop. They think very differently there. They are just warring people. They are always killing in the name of God. We will probably be back there in ten years.

C. Is there anything else that you would like to add that we have not talked about?

G. Not right now, but probably later. Two hours from now, I will have all kinds of things to say.

C Thank you.

End of Interview