

Interviewer: Good morning. Today is 10 January 2017, and I'm here in the West Point Center for Oral History with Salvatore "Sal" Giunta, who received the Medal of Honor for your actions in Afghanistan. Welcome, I'm glad you're here with us today, sir.

Salvatore Giunta: Oh, thanks for having me.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about your childhood growing up in Iowa; what your parents did, and what life was like for you as a young boy.

Salvatore Giunta:

Growing up in Iowa was a great place. Iowa's a great place to be from. I think that the values and the community really does raise children still in Iowa. It was middle of America. It's a pretty, pretty 1950s America that still exists in Iowa. My mother is a kindergarten schoolteacher. My father works on medical equipment in the hospital, so he's on call a lot, and travels throughout Iowa. The house was always unlocked and I never had a key to it. The keys to the car are in the ignition.

We trusted people. I played games, I ran around all spring, summer, and fall. I had snowball fights in the wintertime. It's a really great place to be from, Iowa. Growing up, I was a pretty - I don't know how to say this without accusing myself of something negative. I was a very excited kid about a lot of things, and not all the things I was excited about were positive.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Salvatore Giunta:

But it gave me that chance to explore, and adventure, and do new things. I played sports growing up. I was big into sports from Iowa; wrestling's always a big deal. I remember my first wrestling tournament. I weighed 45 pounds. They rank your weight on your hands, so a little 45-pound boy wearing a singlet wrestling other little boys. It was great. I played football. I really do like to hit people. I'm a defensive, a D-back guy. I like it when they don't see it coming, and I like that they fear me, that I'm back there. I played basketball. All sports, really.

Interviewer:

Right.

Salvatore Giunta:

Swam, tennis, I've tried them all. Swimming was probably the hardest in high school. I shouldn't have. I just thought I'd do it 'cause I could, and it's really difficult, and I don't necessarily know if I can. I can float; I don't know if I can swim competitively. But just a really great place.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Now, when you were in high school, the attack on September 11 happened. What were your emotions when you saw that? You were heading to class, and... Tell me a little bit about your emotions.

Salvatore Giunta:

I think September 11, 2001, definitely changed the course of my entire life. It was early morning in Iowa, and I was in chemistry class. I had this early morning chemistry class, just to get it out of the way, and I remember we were sitting in class, and we were doing the viscosity of liquid, we were dropping these balls in this liquid. I don't know; I was like a C student. I wasn't paying attention. And someone came to the classroom door, and they said, "Hey, turn on the television. A plane just flew into a building in New York." And I think, you know, this, okay, it's some small plane, it flew into this big building, and it's this accident. And I went to a good school. We don't just get a "Turn on the television" in the middle of chemistry class, but the teacher did. And it wasn't this small plane; it was this huge plane. It was this huge building. And it was this terrible accident. But as we watched, another plane came in, and attacks were happening around America, at the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania a plane went down, and all of a sudden, became apparent that it wasn't an accident.

It was an attack on America. It was an attack on our civilians. It wasn't our camouflage-wearing, gun-toting, strategic military targets; it was our people. I remember watching and being sad, and then quickly followed by anger, in that this - I don't know much, but I've read a history book. And it says in Pearl Harbor, when Pearl Harbor got attacked, America stood up for itself. They didn't ask other people to help them; its own people stood up and did something for the country. And I felt that draw of service to the military, and to do something. I called my mom up. I remember telling her, like, "Mom, I don't know what to do, but I think I'm going to join the military." She said, "Salvatore, absolutely not. You're 17 years old. You're going to finish high school, and after high school we can talk about it." I have to say that that emotion, that intense desire to do something, became a fleeting feeling. I was 17, I was in high school. It quickly became about me and I again, real - do I have a date to the dance? Do I have to work? What are you going to do for me? It stopped being about what I can do for others, and that idea of joining the military left me. I don't think it was until senior year - I was getting ready to graduate, and I realized there's very few tangible things I could do at 18 years old to affect the lives of people around me, that are on a grand scheme. And I didn't necessarily have the motivation to pursue it myself, and it became the military was going to give me that opportunity. I just needed to bring a little motivation, and they were going to give me the purpose and direction, and I could run with it. And I think that's when it became apparent that this is my chance, and because of that day and those emotions. I had never thought about joining the military before September 11, 2001. I liked to play games, but I wasn't going to join the military. That day put the seed in my mind, and a year later, I acted on those thoughts.

Interviewer:

Okay. And you indicated in your book that your personality seemed to drive you towards Airborne Infantry. Tell me about what it is that clicked with you.

Salvatore Giunta:

I think because I never thought about the military before, I was very naive. I thought you just kind of like join the Army, and they give you a job, and then you just do it until they tell you to stop, and I didn't know. And when I was talking to the recruiter, the recruiter asked me. He goes, you know, "What do you want to do?" I'm thinking, "Oh man, I've heard stories that if you look like you don't know what you're talking about, they sell you something you don't want." I'm trying to think quick, because he's going to sell me something I don't want, and I see this parachute hanging from the ceiling of the recruiter's office. "I want to jump out of planes." He goes, "Oh yeah? That's 150 extra bucks a month. That's called Airborne. That's great." Picking jobs with bonuses; this guy's not going to mess with me now. He knows. Ask me another question. "I'll pick another job with a bonus." He goes, "But you know, that's a supplement to a career. What job do you want?" "I don't know, I guess what they do on TV. I want to spit, and swear, and fight the bad guys, and jump out of planes, and -" "Yeah, he goes, "Stop. That's it. I got it. Airborne Infantry." He goes, "That is in the description of this job. It's perfect for you. You're going to love it. How long do you want to sign up for?"

College is four years; that seemed like a reasonable amount of time. "Four years." And that was that, Airborne Infantry.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Salvatore Giunta:

I didn't know anything else.

Interviewer:

Outstanding. What's your most vivid memory from Basic Training?

Salvatore Giunta:

Basic training! So because I didn't know anything about the military, I came in an E1.

I didn't do any of the stuff. I figured, "I'll just show up, and I'll do what they say to do." But I ended up shooting Expert. I was a 300 PT guy. I got promoted in Basic Training. I remember being around folks for the first time, and being around the American people. I'd been to five states in my entire life at the age of 18, and they all touch the State of Iowa. When I first showed up I think is probably my most vivid memory, and I met my battle buddy. And I had maybe probably two best friends, three best friends in my life at that time, and I got a best friend that day. And I know that 'cause the Drill Sergeant said, "Giunta, this is Gibson. Gibson, this is Giunta. You two are best friends. Don't leave each other's side." "Okay." Well, Gibson was from Miami, Florida, from a Haitian family, and had gold teeth, and I don't know if he was speaking English or not, but I couldn't understand him. I told him, "I'm like, 'Dude, I've never met anyone like you before.'"

And he assured me he'd never met anyone quite like me before, and I was like, "All right, well, this is going to work out." And that was a team, and I think to see that that's possible, because we have the same aligned goals, we showed up for the same reasons. We didn't get told to be there. We raised our hand, we volunteered for exactly this - whether we knew it or not, that is what we did. And to actually see Gibson and I - I can say after Basic Training and AIT, all in the same location, Gibson was my best friend, right? We relied on each other for everything, and when I was screwed up, I don't sweat over my mistakes; Gibson was going to sweat over my mistakes. He's going to do push-ups when I was wrong. And when Gibson was wrong, I was going to sweat over his mistakes. And this idea of this self-preservation all of a sudden became just true caring for the other person, and when he did great, I was better, and when I did great, he was better. And to see that happen in an instant over such small things, it blows my mind how we can't do that more often in more places, and affect bigger changes than we already do.

And I saw it in Basic Training and at 18 in a matter of weeks. That's probably the biggest memory I have of Basic Training; that we can accomplish anything. We can go from civilians with our hands in our pockets to the military, to being military individuals and soldiers. It's incredible.

Interviewer:

In your book *Living with Honor*, you wrote that, "The Army brought me for the first time into a world with an unyielding moral compass," and then you learned a lot of responsibility. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Salvatore Giunta:

I can. You know, again, I don't want to accuse myself of anything, but everything was kind of gray, right, and as long as you don't get caught, then it wasn't necessarily wrong. And I found out in the military, no. Wrong is wrong, right is right. Right is rarely the easy thing; it's usually the harder thing. But you can't do the wrong thing and say you did the right thing, and it'll be okay. You got to do the right thing to say you did the right thing for it to be the right thing to do. And I'd never experienced someone to hold you accountable to that every single day, whether it was shining your boots, or pressing your uniform, or whatever the task was. But it wasn't just someone saying, "Hey, go do this." It was, "Hey, follow me. Do what I do." It was leading by example. I think before the military, I had bosses, for sure. I worked at Subway and at Castle's, I did other - I worked at GNC. I had jobs, and I had bosses. I'd never had a true leader in my life, that cared about me and wanted me to succeed because my success was our success. And that involved doing the right thing, not once, or twice, or when someone was looking, but all the time. That happened right when I came into the military, and carried me throughout my career. I kept on finding myself in situations that I always had a leader that led by example. I followed people that were doing the right thing, and achieving bigger things, not just for themselves, but for us. It's a different way of life. It's like nothing I've seen before or since.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Salvatore Giunta:

The way the military handles its own, and cares for its own.

Interviewer:

Now, you were assigned to the 173rd Airborne. Tell me a little bit about that brigade, and your battalion, and what it felt like when you showed up there.

Salvatore Giunta:

I ended up there by just pure dumb luck. When I joined the military, I joined Airborne Infantry, needs of the Army. I figured the quickest way to Iraq was be useful, and they will send you, and they didn't. I proved that I could be useful, and then they sent me to the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team in Vicenza, Italy. And I thought I was pretty hot stuff, I got to say. I got promoted in Basic Training, I shoot well, I run fast, I can do push-ups and sit-ups, and I can dance until you say, "Stop." I was pretty sure I was going to be a warrior. And I showed up to Vicenza, Italy, and in early 2004, there's very few first world countries you could go to and see 2,000 combat-hardened young men; and you could do that in Italy. The 173rd jumped into Iraq March 26, 2003. The 173rd spent that first year in Iraq. The 173rd opened up the northern front. I showed up thinking I was cool because I passed Basic Training, and they reassured me that I wasn't that cool, and Basic Training is just that: it's basic.

I think it was a pretty incredible place to grow up. It wasn't about setting the bar high enough so a certain amount of people pass it. It was setting the bar as high as you can and achieving that. We don't want to trip over it, we want to excel, and by doing that, we have to fail. Otherwise, we're not trying as hard as we can. And the 173rd was a unit that forced you to failure on a daily basis, whether it was because your boots weren't shiny enough, or because you weren't running fast enough, or you weren't doing your best. You could be better than everyone else, and you could still be talked to, because it wasn't the best you could do. That's a pretty incredible place to be 18 and growing at, around such positive - ah, they're not always positive, but they're definitely motivating, whether it's a positive motivation or a negative motivation. I get motivated off of both. Sometimes the negative is a little more motivating for me. But it provided that for me; it provided that structure. Also, being in a foreign country for the first time in my entire life. I was receiving a paycheck, I'm living in a foreign country. On a weekend, I could go to Venice.

I could go to Rome. I could go to Austria. I could go to Germany. I could see the world, and come back and go to work. It was this is what we do as American soldiers. We don't fight strictly for America. We fight for a better tomorrow for all. We're not there to conquer, or command, or keep. We're there just to make it a better place, whatever we get involved in. And to see Europe, to see the world that way, and be amongst those people, it shaped who I am today.

Interviewer:

Okay. Now, in March of 2005, you deployed for the first time to Afghanistan, and you were there from March 2005 to March 2006. Tell me a little bit about your first deployment in Afghanistan, and some of the things you learned.

Salvatore Giunta:

I can honestly say my first deployment to Afghanistan, I've never been more excited for probably anything in my entire life. I have two children. I'm pretty excited about my kids, and them being born, and growing the family. But at 18 years old, to go to war for my country; to actually make a tangible difference that there's not a whole lot of people doing that. They're back doing something else, but they certainly weren't there standing with me, standing in front of me. It was one of the most exciting things I've ever done. And then I showed up to Afghanistan, and I was super unimpressed. I'd never been to a third world country. I hadn't visited a second world country at the time. It was just not good. We ended up at this place called Balo that was 55 kilometers or so

from any other American soldiers. They put a platoon of us - about 38 to 40 guys - out there. No running water. No electricity.

We had MREs and bottled water, and the biggest gun we had was a 240 Bravo, at the time. What was going to happen was we were going to do whatever had to happen, and that wasn't determined yet. It put me in that mindset, I think, that this is how we get things done, I by people sacrificing of themselves, not for exactly this, but for everything else. For those around them. In Afghanistan that first trip, I never actually seen someone die before that trip. I know you get old and you die. You get sick and you die. You don't look both ways when you cross the street and you die. You drink and you drive and you die. I never seen the biggest, the fastest, the strongest, the bravest, the most selfless people I've ever met in my entire life, die. And I saw that there, and it put it all into perspective. None of that was an accident; it all happened on purpose.

And it affected me, I think, at first very negatively. One of the first incidents that I can really remember affecting me so negatively, we had a - Third Platoon came out - I'm sorry - yes, Third Platoon came out with HESCOs. And we just had mud hut walls, and our biggest defense was maybe 500, 600 meters of stand-off, of open space. That's our defense. That's a terrible defense. If open space is a defense, you'd better work on your defenses. And they brought us HESCOs, something we couldn't do for ourselves. They drove vehicles down places no Americans ever drove before. I think if they had been drove before, it's probably by the Russians, and it probably didn't work out so well for them. And they came, and they dropped off these HESCOs to us, and then they turned around, and they took back off, and they made it about a kilometer down the road. We didn't drive, we walked everywhere, but they had to drive to bring these HESCOs to us. And the lead American Humvee hit an IED going across the bridge. Four gentlemen inside were killed instantly. The gunner was shot out the top and lost both of his legs, high hip. It's bad business to pick up pieces of your friend. We went out to pull security, and I saw that, and there was no one to blame. We couldn't find the triggerman. We couldn't find where the IED came from. And then we don't go around accusing people falsely; we have to have solid facts to do the actions that we do. That's what makes them right. And I never had a loss that I couldn't bring back. You lose a game in football, there might be next week, there might be next year, there might be next season, it doesn't matter. There's always something else you can do, and there's a way to come back from it. This death, there's no coming back from it, and there's no one to hold accountable for it, either. We can't just hold random people. That, I struggled with. We're there giving our absolutely everything for these people. I do not want to be in Afghanistan, but I'm there for the American people, because that's what they said, where we should be.

And seeing this loss - it wasn't a fight. It was just a bomb, and then nothing. I felt very down; I got very down. I think at that age - I was 19 years old, and I felt infallible, right? We're just going to kick in doors, fight bad guys, win this war. We'll be home next year. You're welcome. And then about - that was three months in - I found out that's not how it's going to be. This is going to be a long war, and we're not going to win always; it's going to be a fight. And that bothered me. We're the greatest country in the world, the best trained, the best equipped, the most motivated, and here we are taking a beating. And not everyone's taking a beating, because there's only about 40 of us sitting there taking a beating. I can't tell you what's happening anywhere else in the country. You can tell me about democracy and voting and all this - I don't know. That's not what I see. They didn't put us in a place with nice people handing out flowers. We were there fighting bad guys that were doing bad guy stuff, and it kept us busy all year.

I think probably the next biggest memory of that first deployment was leaving. My life was going to start again. It was that chance that when I was in high school and I thought, "I'm going to go do this, and it's going to be a good thing. I'll be a better person for it," that was it for me. I have four years, needs of the Army, after a year of train-

up, a year in Afghanistan, I'd do another year of train-up, and guess what? My four years are going to be over. It was going to run out on that next one, so I wasn't going to go. It wasn't going to be my issue again. I remember taking that last deep breath, thinking, "Glad to see you go, Afghanistan. I hate you." I didn't know that a year later, I would also be back in Afghanistan. I said my good-bye forever that first time, and I remember it being one of the greatest things in the world, flying out and the Chinook had its back tailgate down, and just leaving it forever, and feeling life begin. It was a fresh breath of air, and it's fresher than any breath of air I've ever had since.

Because it was life was beginning again. I went back to Italy after that, and life was great. Life was really good. I did make a mistake. I can honestly say I am resilient, if nothing else; I don't always make the best decisions, but I do know how they get back up and brush myself off and move forward. I think still coming back from that first deployment, within two weeks of being back, I got a DUI in Italy. I lost all the rank I ever achieved. I went back down to E1, where I was when I first came into the Army. I had my 45 days of extra duty, of pay taken. I just remember picking up cigarette butts. I just came back from war. I'd been shot in my leg on that first deployment. I got a Purple Heart. I am a warrior, and I'm picking up cigarette butts, and I don't smoke. That's pretty belittling. That hurt a lot. But it's not about what hurts; it's about what you do with that pain, and how you grow from it.

And I think Afghanistan taught me that. There'll be bad days, but as long as it's not over, get up, dust yourself off, move forward, and get something else done. And that was a lesson from Afghanistan that I think without a deployment prior to that, it would've crushed me. It would've been too much for me to handle. But after Afghanistan, not a whole lot I can't handle. I have to be told when it's important, because it doesn't sound that important to me, usually. Again, it made me who I am.

Interviewer:

Right. So how did you end up going back to Afghanistan again? Did you reenlist?

Salvatore Giunta:

Stop-loss is an amazing thing. In 2003, when I joined the Army, stop-loss, there's this little thing in there. I don't know, I was making \$150.00 extra for signing up for Airborne, so whatever this contract says, it didn't really matter. But who knows about stop-loss, because no one heard about it, no one was getting stop-loss. Why should I care about it? Here's my initials. Let's move on. Stop-loss. If instead of allowing you to leave the military and calling you back if they need you, they just don't let you go, and so I was super fortunate enough to be valuable enough to just not let go. And I was going to go back to Afghanistan a private again; that hurt. Two years ago I was going to Afghanistan as a private, and now, after three and a half years in the Army, I'm going back to Afghanistan as a private. And in like six months I should be out, and that's not going to happen; and we're not going to go for a year, we're going to go for 15 months.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Salvatore Giunta:

And we're not going to get out once you come back, because you're going to have to do three months after that. So all of a sudden, this started tallying up into like my lifetime, and at 21 years old, a year of your life is 1/20th of your life, right? I mean that's a huge portion of your life, and someone to say, "We're going to send you back." And I can say I actually know where I'm going, and I'm not excited. I was not.

Interviewer:

Tell me a little bit about your training. The training you had before going your first time, what sort of training you did between your deployments, and if having experience in Afghanistan made you focus on any aspect of your training more or less.

Salvatore Giunta:

When we first came back from that OEF 6 trip, the thoughts were weâ€™re going to go to Iraq next, so we trained vehicles. We went up to Germany and we trained, you know, maybe a month in Grafenwoehr, a month in Hohenfels. We focused on vehicles, we focused on villages, tactics. The ROE was changing every single day. Then all of a sudden, weâ€™re not going to Iraq; weâ€™re going to go back to Afghanistan. Now weâ€™re going to train for the mountains again. Weâ€™re going to train for more rural areas vs. the urban environment. The ROE says weâ€™re not going to kick in doors anymore; weâ€™re going to watch the Afghanis do it. It changed everything. And so to see the training evolve with the rules and with what we were doing was pretty impressive. To see an entire organization at thousands of people large instantly shift directions and take off running the other way to do what is asked for them was amazing. I really do think being in the 173rd, being in Italy, itâ€™s easy to see whoâ€™s on your team.

One, you all have the silly haircut. Two, you all speak English. Three, you all have the American flag on your shoulder. It was something that we could come together over, but it wasnâ€™t until we had to try really hard, and suffer, and require someone else to assist us, that those bonds were forged even stronger, and through that training. I remember sitting in Germany, and we dug this foxhole. It was just raining, and it was cold, and we werenâ€™t seeing any - no one was opposing us, and it was just suffering. Thatâ€™s all we were doing. Being hungry, cold, tired. How does this matter? Afghanistanâ€™s a lot like that. Not always is it a gunfight. Sometimes youâ€™re just hungry, cold, and tired, and itâ€™s a war of attrition, and who just keeps on showing up until the other guy stops showing up. Guess what? You can win off of just showing up. Iâ€™ve seen it happen before. It was amazing training. I didnâ€™t see it at the time; I see it now. I mean so far - I grew up a middle-class American.

Iâ€™ve never starved in my life until I joined the Army. I really believe I was starving, but it taught me something. You still got more to give. Just because youâ€™re super hungry, and your stomach hurts, and you havenâ€™t gone to the bathroom in days, that doesnâ€™t mean youâ€™re over. Youâ€™re still standing; keep on going. That was the training. Not that it had - it didnâ€™t have to be directed at the exact mission. It just had to be directed at making you better. I do believe that 173rd is great at that: making the individual better for the betterment of the team.

Interviewer:

Now, were there any leaders that particularly inspired you, or that you looked up to, when you were going through this training period?

Salvatore Giunta:

I think whatâ€™s awesome - so I am very biased. I wear this pin. I wear this pin â€™cause I wear this medal, and I wouldnâ€™t wear this medal without this unit, without these people around me. They helped me become who I am today by example. I think - I can honestly say Iâ€™ve never had a direct leader that has ever led me down a negative path, or has not taught me valuable lessons, or that has not either pulled the reins and said, â€œWhoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, not so aggressive,â€ or given me the kick in the behind and say, â€œKeep on moving. Keep on going.â€ Iâ€™m sitting here today, and I have to tell you - I have one person that was a leader throughout my entire career, almost at every level: Sergeant First Class Navas. He was Sergeant Navas, my E-5 team leader when I first came into the military. He got promoted, later became my squad leader. He was my squad leader, leading by example in a larger group of people.

And then in my second deployment in Afghanistan, he became my Platoon Sergeant. And you see these leaders keep on popping up, reoccurring in your life, because they continue to do great things. And itâ€™s not because they did that great thing or this great thing; itâ€™s just that everything theyâ€™re doing, everything theyâ€™re touching, is becoming better because of their involvement. Like most of - I remember seeing Barberet - one of my funnier memories of a leader would be Staff Sergeant Barberet, and he didnâ€™t care. He cared about what we were doing as soldiers, and if we werenâ€™t doing it, heâ€™d run

us through the wringer. It wasn't about, "Don't get in a fight." It was, "Don't lose a fight." "Okay, gotcha." So now we just got to not lose fights. And it wasn't about how far we're going to run; it's about how far, how fast, and how much we're going to run. It wasn't about working out to this time - "Hey, we're going to do PT between 6:30 and 8:00." It was about working out until you're totally exhausted, and you did your best you've ever done. Or you know you have nothing left to give, and all of a sudden you realize it's 8:30 in the morning, and you need to go back to bed.

I think about those days fondly, because none of us would've done that for ourselves. We needed a leader to drive us, to push us, to say, "Hey, we're doing this, and don't worry, I'm not crushing you because it's you. Follow me, and I'm going to crush you because I'm going to make you better, and someday you might hold my position." Those were the leaders of the 173rd.

Interviewer:

Wow. So you went back to Afghanistan. Tell me a little bit about your second rotation in Afghanistan.

Salvatore Giunta:

My second rotation I was a little bitter, because I don't believe I should've been there, based off of my contract and everything I said I would do. It was in the contract that I was going to be there if they asked me, so I was there. I'm a man of my word, if nothing else. But I was hurt. I felt like I did absolutely everything they said, everything I signed up to do, all the boxes I signed up and said I would check, I checked them all the first go-around. And I did it, and I was ready to not do it again, and we had to do it again. And again, like I said, I had to do it again as a private. Not just in a different position doing a different thing; in the same spot, doing the same thing, and it hurt me. This time we were in the northeast corner of Afghanistan, in the Korengal Valley. Last time, we had these huge - the first time, we had these very large areas of operation. We'd walk 10 kilometers over a few mountain ranges to go interact with the villagers. The second time, we were going to stay in this six-kilometer by six-kilometer valley for 15 months.

And we were not going to do it with 40 people, we were going to do it with 150 people, with an entire company. And we didn't have to walk 10 kilometers to go find a village. We were only going to walk - maybe a long walk would be like five kilometers, and we'd see a few villages in there, but chances are we weren't going to make it five kilometers before we got into a fight. I think the second trip, for me, in OEF 8, in the Korengal Valley, was much more intense. I remember telling - I was a private. I was telling the other privates, saying, "Hey, you know, it's going to be like this. It's going to be like this. Don't worry. Don't worry. Follow. You know everything you need to do. Just do what you've already learned. They didn't prepare you for no reason; they prepared you for this." And then we got there, and you see these huge mountains, and these cliffs of the Hindu Kush, and it's not anything like last time. The day we flew in, the helicopter got shot at. The day we walked out to our little mud hut with no running water and no electricity, we got shot at. The day we sat there, figuring out this is what we're going to stay in? This place is terrible, we got shot at at a terrible place.

You'd think it would be a strategic target. It doesn't have to be strategic; as long as we were there, they were going to fight us. It became apparent that we would either be great soldiers before it was all over, or we would be no more. I think what stands out to me in those first couple months were watching the other young soldiers evolve, and become true professionals in their chosen craft and trade. You can train, you can say, "Hey, I know how to spell every word. I'm the best speller in the world." Enter a spelling bee. Prove it. Well, we trained, we did all this up in Germany, and we suffered, and we were prepared for it. Prove it. I watched those young soldiers prove it, day in and day out, and become better people for it. And I remember being proud. It's almost like a fatherly moment, I guess. I remember teaching them that, and they're doing it, and now it's better for us because of it. Amazing.

Implementing what you practiced, and not being so afraid. I think that second trip, I was - I can't say that I wasn't afraid. I was absolutely afraid, and there were times that are much scarier than others. But the absolutely fear of not making it wasn't there, because it didn't matter.

Interviewer:

Right.

Salvatore Giunta:

Found out it didn't matter. It's not whether I survive, or you survive; it's inconsequential to the mission. It's that we are successful in what we set out to do, whether the person who's telling us to do that, sitting in an air conditioned office at the Pentagon drinking Starbucks coffee, doesn't matter. We're going to do it because we're here to do it. It was eye-opening. It was eye-opening to see a country that we'd been in for so many years still suck. I don't even know how to say that. I am not a fan of Afghanistan. The country, the Hindu Kush is beautiful. The people I do not like, and I know that because I met them, and I don't like them. I'm not talking about a book I read; I'm talking about all the experiences I've ever had.

Interviewer:

Right.

Salvatore Giunta:

I think after all these years, that's still the one thing that sticks with me. I don't have anything nice to say. Spent two and a half years of my life somewhere I don't have anything nice to say. I have nice things to say about the people I was with. I have lots of nice events, but about those people and that country, I have nothing nice to say.

Interviewer:

Right. Tell me a little bit about the action that you experienced on the 25 of October, 2007, during Operation Rock Avalanche.

Salvatore Giunta:

Rock Avalanche was a big mission for us. Usually, we'd go out in like maybe 14-man sized elements. The first time we'd go out groups of eight, maybe, a squad size; now we're going out in a little bigger, because we're going to take contact. Rock Avalanche, we're going to bring the whole Battalion out. We're going to do the whole Company in the valley, in the Korengal Valley, the whole Battalion was going to be active in the area. We were going to do things that were going to stir the hornets' nest, and we knew that; but that was the mission. Rock Avalanche was a five-day mission for us. We went places we'd never been before. We had seen a few things that I hadn't experienced before in Afghanistan. One of the bigger standouts of Rock Avalanche, October 24, which was roughly the fourth day of Rock Avalanche, our Scout Team got overran.

Our Scouts are our best, our sneakiest, our quickest, our quietest, our strongest, our - just super solid dudes, and they got overran. And when they got overran, the scout team leader, Sergeant Larry Rougle was killed, and Rougle was truly - he was the leader of the best, and he was that guy, right? He was the guy that we all wanted to be like. He was benching like 350 pounds. He's running like 12-minute-2 miles. He was smart. The ladies liked him. Just a super cool dude, coming from Ranger Battalion, so we're all, "This is the guy we want to be like." And he's dead. I remember that affecting us, you know? If they can take one of our best, then - Here we go. We're going into something that I don't know if we're going to come out of. The following day after the Scout Team got overran, we went up on top of the Abbas Ghar [Ridge], and we started moving down, and we moved down into a support by fire position.

Second Platoon was going to go into the village down below. We were about an 18-man element at this time, simply because we still had these little mud huts to protect. We had equipment there, we had gear there, and so we had to leave some people there to protect our little spot, for the time being. And so we were men short, plus we were day five of this

mission, and so the people are wearing out. We're wearing out. We're doing 33 to 66% security; we're sleeping maybe 4 hours every 24 hours. We're physically engaged in work every single day and almost all day, and on October 25, our job was to overwatch Second Platoon going into the village, see if they could gather information, gear, equipment, whatever, and we sat there all day and nothing happened. The night came, and October 25, 2007, was almost a full moon. In this valley with no electricity, a full moon produces so much light it creates shadows.

Interviewer:

Right.

Salvatore Giunta:

It's incredible, the power of the moon, the light of the moon when there's no outside lights. And we're going to walk back after nothing happened; that was that. And because we walked ourselves onto the spur where the terrain dictated we weren't going to walk in a wedge formation - we were going to go more of a single file - we're 10 to 15 meters between people. No one grenade, no one RPG's going to take out a group of us. We're professionals, this. We weren't complacent, by any means. We knew what we were - where we were at, in the middle of Afghanistan, in the middle of a place that people hate us. Will go out of their way to show us how much they hate us. We walked maybe 300 meters, and then the world exploded on us. From about 30 meters away, we were hit in a near L-shaped ambush, and I remember there's thousands, thousands of bullets coming at us, and we use tracers, you know. We're four ball, one tracer. They do the same thing. We're the greatest, except for ours are orange tracers, and theirs are green.

We see thousands of green tracers coming in, knowing that that is thousands upon thousands of actual bullets, at 30 meters, darn near point blank range. And my first instinct was drop down. There was no cover. There was no concealment. We were in the open. We're in single-file line, and they're hitting us from our flank. And when I was on the ground, my next instinct was the guys. At this time, I was a Team Leader. I was a Specialist, but I was a Team Leader; I'd been in the Army for four years. Wasn't that I couldn't get promoted; I just did that reset.

Interviewer:

Right.

Salvatore Giunta:

And to take care of the guys, and I looked back to see - Kaleb Casey was my SAW Gunner, and Casey did not take a knee. Casey did not get down. Casey immediately turned to the enemy and started shooting at a cyclic rate of fire with the M249 Assault, shooting about a thousand rounds per minute. He looked like a dragon blowing fire; three feet of flames coming out of the front of his gun. I promise you, that does not benefit Casey, but that did benefit us. Right next to Casey was Clary, and Clary had the 203, shoots a 40 millimeter grenade about the size of my fist. Clary's lobbing 203s - professionals. You can't tell someone what to do if they're already doing the right thing. There was more boxes to check than we had people to check them, and so we don't need two people checking the same box. We need everyone doing something different, and we all know how it's going to work out, as long as everyone does what they're supposed to do. My guys were doing it. They were kicking butt.

It gave me, it afforded me the opportunity to take stock in the situation, and when I looked forward towards my squad leader, Staff Sergeant Erick Gallardo, I watched his head snap and his body drop to the ground, and I was overwhelmed with every emotion - sadness, anger, rage, fear - and I didn't know - it got me. It took me out of the moment, and I didn't know what else to do other than just run up and grab his body and bring it back. And so I ran forward, and as I was running forward to grab Gallardo, I got shot in the chest, but this entire time the enemy ambush line was on our west, and I got shot from the north, when I was running to the north to grab Gallardo in the single-file line. It hit my plate, no harm, no foul. I'm not going to stop. I know what just happened, but can't cry over

spilt milk; no one cares about spilt milk. We had bigger problems. And I grabbed a hold of Gallardo, and I just took off running back to where Casey and Clary were, I think.

In my mind, I'm setting up a casualty collection point, and set it up back there. And there was this little washout on the top of this it was almost like a plateau that we were on.

Interviewer:

Right.

Salvatore Giunta:

We were just on the downside, the military ridge; not the very top, but just off of it. The enemy was at the very top. And as I got Gallardo back, his body started to move, and the very first words out of his mouth were, "Throw grenades." This dude just got smoked in the helmet with a bullet. It did not go through his helmet, it knocked him out. I've been knocked out a ton of times, and I always wake up and I say something stupid. "What happened?" You got five people standing over you; you know what happened. Gallardo's very first word when it happened to him was, "Throw grenades." Never about him; it was always about us. That's a leader. Subconsciously, he's still thinking about us. I had grenades, and it snapped me out of it again. It took someone else to do that for me. It took a leader to put it all back into the proper time line, and I threw these - I had three grenades, and I threw my grenades to the west, and I continued towards the north. We still had - Eckrode was up there, and also Brennan was up there, walking point.

As I ran, I threw my last grenade, and I came up on Eckrode, and Eckrode was on the ground, and he's shot twice in the leg and twice in the chest. And he had that M249 SAW Squad Automatic Weapon, our mass casualty producing weapons for our squad, and we needed that to be rocking, and it wasn't. And before I could grab Eckrode's gun, Gallardo was there. Not only did he tell us what to do, again he was doing it. And because Gallardo was with Eckrode, it made Eckrode okay. That's what we trained for. The people who train us medical aid are our leaders, and he had already proven he knows what he's talking about, so he was there, so I don't have to be there. We can't all be there.

Interviewer:

Right.

Salvatore Giunta:

I had the ability to move forward again, and when I left, I ran forward and I was going to link up with Brennan. And where - I could tell you who everyone was as they walked away from me in the dark from the waist down. We all wear the same boots and the same pants. I can just tell by just this much, and I know exactly who it is, and I know how they're thinking because we've trained it so many times. And that night, I couldn't find Brennan. He wasn't where he was - should've been. But the book says, the Standard Operating Procedure says in an ambush situation, you have to charge the ambush line. You shoot them, they shoot you, last man standing gets to declare he's on the winning team. That's a terrible story to read; it's way worse to live, and I know what Brennan did. Charging the ambush line. He did what had to happen. It was just it's a daunting task, and I figured if he was going to do it, I'm not going to let him down. I'm going to do what we're supposed to do. I know this is the next step. This should've been the first step. I could not do that myself.

And so I ran forward to charge the ambush line. Most of the enemy fire was focused on Casey and Clary; Clary's making things go boom, Casey's just roping thousands of rounds. This whole time, maybe literally about a minute into this ambush, maybe 45 seconds, but most of the fire's concentrated on them. As I ran forward, I could see two people carrying a person by the arms and by the feet, and I just couldn't fathom - I had - my night vision goggles were up. But it was so bright; things were exploding, tracers were going everywhere, I didn't need my night vision goggles. But I just kept on running closer and closer to these people, and I didn't understand why they were

going away from me. They should've been coming this way, and I don't know how anyone beat me up here, because I came pretty much as fast as I could. And as I got closer, I realized what I was seeing. I was seeing two enemy combatants carry Sergeant Brennan away.

And I did exactly what I signed up to do in the basement of Lindale Mall, to close with and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in close combat - that's the job description. I engaged the enemy. I eliminated one. The other one ran off the back side of the mountain. I grabbed a hold of Brennan, and I just turned around and took off running back the direction I came. And Brennan was shot maybe seven times, in his arms and his legs. He's missing a piece of his jaw. Took his equipment, took his M4, his rucksack, his helmet, his grenades, his vest, and he needed help, and it was more help than I could provide for him. I got like a little pill pack with like an Ibuprofen 800, and that's not going to cut it. I've called for a Medic three times in my life and seriously meant it, and two of those times - it's just like the movies - the medics come bursting through, gunfire and explosions, and they're there to help.

When I called for a Medic that night, there wasn't a Medic that came right away. What I didn't know was in the first couple seconds of the ambush, our Medic, Specialist Hugo Mendoza, was shot through the femoral artery and killed. As I worked on Brennan the best that I could, the enemy ambush line started to retreat down. Now we're maybe a minute and 45 seconds, 2 minutes into it. And as the enemy ambush started to retreat and break down the backside of the mountain - the whole time, we had two Apache attack helicopters directly above us. But because of the close proximity of us and the enemy, they could not engage. Also because the day prior, when the Scouts got overrun, they took night vision goggles, and all of a sudden, it changed every Standard Operating Procedure we had where leaders had these beacons, because we're not going to do beacons anymore because the enemy can see it, because they also have our night vision goggles. We no longer own the night in this valley because they had that ability, so we had to change off of that as well. As the enemy retreated, the Apaches went to work on them. And then all of a sudden, a Medic showed up.

A man named Staff Sergeant Brouters, who volunteered for the mission - came from, he was a male nurse from Electricity Land - and our survivability rate drastically goes up the better care we get on the spot, in place.

Interviewer:

Right.

Salvatore Giunta:

And he came; and he was actually maybe 4 to 600 meters up the mountain, and a small group of them came running straight down into the enemy gunfire to assist and aid us. It does not benefit them, it benefits us, and they came and they did it for us. I remember that being a pretty powerful thing, to run into gunfire for people when you don't have to.

Interviewer:

Right.

Salvatore Giunta:

And they did, to help. We started - after the enemy ambush line was eliminated - as far as I know, no enemy survived that ambush line - we started loading up our killed and our wounded. We don't carry body bags, you know; it's bad to carry your own casket. But we carry ponchos, and you can use it as a litter, and I remember taking, noting that there was four ponchos with bodies in it, and I had Brennan dying in front of me. Brennan was the last one to go up in the basket for the medevac. And we're taking magazines, and we're taking guns, and we're taking grenades, and we're taking night vision goggles, and whatever we could. We've been out for five days, and most of us were pretty depleted on everything we had. And Brennan went up in the basket, and I remember standing there, and like five days ago I started with a couple hundred rounds, couple grenades, a gun, an AT4.

And now all of a sudden five days later, I had two M4s hanging off me, two rocket

launchers, six grenades, extra plates. And you could feel the weight, the true burden of the loss. And it wasn't because all those guys that went up in the helicopter were tired. It wasn't because they weren't having fun. It wasn't because they don't want to do it anymore. It's because they gave absolutely everything they could, and they had nothing left to give, and we were going to carry that weight. We walked back to the Korengal Outpost, which was about - I think it was about a two-hour walk back - and we were told when we got back that Specialist Mendoza had been killed. We were told that Sergeant Brennan died in surgery. Valles was going to be okay; I think he was shot through his knee. Sergeant Reyes took one to the helmet, through his helmet, nicked his skull; he was going to be okay. Eckrode, shot in the leg and the chest; he was going to be okay.

And then I remember sitting there with Casey and Clary and Gallardo, just kind of taking stock of what the hell just happened. That day I don't think was - wasn't a special day. It doesn't stand out to me. I think the day was just another day at work. That was what was expected, and the very next day nothing was going to change, other than we were going to do the same with less, or to the best of our ability. That day only sticks out now because of the recognition of what we all did that day; the validation that it was a pretty crazy day, but we were going to always rise to the occasion. We're the 173rd. That's what we signed up to do is rise to the occasion.

Interviewer:

Right.

Salvatore Giunta:

That day didn't affect my life. November 16, 2010, the day that I received this award, has forever changed my life. It has put it all into perspective, why we do what we do, and it's not me. I'm not the guy you're looking for. I will be the representative of the folks you are looking for, and they are tough, and they are busy, and they are active, and they're still in far-off places around the world, kicking butt and keeping America the greatest country in the world. And ensuring that the lives of others that we touch are better for it. I've never been more proud of my military experience until I got out and I got a look back at it, and I got to see who's doing it now. I'm like, "Whoa." Some pretty hardcore stuff. You've been doing it a long time. I think about Sergeant First Class Navas, who was my Team Leader. He was there when I showed up. He's already been to war before I'd shown up.

When I was in high school, he was in combat. When I went the second time, he went again. He's continued to evolve, and he's still doing it. He's still there, leading young men and women to be as good - that's not true - to be the best they can be. That's motivating to me. That's why I put on this suit and tie. That's why I try to do the best I can, because they're out there every single day doing the best they can for us, and we don't even have to ask them to do it. That's just who they are.

Interviewer:

This has been an outstanding interview. I wish it could go on longer, but I know you have a follow-on that you have to get to, so it's been truly an honor having you here, telling the story of the soldiers you fought with; and I thank you for sharing it with us.

Salvatore Giunta:

Ah. Thanks for allowing me to. I'm one of many, and I'm average at best. I think we do have just such incredible people, and it would be wrong not to talk about them.