

Summary of Oral History Transcript

Student, Citizen, Soldier: Oral History and Student Veterans

Stewart, Scott

U.S. Army,

Interviewer:

Interview conducted by Ms. Meghan Pipp, Salem State University, on December 2nd, 2013

Summary of transcript:

Scott Stewart grew up in Haverhill, MA hearing stories of his father and grandfathers' service. Inspired by this family history, Stewart signed a letter of commitment during his sophomore year in high school and joined the Army in 1997. He trained as an Airborne Combat Engineer in Fort Bragg, NC. Stewart's tours consisted of multiple locations during the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, including Macedonia, Kosovo, and Bosnia, as well as a 2003 tour in Iraq with the 101st Airborne Division. Stewart speaks about winning hearts and minds, the rules of engagement, stereotypes of veterans, and the problem of veteran suicides.

Scott Stewart

Narrator

Meghan Pipp

Salem State University

Interviewer

December 2nd, 2013

at Salem State University

Salem, Massachusetts

Meghan Pipp: Hello, today is December 2, 2013. My name is Meghan Pipp, and I am joined today by Mr. Scott Sargent [sic] who was a non-commissioned officer in the army, and he served from June 1997 to December 2013. Welcome.

Scott Stewart: Thank you.

MP: So why don't we start off by—what was your life like growing up in Haverhill, Massachusetts?

SS: Haverhill was an interesting town, I guess (*laughs*)—kind of like any other suburb, inner city, you know. It has its good parts, its bad parts. I was very active in sports, so it kind of kept me out of the fray of things that are commonly associated with those types of environments, but it was good. It was just like any another typical northern Massachusetts childhood, I suppose.

MP: Were you close to your family at all?

SS: Yeah, so most of my family is from around the North Shore area: Salem, Lynn, Peabody. Not many of us were that far in the North Shore but, you know, being in close proximity was nice. A lot of my extended family is up in Canada and Prince Edward Island, so—

MP: Were you involved in your community? Like you said, you did sports, but—?

SS: Yeah. Yeah, so mostly in sports I used to deal with, you know, the—I suppose nowadays it's almost like a prerequisite to do some sort of community service if you want to apply to college at all, but various groups associated with sporting teams, I suppose.

MP: Did you like school growing up?

SS: Yeah. Yeah, I did. Of course as I got a little bit older and towards high school, I was more focused on sports, girls, those sorts of things, but it was never anything that I, you know, dreaded going to. But I did, I did enjoy school.

MP: Did you always want to join the military, or did you have other plans at first?

SS: It's funny because it was always something that was discussed. Not me in particular joining the military, but my father was in the Army, my grand—both my grandfathers were in the military, so it was always—it wasn't a taboo subject in the household. And I would say that from probably around—actually pretty early on in high school, freshman-sophomore year, I actually really started to build an interest in joining, and I think probably right going into my junior year was when I decided to go ahead and speak with a recruiter. They have a program—I am not quite sure how they do it now, but basically you can enlist into a branch of service being under eighteen, and basically it's just a kind of a letter of commitment, so you agree that once you do turn eighteen, and you graduate high school—you entered service at that point. So I did that early on—probably right at the start of my junior year of high school, so I was fairly well committed early on.

MP: Did you—did the fact that your father and your grandfather both served have any effect or have any—I guess effect or influence on your decision because you said they talked about it a lot?

SS: Yeah. Yeah, it certainly did. I mean just because I think it's easier that way. One, from making an educated decision on—on not going blindly into the belly of the beast, so to speak; but also just having a kind of proper guidance in place because the last thing you want to do is commit—to make that big of commitment and—and not know what you're getting yourself into. So it was helpful that my, you know, my father was there with me throughout the process.

MP: So how did you get along with the people in the different units that you served in? Did you find that it was a good fit?

SS: Yeah. Yeah, it's—the military is an interesting place. It's like—the military itself is kind of like the microcosm of overall society, but within the military as well you have little sub-sects, so it's very fraternal, I guess you could say. And there's a lot of camaraderie, and that's something that, you know, even to some extent that people stay just simply for that. So I did—I was very lucky from the very start to have quality leadership, good role models, mentors in place, so it really did feel like a good fit for me.

MP: Do you have a favorite aspect of your service?

SS: Yeah. Yeah, I'd have to say it goes back to the—the camaraderie. In addition to that, you know you also have—it's challenging, right? I mean if you're kind of—of the mindset where

you're a competitive person, you accept challenges. You want to test your limits; what you're capable of, and not all of it's just physical. I think that one of the biggest misnomers out there is that as long as you're physically fit and bodily capable, you'll excel in the military. But even in the combat arms units which I was, you know, a part of, it's—there's so much more. It's mental. I mean the physical part is a very small portion of it.

MP: And what ways were you able to cope with the separation from your friends and your loved ones when you were away?

SS: Yeah, so when I first—I was thinking of this the other day actually because now it's very easy for all of us to keep in touch through Facebook, social media, and email and everything, but um, in the military it's a little bit different even now because you don't always have access to these things. But not that long ago, you know, social media was nonexistent, so there was good old fashioned writing letters, phone calls when you could, but it never really presented a large problem for me. I don't think that it was because I don't have a sense of home or anything like that, but it was just wherever you are, you know, if you're lucky enough to be around the right people it feels like family there, too, so—

MP: So that sense of camaraderie that you talked about definitely helped with you away from home.

SS: Yeah, it certainly does. Yeah.

MP: So when you were in the combat areas, can you describe what a typical day looked like for you in any of the places that you served?

SS: Yeah, that's kind of a difficult question because every situation and every theatre of engagement and everything is so dramatically different. You know, we would do anything from—for instance, when I did operations in the Balkans, it was—the mission was completely different from let's say in Iraq. So the missions—I guess I could say the missions in like the Balkans, for instance, were very short. They'd—we'd leave; we'd jump in. I was a paratrooper so we would jump in. We would leave from Italy, and we would jump into the Balkans. It was a very short flight. And we'd do patrols through the mountains every day—doing smuggling interdiction, so basically you're—you're just trying to interdict people at that point in time which there wasn't any major hostilities going on. You're just trying to interdict those operations, but Iraq was a lot different, you know. The initial phase of that war was the invasion. So that was a little bit more haphazard once you settle in to, you know—I think it was probably May or—May or June of 2003 after the initial push, and Baghdad fell, and all that you settle into more of a—daily operations, so the vast majority of the day, it was combat. Missions are usually performed at night, so you spend the vast majority of your day as an NCO (*non-commissioned officer*) doing a lot of planning, making sure that everything's in place for that night's missions. And then typically you would go out on patrols anywhere, you know, midnight to six in the

morning or something like that, and then you'd try and get some food and sleep in there somewhere.

MP: Did you do a lot of patrol missions when you were over in Iraq?

SS: Yeah, that pretty much became the monotony of daily existence. It was kind of intermingled with at the time, especially in the—probably the six months or so into the war, there was really a big push for—kind of like for lack for a better terminology—winning of the hearts and minds of the people, so we had public affairs officers and civil affairs people that were operating in and amongst the civilian populations. So a lot of times we would be asked to be part of those missions to provide security. So that was good because you got to be a part of a little bit more than just the combat aspect of—of the war. You got to—you got to go and actually meet the people and, uh, be a part of, you know, what exactly what was going on.

MP: Do you remember any of the Rules of Engagement you had for any of the missions that you were deployed on?

SS: Yeah. Rules of Engagement are—again they change for every mission. Not only that they—there's usually general rules of engagement for an operation. By operations, I mean if you're in the Balkans, or Operation Iraqi Freedom, or Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, and then each particular mission underneath that will have a subset of Rules of Engagement, but typically it would be dependent on those things, so—

MP: Right. So if they changed mission by mission, but did you notice, since you said you did a lot of patrol missions while you were in Iraq, did you notice like a general shift to the Rules of Engagement over time?

SS: Well, it certainly adapts with the—transforms as the situation—uh, transforms in whatever theatre you're in. When you're fighting a uniformed enemy, like let's say the Iraqi Army, your Rules of Engagement are obviously going to be very different from when you're fighting an insurgency. And that's pretty much when, speaking to Iraq in particular, that's pretty much when the Rules of Engagement shifted dramatically because you can't possibly just engage—you have to be sure of who—who you're dealing with.

MP: Right. What were some of your most exciting experiences you had while you were in combat?

SS: It doesn't sound exciting—well, leading up to combat it doesn't sound all that exciting (*laughs*), but it was—it actually turned out to be—to be a great time, too. But when I went to—when I deployed to Iraq it was only—it was December of 2002, so it was leading up to the build-up of forces in Iraq and Kuwait, and we actually—my unit, there was twelve of us. We actually were tasked to provide security for a merchant marine ship out of Jacksonville, Florida, and so we actually took a boat all the way to the (*chuckles*) Middle East. Which on the surface I

remember my initial reaction was, “Well, if I wanted to be on a ship, I would have joined the Navy,” but luckily, you know, it afforded a really—a really good bonding opportunity. I mean you have nowhere else to go (*laughs*), so you spend a month on a ship with your teammates, and it ended up being a good time, so that was exciting. It was something different, but in terms of just general operations, and in particular exciting ones, I mean it depends on how you define the word excitement (*chuckles*) because they’re all exciting in their own merit. I mean some—there’s good excitement and bad excitement, so— (*laughs*)

MP: Can you talk about what the most challenging part about being in a combat zone was for you?

SS: Yeah. I would say that it goes back to the—when you have the shift—like a clearly defined shift in policy or, I guess, more loosely defined like Rules of Engagement, it—it becomes very difficult when you’re trained for years and years in combat missions, and then so you’re dialed up to a ten, and all of a sudden you have to be back at a five. So that type of transition is very difficult and it also—it’s amazing what the human body and mind can get used to in your surroundings and everything, and that’s necessarily the biggest problem. The biggest problem is just a lot of the unknown factors. Like I said, it was much easier when you had a very well-defined opponent, but when you’re in theatres like Afghanistan or Iraq now where you’re fighting this more of an insurgency force, it’s very difficult and it’s very—you don’t want to make any mistakes, I guess, is the best way to put it ,so—

MP: Right.

SS: —that can be extremely stressful.

MP: So now I think we’re going to switch to talk more like foreign policy and politics. Was the reasoning behind the missions that you were sent on always clear to you?

SS: Yeah. Yeah, we were lucky. When I was in Iraq, I had actually been detached from the 82nd Airborne Division and attached to the 101st Airborne Division; and that time General Petraeus was actually the Commander of the 101st Airborne Division. And his extra-marital affairs these days alone aside (*laughs*), he was really a—a probably the most well-respected commander that I’ve ever served under in the military, and one of his biggest things was always that each individual soldier was empowered and their leaders needed to be very well-informed. In no way shape or form can you always have everybody tuned in to exactly what’s going on. But as long—I think that it’s if there’s a general belief that you believe in the—or you have faith in the leaders above you, and that you’re doing the right thing, and you’re being asked to do the right thing, then it makes the job much easier. So for the most part I would say that throughout my years—again I say for the most part, but throughout my years in the military, it was always pretty well-defined exactly what was going on and why we were doing the things we were doing.

MP: Okay. Can you speak about what you understood about the U.S foreign policy at the time?

SS: Yeah. That was a little bit more (*laughs*) foggy, um, because of the fact that you're dealing so much with the nitty-gritty on the ground type of operations, and the much bigger picture in terms of foreign politics and foreign policy is not always clear. But I will say that it was—it was fairly well-defined to, I would say, the entire American public following 9-11 what our—what our policy was. Prior to that in the Balkans' wars and stuff like that, it was—it was even easy then because it was more of a NATO peacekeeping type of mission, but, you know, from—from a sergeant's perspective on the ground in an area like Iraq it—it can be a little convoluted, but at the end of the day it's really not of concern.

MP: So you didn't feel like it was necessary to know exactly what the official reasons for being there were, it was just more what you were doing at the time?

SS: Yeah, yeah. So that—well, you want to believe that (*pause*) what you're doing, and what you're being asked to do, and what you're asking the soldiers underneath you to do is not for something to be done in vain, but—and I think that once you come to terms with that, and you're comfortable with that, everything else falls into place. And it really goes back into the—like I said about just having faith in those appointed above you, and I would say that generally speaking that the overall attitude at the time, at least in the first couple of years after the initial invasion, there was a strong belief in the cause and the priority of being there. I think that over time that's actually, obviously, gotten muddied a little bit, but when you start to let politics interfere with the everyday operations of your mission, typically speaking, bad things happen, so—

MP: Has your understanding of the foreign policy or any of the decisions that were made change—how has your opinion of them changed since you've been back?

SS: In some ways, obviously, I have the time and, you know, the interest to spend a little bit more time looking into these things. I think that all of the things that were done were necessary. I don't think that—I don't think that the end game was ever clearly defined in either situation if we're—if we're talking specifically about Iraq and Afghanistan. I don't think that there was ever really a plan in place to—like an exit strategy, and that—that creates problems because if you don't know what the endgame is, and you don't know what it is exactly that we're trying to accomplish, it becomes harder and harder to keep morale up and to, you know, provide some sort of definition to what it is to the overall mission. So I think over time not only has a lot of the individual—individual veterans and still active service members—I think that over time that their viewpoints have changed, and I think society as a whole has changed their opinions on these things, too. Following 9-11, I mean, you had everybody screaming from the top of the mountains that we needed to go to war all over the world, so it's—it's pretty interesting actually from a social aspect to see how that changes so dramatically over a relatively short period of time.

MP: So what have you learned about yourself and others about your role in the war and since you've been home.

SS: Hmm. That's a good question—actually, that's a lot of questions all in one (*laughs*), but, yeah, I'll break it down for you, so—about myself. It's interesting because you don't—well, one, you learn exactly what, you know, your barriers, your boundaries, what you truly are capable of, and that's good to know. I mean a lot of people I think go through life and, you know, it's a lot of could have, should have, would have, and maybe I could have. But these types of situations, being—being in those types of situations definitely let you define a lot about yourself. And then also not all of it's good because coming out of those situations, you know, bodily you may be in one piece, but sometimes there's, you know, there's just things that you don't realize have affected you in certain ways, and I'd have to say that through all of that it is—it's changed me as a person, I think—just to be a little bit more empathetic, a little bit more understanding, a little bit more culturally sensitive than had I never experienced these things. People that I was—I served with, and I'm still associated with, I would say that it's a mixed bag. You have—I've actually had quite a few friends that have—that didn't end up in good spots. They, you know, were physically wounded, and that's just—that's just a risk that is associated with the nature of the business, but mentally—I've had four or five guys that I—that I've served with that have committed suicide. And that's a big problem because like I mentioned there's things that change in you that you don't necessarily recognize right away, and unless you address those issues then it really gets away from you, and it's unfortunate that it has to happen or it doesn't have to happen, but it's unfortunate that it does happen. And, um, yeah, so I mean I think that as far the guys that are still active that I'm in touch with, and still friends with, and very close with, I think that they've become a little bit tired. You know, some of these guys are on their fourth, fifth, sixth tours, and if you really put that in terms of years that's four, five, six years away from life because the biggest—I think the biggest obstacle when you're deployed that much, or deployed at all, or, you know, in a theatre of operations like this is that you have to come to terms with the fact that life back home is still going on, and it doesn't just stop because you're gone. So when you come back, life has still happened, and it's difficult to deal with sometimes. I remember one time I got to call home on—I think it was Memorial Day or something 2003, and my sister answered the phone, and they were having a Memorial Day barbeque, and I was so mad (*laughs*). I don't know why, but, you know, I guess I was just pissed because they were having a good time and everything, and they, you know, they weren't experiencing what—you can't expect people to share in your experience. So those are the types of things that, you know, that are out there and floating around, and it's hard to put your finger on, but it definitely, definitely changes a lot of things.

MP: So did you have—after you were home, did you find that memories of the war or different like habits or anything would creep into your now civilian life?

SS: Yeah. Well, there's some things that will never go away. I mean (*laughs*), you just become accustomed to certain behaviors, certain attitudes, and reactionary type of—type of situations. I

mean if you're asking for specifics I, you know, to this day I still—I don't like being in crowded spaces. You know, there's certain things and certain elements that are kind of abnormal once you're in regular civilian society that you find yourself doing, and you kind of feel foolish, but nobody knows (laughs). But it's—but other than that, I mean, a lot of it just has to do with situational awareness, knowing your surroundings, that sort of thing, and what happens is I think that, you know, for so long of a period of time you're kind of—you have all your senses at such a heightened state of awareness, you can't just shut that off. And when you're stressed, or tired, or hungry, or, you know, in those types of situations that—that's really when those types of things present themselves again. So yeah.

MP: Had you already planned on pursuing a college degree before you enlisted in the military? Did you like think that when you made the decision to go, you would come back and go to school, or is that a decision you made once you got home?

SS: Well, probably most of the people—98 percent of the people that go into the military will tell you that, “Yeah, I'm going to go to the Army, the Navy, or whatever it is, and I'm going to, you know, do my term of enlistment, and I'm going to try and take classes while I'm there. And then I'm going to use whatever Veteran's Administration benefits, educational benefits, they provide to go ahead and get my college education when I—when I get out.” So that's like the master plan (laughs), and everybody's got the same plan. I did, so I had—I certainly was one of those 98 percent, but it's not—it's not as easy as it(laughs)—as—as they make it out to be.

MP: How do you think your military experience has benefited your college education, or do you think it has?

SS: Yeah, definitely by far. I've taken—the biggest things were probably just a sense of perspective. You know the college, college courses, and college, you know, studies about the world, and business, and everything else that comes along with it. They're great, and—and it's obviously very valuable in our society, but there's—there's a whole lot to be said for—for life experience, and being able to apply what you're learning in a classroom to real-life situations or associate the two together. One, it makes school a lot easier to deal with because you understand why you're learning something. It's not like, you know, when you're in second grade, and it's like—well, I don't know second grade—like sixth grade, and you're like, “I don't—when will I ever need algebra?” (laughs) So you can kind of, you know, bridge that gap between real life and what you're learning in a book. And then I think just the—just the discipline aspect of it. I—you know? I can't speak from experience in terms of a traditional college education where after high school you go for four years and whatever, but I can imagine that going from living under your parents' roof in high school, all the way up to high school—and kind of your life being dictated by your family, and all of a sudden you have all this freedom. I can imagine that it's a little bit—everybody probably goes through a little bit of an adjustment period, and it can be difficult for a lot of people. I mean, if college was super easy, then everybody would do it.

MP: Right.

SS: But I think that just having the military experience, more importantly the life experience, really actually prepares you much better for that.

MP: In the biographical form that—that you gave us, you said that you went to Bunker Hill Community College for January to May 2004 which would have been right after you got out, but you—

SS: Yeah.

MP: —didn't go back until 2013. Was there a reason why?

SS: (*Laughs*) Yeah. Yeah, I ran out of money! (*laughs*) So when I first got out, I was under-prepared. I was underprepared fi—economically and, I think, mentally. You know, I went immediately, almost immediately. I got back from Iraq in November of 2003 after spending close to two and a half years not just in Iraq, but Afghanistan, all over the place, and in almost continuous combat zones, and I thought that it would be simple. Come back, put my Veterans' Administration benefits in place. That way I could, you know—I'd work during the day, go to school at night. Well, that proves a lot more difficult than it seems on paper, I mean, especially when you're supporting yourself. So really what I found was that mostly it was—it was a very difficult adjustment. For a lot of reasons I didn't understand at the time, but also just because from an economic standpoint, you know, I just couldn't do it. The benefits back then were much different. They weren't anywhere near as good as they are today, and today they are amazing because I think that they saw the value in having—you know, making sure veterans get the best educational benefit that they can. But—so really I just got to the point where I had to make—make (*laughs*) as much money as possible, and school just didn't fit into that—into that picture, so I—I somehow weaseled my way in to a job in the asset management business. I worked at that for a long time, and then luckily I'm very fortunate to have done well at that. And I decided last—last spring that, you know what, I'm just going to take a break from work and go ahead and achieve or pursue my original educational goal which had never changed. It was just something that was always on the back—I'll start later. I'll start later, but luckily I'm very fortunate to be able to do this, so—

MP: Do you feel you have adjusted smoothly to college life with like assignments, and deadlines, and meetings, and everything?

SS: Yeah, I think it goes back to the life experience things again (*laughs*).

MP: Right, yeah.

SS: But, you know, as far as like assignments, and deadlines, and meetings and all that stuff, I mean that's something that you become very familiar with that in the military but then also in the business world. You know, again I'm very fortunate to have had that, you know, span of a

career in the finance business, so I mean those types of things also help put things in perspective. I mean it's—it's very easy to get wrapped up in what's going on, and be very stressed out about having papers due and having group projects or whatever, but, you know, when you keep an eye on the big picture, and you can again associate it with your life experiences, I think that—that it helps a lot. So the transition—it was a little bit difficult at first kind of—that first day of walking into school after all this time was like, “What—what am I doing?” (*laughs*) But it's— after a couple of weeks, you get into the swing of things, so it's fine.

MP: Well, I'd like to thank you for participating in our interview, and just as a final question— What inspired you to participate in this project?

SS: I think mostly is that I think that there needs to be a better sense of awareness. There's a lot of misperceptions out there about military community and the veteran community as a whole; not all of them bad, some of them are good. But I think that in general, especially in an university environment or a school environment, when you're taking classes with the veterans and different people—we spend a lot of time understanding people—you know, trying to understand other people's cultures and everything else like that. But very seldom do we look at the person sitting next to us and try to understand them better, so I think that this type—things like this really, really go a long way to help.

MP: All right. Thank you very much.

SS: Thank you.