

# Ron Whitehead

- *Interviewed by Kyle DeSantis, Nicol Haywood, Zachary Salvo, Kim Cercena, Perry Verrino*
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- *Documented by Kevin Wise*



**Branch:** Army Infantry

**Rank:** Sargent E5

**Years of Service:** Army: August 24, 1989 - August 24, 1993  
Army National Guard: August 24, 1993 - August 24, 1995

**Locations of Service:** Germany, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia

**Medals:** Combat Infantryman Badge, Master Driver Truck Award, Army Commendation Medals

## **Interview:**

**Why he joined the Army:** “My grandfather is a WW2 vet, so I was thinking of joining the Navy, but I never had much experience on a boat, so I went and saw the recruiter. I grew up in the country in Maryland, so I was used to firearms and stuff like that. When I saw the Army recruiter, my MOS Was 11B which was infantry, which is pretty much what they did at the time. At the time I wasn’t thinking of a career after the service, but I was still able to apply what I learned in the infantry to my current job as an art teacher.”

**First day in service memories:** “I think about basic training just about every day because my name kind of sticks out -- Whitehead -- It’s kind of easy for people to remember my name. My grandfather said if you leave basic training and they don’t remember your name, you did a good job. The first day they knew my name because it stuck out. They bring you in on these big cattle trucks. There’s like a hundred of you on this cattle truck and when they open the door, you have five bags that you can’t carry but they tell you to. And then you put these drill sergeants in a line and I walked past this big guy and he screamed “Whitehead! Your butt’s mine!” I tried to hang low during basic training but that didn’t happen. The day you graduate basic training you realize they’re actually people. The drill sergeants basically give you tunnel vision while in basic training. They will yell at you for taking too long in the shower, but you don’t realize that sergeant left and showered, shaved, and did everything while another one was yelling at you. Nobody figured this out until the end of basic training. The biggest thing about basic is that you only get three meals a day. Before I got to basic training, I never ate eggs in my life, and when I got to basic training, I ate eggs. You eat whatever they give you.”

**Most memorable experience:** “One would be at the very end of basic training. You go to ATS, which is your specific training. They put us all in alphabetical order and I was at the end. They

called my name and said, "Whitehead! Germany!" And my first thought was 'My mom's gonna \*\*\*' I have really fond memories. I'm a teacher and we always talk about equity and race and it really bothers me. I'm a veteran and you don't look at people that way. Since we were in Germany I was mechanized infantry. We were put in Bradley fighting vehicles because we couldn't keep up with the tanks on our feet. In Iraq, we drove over a mine in the Bradley fighting vehicle and I was the one who controlled the hatch. I looked and made sure no one was hurt. I just kept on going because that's what I was trained to do. I think one of the biggest things I really like about the Army is the good leadership. The good leadership is something I like. If the troops didn't have AC, the leader didn't have AC. One time we had six meals and there were seven of us. The highest ranking person didn't eat at all. We offered him food and he refused it. Good leadership is saying you're going to do something and sticking to it. I'll always remember that. Sargent Sarzar (\*sic) wouldn't eat. He said I love you and I want you to eat. Then when you go up the ranks you remember that stuff and you do those same things. You don't find that good leadership very much anymore.

My best friend is my gunner. We always talk. We're very close and once the war was over we went down into Saudi Arabia and we got to shoot all of the leftover ammunition. We got to carry and shoot a two missile launcher. Whenever I call him I always remind him of that because I've never seen someone so scared in my life. It's all about perspective in the service. I was 19. I was young and dumb. Sargent Smith, who was my commander, had three kids. Talk about a hero. I'm a father now. I couldn't imagine being in the Army now. I don't think people think that veterans are normal people and I remind them that when I talk about veterans with someone. I call Sargent Smith a couple times a year and remind him of having snowball fights in Germany and then we're in Iraq. I was more worried about him. As a young person you realize it's better you go than them. People like Smith -- he was 27 -- they're old."

**Combat experiences:** "I was with the 1st Armored division in Iraq. It was pretty crazy because when they did it, they did it right. Shout out to all the Vietnam Veterans, they were my leaders. They made sure we got this right. I was with the 1st armored division task force. We had M1s. They broke us up from the infantry battalion into companies, and each company had four Bradleys. When we went into combat they took half our Bradleys and paired us with the tank. Half-tank and half-infantry. If you google a map of Desert Storm it shows a triangle of red, yellow, and blue and where the number 1 is, that's the routes we travelled and where we went. We were all the way up front. I was in 7th corps. We started in Saudi Arabia and went through Iraq and Kuwait. When you got to the Iraq border you could tell they've been at war for a long time. They had these huge berms. They were taller than three stories. Engineers had to build ramps for the tanks to get over. We were breaking records from WW2 with distance travelled in armored units. My superpower is sleep. I can sleep anywhere, anytime. As a diver, you need to. You can barely see at night. Most Army and Marines people fight with night sights during the day because we're taught to read heat signatures. I know exactly what a hot M1 at night looks like at night and I know what a Russian T52 looks like just because of the heat signature. We can shoot a lot further than we can see. We had the best equipment for Iraq. We also had to be aware of friendly fire."

**Medals and Citations:** “I earned my CIB (Combat Infantryman’s Badge). It’s probably what I take the most pride in. You had to be a grunt, or in infantry to earn that. A blue rifle with a reef around it. It means you were a combat arms person. I got a master driver track award. Which means you drive safely. I earned a couple Army commendation medals. If you see something on the right sleeve it’s who they went to combat with, and on the left it’s who they’re with now. I’m proud of the first Army division. We always made fun of the other guys. It was like High School. Desert Storm was almost 30 years ago. You have to keep your memories positive. If you go to the VA, you’re talking to a therapist who doesn’t know what you went through. If veterans are asked how they feel on a scale of 1-10, they may say 8 when they’re feeling like a 1 because that’s what they’re trained to do. People who go to the sick hall in the military are called wimp and they suck it up. A lot of veterans lie because they want to continue.”

**Memories of the food:** “I love chipped beef gravy on toast which they call Crap on a Shingle, which I still love today. Eating in the military isn’t about taste, it’s about nutrition. In Iraq, we ate MREs. I had the same spoon the whole time I was in the military. When it’s time to eat, you stuff your face. Same with sleep.”

**Entertainment during free time:** “We played spades. Most people in the military are card players. The game was mainly spades. You got a partner and you stayed with them the entire time. I was paired with Philippe Cornado and when things were dull, we’d just start playing. And when things picked up again, we just put our cards in our pockets and picked it up again later.

**Pranks to pass the time:** All the time, especially with young guys and new people. We played pranks on the lieutenants and stuff like that. It was weird when someone was nice to you. It was almost like a bad thing. Everyone knows when it’s the time to be serious and the time to be fun. Two of our higher ranking officers had never seen combat. Our captain had two tours in Vietnam, so he was this old, grumpy, \*\*\*\*\*. There were times he was nice and we had to tell him to go back to his old self. Going back to the food, If you get a steak dinner, you know you’re going to get the shaft. You didn’t get a nice meal unless something’s happening.”

**Keeping in touch with family while in service:** “When I was in Germany, yes. In Iraq they had these big tents set up and I only called three times when I could’ve called five. Me and the other single guys got together and said we’ve got to man up and let the married guys call. You had maybe five minutes each to call. At 19, as a young person, I realized that people should be talking to their kids.”

**Final days in service:** “I did four years. I did two years in Germany and Iraq. and my last two years were spent in Fort Polk, Louisiana. And let me tell you, if you’re a grunt, Louisiana isn’t fun. It’s the worst because it’s hot. A friend of mine took a photo at the sign and when I went back, I joined the Maryland National Guard. Four weeks later for summer training, and guess where I went. Two months later I was back at 4th Polk. My high school wrestling coach was a Colonel in our division and he picked me to be his Hum-V driver because he knew me and I knew the base. I stayed in the National Guard while I was in college. When I got the GI bill, I got \$1500 and had

to pay \$100 out of my paycheck for the first fifteen months and then I got \$36,000. It's different now, and I think it's a lot better. I used the \$36,000 to live off of. I paid for all of my own books and classes. I soaked up college. It was so nice. I was used to people yelling at me. I met my wife there. Food was better,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the people there were female, I was used to so many people yelling at me. A nun pulled up a picture of the Bamberg rider and I freaked out when I saw that."

**Thoughts about war or about the military based on experiences:** "It just made it more real. I grew up in Maryland in the country. I shot little Army men with a pellet gun. It was like the wild west. I walked around with my pellet gun my whole life as a kid. It's real people. It's not a video game and everything just gets meshed in."

**How service and experiences affect your life:** "I would say that one of the biggest things is that people would think that since I'm this art teacher who was in the military, I'd be in their face, but it's not like that. I'm not the person who is the phone police. If you're getting your work done and I see you on your phone, that's cool. I tell my kids if my wife calls, I'll say excuse me, step out of class and take the call. They know I expect the same of them. I've never had a problem with cell phones. I've never demanded kids stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. They stop talking because they respect what it means to me. The military taught me to respect everyone and a lot of other common sense stuff that you would think is common sense, but it really isn't. I don't understand why my colleagues go nuts over this cell phone stuff. It's not a problem unless you make it a problem. My kids know they're not going to get to me. I tell them I was in Iraq and that I love my job here."

**Another good analogy:** If you're in a car and driving to work and you get in a really bad accident, people would probably understand why you wouldn't want to drive anymore. But if you go to the workplace and you're having trouble because you're a combat vet, you shouldn't be having trouble."

**Final comments:** "Always use your gifts to help others. I take my kids to the VA hospital three times a year. We do this thing called the Living History Project where we match kids with veterans and interview the veterans. The kids paint the stories of the veterans and they get three different pieces of artwork."