

Rick K. Bonzo
Cedar City Library Veterans' History Project
Interviewed by: Steven D. Decker, Library Director
Date: 2007
Last Edit: November 2010

Q: Ok if you'll state and spell your name and tell us where it is you are living.

A: My name is Rick K. Bonzo R-I-C-K K. B-O-N-Z-O. I reside in Enoch, Utah. I grew up in Cedar City, Utah and moved to Enoch about thirty years ago and reside in Enoch right now.

Q: And you were in Iraqi Freedom.

A: I was in Iraqi Freedom, yes.

Q: For how long?

A: We, from the time we got activated 'til we got home was about eighteen months. We spent six months in country here training up. Five months in Mississippi, one month in California, and then we spent twelve months in Iraq.

Q: Doing what?

A: Our missions, we were in the Anbar Province out in the Ramadi area. Our battalion had three missions to do while we were there. And one of them was artillery which that's what we do. That's what we train as is artillery men, the 222. Our other mission was forward operating base defense and security of the base on outposts. Make sure that the base is secure on the gates and we had that twenty-four seven. And then we did patrol missions throughout the Anbar Province and did some OPs out on the roads and stuff like that. So over the twelve months we was there we had three missions that the battalion took care of.

Q: And you went in as a member of the National Guard.

A: I went in as the Utah National Guard. The Headquarters Battery of the triple duce.

Q: Located here in Cedar City.

A: Located here in Cedar City, Utah yes.

Q: And how long have you served in the Guard?

A: I've been in the Utah National Guard for thirty-four years. Last December I had thirty-four years in.

Q: And your rank?

A: I am a first sergeant.

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Q: And your job classification.

A: Well as the First Sergeant of the Headquarters Battery I am the Senior Enlisted Soldier to take care of all the troops on the enlisted side of the house. We do have the officers too, but I was the Senior NCO on the enlisted side of the house to take care of all the missions and staff on that end.

Q: And this deployment to Iraq is your first combat mission.

A: That is correct. That's our first mission overseas, for me being in the Utah National Guard to go into combat. That is correct.

Q: What are your feelings about that?

A: You know it was when we first got activated...it was a pretty exciting feeling. You know I'd been in the National Guard for a long time and probably for the first twenty-five years that we served in the National Guard we never, ever had to worry about going outside of the country. And then we get the last eight to ten years, the National Guard has provided a lot of military, helped the active duty military. And the feelings I had was excited the first because you'd trained and you'd trained an you'd trained all of your life as I call it to go to the big dance and finally we got a chance to go to the dance. As we got into the training and got away from home and spent that time in states and doing all of that training and you know and the closer it got to going over seas I guess it started hitting home. And you know it as exciting at first but then it got scary. And it was pretty scary there until we got in country and then it was scary everyday but you learn to deal with it and you learn to live with it. We had a bunch of soldiers with me that, that I knew really well and we were all kind of got a long and took care of each other. So that's probably the bit of it.

Q: You mentioned scary in country every day, is there a particular event that sticks out in your mind that...maybe not scary, maybe it was particularly frightening, maybe it was particularly humorous, maybe it was kind of exhilarating. If you had your grandkids sitting around you here what...we are telling stories, what's the first one that comes to mind?

A: You know probably, the thing I remember is the day we left Kuwait and flew into Iraq. We were on a C130 and we landed on a base that was about 40 miles from Ramadi, Iraq where we were going to be stationed. And we flew into there and I can remember the airplane in. It was pretty exciting we were in full combat uniforms, full combat, fully loaded with our weapons and stuff like that. Once we landed in TQ we regrouped again and that evening I can remember they had the choppers waiting for us and we were going

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to fly after dark into Ramadi. And I can remember that night that they lined us up out on the kind of the run way where them choppers come in and you've got a full pack on your back, sixty to eighty pounds on your back plus fully loaded and I can remember that chopper landed. There was three of them that landed. And they took about twelve men apiece on a chopper and we had to run for about 100 yards and I can remember going down that hundred yards fully loaded that I thought this is a young man's sport you know I was...but the blood was...and I climbed on that chopper and the first thing I see is two gunners poking fifty cal's out the window and at that time I knew that we were in the midst of it and it was dark and it was black out conditions and them choppers took off and we just... had to go to go like I say forty miles across the desert and that was pretty exciting. It took about twenty minutes to go that far and I can remember sitting there on them little seats and just thinking. There is a lot of responsibility and we are in it right now and that was probably one of my highlights because I really like to fly on choppers. And I've been on quite a few, but never in combat, but that night it was in combat and it was quite an experience.

Another time was probably the first time that we were on the base when we had incoming which was mortars or rockets. I can remember the first couple of mortars that come in that we'd only been there about three days when our first mortar attack on the base come and being "greenies" as they called us "new guys" it was pretty...pretty excited to make sure that everybody was taking cover and then you have to take accountability every time we had them mortars. So that was probably...you know the exciting [chuckles] things I can recall back. But there were something that went on it seemed like every day. There was something that you can remember for them 365 days in there that you can look back. And I kept a pretty extensive journal and wrote in it every day and so I hadn't even looked at it for probably the first six months I've been home, but I've finally started getting into it and it is pretty interesting to look back and see what, where you were this certain time, this certain date and see what was going on.

Q: I guess when somebody joins the Guard, they know that there's always a certain possibility of something like this happening.

A: Yeah that's always...like I say, the first twenty five years you never ever did ever think to worry, but nowadays it is just a common deal. When you join you better just plan on, you are probably going to get a tour somewhere because they depend heavily on the National Guard. They finally figured out that the National Guard is pretty great guys and great soldiers and they go and get the job done. So yeah, nowadays you better plan on going.

Q: Did you feel like you were adequately prepared to be there?

A: I do. I felt like...we trained hard. We trained hard, some of it we maybe could have trained a little quicker when we was in states training but I felt like they give us all the

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stuff we needed to go over there. You know things change a little bit once you get in country and get in real live stuff than just when you are training. But we spent a month in California at the National Training Center before we went over and we spent about twenty-one days in the desert and they kept telling us...it was a hard time there and that but they kept just pounding into us different scenarios and different missions and they said this will be the hardest day here but it will be the easiest day over there as I recall. But, you know so they really trained us up just before we went and you know you can train for so much but there's a lot of different stuff that scenarios that happened. Plus the weather was a big factor. They kept telling us that it was going to be...to get used to the heat. And I can remember the day we were dropped off in Kuwait that it was like 118 degrees when I walked off that airplane that day so I knew we was in for it, the heat. So the heat was a big thing, trying to get us all acclimated to the heat and make sure everybody drank enough water and keep up with it. But I felt that we were trained and we were ready and that was one reason, one of the many reasons that we all come home.

Q: With the heat, is it dry heat or wet heat? Is it humid?

A: It's dry.

Q: It's dry heat.

A: Yeah it's dry. When we was in Kuwait it was really dry. Once we got into Ramadi we were on the bank the Euphrates River was pretty close to us and that's a pretty good size river. So we did have a little humidity right there when we was on our base, but most of it is pretty dry heat.

Q: Now you mentioned you all came home and the two times at least in recent memory that this unit has been deployed Korea and now, you have all come home both times.

A: That's correct. I know the 213th that was in Korea they went over there and I am sure it was around the same as we had. They had 500 men, 500 soldiers and they fought some big battles and did some great stuff in Korea and they all come home. And when we went Iraq we had about 525 guys in this battalion and...there was the brigade that were in over there. There was eight battalions in that brigade from all over the country. And we were one of the only battalions...we were the only battalion out of that brigade that did not loose a soldier and we all come home.

Q: Why do you think that is?

A: My personal opinion is that, you know we come from small towns Richfield, Cedar City, Beaver, St. George, and there is a lot of family members in the Guard. There's a lot of father-sons, there's a lot of cousins, there's a lot of nephews, there's some uncles and I

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feel like they come from small towns and they know how to take care of business they take care of each other and I think you know they can say what they want about religion. I think the religion has quite a bit to do with it coming from these small towns and you know I always said, we had a lot of prayers with us while we was over there. And I think every community which there was a battery out of, I know there was prayers all the time. And that was a big thing and I just think that we all pulled together and it's kind of it was our...we had to follow after the 213th and I think we did a good job.

Q: Is there a particular moment of religious or spiritual experience that you would care to share?

A: You know it was...every day when we were, when we were over there...we had Colonel Miller, he was our Colonel and was our officer and he'd have our meetings, our staff meetings or our meetings to go over the daily events and whatever, but we always prayed. He always made sure there was a...the chaplain was always around. And he always prayed and before anybody in the battalion ever went out on a mission, we always had our pre-combat checks to make sure you had all of your gear, had all of your water, had enough ammunition. Everybody checked each other to make sure because you didn't know, you could go out on a five hour mission and not come back for two days. So, it was big, critical that you had all of your gear, but I can remember that we always at the end of checking everybody out there was always a prayer sense. Somebody in the circle, they'd have a prayer circle and that kind of caught on. We had a few Marines that we were hooked up with, they'd come and wait for us and finally before it was all over several times, not every time, but several times, they would join into the prayer circle. So you know I think that was just a SOP. You know it wasn't nothing on no cards that said we had to do it, but I think it...I think it really helped us out. And we did had a good while we was over there they had put together like a branch presidency for the church. Each battery had its group leaders. We did have the opportunity to go to church on Sundays, two times on Sundays. They did hold family home evenings. They did some Sunday School and the priesthood meetings almost weekly. So it was there and it helped. There was no doubt about it because they give a guy I felt like every Sunday, I'd try to go on Sunday morning, they would have a session in the morning and I would go for that hour and I really enjoyed it because once I got going for one hour, I felt like everything was lifted off my shoulders and I was at peace for one hour while I was in the church.

Q: What about the Iraqi people, how did they receive you?

A: I being as the First Sergeant I had a lot of responsibility on the base so I didn't get to get out and interact with them a lot. I did go on as many missions as I could or they would let me get outside the wire and every time we...we did a lot of school missions, went to a lot of schools and give out supplies that we were getting from the states. And what I had with them, I had very positive, most of them...most of them were willing to

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and really wanted freedom but they had been at war for so long that they really don't know freedom. They just don't know it. But over all...and I still will say it today, I feel that that country wants freedom. I feel like the will get freedom, it's going to take awhile. You know the whole United States didn't get freedom over night it took time to get our freedom. I think that they eventually will get that but it is going to take quite awhile. Kids, they love the American Soldiers and our guys they really relate to kids because a lot of them had family at home, so they know how they were. And the kids, they loved, the loved to come and if you ever had a pencil or a pen or paper they loved crayons. They loved...if we could give them something that they could write on they really enjoyed. We got in pretty good with the schools and we had a lot of support coming from the States for different stuff, but overall we did a lot of missions out on the roads where we would stop a car randomly and most of the time they were really receptive to it. So I think it is there, it is just they've got a bunch of other people probably not Iraqis and I feel like that they've got some outside that's trying to make it cause the trouble. So...

Q: You know even while we are sitting here doing this there is a smaller war in D.C. with congress trying to put limits on times. They say they will fund the war, but it has to be withdrawn by a certain period of time and President Bush saying he'll veto that bill if it comes through or when it comes through. Do you feel as a soldier that you were supported by the political establishment?

A: Yes when I was there you know, what we see...what we see over there is we see the military leaders you know and we see their support for us. Yes you do see some of that stuff that is coming from Washington D.C. and it does hurt there is no doubt about it. They can say whatever they want but you know if they are going to say that they are going to sit and say they are going to take us out of the war then with all that we have done over there within the last three four years and just say that it is over, I just don't go with that. It is not a good...it's not a good moral builder for the soldiers because they have put everything they'd have had into it to try to make it a better place. And it is a better place now than it was four years ago, definitely a better place. They can say what they want, but half the time they really don't know what's...they've got facts and figures in front of them and they don't understand it. I really...but most of the soldiers keep their heads up and they know what is going on and they listen to their senior commanders and that's where they listen to and they keep us motivated.

Q: What about your family life while you were serving?

A: I was pretty, like I say pretty lucky because my family is...I had one son and he was already raised and gone on his way and my wife she had a full time job. She was very involved while I was gone with the family support of the Guard. And she was very involved in helping other people but my family life I felt like was good because I...I had a lot of responsibility over there and my wife knew that and so when we would talk and

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you know unless it was really an emergency or something like that she knew my mind had to be in the game over there. So, my family life I felt like was good. You know they were concerned and worried and stuff like that. But I had a few soldiers that has two or three kids, four kids...pretty young marriage and you know it affected a lot of them. It affected them and we tried to relate to that. Everyday that was part of our job is making sure that our families were taken care of and like I say we had a heck of a family support unit here in Southern Utah that if somebody's family wasn't, needed help or needed some kind of anything, they could call the family support. And they checked in on them on a regular basis, but it affected them, there's no doubt about it. You know but it...we had to make sure that the families were here and we were over there because we didn't need no soldiers going outside the wire and having his family on his mind which they do, but if they was having trouble at home he was having trouble over there and that wasn't a good mix because there was too much going on. But we really watched that really close.

Q: You served in desert conditions.

A: Very desert conditions. Everything was...over there was pretty much desert. It rains anywhere from I can remember when we was in Kuwait for a couple of weeks before we went into Iraq it got as high as 136 degrees. The wind blew a lot. I said I would never cuss the Southern Utah wind again after being over there in the desert but the wind blew quite a bit. It was pretty, pretty hot. Most of the time...when we got into Iraq from I would say middle of April until maybe the first of October it ranged about 115 to 120 everyday. At night it would go down to about 100. Then from October oh to about April you know it weren't really too bad it would get about seventy-five during the day sixty five, it got a little colder sometimes. We got quite a bit of rain there for a couple months, November and December, but most of all it was pretty deserty. We'd seen some, several wind storms over there. Dust storms as they call them where you can see it coming across the desert and all of the sudden it just comes into your area and it is black for about five minutes. You can...in the middle of the day and all of a sudden it is just covered up with dirt and sand. But we lived in old barracks that was all sandbags, no windows, everything was sandbagged. So when the wind and the heat and everything like that, it was pretty much it was deserty conditions most of the time. The Euphrates River was right there and if you was along the Euphrates they...they had a few fields of crops and stuff like that that they would use the water out of, but most of the time it was all desert.

Q: I remember sitting in a meeting with Jed Townsend where he would talk about the rains and the mud and how that slowed operations. I guess sand or mud is what I got from.

A: Well it was, the sand it was like kind of like a sandy-clay mixture it was kind of weird soil it would really when it would rain it would really, it would really get really sticky and muddy and it never ever soaked into the ground too much and it would just sit there

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on top of the ground. Out away from the areas we were, sometimes out in the sandy that wouldn't be so bad but boy it would rain and it would come down hard and it was always nice to have a little rain but it was never like good old Southern Utah rain you know how it smells after a good rain in Southern Utah. That over there it just...it never did ever...I don't know what it was in the air but it just did ever seem good. But yes that did hamper us because it would get pretty muddy...muddy.

Q: Any regrets?

A: No regrets. No regrets no. Like I've had a lot of people say, would you go tomorrow and I would say yes I would go back tomorrow. Do I want to go back tomorrow, no I don't want to go back tomorrow, but if it calls and I am still in the National Guard as I am today, I will take and go again to defend the country and take care of business. I feel that you know we need to go and do it because if we don't take care of it over there, I am afraid they are going to be here and we do not want them in this country. So no regrets, I met a lot of great people in the eighteen months I was gone. You know and not only my people, not only our soldiers here from Southern Utah, but there's a lot of great soldiers from all over the country. So our friendships, I am still talking to several of them from back east that we got to know and I email, we talk on the email here and there. So that's one thing I can always say you know, I've got that experience now you know and I look up to that.

Q: I know there are a few, but I don't know how many that have come home that were in the Guard and have gotten out of the Guard at their earliest possibility and not signed up for it again. Is the Guard loosing numbers? Is this unit loosing numbers?

A: You know when we come home, we had a pretty good drop out rate and they plan on that for National Guard you know the retention and they plan on that going, but there is so many kids as of I think a month ago I was in a meeting and this battalion, we had lost a lot of guys when we would come home, but we are still sitting at 100% strength because of the new kids getting in. It's amazing how many kids this day wants to join and go serve. So you've got an attrition rate there where some are going to get out, some are going to retire, several of them come home and they retire and several of them you know their wife says, "Hey I just can't do it." They've done their six years you know and they have served their country so you know you cant blame them. And some of then are still in and going strong. It's just the way it is here. This unit stays at 100% strength even in the down times. When the rest the state, or when the rest of the Nation's retention and recruiting is down, the Utah National Guard especially the triple duce. It is just in the heritage down here. It stays at 100% very seldom do we ever go below 100[%] and most of the time we are in the 120% of strengths. A lot of the times they have to quit recruiting because they got more kids than they want in.

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Q: Is there a difference in the Guard in the active duty as far as age or...or things like that. Is the Guard younger, older?

A: You know the Guards...the Guards...the Guard members are a little older in the active components that we worked with. A lot of them active components they are eighteen nineteen twenty year old kids and you know the National Guard probably age...we do have a lot of younger ones, but the average age you know is probably thirty years old in there, in the triple duce. In Headquarters battery I know they have a lot of older ones that have been in for a long time. But the active component is really, really young. They do have some leaders, but a lot of them E5 sergeants and staff sergeants in the Guard, they are thirty-five years old. In the regular Army, they are twenty-two year old kids leading the...leading the charge. So, and that is another thing about the Guard is the reason, we've got a little more maturity and a little more experience in there so that helps out a lot too.

Q: Has your service colored your political, or social, or religious views at all? Do you feel like you are the same person you were when you left or have things changed?

A: My wife tells me that I don't have as much patience as I used to. [Chuckles] I guess when I got home...after being over there and being in the war for twelve months and you are on high alert twenty-four/seven everything has to click. You just don't, you've got to make sure, you can't go into anything half or you start loosing people. So I guess I am pretty easy going, but my patience was you just had to make sure they guys were on top of things twenty-four/seven because that was the last thing that I wanted to do was loose somebody from my battery. So, maybe my patience wore thin a few times, but that was for the good because I was trying to keep them alive. As far as coming home and I felt like the first probably couple of months you are pretty...pretty...oh jumpy or you are kind of you wouldn't call it jumpy, but you are just kind of I couldn't relax. I couldn't relax for the first two months I was home. I was still playing the game over there and you just don't relax over there. Even when you are asleep, you don't relax. But, after that I felt like everything fell into place. I went back to work and you know had all the support I could get from anybody and they keep checking in. We've had a couple of times at drills where the veterans of foreign wars, they send people down to council and if we are having trouble, they are more than willing and happy to help. But I felt like just with the training we had, just with our guys and stuff like that, this really worked out. I can remember we was going through an evaluation and they brought some people in from back east that didn't even know our unit and they went through all the batteries in this battalion, went through some counseling one-on-one with every guy that served over there and when they were done, I had a couple of doctors...psychologists...I can't remember for sure, but they said they could not believe how this unit adapted and how there is less problems in this unit than in other units. But there you go back to the good old Utah way and the small towns and Southern Utah taking care of people.

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Q: What do you do in your civilian life?

A: Civilian life, I work for Albertson's food stores right here in Cedar City. I've been with them for about twenty years, now they're super. They really took care of my wife and my family while I was gone. Didn't ever have any trouble with them, they've always been a good supporter of the National Guard and still support me and they've been really good to support and didn't ever have any trouble with them.

Q: If you could give advice to the service men and women of today, what would it be?

A: You know if it was me, I'd like to see everybody, if they were able to when they turned eighteen to serve their country because I think that the United States would be a better place to live right now. I think if every eighteen year old male female had a chance to serve their country, if their means were that they could do that I think it would make the country a lot better. What I can say is I feel every day for them. I watch the news. I see what is going on over there. I can say, "I have been there. I've seen that," and I can see what they are going through, but you know we need it. We need it to stay free and to keep this country going. All I can say is keep on moving and keep on going along with the mission.

Q: We have a volunteer Army, a voluntary Military right now there's no draft.

A: That's correct.

Q: I guess you and I sitting here can't answer this, but should there be compulsory Military service? I look at Denmark and countries like that, that I know some people from and they have it. I don't know if it is good or bad.

A: Well like I said, I...my opinion in serving in there is I really feel like they should have one. I really do. I feel like the draft, not that I am a war monger or nothing like that, but I just think that it grows kids up and gives them a little discipline, gives them a little bit of structure in their life. Even if they was to only serve for two to three years, I think the Military is a good thing. I really do.

Q: Anything that we haven't covered that you would like to?

A: No I would just like to say you know I appreciate being able to come and talk about it. I...I'm glad I had the opportunity to lead soldiers into the combat. I'm glad I worked with some great people from the triple duce, some enlisted soldiers, officers. It's just been a...its been a good time. You know there were several days over there that I...I thought that we maybe would never get home, but you know it's been an experience for me. Ever

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since been come home, the cities, the communities have shown us so much support. And it has still shown. We've almost been home for quite awhile and we still get support and we still have that support out there. Now just I am glad I've able to do it and like I say brought everybody home and serve my country.

Q: Ok. Thanks.

A: Thank you.