Bruno Moya: A Las Vegas Marine at a Turning Point in American History

U.S. Marine Corps • Post-9/11 era, 2001–2008

Bruno Moya grew up with a life spanning the United States and Mexico. Born in El Paso, Texas, and raised in Ciudad Juárez, he moved to Las Vegas in 1989. He joined the Marine Corps in 2001, as a momentous shift in American history approached. Just days before he was scheduled to graduate from boot camp in San Diego, the September 11 attacks took place.

Moya remembered the sudden change in atmosphere on base: the familiar sounds of nearby air traffic stopped, the recruits were kept in their barracks, and drill instructors brought out a television to explain what was happening. “They showed us the towers going down, and they gave us a talk about preparing for war,” he recalled. His experience makes the sweeping public story of September 11 personal, showing how national events changed the expectations of people already training for military service.

Moya trained as an infantry machine gunner and later deployed to Iraq. He described carrying equipment, traveling for days with his unit, preparing for combat, and trying to make sense of the larger military operation from the limited perspective of a young Marine. His oral history also addresses the effects of combat and the difficult process of returning to civilian life. These recollections require sensitive interpretation: rather than presenting war as an adventure or reducing a veteran to trauma, the story should allow room for Moya’s own complexity, uncertainty, and later growth.

Back in Southern Nevada, Moya pursued further education, beginning at the College of Southern Nevada and later transferring to UNLV. He became involved in student-veteran organizing and helping former service members navigate college. “Mentoring, that peer-to-peer aspect is really important,” he explained. Moya’s story links international history to the experiences of one Las Vegas resident: migration, a national emergency, war, and then a sustained effort to help others find their place after military service.

Source Bruno Moya, oral history with Barbara Tabach, January 20 and February 3, 2022; Veterans’ Voices: We’re Listening (UNLV, 2023).

Transcript

Bruno Moya

U.S. Marine Corps | September 11 and the Iraq War era

September 11 in Marine Boot Camp

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INTERVIEWER Yes. There was a big gap there, fortunately. When a Marine is being trained, and they're being trained, it seems to me, it sounds like, for the discipline of the combat but there's no combat happening, how does that fit into the equation, the mindset and all of that?

VETERAN It's better to be prepared for the worst to happen than to hurry up and get trained for the worst to happen when it's already happening; that's the idea. Although we're not at war, we weren't at war while I was at boot camp, it could happen at any moment, so the mindset is very important; that warrior ethos of it's up to us to be prepared to go to war or to fight for this country at any moment, and we have to be prepared at every minute, and that's these little saying that they engrain in us from boot camp all throughout our training and everything else. I think it serves a purpose, and it's probably why it's difficult to transition out of the military because we have this mindset, and now it's kind of gone.

INTERVIEWER Yes, for sure. September 11, 2001, occurs. Do you remember where you were when that news broke?

VETERAN We were standing in line, getting ready to handle all the weapons because we were three days away from graduation, and so we were turning in a lot of our weapons after formation and everything and after drill because we were just practicing for the ceremony of graduation. I remember MCRD San Diego is right next to the port in San Diego, or international water in San Diego, so planes are flying in and out every minute. It just becomes the sound of the wind. Suddenly, all of that stopped. Everybody that's in boot camp is a recruit, so there's all the Marines that work there that are responsible for certain things, and they're allowed to watch the news and all this other stuff. They're regular Marines that work in boot camp. There was an uneasiness with everything like something just happened. Whatever was going on, there was something obvious, I remember that. I don't remember the details. But then I do remember we all went back to our barracks, but we stayed where we slept. Our drill instructors pulled out a TV, which never happened; you never watched TV aside from watching something that was meant for training or anything like that. I remember all four of them were there, and usually they would take turns. But because we were practicing for graduation, they were stuck in the base, and so we were stuck with all four of them. We weren't allowed to leave, and nobody was allowed to come in. They rolled out this TV, and they all talked to

us about what was happening where attacks had just occurred in New York. They asked us if any of us had any family in New York, and then they showed us the towers going down, and they gave us a talk about preparing for war. That's how that occurred. Everybody remembers where they were for September 11th if you're old enough. For me, that was it. Then I not only transitioned from being just a regular kid from Las Vegas to being in the Marine Corps, but to being a Marine that was…one of the more significant attacks in history for us.

INTERVIEWER Yes. Your training is now full of additional purpose.

VETERAN Right.

INTERVIEWER Potential purpose. I would imagine that those thoughts…Like you say, we can all remember where we were, and as if it was yesterday.

VETERAN Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER And even all this time has passed. You're graduating just a few days later. What happens next for you and for your fellow Marines?

VETERAN From boot camp, you go to your training. Everyone goes to some type of infantry training. I joined the Marine Corps as an infantryman, as a machine gunner, so I went to this place called ITB, Infantry Training Battalion. I checked in there ten days after boot camp. I got 10 days leave; they call it 10-day boot leave, so 10 days to go be with your family and all of that stuff.