

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

**Cherry, Israel “Izzy”**

U.S. Army, Private First Class, Driver  
Army Reservist

*Interviewer:*

Interview conducted by Caitlyn Connor, Salem State University, on 11/19/2019.

*Summary of transcript:*

Israel “Izzy” Cherry, graduate of Everett High School, previously of Lynn, MA, and several other Massachusetts communities, joined the Army right out of high school. In the Army, he served overseas in Iraq and Kuwait for five years as a driver, reaching the rank of Private First Class. Losing his mother at the age of 13, Cherry moved around quite a bit during his childhood, while sports—especially basketball—served as a large part of his life. With college seeming out of reach, Cherry joined the Army following an interaction with a recruiter on the way to a basketball game. Following his return to civilian life, he coached a youth basketball team, joined the Army Reserve, and enrolled in Salem State University under the G.I. Bill in pursuit of a career in human resources. In this piece, Cherry discusses his experiences and how they have impacted him, along with his thoughts on others—including his young son—potentially joining the military.

Israel “Izzy” Cherry

Narrator

Caitlyn Connor

Salem State University

Interviewer

November 19, 2019

at Salem State University

Salem, Massachusetts

Caitlyn Connor: Today is Tuesday, November, 19, 2019. My name is Caitlyn Conner and I am joined by Izzy Cherry at Salem State University. [Izzy is] a student and Army veteran, who currently serves in the reserves. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today.

Israel “Izzy” Cherry: No problem.

CC: So I just wanted to start with—I see that you grew up in Everett and Lynn, and just kind of asking you what that was like.

IC: It was regular. I lived in Lynn until I was about 13. I bounced around a lot after that, and then I finished out in Everett. They're pretty much kind of like same town. It was probably kind of a little different. But it was cool. Played a lot of sports, had a lot fun, same old stuff, and yeah, I liked it.

CC: So tell me a little about your family.

IC: Well my family is mostly from Boston. They—my mom, she moved out to Lynn and stayed out there for pretty much her whole life. She passed away and then that's when I bounced around. The rest of my family, they were like, you know, from Boston initially and so they'd leave and they just migrated all over Mass[achusetts]. But that's pretty much it.

CC: So could you tell me just a little about your high school experience: what was that like? It was in Everett you graduated from?

IC: Yeah, I graduated from Everett High. High school was regular. I went to five

different high schools; I went to Melrose High, Malden High, Everett High, Fall River—which is Durfee—and then back to Melrose High, but like I said I finished at Everett High. Moving schools I really didn't like. Affected me then; I kind of felt like an all-star, because, like I played basketball and sports and stuff so, like, it was just another addition but it was kind of annoying restarting and stuff like that so it was cool that I got to finish at Everett High. I stayed there the longest—like a year and a half. So, yeah, that was pretty much it.

CC: So growing up what were your impressions of the military?

IC: I never thought about the military like at all. Like, I just thought people go there and they'd shoot, and then that was pretty much it. Like, I knew, like, the basic stuff that they fight for our country and all that other good stuff. At one point I thought, like, the military was, like, everything. I didn't know that there were separate branches and all that. Growing up, like, nobody—I felt that was a southern thing, where they break it down, like, people were more raised in the military down there, but up here it was, like, a fast paced way of living so, like, you don't really talk about it unless you're from that type of family or something like that, or somebody who went, or you just so happened to stop by a recruiter's office like I did. So, yeah.

CC: So you just stopped by a recruiters office? Is that what kind of led you to joining the military?

IC: Yeah, so I was—what was I? Yeah, so, I was—I had a game and I had to go from Everett—I was still living in Everett, at the time, but I had to go all the way to Melrose—and I'm running, chasing the bus, and I missed the bus. And I'm like, "Well, I need to get to this game." So I'm walking, trying to get there. And a recruiter drove past and he was like, he knows the stop, stop, stop, da, da, da, and I was like, "Man, I've got to go. I don't have time to talk." And he was like, "Where are you going?" And I was like, "I've got a game right now." And he was like, "Well, I can give you a ride over there." And then, so I was like, "Alright, well you got me, we can talk then on the ride!" [Laughs] And then he gave me a ride to Melrose High, pretty much made his spiel, and I was like, "Yeah, yeah, you know, I'll come by the office later on." And then I ended up going for real. Like way later though, like a month later, when I realized senior year I wasn't going to go to school and all that other stuff. So I ended up stopping by and seeing the same guy, and we just got to talking again.

CC: So is that why you specifically chose to go into the Army?

IC: Yeah, more of like—like a necessity. You know what I mean? I didn't want to be in the streets, and doing what I was doing already. So I was, like, it was time to make a change. And I couldn't go to college. My grades wasn't that good, and nobody really talked to me about college neither. That wasn't an option at the time, and so I was like, well you know, [Laughs] let's do something.

CC: So could you tell me a little about when you when you went into that army? Like

what your boot camp experience was like and where you were?

IC: Well, initially I knew, like, I was waiting for the plane. I was the only one that actually went into the army, from MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station], that's where, like, you sit and wait and everybody goes into different branches from there and you all branch off at the airport. So I was the only one going into the army. I finally get down South. I was, like, I really don't get nervous a lot, so I was just kind of chilling. And then I finally got to South Carolina, and it was real late, and we got on the bus and dudes just started yelling and acting hard. And I was like, "Yeah, probably made a mistake." [Laughs] Yeah, you know what I mean? It just seems a little weird. So I was like, you know, it is what it is. I'll get through it; I'm already on the bus now, I can't go back. They ain't going to give me a ticket. Yeah, I just thought it would be a whole bunch of guys yelling and acting crazy—that and all fake hard type stuff. So, yeah.

CC: What was it like, from back what you just said, when you were sitting, and you were the only one that was going off into the army. What was that experience like, just kind of being the only one?

IC: It was lonely. I had just seen my family because you'd kind of get, like, a send-off almost. But I had seen my family a day before. So when I was actually at MEPS, I was by myself. So I didn't know that, like, my family could actually go to MEPS and say bye and stuff like that. So everybody else's family was there, so I kind of just walked off. You know what I mean? Little lonely, you know what I mean? I was just there on my phone, listening to music, and—just patiently waiting. I was more anxious, like, to get this over with. I don't want to be waiting at the airport for two hours and all that.

CC: So how did you feel kind of after boot camp? What was that experience?

IC: I was real—like, it took me a while to get broken in. Like, that's the whole point of boot camp: to kind of break you down from your norm, and to build you back up in their image. So it took me a while. In the beginning part I was getting in fights a lot and all that then I had a humbling experience where I almost got, like, kicked out. Because, you know, because I was still in my ways, and then I didn't want to, like, go come back here like a failure. So I was like, "Nah, I've got to get it together." And then, like, I kind of conformed with—still, like, in myself, I was like I'm still going to be me but I'm going to do it the right way. So, yeah.

CC: So how did you feel when you learned you were going to be deployed?

IC: That was weird too. It was another experience where it was like, you need to get thrown into stuff. Soon as I got to my unit there was, like, you go into this thing called NTC [National Training Center] and it's, like, training and stuff like that. And for—it's supposed to be worst conditions. So when you get over there it's not, you know, no big issue. And so soon I get there, the unit's leaving for NTC, and I was like—the person that picked me up from the airport's like, "Yeah, you know, if you're not on the NTC bus, you know, you're not going to get deployed." Like a month later [Laughs] my platoon

sergeant came back. She was like, you know, "Nice to meet you, da, da, da. Call your family because you're deploying with us." I was like, "Oh, well alright." So, it was like, OK. [Laughs] You know what I mean? Like, everything, being in that situation, it was just like, you're just in it, you know what I mean? Like, you really don't have no feelings; it's not like, almost like, "No, I'm not getting deployed." So, I just let it be. [Laughs]

CC: So what was it like the first day when you were there?

IC: The first day it was just real, real hot. I felt like I was delirious. I got off the bus; I was hot already, shirt off on the plane. The bus kind of had AC, so it was a little cool, but I was mostly just focused on the heat. I didn't care about nothing else. I was like fresh to the military, so I was, like, a private at the time. And so that just meant, like, I was new to everything. You know what I mean? Everybody else was kind of like, some been deployed, some even are kind of tested military-wise, but I came in new; I didn't know nothing. All I feel is heat, you know what I mean? [Laughs] All I knew was, like, the Massachusetts summers, because I never really been out of state like that. And so I was, "Yeah, this is crazy." It was like 120 degrees or something crazy, so yeah, I was not compliant. We had to, like, take stuff off the truck. I couldn't move. I was trying to drink water. It was a lot going on, but—pretty much the heat set the tone for me. I knew it was going to be rough for a while.

CC: So you were both in Iraq and Kuwait. So, what were—was there like any big differences between those two experiences? Or—?

IC: No, they were pretty much the same. I think Kuwait's more relaxed. You can do more as far as like—activities-wise. You still have activities both ways but in Kuwait, like, if you're not working you kind of, you know, put on your sweats or play flag football. Like, there's different activities compared to, like, when I was in Iraq. Like, you just, like, you know, uniform all the time; you still have your relaxation time, but, you know, the zones are different. So you've got to, you know, act accordingly.

CC: Did you get to interact with any of, like, the local people, or the local culture at all while you were in either place?

IC: Some. Yeah, some. A little bit. Like I didn't really, you know, because I was new. So I didn't really talk too much. We had an interpreter, where actually, you know, each team could. Because I was doing QRF, which is quick reaction force. I was just a driver, so every team had the same interpreter. And so we would do it in shifts. So if I actually needed to interact with somebody, you'd just talk to the interpreter. And then he, pretty much, handled it. Well, we had had a few interpreters. The one that I talked to went and handled it, and the other one was kind of lazy. I think he just wanted to chat.

CC: So you said that you were a driver. What were, maybe, some of your other duties? Or kind of what did those duties entail?

IC: Pretty much just drive. Like, when you need a driver for quick reactive flare,

everybody else got to do everything. Like, even when, you know, when you're just doing your rounds, and all that. Like, you can't—the driver's not supposed to diss 'em out and nothing like that unless it's absolutely, positively necessary. You know, nothing less than like crazy, you know, 2003-type situations. But, for the most part, I just drove. And then when I would go back to, like, after our thing was over, I would go back to the little shack and do radio sometimes. We would take turns, because there'd be 24-hour shifts. So we'd just take turns doing the radio, everybody getting relax time. And then the other two in the back, they would have to load the truck and all that other good stuff. So, yeah.

CC: So what was your most impactful experience, would you say, during your deployment?

IC: Most impactful? [Pause] I would say, my first sergeant. She was really—she took a liking to me, and she just, like, made sure I was doing what I needed to do. They'd still be getting promoted out there. So, like, teaching me how to get promoted, you know, making sure all my stuff was right. Sending me the boards and soldier of the months and all types of stuff, you know? And even a full battery router, which was cool. It was different. But I mostly just learned, like, the military stuff that I didn't get to learn right away. Because like there's two separate first hand training. And then when you go over there, most people get to learn their unit and all that, and I was kind of thrown into the fire. So she was more just teaching me what to expect, you know? What's next after this is all over, how they get—you know what I mean? Just stuff like that. And so, I think just learning the game, and gaining the knowledge so when I go back, you know, I'll be, you know, still a PFC [Private First Class] or whatever the case may be, but a step ahead of every other PFC around me. You know what I mean? Unless you was with us at that time.

CC: So how did you feel when you learned your deployment was going to be over and that you were going to be returning home?

IC: I was happy! [Laughs] Yeah, I was—it was a happy time. I just couldn't wait. You know how it goes. Have you ever been like with, well, a lot of people? When you're without something for a while, you just kind of miss it. Like, I was missing things that I never even did, or probably will never do. You know what I mean? I wanted to kiss the ground when I got off the plane, to be honest, [Laughs] but it was cold outside so I couldn't do it. [Laughs] But, I just missed everything. Like, I was in Kansas—that's where my base was at initially—and, like, I hate Kansas, but I missed Kansas when I was over there! You know what I mean? I couldn't wait to get back.

CC: So, I see that you're in the reserves. So what is that experience like?

IC: It's like a—I really don't like it too much, just because I was active duty, you know, for five years. I was doing this, and doing that, and you get over there, and it's real slow. Like everything's slow. You know what I mean? The discipline is not what it was when I was active duty, and so it frustrates me because it's like, almost like, "What am I doing here?" You know what I mean? And I'm not coming for any reservist or anything like

that, it's just a different life. You know what I mean? It's almost like, you know, if you're doing any job. If you're a part time worker, and you're there 9 to 5, 40 hours a week. You know what I mean? That person's going to know a lot more than somebody who's just working three hours a day. You know what I mean? So when you do it on weekends, you know, every month, and two weeks out of the year, you don't get the same experience, you don't get the same discipline, and even, like, the leadership is different. You know what I mean? You know, like, when I got to my unit, there was a lot of soldiers that didn't know certain things that would help them propel their careers that I learned soon as I got into the military. So it was, like, kind of frustrating and stuff like that.

CC: How do you balance being in the reserves with being a full-time student?

IC: It's easy. You know, on the weekends, you do the reserves, and then, during the week, do, you know, school. It's not too much. It's a bit full. You know, I've got homework and stuff like that, but they're lenient and so I get the job done. It's nothing crazy.

CC: So when your time is up, do you have plans to re-enlist?

IC: Nah, this is pretty much it for me right now. The whole purpose of me going to school is so I could kind of like—I feel like I got what I needed, and so the purpose of going to school is to, kind of, you know, excel my life in different ways. I want to go a different route, live a different life—kind of more free—and enjoy things that I never got to enjoy before.

CC: So as a member of the reserves, do you still consider yourself 100% a veteran? Or is it kind of 50/50 because you have kind of one foot here at school, one foot in the reserves?

IC: Yeah, I consider myself a full vet. Like, I feel like I served my time, and did what I needed to do. The reserves part is just like an added bonus, almost, you know what I mean, because you still get a little piece of it. But I still even miss my active time; it doesn't even really satisfy that. So, yeah, I do.

CC: So what advice would you give someone who is considering joining the army?

IC: Be open. It just depends on who it is, to be honest, because everybody's different. But some people show the same tendencies as somebody from my area or around my old areas, or have a similar background. I would say definitely be open. You know what I mean? Because, nobody talks to you about, you know, really what to expect. So I would say, you know what I mean? Keep your head down, do what you need to do, and leave what you did in the past in the past because it's not going to help you there.

CC: So what was your transition like after you left the army, like, into civilian life?

IC: It was kind of seamless, because soon as I got out, like, I came to school. I really haven't had time to think about it because it's, like, everything is fast-paced. Like, you know, I loaded up on classes so I could finish school a year early. But for the most part, I definitely feel the difference because it's like already a lot more freedom. It's just the workload is like, you know, a lot more heavy. I don't have the stability of the military. You know what I mean? If I fail here, you know what I mean, I'm not going to get a check. You know what I mean? If I fail in the military, you've got something to fall back on because they're not going to—the government's just not going to fire you unless you do something that's like, you know, just way out into left field. But here, you know what I mean? I don't even need to do anything. [Laughs] If I fail, it's like that's it; it's all over for me.

CC: So what made you want to come to Salem State?

IC: It was like one and one for me. Like I said at the time, right after high school I never even thought about college. So, in the military, I still really had no background about college and what I could get into, how, you know, a GPA would work from high school. I didn't take a lot of the tests I was supposed to take. So I was like, well you know, let's just try and I'll apply to Salem State first. Gotten in, and I was like, well, that's where I'm going. [Laughs]

CC: So I see you want to be a human resource manager. So how did you get your interest in that kind of area of study?

IC: My last year in the military, somebody kind of took me under their wing—another one of my first sergeants—and he was, like, trying to show me, you know, supervisor stuff and stuff like that. And he put me in a road that was considered human resource, military-wise, and I started excelling in that role. I started really liking it. I knew, obviously, it wouldn't be the same in civilian life. But I knew, you know, like the customer service part, files, and things like that. You know, where it would interest me. I always wanted, you know, hiring, interview, and do all types of things like that. So I was like, well you know, if I already liked this, you know, then I could do it and bring it to [the] civilian world. You know? I'm going to go to school for it.

CC: Yeah. So, I understand that you were put—you were in the Veterans Learning Community, and could you tell me a little bit about how that worked?

IC: Which community?

CC: The Veterans Learning Community.

IC: Oh that was the integrated classes, right? Yeah that was cool, too. So when I first got to Salem State, I didn't even know I had class. I didn't even know I was in because of, like, how the G.I. Bill works and all that. And the G.I. Bill is what pays for school so I wasn't aware of, you know, what was going on. I got a call one day from the vet office and it was like, "How you doing Izzy? You missed a week of class." And I was like,

"What're you talking about?" [Laughs] I didn't even know I was in school! And so, she was like, "Yeah, but you still can come in and figure it out." And then so I rushed here, same day, and Melissa—she helped me put my, like, schedule together and I already had two classes which were the veteran integrated classes. And so that was pretty much it. So I just walked in and the teachers were, like, it was a little confusing at first 'cause, like, the classes were a lot smaller; it's more hands on, like, than a normal class would be because of the size of the class. And everybody's kind of helping each other and talking to each other like off the riff. [Laughs] It was different. It was different, but I liked it. You know what I mean? It helps—it's easier to connect with people that, like, already know what you're going through. Like, they've got the same, you know, nervousness or they have a similar background just being a vet in general so they know what it's like to, like, you know, be like twenty-something years old but you're in class with 18 year olds and so—you know what I mean? Like, they're going back to their dorms, you've got to go back to your family, like actual life. You know what I mean? So it's different. So it was good to, like, at least connect to somebody and know somebody on campus because I didn't even know nobody either.

CC: Do you think being a veteran has kind of come into play in some of your other classes outside of that program?

IC: Yes and no. Yes and no. Kind of. In a few of my classes—like I'd never bring it up; I'm not one of those, you know, "I'm a vet" type. If there's like a writing assignment and I can use it to relate to something or something like that, like, oh yeah I have a better understanding of how this went on because, you know, I was doing this. I might reference it there but nothing like, you know, anything like that. Like I won't say, "Hey, I'm a vet," and all this extra stuff. I don't really care to do that. I feel like if you say that, you know what I mean, like nobody even really cares anyway. You know I mean? Like, because I know if I was a professor, and I was like, you know, [Laughs] you're late on a paper and somebody's like, "Yeah, but I'm a vet!" Like, they went, "Alright, OK." [Laughs] Like, that's not going to, you know—the paper's not going to write itself. So it's—at the end of the day, you've still got to work whether you're a vet or not. That's how I got it.

CC: Do you think your experience in the military has kind of impacted who you are as a student at Salem State?

IC: Yeah, definitely. Just because it's like, you've got to get the job done almost. You know what I mean? Like I know my mission is to graduate as soon as possible, so I'm going to do it by any means. I feel like I already kind of had that before I got into the military. But, like, in the military you learn, you know what I mean, to make your mission more clear. You know what I mean? So here I wanted, you know, when I'm not understanding something, what classes I need to take, and concentrations and all that, I really didn't get that. You know what I mean? The old me would be like, "Well, the mission is I need to graduate, but I don't know how." And I probably wouldn't have said nothing for a while. But, you know, now I seek the information, I double check it and, you know, do what I need to do so I know it is right. So I'm not just doing anything for

any reason.

CC: Do you feel, like, fully supported by the university and Veteran Services?

IC: Yeah, definitely. Anytime I have a question, they answer it. I really don't be in there like that except if I have a question, and for, like, financial things or a question maybe like once in a while for classes. But for the most part, you know what I mean? Anytime I need something and I ask for it, they help out.

CC: Do you think students heading to college should join the military first?

IC: It depends what you're looking for. If I, like, say I got a full-blown scholarship, I wouldn't never have went into the military. Nah, I would have went to school. You know what I mean? This is pretty much my scholarship. So, you know, if somebody's telling you, you know, you can do this and don't got to pay for it, but it helps advance your life, you know what I mean, to just, you know what I mean, definitely take a look into it. You know what I mean? But not everything is for everybody. You know what I mean? So I'm not—I'll never say like, "Yeah, you should go here. You have to go do it." You know what I mean? Because when I tell my friends or my family, like, you know, "Oh yeah, you know, this is paid for." And they'd be like, "Oh, well that's cool, this and that. I wish, you know, I had this situation." And I was like, "No you don't." Because, [Laughs] I know you, I know your personality. You know what I mean? I'm not saying anybody won't make it. I'm just saying, like, you're going to be here like, "Yeah, I've got to go." [Laughs] And, you know what I mean? Then you've just wasted a year of your life, so.

CC: So I see that you coached youth basketball. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

IC: Yeah, so, I started coaching real randomly. Somebody I know that works in the Malden area. He put it on social media like, "Oh yeah, we need a Youth 7-8 coach." And I was like, "Oh, OK." You know what I mean? I just decided to do it because I like basketball and stuff. I hit them up; he pointed me in the right direction. I went down there and I just had, like, already a team pre-made so there was already fifteen kids there. I started coaching them and the they turned out to be really, really good. We went undefeated that year. We won the North Shore Title. It was a lot of good days going on. I seen development, I got to connect with the kids, we got to meet—well, the kids got to meet and take a picture with Brad Stevens, the coach of the Celtics. And then the following year I had that pretty much the same group. More control, held own try-out. You know, it just kind of build from there. Luckily we got to actually play at the Garden that year also. You know what I mean? So it was fun. We just had, like, a lot of experiences. And now my kids—you know what I mean? I had since they were they were little, and now they're in high school. And you know what I mean? Now I've got like two of them playing varsity already as freshmen. So it's just—I think it's cool to see their growth, but it's better to make an impact because I know, like, I didn't have a me when I was, you know, growing up. I wish I would've have somebody like, "Yo, you

know, did you do your homework?" I was going out to—I had a relationship with the principal at the middle school where most of my kids is at, and so she'll call me, text me, if anybody is not doing their homework, if they get in trouble, and all that. And it can be annoying going up there but, at the same time, like to have that connection and relationship with the school, you know what I mean, and help kids. Because when you're a kid, all you care about is the sport. You don't really care about, you know, going to class, and being disciplined. But if you can match them and learn there early, like, if I get this and this grade, and I've got this and this skill, you know what I mean, one day it might lead to something like a scholarship or something like that, yeah. I wish I had that so if I could try to give it to them or point them in the right direction. Then it's cool. So, hopefully, when they're seniors, you know what I mean, we'll be having a way different conversation, like—[Laughs].

CC: So I see that you have a little boy named Malachi. Congratulations!

IC: Thank you.

CC: So what's he like?

IC: He's strong. [Laughs] Like physically. He's really big for his size; he's like one, but he looks like he's three. He's kind of tall. He's just like a ball of joy, always happy. Didn't really cry a lot when he was little-little, unless he just wanted—he's one of those that, like, you got to carry and walk around with him. You know what I mean? Soon as you sit down he's going to start crying. He'd just wake up out of sleep and start crying [Laughs] but if you walk around with him he's fine, he's having a good day. But yeah, he's just a good kid overall.

CC: So how would you feel if he wanted to go into the military?

IC: I would tell him no. Just because he's my kid. [Laughs] You know what I mean? I wouldn't tell him no because there's anything of—you know, like there's anything bad. I just feel like, you know, I want a different path for him. You know what I mean? I think mostly because he's not going to have to come from the same background I had to. And so there's no real necessity. You know what I mean? Like there's nothing linking—you know how, like, his generation's a family and family are family. Well, I'm the first generation that went to the military in my family. You know what I mean? So you can't tell me like, "Oh he wanted to do it for the family." [Laughs] You know what I mean? Like you can't tell me you want to do it because, you know, you're not—because you're scared that, like, you know, you're not going to get into college cause your grades gone. I'll be on you for it. You know what I mean? So, if he—I want him to go to college first and then you decide to become a commissioned officer, you know, after you finish school. That's something different, you know what I mean? We could work with that. But I want him to definitely—to have the freedom. Because freedom—there is nothing like freedom. You know what I mean? Even though the military's great. You're free just earning to stand. You know what I mean? But getting out: not free. You know what I mean? I didn't really feel freedom until I got out, and got to experience all these different

things.

CC: So is there anything I haven't asked you about that you want people to know about your military experience or you as a person?

IC: No, I feel like you pretty much hit the nail on the head. My military experience was great, I enjoyed it. I got friends that's like, you know, like my brothers and sisters. You know what I mean? So, that's definitely something I didn't expect because I'm not really—I'm not too social; I don't really like to connect. But when you're put in a certain situation like that, you're like, it just happens automatically. You know what I mean? So I thought that was really cool. But yeah, other than that, that's it.

CC: Alright, well thank you so much for your time!

IC: No problem. Thank you.