“I wouldn’t say it then, but I’ll say it now. All five years was the best part. The best five years of my life,” says Corporal Andrew Kisbert.

Talking with Andrew about his experiences serving in Operation Enduring Freedom, I expected to hear about hardship and lessons on honor and duty. I did not expect the fondness with which he remembers his active duty service in the Marines between 2007 and 2012.

Andrew, who comes from a line of Marine and Navy veterans, says the military was “in his DNA.” He spent the first nine years of his life at different military bases around the world, moving around with his father, who served in Vietnam and had a 30-year career in the Marines. “He was this Titan of a man,” says Andrew as he remembers watching his father putting on his uniform every day. Andrew says he wanted the same thing for himself one day.
“I wanted to do something bigger than myself. I wanted to see the see the world and travel,” says Andrew. He was studying at the University of South Carolina when he decided to finally enlist after talking about it for years. He says he woke up one day and said to himself, “Today's the day.” Andrew went to his hometown recruiting station in Florence, South Carolina, to enlist and was training at Parris Island a few months later.

After Parris Island, Andrew trained with the School of Infantry at Camp Geiger. He says he had always imagined himself in the infantry for several reasons: because his father had been an infantryman, because the infantry was always featured in war movies, and because the infantry was “the hardest division of the hardest branch” of the military. “Embrace the suck,” Andrew says, quoting a joking infantry motto. He also trained with F.A.S.T., or the Fleet Anti-Terrorism Security Team, in Norfolk, Virginia, to prepare for his first deployment to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

In Cuba as he worked standing security, maintained equipment, tracked movement, relayed information, and worked with high-ranking officials in the Operation Command Center. Andrew says he learned attention to detail at Guantanamo Bay. “You cannot let one thing slip up...and you have to stay focused 24/7,” says Andrew. While Andrew describes his time at Guantanamo Bay as “stressful,” he also explains that it was a privilege to be a young officer working closely with corporals, majors, captains, and admirals. “It's unheard of,” says Andrew.
He was next deployed to Bahrain and “bounced all over the Middle East,” training different foreign nationals so they could defend themselves. He and his team served as “the quick reaction force for the Naval 5th fleet...for as far from Beirut to Pakistan.” Working with Pakistani and Jordanian forces as well as the Bahraini Ministry of the Interior, he experienced military and cultural differences. Andrew notes that, while the Bahraini and Pakistani forces had less experience with training, the Jordanian forces, who knew basic English, were the most sophisticated in their knowledge of weapons and martial-arts-style hand-to-hand combat. While he learned patience from working with foreign nationals, he was “not expecting” some of the cultural lessons he learned. The people he met in Jordan and Bahrain “were really into gift-giving” and would “give you their last drop of water if you asked for it.” Andrew also reminisces about his team’s visits to the Dead Sea, the Jordan River, and Petra, sharing his excitement at getting to see and learn about the world “as a young person, for free, with the military.”

“A boring job” came next after Andrew’s time in Bahrain; his team was sent to Bremerton, Washington, to provide security to a submarine that had come in to dry dock. Though the rotating security schedule was uneventful, Andrew is grateful that he “got to see another side of the military [he] never would have gotten involved with” as well as take a tour of the “magnificent piece of equipment.”

Before Andrew’s final deployment – this time to Afghanistan – his team was dispersed and he joined the 1st Battalion 6th Marines where he trained with and adjusted to a new unit. This new unit was sent to the Sangin Valley in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan, a “very kinetic” place they had heard “horror stories” about
“where,” says Andrew, “we were had been basically untouched.” The mission was clear: Guard Route 611 and the large hydroelectric dam nearby while clearing the Taliban out of the area. They were successful, Andrew says: “The last month we were there we seldom saw [enemy] activity. We did our job, completed the mission, came home.”

While in Afghanistan, his team trained the Afghan National Army and built relationships with the locals by asking, “What can we help you with? What do you want? Do you need anything?” Helping with anything from irrigation problems to getting a school started, they attempted to “win the hearts and minds” of people who lived in fear of the Taliban.

Serving as a designated marksman in his platoon as well as a team leader, Andrew held a bundle of responsibilities. What he remembers most is the men he served with. “What really played the biggest impact on me,” Andrew says, “was I saw a group of men come together in such a way that I never expected. I saw young men really reach deep down and pull out everything they had and lay it all out on the table. They were willing to do anything for one another. And I think for me to be a part of that and say I’m a Marine who served with men who were willing to lay it all on the line for one another really played the biggest impact.”

Andrew says he carries his memories of serving with these men with him every day. He carries with him the memories of those he lost, including his best friend, Scott Harper. “That will certainly change anyone,” says Andrew, “especially when it’s one of your friends…a close friend.” Andrew explains that now he tries to live his life in a way that honors the brothers in arms he has lost.
After living in a “constant state of alertness” for months in Afghanistan, Andrew says, “I’m a lot more focused now.” He says that the Marines gave him that focus and that losing friends has given him “a desire to stay focused to keep their memory going.” He wants to keep a mentality of “hard work, dedication, selflessness, serving others, and putting others before you.” Andrew, who is currently working towards a degree in political science at The Citadel, says, “It’s been doing good for me so far.”

Looking fondly back on his experiences, Andrew explains that he went into the Marine Corps wanting to “feel a sense of honor and pride and duty and selflessness.” “I gained all of that,” he says. He says he matured while traveling the world, doing things he never thought possible, and serving his country with “the finest group of guys I ever had the pleasure of meeting.” From these five years he took away lessons on courage and fear, responsibility and brotherhood, humility and gratefulness. His greatest lesson might be that “life is precious – definitely worth fighting for – but precious.”

Andrew’s words of wisdom are warm reflections on his five years of active service in the Marine Corps. Now that he has “dropped his pack” and reentered civilian life, he says, “Nothing I will ever do will be as hard as that.” Andrew finishes by adding, “I loved it. I miss it every day. And I carry every bit of the Marine Corps with me.”