

Interview with Nate Lahti, Marquette Michigan, February 16, 2007.
(About being an Iraq veteran and a student at Northern Michigan University)

Melinda Stock: When were you born?

Nate Lahti: I was born February 9th 1985.

MS: What is your name and rank?

NL: My name is Nate Lahti, and I'm a specialist.

MS: Where are you from?

NL: Marquette(?), Michigan.

MS: Did you grow up there?

NL: Yes.

MS: Why did you decide to come to Northern?

NL: It was away from home, but not too close to home.

MS: What is your major?

NL: I'm a nursing major?

MS: (What is your) minor?

NL: Military Science

MS: Is everyone who's in ROTC a military science minor?

NL: I really don't know. Probably.

MS: Why did you decide to join the military science program?

NL: I was actually, from high school I was in JROTC I'd gotten a scholarship to Northern's Military Science program. To go there and commission as an officer, and go through school. What happened was I decided to drop my scholarship and join the National Guard first. Then I got deported and came back. And now I'm just in the (ROTC) program, and the minor. (...?) I decided I wanted to be an officer.

MS: So you applied to Northern Michigan University?

NL: That's kind of messed up. Around 2003 I was here and I was under the military science, I had the military science scholarship, the ROTC scholarship. Then December of 2003 I enlisted in the National Guard. I dropped the scholarship. I was going to go with the simultaneous membership program. And in October of 2004 I was deployed, and the December 16th of 2005 I came back. So 2006 is when I started school here again.

MS: Is there a reason why you wanted to join the National Guard?

NL: I figured to be enlisted first before I become an officer. (?)

MS: So when were you deployed?

NL: I was deployed October 2004, we got back in December of 2005.

MS: How did that deployment happen?

NL: What do you mean?

MS: Did you know that you were going to Iraq when you enlisted in the National Guard?

NL: I was pretty sure I was going to go.

MS: So you were at NMU, and then you joined the National Guard, and went to Iraq, and then you came back?

NL: Yup.

MS: How did you come back to NMU?

NL: Like you mean...

MS: Was it your decision?

NL: Yeah, I decided to finish up school and see what happens after that.

MS: What was it like in Iraq? What were your responsibilities?

NL: I guess it depended on where we were. We did a lot of different things. We did weapons caches, ignitions. Sometime we'd do submissions.(?) Just do basic maintenance and drive bulldozers, dump trucks. We drove convoys security. Every once in a while we (?) we'd dive in front on the convoy and just check the road up ahead, and check out a couple house and whatnot. There's a lot of different jobs we did.

MS: Is there one particular job that you did?

NL: Weapons caches and convoy security. I did just basic driving things in convoys. I did bob(?) security, bob(?) maintenance, went out on other weapon missions. Didn't do to much road clearance but a lot of the guys did a lot of road clearance.

MS: Can you explain what these things were, like what were weapons caches?

NL: Weapons caches, pretty much you go out and look for weapons. You'll find a caches of weapons and you'll take it and you'll destroy them. Road clearance, the people that do road clearance the go over and IEDs and whatnot.

MS: What are IEDs?

NL: Improvised Explosive Devices that (?) artillery rounds or whatever that they find on the road.

MS: What else?

NL: Convoy security that was with the rat pack you drive up in front of the convoy and you might check out like um see if you can find any IEDs or stuff up ahead or you can like um if an IED was set off you try and go find the trigger man or you go and try and like um, we do one mission where you go see if you can find any weapons in houses and whatnot.

MS: Bob security?

NL: A bob is like the forward operations base it's like your camp, pretty much. And every once in a while like people do a security watch in the towers, and we would also go and just do basic maintenance in the camp. Like, hauling rock or something to build up these walls or whatnot.

We were at Camp Ramadi, and right next to us were shark faces, the special forces. And we took bulldozers and pushed them around (?)

MS: So by which city in Iraq were you?

NL: We were all over actually. We started off in Kuwait, and we drove up into Najaf and not too much really happened in that area but then we stayed there for maybe about a month and we moved up to Ramadi. Most of our operations were along the Eupharates river and whatnot and we went to Fallujah and up to Baghdad, we went as far north as... that air force base... Camp Anaconda at Balad. We'd go up as far as Balad but we didn't go much further than that. We'd go up towards the Jordan border every so often. A couple of our guys were there the whole time, and on the Syria border. We were mostly in the Al Anbar province, in the (?) triangle.

MS: How did you get to these different places?

NL: Most of the time we convoyed. And every so often, if we were coming off or if going for leave, or go someplace else, we might get the chopper or something. But it was mostly convoy.

MS: When you were leaving for Iraq, how did you feel about that, were you okay with it?

NL: I was fine. I was a little bit nervous, not knowing what to expect I suppose. But it's not so bad once you're there. I think it's worse for your family because they're wondering what you're doing. In Iraq you'll have a million thing to do, a lot of things going on, or absolutely nothing.

MS: How did you get to Iraq?

NL: We mobilized in Fortsill(?), Oklahoma. We did a little bit of training in Fort Hart(?) for one or two months, or something like that. Then we flew into Frankfort, Germany. From Germany we flew to Kuwait. And we staged our stuff in Kuwait. From Kuwait we convoyed into Iraq.

MS: When you were in Iraq were you able to keep in contact with your friend and family in the U.S.?

NL: Well every once in a while we would have access to satellite phones, so that was really easy to talk to them on those. And we actually had computers, and were able to have a satellite to use those computers over there which was kind of cool, so if we had time we could send email or something.

MS: So as far as you know were your parents okay while you were away? Were they really worried about you?

NL: My mom was really, really nervous the whole time I was gone and my dad was nervous. He was a little better than my mom was, though.

MS: You were gone for a year?

NL: Yup.

MS: So, when you were leaving Iraq, how did you feel about that? Were you happy to come home?

NL: It's exciting. You miss your family. You get your friends there, they become pretty much like your family, but even if talk to your family with letters or whatnot for a year, a year is a long

time without you family so it's a great feeling when you go back and you can finally see everybody again.

MS: so when you came back, did you come back to Northern Michigan right away or did you hang out with your family for a while?

NL: I came back. I came in through the KI-Sawyer airport then I spent about a month or two back in (?) then came back to Marquette.

MS: What was the scariest thing that happened to you while you were in Iraq?

NL: Scariest thing? Nerve-wracking moments. I don't know. There's one time I was out on convoy security, pulled up alongside an IED that was a couple feet to the side of the road. And we were driving in blackout using night-vision goggles to see what was going on. We were parked next to a bomb for like 2-3 minutes before someone looked out the window and realized it was there. It gets your heart beating a little bit. Other than that you get used to a lot of things. At first, mortar attacks at first are a little nerve-wracking. Just odds and ends I guess.

MS: What are mortar attacks?

NL: Mortars are shot from tubes, they have fins on the back and they're probably about a foot long on top, it's a big oval shape thing they throw in the tube

MS: When you were in Iraq, were you able to celebrate any holidays, like Christmas or Easter that you normally celebrate here?

NL: We acknowledged them. I don't know if we really actually celebrated anything too much. They might send in something special to chow hall or something like that. There were some options, but it wasn't like an all-out celebration either.

MS: Were you able to interact with any of the people living in Iraq?

NL: We had some interpreters, and there some natives who were able to speak English. You pick up a little bit of Iraqi language, literally only the basic, basic things, like "stop," "go," "here," "come on." The interpreters, you actually can learn a lot from them, talking to them and you can see the Iraqis pointing to you a bit more. I was able to talk to some people. Every once in a while, we'd go on a mission where we'd bring stuff out to schools and see the kids, and that's kind of cool. We'd hand some candy out; throw some candy out on a convoy, throw an MRE. We got to see the people a little bit.

MS: What was the climate like? Like when you think of Iraq, you think of just desert.

NL: There's some places we call "moon dust" and the sand would be really fine and all over and there's some places that would be the typical, just plain desert, but there's actually some that were very tropical looking, especially Ramadi by the Euphrates. There's a lot of palm trees and whatnot. There's a rainy season there. It gets really mucky. It'll get really bad with mud. For the most part, the temperature, it'll get up to 130, 140's and it's pretty hot, though without the humidity it's not as bad as it sounds. Still really hot, but it'll get really cool, too, like up in the Jordan border area, I woke up with frost on my sleeping bag.

MS: When it was really warm like that, did you still have to wear those long uniforms?

NL: We'd wear our gear when we're out on missions, the only thing that we did sometimes that we probably weren't suppose to do was that we'd take our shirts off, or some short sleeves with our flak vest on, and that wasn't so much of an authorized thing to do, but it happened.

(Tape breaks, continues with a discussion on coming back after Christmas)

NL: Coming back from leave, and you see you family midway through the appointment. It's like kind of the ultimate season trip. You're back, you see your family, everything seems normal again by the time you're ready to go back. Like I came back, and the first thing they asked me was "Do you want to take a convoy back to camp or do you want to take a chopper?" I said I'd take the chopper since it's a little bit quicker so I went down to the flight line and they asked if there's room for one more in the Chinook. So that was alright and I didn't have to take the convoy up there, so I go wait by the flight line and the Chinook comes in, we go pile in back and I was sitting on the back door. What they do is they keep the back gate open on the chopper when they're flying. I was sitting at the end, on the last seat there. We take off and started looking around. It's neat you can see the city and it's like you're flying in a car almost. You can see out the front window and you're weaving around. You look out the back, and you can see the lights of the city that you're flying over, but finally we get to this one area, and they put me down and I saw something, it was like someone flipping a light switch on and off. I didn't know what in the heck it was, and I start looking, and pretty soon, the back door started sparking. I thought maybe they're shooting at us. So I leaned back in and I come back down and we landed back in the (?), and I said I asked about the sparks on the back door and they said I saw the tracers coming up at us. I was watching sparks off the back door and it was some guy taking crack shots at us.

MS: What is a Chinook?

NL: A Chinook is a twin-bladed helicopter, used for cargo and troop transport.

MS: When you were joining the military, did you understand this military "language" that you're currently speaking?

NL: I knew some of it, like I had family with military background, and then that JROTC high school program, you actually got to learn more than you thought you'd learn about it there, so I had a good idea before I did.

MS: What is the JROTC?

NL: It's a Junior ROTC. You know how they have the ROTC program here at Northern, well the junior RTOC is at some high schools.

MS: Is it a class that you take?

NL: yeah, it's a class that'll teach you a little bit about the military, and you might get to go to some camps in the summer, do rappelling and shooting and whatever, it's kind of neat for a high school student.

MS: Were you with women or were the women separate?

NL: There were some women there. We'd be in separate tents or barracks or whatever we had, but for the majority I'd say it was mostly men in our area, but there were some women.

MS: what did you eat when you were in Iraq?

NL: That depended largely upon where we were. If we're out on a convoy mission, we'd eat MREs or we'd have the rations on the convoy, meals ready to eat, and they'll have prepackaged preserved foods in there. If you're in the camps, if you go to some camps, they might serve one hot meal a day and the rest of the meals would be MREs, then if you go to other camps, they might have a chow hall set up and you have decent food most of the time you're there. You'd have hamburgers, chicken, they might have fruit. On special occasions they might send in some lobster or steak or something like that. MREs get old after a while, but they're better than nothing.

MS: When you were in the camps did they have any sort of recreation activities for you, or was it just your job all the time?

NL: It was dependant on the camp too, most would have a place called an MWR, some times they might bring them in, it's moral wellness and recreation, or something like that. They might bring in weights for people, to use to kill time, or weight lift. Or ping pong tables. And some would have it, some wouldn't. It was nice when we were able to find a satellite, we could play on the computer a little bit or something, other times we wouldn't. We'd find ways to amuse ourselves.

MS: How old were you when you where in Iraq?

NL: Nineteen.

MS: Was that the average age there?

NL: Yeah, that was a pretty good age gap actually. Teenagers to people who had been in the Vietnam War. So there was a pretty good age gap there. It's nice having people with experience in combat areas be deported to Iraq.

MS: Are you still in contact with any of the people you were in Iraq with?

NL: We still hang out. We might get together once in a while, go skating or something like that. And I talk to each other on the phone.

MS: Do they live in Michigan too?

NL: Most do. Most my friends in my company are either still in the guard, live in the area or close to the area. There's some people. We're attached to an island unit and you don't see any of them in combat because there in Iowa. A good chunk of them I still talk to.

MS: So what is the ROTC program here?

NL: At Northern?

MS: Yeah.

NL: Well, when I first got here to right now it's changing a little bit. It's got new people in it. It's a pretty good program. I'm not fully active in it. I go to the classes, or just go in to get the minor right now. I go to there labs, and they can be interesting. Some of them, for prior service people, might be a bit boring sometimes, when they're describing the basic. But there's always something to try and learn from them. I sometimes it's good to relearn the basics anyway.

MS: In the ROTC programs there's people who haven't really had any military experience and then there's you.

NL: Yeah. There's a lot of prior service people in there that I know.

MS: Do the people that haven't been in service, do they seek advice from you, or can you help them study, do you tutor?

NL: Well, that's the good thing about this program. First of all you have the cadre, I'd say most cadre are really good, they'll help set up things. They'll teach other people things. And sometimes people ask prior service people questions. But the thing about being in prior service, I don't know everything. And there's still a lot of things I can learn. So maybe I'll ask them questions too. We'll all build off of each other. It's not like, I'm prior service, I know everything about everything. That's just not the way it is. There's still a lot of things that I haven't done I have no idea and I'm still learning.

MS: What are the cadre?

NL: The cadre are like military equivalent of a professor, of the program. You'll have people from active duty in the army, like they'll bring in a master sergeant or a colonel, some staff sergeants, whatever, to help train the cadets. They basically give the cadets a basic training schedule or different tasks they want accomplished. They'll have the cadets go accomplish these tasks, and they'll help them along and they'll teach the classes.

MS: What do you do in the classes? Or the labs?

NL: The classes might go over how to do operations orders and different types of tasks that you'd do as an officer and if you go to the labs, like the last lab I went to was the patrol bases, they explain to you what a patrol base is, how to set up a patrol base and you'll actually go out there and start trying to do it firsthand. It's just pretty much hands-on training, more than what's in the book. I think they're good. ROTC doesn't have much equipment compared to active duty but they do a pretty good job with what they have.

MS: What does ROTC stand for?

NL: Reserve Officers Training Corps

MS: And what is the goal of ROTC?

NL: ROTC's main goal is to take cadets and condition them as second lieutenants in the army. Some people go in it just for the money, but the main drive there is to be a quality second lieutenant.

MS: And what is the difference between being a second lieutenant and what you were in Iraq?

NL: You mean if I were to personally become as a second lieutenant? I think what I learned from Iraq would be a good building block to being a second lieutenant. Any experience that you can get in the military is good, and you get to see some things hands-on and understand it a little better when you're put back in that situation as a leader. I guess Iraq for me is just I learned things from there, I'll take what I can, and build upon it. If I'm ever a second lieutenant leading people, I can think back, use the other people competently, and lead well.

MS: Are there any moments about Iraq that confuse you, and then you learn stuff in the ROTC program, and you think “Oh, that’s why we did that in Iraq?”

NL: Not so much. Everyone does things a little bit differently. The military has set standard procedures and each leader has their own leadership ways.

MS: Was there anything confusing about Iraq?

NL: Like the higher mission was, you mean?

MS: Sure. Anything, really.

NL: A lot of things you’ll do, and you wonder why you’re doing this. If you’re given a task, and you’re a subordinate, you may not understand the higher mission that you’re going to accomplish, but that’s not really your job sometimes. I guess in that aspect there were some things we did that we didn’t know quite why we’re doing them, but they’d know higher up and we’d have to ask permission.

MS: When you think of fighting in Iraq, you’re not going to think it’s fun, but were there any moments when you did have fun in Iraq?

NL: Definitely. You get to see some wild and crazy things going over there. It’s just a whole different world. There’s times it’s really serious, and times you’re just sitting and goofing around too, so it’s not all bad. There can definitely be really bad times, but it’s not all bad. There’s not constant fighting or anything where you’re constantly getting shot at. There’s downtime and chilling out and hanging out with you friends.

MS: What’s a taser?

NL: It’s just a little electric shock thing. You do stupid, stupid stuff when you get really bored.

MS: Did you get any awards or medals for serving in Iraq?

NL: (?) A couple auxiliary participation awards, which aren’t really an award, (?) It’s pretty much you go there and they give you a couple other ones for reserves, components (?) medal.

MS: Is it weird to be considered, at least culturally, a veteran?

NL: I felt weird being called one at first. I usually use that term for my grandpa, you know, old people. I guess that’s wrong to say, but yeah, it did feel weird after someone called me a veteran. That usually implies 60 or 70 years old.

MS: Are you used to it now or does it still strike you as wrong?

NL: I guess it’s still a little odd. I still feel like people who served in World War II and whatever did a lot more than we did.

NL: We had our paladin get blown up. It’s pretty much an artillery piece that has a howitzer on there that shoots 155 rounds out of it. And we had another attack and it blow up our paladin. It blew up a building behind us, and it blew up something down the road a little bit. It actually went right down the hatch of the paladin, killed two guys that were inside... I got lucky there.

MS: Thanks for letting me interview you.