

Summary of Oral History Transcript
Student, Citizen, Soldier: Oral History and Student Veterans

Hopper, Dakota

U.S. Army, Sergeant 11B-B4

Interviewer:

Interview conducted by Ms. Aliah Santos, Salem State University, on 4/11/2016

Summary of transcript:

Dakota Hopper, raised in Arizona and Massachusetts, comes from a family with a storied military history. Hopper's post high school minimum wage jobs and desire for economic advancement led him to join the Army in 2010. He attended Sniper School at Fort Benning, GA, where he remained for the first two years of his service. He then spent nine months at Hohenfels Army Air Field in Germany before being deployed to Kunduz province in Afghanistan. Hopper engaged in several firefights and experienced two IEDs. He speaks thoughtfully about the cultural barriers between Americans and Afghans, the nature of the Taliban, and transition to civilian life.

Dakota Hopper

Narrator

Aliah Santos

Salem State University

Interviewer

April 11, 2016

at Salem State University

Salem, Massachusetts

Aliah Santos: Good afternoon today is April 11, 2016 my name is Aliah Santos and I'm a student here at Salem State University. Today I will be interviewing a veteran of the U.S. Army Sergeant Dakota Hopper. So I heard that you were born in Danvers, but you went to the high school in Beverly. Where exactly did you grow up in the time between there?

Dakota Hopper: I was born in Danvers yes, but when I was two weeks old I actually moved to Arizona, and yea moved to Arizona where my dad was working as a correctional officer, and then I grew up in Arizona all the way till I was nine or ten years old, and then we moved to Beverly where my mom's family's all at. And then from nine to eighteen, I was going to Beverly High School, Memorial Middle School and all the Beverly schools down there

AS: What was it like in Arizona?

DH: Very hot, no it was interesting. I actually miss Arizona because it was; it's completely different than it is here in New England. Where we lived, there was all desert, that's all we had, like our back yard was just desert. And you know how you see, like movies, where you see like tumbleweeds? We had those, and we lived in Flagstaff Arizona, and it was just all desert. And it was nice living there because you could walk every where and not have to worry about like, getting hit by a car or something like that like you have to here where there's roads everywhere. So the difference going from Arizona to Massachusetts was kind of a cultural shock within the country.

AS: You just had to worry about getting hit by tumbleweeds.

DH: Yea exactly.

AS: So would you say you liked it there better, would you ever go back?

DH: I would love to go back, I would love to move back to Arizona. I am, I hate the cold, I hate the cold. I got, when I got injured; my back is just extremely sensitive to cold now, so I try to stay towards like the warmer parts of the country now.

AS: I understand that. So when you were growing up in Arizona, and even when you came back up here to Massachusetts, did you have any general idea of what you wanted to be when you were older?

DH: For the longest time I actually wanted to be a fighter pilot. My uncle, who is in the Air Force, he was a fighter pilot, and he used to come visit us in Arizona every now and tell us like stories about it and flying planes and stuff like that. And I've always been, like, extremely interested in flying planes and trying to go that route, but it was always a toss up between being a professional football player and a fighter pilot. And military wise it just turned out to be that way.

AS: So you'd say that your family was a major influence on you?

DH: Oh definitely. My family is, I have a very, very large family, but they are very tight knit. And even though they all live all over the country, they always stay in contact and they generally have a pretty good influence on everything you do within the family, yea.

AS: So, both your uncles and your father had ended up serving in the military right? Can you like talk about that?

DH: Yea, well I have six uncles and seven aunts. One aunt served in the military, of the six uncles, four served in the military. My dad served in the Marine Corps in Vietnam, I have an uncle that's an engineer in the army. I have the uncle who is a Captain I believe in the Air Force who's fighting fighter jets and my dad ended up he was a, I don't know the Marine Corps rank, he was a Sergeant or a Staff Sergeant, whatever it is in the Marine Corps in Vietnam. So being in the military, or we have a very family, military family oriented like, way we run our family. Regardless of how you try to escape the military somebody else in our family is somehow associated with the military. So my dad he was kind of, he pushed for me when I wanted to, you know, first started looking into the military. He's like, "Oh go for it, it's awesome!" you know, "I love the military," but the military in Vietnam was a little bit different than the military is today. My dad, he was, he was a big supporter of me going into the military, my mom she wanted me to have nothing part of the military cause she knew all of my uncles were in the military, Coast Guard, Marines, everything. She didn't want any of her sons going into the armed forces at all.

AS: That makes sense.

DH: Yeah.

AS: Makes some sentiments of sense. So, would you say that was your finalized decision to serve, or did something else, like finally give you the decision, “this is what I’m going to do.”

DH: Uh, honestly, what the biggest thing that kind of pushed me over the edge to serving was, I was working as a taekwondo instructor in Beverly and that was just right around the time where like the economy was going to crap. And my master ended up having to fire three instructors, and I was the lead instructor for teaching children between the ages of two to eight, and he had to cut back. So when I got fired I had nothing and I was right out of high school you know, I didn’t know what to do with my self and so I started looking at other jobs. I worked at like you know, minimum paying crap jobs and stuff like that; I was just not happy and then my brother, my older brother had actually just joined the army a year before I did and I contacted him. We went down to El Paso Texas to see him before he went on his first deployment to Iraq, and he kind of was just like, if you really have your not sure what you really want to do and your working all these jobs that you hate working and you not making great money, he goes, the military’s always an option. And he kind of he sat me down for like an hour and he just talked to me about like the fraternity that you feel, like the group, the camaraderie you feel with being in the army, and I was always kind of looking for that. And he was kind of, he kind of pushed me like, or go see the recruiter. And then I went saw the recruiter and then a whole bunch of stuff happened with the recruiter. He got in trouble, and then they took him away, and then they moved him to another state, so I originally was supposed to actually join the Marine Core like my dad, but my recruiter, he got in trouble, got sent to like Maine or something like that, and the Marine Core just never worked out for me. So the next thing was, I wanted to join the Army and my recruiter he was, he was very good with trying to get me what I wanted in the Army, cause they couldn’t do that, you cant do that in the Marine Core. So having my brother, my recruiter and my dad just all kind of saying, you know the Army is not, you know, a bad place it’s a good thing to do it kind of pushed me to actually go down that road.

AS: Would you say you would have preferred the Marine Core or the Army though?

DH: Hein sight, the Army. I, only reason I wanted to go in the Marine Core was because my dad, my dad was a Marine, and that’s the only reason I wanted to go into it. “Oh my dads a Marine and I got to be just like my dad!” but I look back from where I am today and honestly without going into the Army, I probably would not be where I am today, without joining the Army.

AS: Okay so, on the topic of the Army, you ended up going from trying to be in the Marines to ending up in the Army after major drama, so when you finally did get in where did you do your training?

DH: Uh, I left Massachusetts on January 4, 2010 and I went to Fort Benning in Georgia where, that’s the home of the infantry school, it’s not the home of the infantry anymore. But, anybody who’s going into the infantry, they call it OSUT, which is One Station Unit Training. They take all the infantry guys, they stick you in a fifteen-week intensive

course on basic training, which is nine weeks, and then they go into specialty training, which is infantry tactics and maneuverability and stuff like that. I was at Fort Benning for sixteen weeks I think before I finally got sent to my duty station in Germany.

AS: Hmm, what was it like there?

DH: In Georgia?

AS: Yup!

DH: Awe, I thought it was going to be amazing because it was hot, you know, it's the south, it's amazing. And, it rained every day, it snowed twice while I was in Georgia, which I didn't know was even possible, and basic training, the design of basic training is to literally break you down of who you are and build you back up to what you have the potential to be. So they try to strip you of all your like, your mindset of being a civilian. They try to strip you of like being an individual and they try to build you, they build your confidence back up to being, you know a team player, because in the army everybody has to work together, you cannot work as a single unit or a single person, and it just will not work, so they build this mentality of you have to work as a team. And they, in infantry school, they teach you to be the most badass walking the face of the planet, that's the mindset that they instill in you, because you have to have that mentality when going into battle. You cant just be like, oh you know, I'm not feeling it today guys, no you have to have the mindset of I am a badass. So Fort Benning was not fun the first time I went there, it was not fun. Looking back on it, it was a breeze compared to the other stuff I've done in my life but...

AS: You said the first time, so does that mean you went back?

DH: Oh yes. I ended up going back again, after I was station in Germany, went to Afghanistan, came back, but before I went to Afghanistan I went to sniper school which is also based in Fort Benning And sniper school was seven weeks long and that school is nothing but a mind fuck. They just play games with your mind all the time and it, that was the second time I've gone to the Fort Benning And I thought you know, I'll never have to go to Fort Benning ever again, and then after I got back from Afghanistan and PCS from Germany to Fort Benning So, I was stuck at Fort Benning for another two years, where that's where I was stationed before finally getting out of the army. So Fort Benning it's like a black hole that keeps sucking you in no matter how far, far away you try to get away.

AS: You went from an action hero, to being just like some twilight zone esc character, to just begin absorbed into a black hole.

DH: Yes, exactly.

AS: So, you spoke about ending up going into Germany, what did you do there?

DH: The large, the majority of the time I stayed in Germany was training, because when I first got to Germany, our unit had just been activated to go to Afghanistan. So before a unit gets activated, you have to spend a certain amount of time training to prove to the commanders that your unit is ready to go to Afghanistan. So when I first got to Germany, I spent nine months out in the field in Hohenfels Field in Grafenwhor, Germany training out in the snow. Many, many, many nights sleeping in the snow, many, many, nights just freezing my nuts off, just wishing I was somewhere like Arizona. Germany, I actually loved Germany. Germany is a great place to live. When we weren't training I was going out to I saw Paris, I probably saw probably about seventy percent of Europe being stationed in Germany. Granted it was only for like one or two days, so I didn't get to like, get the full experience of each country, but it was actually pretty cool being in Germany then going and seeing the rest of Europe. But when I wasn't training, I was, you know, we were out in the middle of northern nowhere Germany so we had, we didn't have anything near us. But, Germany was great, minus the cold where I think they have two warm months of the year, at least of the part of Germany I was at, and I was, it was terrible but...

AS: Was it colder than here?

DH: That is actually the coldest I've ever been was Germany; like, negative twenty-five, wind chill of like seventy, it was terrible. And it only furthered my hatred for the cold, and then when I moved back to Massachusetts, I was like I can't deal with this like, this rain and this cold, I can't do it. So, but Germany was actually great, I would love to go back and visit Germany anytime.

AS: Hmm, so, from Germany you ended up going to Afghanistan, where exactly did you go there?

I was in Kunduz Providence, which is Northern Afghanistan. A lot of the majority of fighting you here is in like the south and the eastern Afghanistan, because those are like, the Taliban, like hotspots. But in the north, you're mostly fighting Taliban that is like, dealing with drugs, cause they all come from Tajikistan, I think it is from the north I can't remember the country, but we'd all sit on the boarder right there and just watch the drug trucks come in and we couldn't do anything about it. So we were fighting, we were trying to fight the Taliban's, like their money supply, try to cut off the money supply to the Taliban, while also trying to bolster the Afghanistan police and the military force because they are not well trained at all. And we would spend months just training them how to fight how to, you know, how to act how to maneuver, how to deal with certain situations. So we were there mainly for teaching the police and the army more than we were just to fight the Taliban and reestablish the government and stuff like that.

AS: Hmm, would you say you enjoyed that more than training?

DH: Ahh...

AS: That's hard work.

DH: I think that what I miss most about Afghanistan is the bonding you have with the other guys. Cause you're stuck in a tent with another guy for twelve months and you know, what I did in the army, what I did in Afghanistan, I was in a very small group, so there was only eight of us as opposed to other groups that had like fifty people. So, the eight of us got to know each other very well and we became, you know, very tight nit. So I think what I miss most about Afghanistan just is the camaraderie, and like the group being together as a group. I don't miss Afghanistan one bit that's one thing I just never want to experience ever again.

AS: Well... so, was there anything difficult about being deployed to Germany, to Georgia, to Afghanistan, to Germany and Georgia again?

DH: Um, I think the hardest part of being deployed to Afghanistan was the communication. We were on a combat outpost that we didn't have Internet for the first seven months that we were there. So talking to relatives, talking to loves ones was almost impossible. The only way we could do that was though like snail mail, that was it, and that takes forever especially when you in Afghanistan at an APO. I think that that was the hardest part other than getting acclimatized to the weather and dealing with the cultural barrier between the western culture and the Middle East. You don't, people don't realize that the cultural barrier between the two is so like, its very big, and just the slightest thing that, you know, seems normal to the western part of the world, can be completely offensive to somebody in the Middle East. So dealing with that and getting used to their culture, just not being able to talk to your loved ones I think is the hardest part though of being in Afghanistan. Firefights and stuff like that, they just become, it sounds bad, but you go on autopilot almost. It just becomes part of the normal day, the normal routine, us spending a year in Afghanistan.

AS: So usually when we think of a cultural barrier the first thing we think of is language.

DH: Yes

AS: Because language is heavily tied to culture.

DH: Yeah.

AS: Was that a major part, or was there other things about that cultural barrier?

DH: There was, there is many things about the cultural barrier. You take, its stupid but you take a five-hour course, a crash course on their language and it doesn't help, it doesn't help. You miss [pronounce] a word and it turns out to be another word that might be offensive, and like, it's just better to just let the translator we have do all the talking, cause we make ourselves look stupid. But, no the women in Afghanistan are heavily oppressed and they, you're not even allowed to like glance, look at them even though they're wearing their burkas. You can't look at them at all. Like the only thing you can see is their feet and then just looking at their feet is like a death threat to them. It's bad,

their driving is, I wish I could show you videos I took while I was in Afghanistan, the videos of the Afghans driving is interesting. There's no set laws, they don't have driving laws, they don't have rules, drive on the left side or right side of the road, there's nothing like that. Their culture is, if you're in the way, I'm either going to run you off the road or I'm going to go around you doing like fifty mile an hour to get where I need to go. They, it seems like a very Boston, like rush kind of type area where everyone is in a rush to get places, but it always seems like when they get there they're like oh slow moving now. The culture there, it's completely different, you know. The things you see in like textbooks and like on T.V. and stuff like that, they don't even compare to what you actually see when you're actually there, it's completely different.

AS: I'd imagine something like Rome, like all those pictures where everyone's like stuck in a traffic jam.

DH: Yes exactly.

AS: That's what I would imagine.

DH: But lots and lots of dirt roads.

AS: Oh no, [low talking] So, would you say your favorite part about deployment ended up being the camaraderie, or was there something else that you found you genuinely enjoyed?

DH: Actually the part I miss the most is definitely the camaraderie, but I actually miss getting to know Afghani people. Cause like, what I did in the military, as a sniper, I didn't get to interact with the locals a lot. We were always off doing our own thing in groups of like four people, and so, the times that I actually did get to like sit down and you know have a one on one conversation with a local who spoke broken English, I actually enjoyed that because I felt like you know, I was making a difference to like, teach him like, hey were not here to you know, rape and pillage you entire country and turn it on its head and you know, put in democracy because democracy is you know winning worlds, you know. I was there to you know teach them like, you know, we're hear for your benefit, you know. I'm not here to try and, you know, destroy your way of life, I have no interest in doing that. I just I wanted to better understand Afghans way of living so it would better reflect my personal opinion about them, because when I went into Afghanistan you hear all the, "Oh they're dirty, they're ugly, they're stupid people," don't, don't listen to any of it. The Afghani people are, they're very intelligent, they're extremely smart, and they know what's going on within their country. So I think talking to them helped my own opinion about them and that really, I actually fairly enjoyed talking to the Afghans.

AS: So would you say that a cultural understanding of each other is necessary in a war?

DH: Absolutely, because most people, how do I word that, I think that most people when they see that people go over to Afghanistan, they think were just over there for oil and

whatever money reasons. But to truly understand why we're there, you have to understand their culture, and for them to except us into their country and accept us to help them, they have to understand the westerns culture of being world police.

AS: That has definitely become part of our culture at this point.

DH: It is yes.

AS: So, the people the camaraderie, those were you favorite parts?

DH: Yeah.

AS: Now, what was your least favorite part, aside from snail mail?

DH: Um, the worst part, uh there's so many, uh the hottest...

AS: You can just list.

DH: Yes, uh the hottest I've even been was Afghanistan. It was one hundred twenty-four degrees during the summer and like, at night it was like one hundred eleven, like you couldn't sleep. Like we didn't have A.C.s in our tents. We have just build this cop and this fob and there was nothing, like any sort of electric, like electrical that you could plug in something and not have the worry you know, of it blowing up in your face. The heat, I was injured in Afghanistan, so I definitely didn't like that. I think the part that I hated the most was probably the perception that people of the Afghanis had of Americans. Because the people that had the 10th mountain that was there before us, they were, they didn't have, there's a big thing in the military called the heart and minds, to win the hearts and mind of the people rather than getting in fire fights and shooting at them, you show them compassion and show them that you're there to help. The group before us didn't do that. So it kind of screwed us when we got there. And so the Afghani's were constantly like, attacking us and fighting us because they thought, "Oh all Americans were terrible, the devil," and all that stuff. So they were constantly you know, fighting us because they thought we were bad people. And I think that's that what really sucked about Afghanistan because that wasn't our job

AS: That seems like, agonizing to think about.

DH: It is because, no matter what you do, they already have a preconception of what you are as a person.

AS: It seems that there was a giant miscommunication just on what both of you thought, because you going in with one mindset and them coming in with their own mindset, so that goes right back to the cultural aspect.

DH: Yes.

AS: But, on the topic of, you've mentioned that you were injured there several times, can you can you elaborate on that?

DH: Uhh, I was in parts of Afghanistan that I'm not allow to talk about because security reasons, but we were doing things in parts of Afghanistan that we weren't technically allowed to be there. We were working under a different government technically. So the whole situation is not even on record, but from my own accounts, I was blow up twice, and I have two ruptured discs and a slipped disc, or two slipped discs and a ruptured disc, whatever that combination is I don't even know anymore, in my back. So I haven't been able to do most thing that I've enjoyed most of my life anymore because of that, and I think other than the other things, that was definitely the worst part of Afghanistan, was getting injured.

AS: I would say I would expect that to be above the climate but..

DH: It definitely up there.

AS: But apparently it's below the climate.

DH: Yeah.

AS: So when you were on base, and you around all the people, all your fellow soldiers and such, you explained deeply how much you enjoyed being around them, how much you enjoyed the communication, the camaraderie you had with them. What was your favorite thing to do with them while on base while not...?

DH: They love soccer, they love soccer, and you don't need to speak the language to know that when they want to play soccer. They had a soccer ball and we would go to the translators' tents and stuff like that and we would just get a soccer game started up with them. We would play out, it was out in the desert with rocks and stuff like that, but that was, those moment we like the true moment when you realize, we're all just people, regardless of what culture we come from, regardless of what language we speak, people are coming together to play, you know, a world loved game of soccer. And I think that really, you know, made our ties with the Afghani people. Because there would be times where there'd be like eight year old kids that usually wander outside our base and like stuff like that, cause you throw candy at them or something like that you give them candy, and we would go get clearance from the higher ups to be like, "Hey can we bring there kids in to you know play a soccer game with us?" and then they'd you know grab a few of the kids and then we'd bring them inside and we'd just play soccer for an hour, two hours and they love that. They like, that's their favorite past time, and I definitely enjoyed playing soccer with the people when I didn't have, when I wasn't working.

AS: So would you say that playing games and such like that and having conversations, that it helped mend some type of relationship between the U.S. Soldiers that were there with you and the people that you were around?

DH: Yeah, I would say that it did because I felt like by inviting these kids over to, you know, play soccer with us, I feel like they would go and tell like, their parents and the other kids and stuff like, "Hey we were on the American base today playing soccer with a bunch of soldiers, we had a whole bunch of fun," and I feel like you know, when I first got to Afghanistan I didn't like the idea of hearts and minds, that didn't work for me I was like I'm not here to try and be compassionate to these people, you know, that's not who I am. But towards the end of my deployment, I started to learn that you know, showing that compassions, even though such a small thing as playing soccer, turns out to work in the end game. Cause they go tell their parents, they go tell these other people like, hey the Americans aren't that bad, you know. And that in return end up helping us out because, maybe there's less attacks coming the summer months, maybe it's you know, less something or other from a small group of Taliban. Things like that I think make big impacts on future, you know, generation that come through Afghanistan, because that's the big thing, these kids are going to be the next generation of Afghanistan, and if they grow up thinking, you know, oh the western culture is terrible, it's just going to create more fighters for them and stuff like that, So, if we can change their minds at a young age, you know, maybe it will change things

AS: That's a very important viewpoint.

DH: Thank you.

AS: So we've talked about several things now, and we've talked about your friendships, we've talked about just the feeling you've had while there, what was the most important friendship that you've had? Do you still have any with the people that you were with?

DH: Yes there is, one of my best friends that I was in the Army, Jonathan Carmandy, he's in California, he's going to school now too. We, when I first got to Germany, I didn't know anybody, and he kind of took me in and like, he had been there for a few months before I got there, and he took me in he kind of shoed me the ropes. And we shared a lot of the same interests so we became very close friends and then we deployed to Afghanistan together, dealt with all that fun stuff together, came back, then went our separate ways. And still to this day, I talk to him at least once every week, two weeks because that was always one friendship I like truly cherished as a person. And there's a lot of other friends, like my friend Chris Hunter, he's always been a very good friend of mine, he's always been there for me too. So that was one thing I took away from the Army was the friendship, of like feeling the brotherhood, like these guys are my brothers, and I will do anything for them. So I definitely took away a few very close friends.

AS: You just expanded your family.

DH: Yes exactly.

AS: Your already very large family.

DH: Across the country now.

AS: So, you're a Sargent, and I feel like that's one of the only things we haven't touched on, cause we've touched on your feelings and we've touched on your friends, we've touched on the people you've interacted with, we haven't touched on your ranking, your responsibilities, of it how you became such.

DH: Uh it was not fun, no. Getting to Sargent, it wasn't, it takes a lot to become an NCO, a non commissioned officer. A non commissioned officer is a person that's in charge of the people of lower ranks, so being a specialist, which is an E4 in Afghanistan; I wasn't in charge of anybody. My job was just to you know, be behind a sniper rifle and watch other people and stuff like that. When you become an NCO, you're put into a role where you have to look at it this way, the choices you make will directly affect the people under you, so my choices and my decisions are literally life or death with the people I'm personally responsible of. So when you become an NCO, it's a very big thing because you have to be a certain type of person to be put into a leadership position such as that. The basic way you get to Sargent is you do all these stupid online correspondent courses, its just red tape, and it just basically shows oh, you know, I'm competent. And you go in front of a board of all these top ranking people, and your unit Sargent Majors, First Sergeants, all these people who have been in for twenty something plus years, and they drill you with questions. They ask you questions about like, the NCO creed, things you have to memorize, what would you do in this situation, and it's a little bit different for the infantry because they question you like, "Oh lets say your getting flanked from this side and this something happens what would you do in this situation?" and you try to give how you would react to that situation, and based on that drilling of questions from those higher ups they dismiss you from the board and you don't even know if you passed the board, you don't. You sit there like till the end of the day and then they come out with a list and they say you either passed the board or you don't, and if you pass the board that means your in line to be Sargent. They do promotions once a month and then as long as you meet the minimum requirement points, which goes back to doing those stupid correspondence courses, you get promotion points for doing that, as long as you meet point you get promoted then. So your fate kind of really lies within the higher ups trusting that you are a competent person who can be put in charge of other people's lives.

AS: It seems like some type of schoolwork just like will always be present in your life.

DH: Uh yes I spent I think eighty hours doing correspondent courses to completely max it out, then you get points for like Afghanistan, you get points for being in Afghanistan, you get points for like different ribbons you have, scoring high on PT tests, you get a lot of points for that, scoring an expert in marksmanship you get a lot of points for that too. So you have to be a well-rounded person to become an NCO.

AS: Would you say it was difficult on you?

DH: It was very difficult, especially when points were so high. Cause in the infantry, points are rather low compared to other people, but it takes a lot of effort to be put into a position such as an NCO like that yeah.

AS: And so once you were finally in the position, how did you feel and what was it like when you like, “ok this is what I am?”

DH: You know I, before I became an NCO I had this idea of like, I’m going to become a Sargent and its going to be amazing, and I’m going to feel like I’m going to be Captain America with you know, a cape flying in the wind. And then I got pinned a Sargent and I was like, “I don’t feel any different,” just the rules change. Like you can’t, go hang out with the privates out in the barracks and stuff like that, you can’t hang out with stuff cause you, I forget the article, but NCO’s can’t hang out with people like that on off hours. So just stupid little rules like that changed, but I honestly didn’t feel any different. I though I was like I’m going to be a leader it’s going to be amazing, and then the next day when I came into work, “Hi Sargent Hopper,” okay so my name changed that’s the only thing.

AS: So did it basically feel like going from eight grade in middle school to ninth grade where there was no real difference?

DH: Pretty much, pretty much until you get into the higher ranks there’s really no difference, other than hey now I’m in charge of five people, my personal responsibility is these five people; that’s about it.

AS: Would you say you had more time or less time with leisure?

DH: As a...?

AS: As a Sargent versus before.

DH: I definitely had less time as a Sargent because when I got to Georgia, that’s when I started the medical process, so I was a specialist for a year and a half before I finally became an NCO. So I was only an NCO for a few months before I decided that I was like, I cant do this anymore because of my back, so then I got medically discharged from the Army. So I didn’t have the full NCO experience that most people have, but it really didn’t feel like...

AS: Just kind of a crash course.

DH: Yeah.

AS: All that work. So, what would you say you miss the most about being in the Army?

DH: The camaraderie. In the Army you do a lot of stupid stuff, go cut the grass with a pair of like scissors, go, there’s like a half inch of ice on the ground, oh go melt it with a blow dryer. You do a lot of stupid things for no reason because they have nothing else for you to do, but I definitely miss the people, that’s the one thing I truly miss about the army is just the people. I don’t miss the dumb things and waking up at five in the morning to

go run eight miles, I don't miss that at all. But the people, is just feeling in a place where like you feel accepted, cause everyone's the same. I don't want to say it's almost like being in a gang, because its nothing like that, but it's the same as wanting that acceptance from a group of people. You get into group; you get so close with these guys and it's just like, and then when everybody leaves its just kind of like now what?

AS: Go find something else.

DH: Exactly.

AS: Well, so you miss the camaraderie, and you came off because of medical reasons, but if it wasn't for the medical reasons would you have remained?

DH: Yes I would have stayed in; I probably would have changed my job. I really was pushing, I started a packet to become a helicopter pilot actually while I was in Afghanistan, cause you have to have recommendations from other people; I have my uncle who's a Captain who's a fighter pilot, and I was talking to a few other of the warren officers who were on our base who were flying helicopters. I really wanted to become a helicopter pilot, I was pushing for that. So if I ended up staying in, I probably would of gone to flight school and try to have become a, I really wanted to become an apache helicopter pilot it was my dream in Afghanistan.

AS: Your dreams got slaughtered.

DH: Yes.

AS: So we've talked a lot about what would be considered the hardest part of being deployed, and the hardest part about training, and the hardest part of just being over there, but there is a different side of it known as a cost. What do you feel like was the biggest cost on your own part of being over there?

DH: My health. I think that's honestly it, because if I had never gone over there I'd still be able to run, play football do taekwondo and stuff like that. I can't do anything I love doing anymore because of that, so I think the ultimate cost was my own health. It ended up making me get out the Army and come to school, and now I'm doing something you know, I enjoy doing and I wouldn't have, you know, I wouldn't be able to do that without the Army, but I sometimes question the cost I paid for going to Afghanistan with my own health and never being able to do anything ever again.

AS: So would you say it's a regret?

DH: Yes its, yes and no, because I had no control over the situation so I cant really regret going there. It's more of a regret like a self-guilt of getting hurt or putting myself in a situation of getting hurt.

AS: Huh, so transitioning from being in the military for years and then back into civilian life, you talked about how in training how they broke you down from who you were to be a nice, cooperative soldier. What was it like in the reverse direction?

DH: Honestly, it was not easy. There are a lot of things you have to get used to doing again in going from the military back into civilian life. You go from a very structure life, at this time you have to do this, be here, do this, do that, the way life is in the Army it's structured. So going from that to just being able to do whatever I want, you know, not have to worry about waking up at six o'clock in the morning anymore to go run, I think that's the hardest part, is trying to figure out like, cause in the military you constantly go, go, go, do, do, do, and then your mind becomes trained to do that. So going from your mind constantly having to be stimulated, to constantly doing something, to doing nothing, is its really taxing mentally to try to figure out the transition from military back into civilian.

AS: So would any of that have had an influence in you decided to go to college?

DH: Yes because, I was working when I got out of the Army, I originally started working at Lockheed Martin and I loved that job. I loved it, but the time was deciding to go to school and working at Lockheed conflicted, but I wasn't mentally stimulated at Lockheed. I was doing the same mundane thing walking back and forth, it was tiring, and so I was actually scared to death, like I've seen combat, I've seen things, but coming to school terrified me because, being twenty-four years old, twenty-five years old, and then going into a classroom with a bunch of eighteen year old kids who are right out of high school, who have the knowledge fresh in their mind, but I completely forgot like ninety-nine percent of the stuff I learned in high school, its weird that, that little thing terrifies you as opposed to seeing gun fire and stuff like that. So I was, I was scared shitless honestly coming to school.

AS: And would you say that difference between these eighteen year old fresh out of high school people, and you being in your mid-twenties was the hardest part of going to school or was there anything else that was difficult?

DH: I think dealing with the eighteen year old kids was difficult because I'm used to, you see kid eighteen year old kids, sitting on their phones in class and stuff like that and, if your in the military, you would have gotten torn apart for doing that. I would have got yelled at I'd be running, I'd be doing all sorts of stuff. Seeing them doing that, and me being an NCO, I was getting frustrated in class because I was in class to learn. I wanted to try and absorbed as much information from the professor as humanly possible and I see these eighteen year old kids just completely blowing off class, ignoring class, doing this and I'm like, this is driving me nuts. But I think the hardest part of going to school was connecting with people. I think that's why with the veteran community, the first step program, I cant remember the name of it is, but that program truly helped me transition into school because the classes are all veterans. These are people who understand you, these are people who know what you're going through and it kind of helps ease you into the process. Going from those classes to classes where it's just like, kids who just don't

care, there here because mommy and daddy are paying for school. It's hard, it's hard to relate to these people and that was the problem I was having. I couldn't make friends with other people because I wasn't accepting them as eighteen-year-old kids.

AS: Would you say that's similar to how you went in and you had a set mindset about the Afghani people, would you say it's a similar situation?

DH: Ah that's actually a very good point .Yes; I would say that, yeah they couldn't relate to us, that's a good point. I would say that. I didn't even think about it like that, yes

AS: Breaking barriers, so the veterans community was something that was incredibly important to you at college and coming to college, would you say that was the most helpful thing for you? Were any professors genuinely like, your biggest help, because your in criminal justice and you have a bachelors for that and, forensics? So many questions on that one.

DH: Yes actually, Professor Darien was a huge influence on me staying in school because, I actually talk to I think of that group of people, I think there was eight or nine of us in that class. Four of them have dropped out, that's fifty percent of the people have stayed in school. I think its professors like that that truly, you know, want you to learn, like when I was in Professor Darien's class, I was a computer science major, I didn't know anything, you know, I was still kind of learning what I wanted to do. I ended up changing my major to criminal justice because computer science didn't work out, but it was professors like Professor Darien who taught me like, even something as history you know, it never changes, but I say this all the time, I had learned so much in one semester from Professor Darien's history course than I did all of middle school, all of high school and then just learning stuff in the military. And it was kind of that learning that he kind of instilled on us as veterans, that kind of kicked me in the ass to keep going, cause there's been many times I just want to stop, I just want to quit, I'd rather be working, I'd rather be doing something else than going to school. But I think it's the drive that I have to better my life to continue learning that's kind of set me on the path to keep going

AS: So why criminal justice, why computer science?

DH: Computer science originally because I was very interested in computers, I'm pretty tech savvy and stuff like that, but I had never done any programming at all so I was kind of thrown off by that. But I've always had an interest being in the FBI and the CIA, but I can't do the FBI anymore because of my back, I wouldn't be able to pass the academy, so I chose criminal justice because I want to try and like seek out different avenues whether it be martial, DEA, something else, some other federal agency. To get into any of those agencies you have to have minimum of a bachelors, and having a bachelors in criminal justice helps, but I've actually, I've always been interesting in law, criminal cases and stuff like that. That stuffs always kind of interested me, T.V. shows like the *First 48 Hours* and stuff like that, I love those shows.

AS: Would you say it was a similar interest to the interest you had with the military?

DH: Yes because I've always been a huge, I've always loved learning about World War I, World War II, and then going to war myself and seeing that myself and learning the laws, and like its always kind of related back. It's always kind of related to each other in a weird, round about way, regardless of the topic I guess.

AS: So, on the topic of being in classes, and wanting to constantly tunnel vision on learning, that you need to learn, would you feel like that makes you more or less capable that the students who have just come out of high school, despite that they have that knowledge fresh in their minds and they can do trigonometry just because their pre-calc says so?

DH: Oh trigonometry. Um I think it helps me more because, they have the knowledge to fall back on, they can crash course and they can you know, study overnight for a test or whatever, but I am genuinely interested in learning now. When I was eighteen, I don't think I would have been, you know interested, in coming to college and learning the way I am now. Just because I think, because I'm older and I'm more mature now, I understand what the real life has and like, I have real life experience now. I understand what life is going to be like after college and so, just floating your way through college with C's and D's and stuff like that, that's not going to help you once you get out of college. So I think with my ability to just, you know, be able to learning the information and trying my best to get good grade, its going to end up setting me apart and helping me in the long run.

AS: Which is also a very interesting view.

DH: Yeah

AS: As somebody in that age group. So, your military experiences you said, they've had a great impact on your life and really had a great impact to work as a student and work in any type of situation. How flexible did it make you or how much did it hold you back in a way?

DH: It held me back actually because, like I said, in the military you become stuck in your ways, and so with college, college is easy, all it is, is time management. In the military that's the number one thing you learn in the military, is you have to be on time. Ten minutes early, I'm always ten minutes early for everywhere I go, doesn't matter and time management is the biggest thing in the military and it directly relates back to college. College is easy if you manage you time easily, if you know you have a project due in a month, why not start it a week, two weeks out and you know, slowly build up so you're not killing yourself the night before. That's all it is so, I think in that aspect it was really easy but, I think getting used to what is essentially the college life is what made college more difficult.

AS: So why Salem State?

DH: I had originally has actually applied to UMass Lowell and I was accepted there, but I had found out through my sister in law that the veterans program here was one of the best in the country, and then I had called the veterans program they had at UMass Lowell and I had heard terrible things about the veterans program at UMass Lowell, and so, even though I had been accepted to UMass Lowell, I was like, I'm still going to apply to Salem State. So I applied to Salem State, heard back a month and a half, two months later, and was accepted and I was like, now I have the choice of which, you know, based on the classes I wanted to take and the vets center, ultimately the decision came down to the decision came down to Salem State has one of the best veterans programs in the country, and that truly helped me transition from military to civilian, back into the civilian world. I don't think I would have done a third so well at UMass Lowell if the veterans program wasn't here.

AS: So as a nice way to like simmer it down and simmer back into a way, would you, if you had the chance to go back start everything all over again, would you have done it the exact same way you did?

DH: Military wise or just life in general?

AS: Everything, military, school, everything included.

DH: Uh, I mean, everybody has a few things they'd probably change, but honestly, probably not, and I kind of attribute this to my old, Master Kim in Beverly, if he had not fired me I would have never joined the Army and then if I never joined the Army, I would have never been to sniper school, I would have never gone to Europe, I would have never gone to Afghanistan, I would have never probably gone back to school and get a bachelors and eventually start working on my masters. So I look at one life event changed the rest of my life, and would I change it, I don't think I would, maybe getting hurt, change that obviously, but I don't think id change any of it.

AS: So as a way to just finally just wrap this up, I'm incredibly interested in why you decided to be part of this project.

DH: As I had said earlier, you know, there's a big thing in the, with veterans is our mental state is, people don't understand us and I that's why I think, a lot of veterans shut people out. People don't understand what we've gone through, they cant relate to us, so I think the biggest reason I did this was because I want people to truly realize and understand that just because what I experience in the Army what I've seen, what I've done, does not mean I'm a terrible person, does not mean I'm a horrible person, or mean that you know I'm a psychopathic killer or something like that. I'm just a normal everyday person who had a different life style than an eighteen-year-old kid, and without doing this project people aren't going to know that. So you have to answer these questions to make them public, and to get people to realize and start talking about the issue of you know, veterans need help, and that's one aspect I think people really need to learn.

AS: Alright, so this was an amazing interview and I would like to thank you for coming out here and for working a part of the project with Professor Darien, myself and everyone else involved, and that just about wraps it up, thank you.