

Summary of Oral History Transcript

Student, Citizen, Soldier: Oral History and Student Veterans

Dyer, Brian

Military Occupation Specialty, Navy, Hospital Corpsman, E-4 Promotable

Interviewer:

Interview conducted by Alex Berube, Salem State University, on 11/25/2019

Summary of Transcript:

Brian Dyer of Atlanta, Georgia joined the Navy as a corpsman in 2002. He was trained at Camp Lejeune on Parris Island and was deployed to South and Central America during 2005-07. Dyer worked on drug interdictions in conjunction with the U.S. Coast Guard and DEA while acting as a medic. On the second mission, he had to work to save an enemy combatant that ultimately died. He then spent his second deployment with the Marines, though he found this did not fulfill him as much as his time as a medic did. He spent most of his life searching for a purpose that was his own and not the one his family members expected of him. Dyer is extremely forthright about his past and his journey to find his identity after leaving the military. In this interview, he remarks on his life growing up with a family in a rather cult-like religion and how his military experience changed him. He discusses his struggles and the obstacles he faced throughout his life and his perseverance against all odds. Dyer also is an entrepreneur who seeks to help fellow veterans and marginalized communities.

Brian Dyer

Narrator

Alex Berube

Salem State University

Interviewer

November 25th, 2019

At Salem State University

Salem, Massachusetts

Alex Berube: So today is Monday, November 25th, 2019. My name is Alex Berube and I am joined here today by Brian Dyer, a Salem State University student and Navy veteran. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today, Brian. Welcome.

Brian Dyer: thank you, Alex, for having me.

AB: Of course. So we're gonna start off with the questions. So I've seen that you grew up in New York, Savannah, and Nashville. What do you remember most about these places?

BD: Interesting starter question. So, yeah, I grew up in Georgia. I was born in Atlanta, at Scottish Rite. That is now another - I believe it's called a children's hospital now. My family didn't come from means so we were - I remember being young and my mom working two or three jobs, and when my parents got divorced at like four after a domestic - quite a few domestic abuses - we left for New York. I believe we were in Brooklyn for about two years, moved back to Atlanta where my extended family - they were part of a very distinct religious group that was in the midst of a battle of being known as a religious cult, so I remember a lot of religious discussions around the dinner table. Christmas wasn't celebrated, so a lot of the normal American kid-like things we just didn't celebrate so it was a unique experience when I look back on it thirty years ago. So my mother got remarried when I was six and - to a pastor of a church who was a former Army Ranger, and he was in the National Guard, he was in the Gulf War One, and he saw some front line action, and he was a very dominating alpha male. You know, if you think of a six foot four man with arms the size of tree trunks who could fix anything with his hands and, you know, just dominate a lot of conversations and didn't have a very high EQ and

always wore a, you know, really thick leather jacket around anywhere and he was one of those guys who had a gun and a knife on him at all times and he lived that way. They got married, we moved to Nashville where his job was - where he was stationed at and yeah that was a brief part of my childhood.

AB: Thank you. What was it like to move around to such different places?

BD: Chaotic. There was a lot of underlying tension about what was next and - the positive side of being in a military family and moving a lot is that you get to meet a lot of people and you build a lot of transient relationships; it teaches you to build and establish quick-acting friendships, if you will, and so not having a lot of roots I think that carries through thirty eight years later.

AB: And you mentioned that your family's religion was cult-like and I did see that in your bio. Would you be willing to explain anymore of that?

BD: Sure it's an Eastern Asian philosophy that surrounds - that's based in Christianity but it has a lot of very deep ties to - not Buddhism but more Eastern Asian-like vernacular surrounding - like they use a lot of extensions of Christianity and then they push out and they say that they're the only church, that they're the best out of all the churches. Baseline, they're the best church. So when you're a part of them, you get indoctrinated by going five or six times a week to church; conferences every holiday. They don't celebrate Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, any of the traditional American Judeo-Christian holidays that we do. So you kind of live in the world but outside the traditional world and anything that - even going to high school, college, any of that is - it's based around your church life it's not based around your education. So this whole idea of liberal thought and being able to explore any type of educational discourse is just - it's not only not used or it's frowned upon. However, what they do say is that you have to get a bachelor's degree because they realize that people who have bachelor's degrees have higher degrees of success and they can get money back to the church and they can be - the more successes they have, the more the church has. There's some vestiges of Scientology also involved in it. You know, LDS; it's similar to that. But my grandparents were part of it, they settled the first church in Atlanta and being elders in the church, I was expected to take on a role in the church which was - it was hard to do because you know my stepfather over here preaching Pentecostal, my grandparents are over here preaching that they are the only church and they are the overcomers and I was pulled in both ways. But we also lived right next to a - we lived next to Pulaski or near Pulaski TN and we used to go to KKK rallies and being as how it's just part of our culture and you know as a kid you don't see that as wrong but then as an adult you go - you spend a lot of money on therapy to get over stuff like that so but year that's a little bit about it. [Laughs].

AB: How would your parents have described you as a child?

BD: Depends on what time. My father would label me as a pain in his ass, smart but reckless and my mom would say that I was always argumentative, always trying to pick - insatiably curious and you know she still said the exact same thing now. She's like "can't you grow up" I was like "ah maybe." But there were times when she would say I was a giant pain in the ass but I was, you know, her favorite son, you know, because I challenged her at all times.

AB: And what was your relationship like with your family growing up?

BD: I was a black sheep so being - my younger brother, his name is Patrick. He's a second lieutenant in the army. He actually just got back from Kuwait a couple weeks ago but he's always been the rule follower, the golden child. He didn't really challenge things and I challenged everything because for some reason, you know, I wanted to know why we did things and for what reason; not just tell me to do it and do it and so that's - those traits don't align today but I'm curious about everything.

AB: And has your relationship with them changed since being in the Navy?

BD: Since being in the navy or growing up? In the Navy, they said that it gave me discipline, maybe a sense of purpose, focus, identity. It took some of the chaotic pieces or negative pieces of having ADHD and it was - I was able to put a framework around it and a control around, you know, behaviors so I would say that it was for the better.

AB: What were your views on the military growing up?

BD: My grandfather was in Korea. He told me some pretty cool stories about going to Hawaii and eating pineapples they were off base - that they weren't allowed to eat because pineapples were highly acidic until they actually matured so when you pull them off and eat them - they actually burn your lips and leave a terrible red mark around your lips and everybody knows about it except for the newbies that came in and so he always told that story fondly. He never really talked about his service, about some of the stuff he saw in Korea, until he neared his death. But then, you know, we were able to have those conversations. My stepfather was all right. He was a pro-gun, pro-second amendment, I'm gonna protect my hearth and home by all means possible, spare the rod, spoil the child type of parent. They were very much pro-military, but everybody's pro-military in America because we worship at the altar of the military industrial complex. Sorry that's a narration.

AB: That's ok. What were your family and friend's reaction to finding out about your decision to join the Navy?

BD: My mom slapped me and for good reason. I didn't tell her my decision or plan - it was dirty. I've been talking about it for about a year after 9/11. So I joined September 29th, 2002, so it's about a year

and two weeks after 9/11, when we were just about to head into Iraq. I think we had just put special forces on the ground and I was twenty years old. I was working at a collection agency. My grandparents - they were pretty wealthy and they said they would pay for me to go to school as long as I abided by the church's rules and regulations, which meant moving in with people that I had grown up with; moving in with them into what is called the brother's house and it's basically this six or seven person house that everybody has their own room and living space but - you know, the typical college experience isn't that you have to, you have to serve at the church which is right next door and you have to do all these things. And my grandpa offered me a free ride and a free car, you know, they gave me all the financial wherewithal ... my parents, that got divorced when I was at eighteen, and my stepfather had kind of flown the coop, if you will. So I haven't seen him since and it was one of those things where I just lost my purpose. What was I supposed to do? So I was working at a collection agency. I was on the phone calling people about their credit card bills, you know, I was good at it. I made decent money, but I didn't have a purpose. And then one day I was at a Wendy's and there's a Navy recruiter who's standing behind me and I forgot my wallet and he was like "Don't worry about it, I got it" I'm like freaking out - there's wine, it's rush hour, like everybody's like, "Let's get in and out." It's fast food and the guy pays for it. I don't know, it was like a \$3.99 burger or whatnot and we go and we sit down and we start talking about his experiences and he happens to be a corpsman and my mom had been a nurse my entire life and I loved medicine. I thought it was fascinating and we started talking about it and I was like, "You know what? I'm not doing anything else right now, let's do this." So two weeks later, I joined and that was like - September 5th when I met him, 5th or 6th, and yeah - 3.5 weeks later, I was flying to Chicago and I was on a bus where everybody was being yelled at, like, four in the morning. Like, what the hell did I just do? My mom slapped me, gave me a hug, and I think that's the breadth of all the emotions was - like this should've been better planned but I'm proud of you for making this decision.

AB: And what was a typical day in boot camp?

BD: So I went in September. I didn't realize that the weather was gonna be something that southern boy had never seen before. That was wind and - wind and cold and brutal cold and snow and savage ice hitting you in the face like - I just remember the weather being just awfully terrible. This is Great Lakes, Illinois, which is right next to the Great Lakes - like the wind that comes off of there is something I have never experienced before and something I hope to never again. Even on the Boston ... don't know what I did there, so yeah, it was - the typical day was you had - every day was typical except the human response to it wasn't typical because every day was laid out for you. Every - you wake up at five to revelry, which is a Navy kind of motto to wake up. And then we would run to the bathroom, get cleaned up, shit, shower, shave, and then we come out and then we get on the line and

get inspected every single day - every day except for Sunday and even Sunday was sometimes a little chaotic. But every moment of your day was planned, so what that does to you - it breaks you down as a person and to just following this timeline. You don't think outside the timeline because later on it prepares you for deployment and when you're deploying you need to be just able to do things with muscle memory no matter how fatigued you are. And they were teaching us that kind of self-discipline to be able to say, like, "I need to get this done, this done, this done." And, so every day was the same - famous night, you know, song but every day was different as well because you never knew how people were gonna react because people are exhausted. People are learning, they're changing, everybody's changing into this machine to get things done.

AB: And was boot camp what you expected?

BD: Yes, and it's exactly what you expect but you are never prepared for it. There - if anybody says that they are prepared for it, they are telling you a boldfaced lie because what you're doing is putting - they put 200 males in a room all from 18-29 or 17-29 in a very long room without anything and - except for the same function; bed, blanket, your gear, and your locker. Everything's cleaned and organized and tidy and you're asking everybody to work together as a team, as a collective whole. I guarantee if you tried to do that on this campus, try to get 200 people together, what you would find is a crazy amount of chaos and nothing would get done. So that's - the military is incredibly good at that. They've been doing it for years and you put in that kind of structure, that institutionalization, people learn to work together. It's the most diverse place that I had ever been to. You know, I grew up in a very white culture. I'm sure that there's a better way to say that, but I grew up in a culture that distinctly didn't have any African-Americans or women around me because our church didn't really bring in African-Americans. But they also didn't bring in a lot of - you know, the women that were - we weren't allowed to be around the women either, so when I went to boot camp, it was the first time I'd ever had to work with African-American kids from the street, you know, farm boys from wherever - you know, urban kids, middle-class kids, like, we were all just kids trying to get along and make it through boot camp.

AB: Can you talk a little bit about what a day in the Navy was like?

BD: What a day in the Navy ... Every day was the same, every day was different. Once again, boot camp teaches you that - you learn to deal with it on the fly. 99% of the time you're doing - I won't say nothing, but 99% of the time it's not chaotic. That one percent of the time is the most chaos you can ever imagine dealing with. Some people have different experiences as well, unless everybody has a different experience. Let's just say that - just because we're all training the same doesn't mean we all come out the same or have the same experience or have the same reaction, the same challenges. I was

with the Marines for my first four years. I was stationed at Parris Island and in Jacksonville or Camp Lejeune, if you will. It was the best years of my life because I was surrounded by - I was - I had an identity as doc. As a corpsman we were known as doc, so basically we were the doctor in the field so it gave me - I wouldn't say a sense of power but a sense of responsibility and pride and identity that just being a sailor doesn't typically give you. Some people probably get that from what they do, but I had a very unique experience, if you will. So my days with them was different because it was very alpha, it was very primitive, and not primitive in a bad way, but it's like going to a primitive cabin, it just lacks a certain - it lacks the certain comforts that you would have and sometimes you want that and get that. I met some fantastic Marines who are great people and I had amazing experiences with them. I also met some pretty terrible people but that's the military. Out of, like, there's - you can't - everybody's experience is different. When I was blue side and I did two deployments, it was pretty much the worst days of my life because my identity was just as a sailor. It wasn't anything special anymore, and everyday was exactly the same. Twelve - fourteen - sixteen-hour days, five hour watches where you're just standing, staring at the ocean. You know, at night the ocean is the darkest black you can imagine and I just remember being - how are we so free, but when you are 200 miles out to sea, you're really not free, you're imprisoned. I just remember it being really, very, very stressful, very chaotic, and also very boring.

AB: What was it like running combat operations?

BD: As much as I'd like to say that I had some really cool stories about that, combat operations, I - we did two operations and they were basically drug interdictions and I had no idea what I was doing as [laugh] as I remember. I mean, the chaos and strats, I - you can't - you can't get over this boat, it's like 400 port - is it porter feet? Four feet long, there's 200 people on it, not - it's more than that. It's 200 yards - I don't know, I forgot. But - so we're on a frigate. So if you look at it like a battleship - the game, you know, a frigate is the equivalent of the two prong ship, just this big - has two prongs you can put in it. The battleship has five, so we're on the small boat but we're part of a much larger fleet ... little bit . So we have destroyers, we have cruisers around us, we have helicopters everywhere, and we are circling this four-masted boat which formats - means that you can see four masts at the horizon - so like, from six miles off, you can see four masts. I meant that's how large it is, so to some kind of civilian, I said "If you go to the Boston Harbor and you see a boat with all the Conex boxes on it, that's probably a 2 masted boat." I don't think they could do a 4 masted boat here so - but these are very large. I mean they're territories, if you will. They're massive, massive pieces of equipment, and so we would circle around it for four or five days while they're getting interdiction notices from the DEA liaison for that city or for that city or country. And then that country's reporting to the embassy in DC and DC saying go ahead and do it, then we make an ops plan around it and - as a medic, I didn't have

any kind of overall ops strategy. I was there as a function, as a tool, but we worked with our Coast Guard liaison so we had six Coast Guard narcotic interdiction people - that their job was to work out all day, make sure that they are in prime shape, and then they would ever know and then we would jump on what - it's called a rib and that's a rigid, rigid boat and what we would do with that is - you would have this frigate right here that's about twenty yards off from this massive, massive beast of a boat that just - I can't get that on the size difference. And the water displacement is pushing the water up and down so these twenty-foot swells are just normally way high and you're just bouncing up and down. They put you in this boat and you're just holding on for dear life. It's good that I loved whitewater rapids - it reminds me of white water rafting now so - so we would go over to the other boat and then they would let down a ladder and we'd have to climb out this - and it's a steel ladder but it's one that's flexible so it just kind of - you're just kind of hanging on for dear life, trying to climb up this thing. And all my guys are armed to the teeth and I've got a sixty pound medical bag and I'm just remembering looking down and being like "Don't ever look down again because next time you do you're gonna fall in the ocean and nobody's saving you because there's no way to be saved." So it's like we climb up, and then my guys take two go this way, two go that way and then I'm back here with the senior and - think he was a chief at the time, it was a first class, you had a chief there - but I go, "What are we expecting?" He's like, "Most of the time, these things are peaceful. Sometimes they're not." So it's like okay, he's cool. He's cool, calm, and composed, I'll present the same way. And you know, all it really showed me - one thing that, like everybody believed that the War on Drugs was a success but what I saw there - I saw poor people just trying to make a living so it dramatically changed how I looked at pop - like what our policies [are] and whom they really effect. The first one we went on there was nothing there. We spent about eight hours on the boat. We didn't find any cocaine and or any terrorists, which are kind of the two mission parameters. So then you climb back down and, mind you, there's a helicopter surrounding us and they have a fifty cal on it as well, and I'm talking to some of these guys and you know they're just poor farmers, like they're poor sailors. They get paid like ten dollars a day to stay on this boat and transport stuff and they get food and water and they'd send it back to their families just like I was doing. So I've really felt a true connection with the people instead of the policy. The second one was a little more rough. We took some gunfire, one of my guys was hit - it was the first time I had ever experienced that and ... [lengthy pause] Yeah. So he took it - he took a shot. It was a shoulder wound when it passed through and I hadn't trained on this stuff - like, I had 3 months of training. I never - had never seen this or experienced it and you think - you hope that you would come out as like a warrior or a hero but my training just kicked in; whether I did it right or wrong, I don't know. The guy lived. It wasn't a terrible wound. He was medically retired later - it did injure one of the nerves and you know - so then we had to get the helicopter come out and then they brought down a stretcher so we put him on there and they carted him up and then they sent him back to his home

country, which happened to be Peru at the time. And it was just weird that we were attacking this, you know, this boat and it was coming out of Peru. Then we were sending people back there for medical treatment. One of my guys did shoot another one of the enemy combatants and I ended up having to try to stabilize him. He eventually did pass away while I was trying to take care of him and it's one of those things where you just - it's surreal. It's this real moment that as a medic I'm required to not take care of myself. I'm required to take care of the enemy who's taken a hostile position against me. But I had to give my all to take care of them and there was really no reason for us to be on that boat in the first place. I mean we did find like eight million dollars' worth of cocaine but that's a drop in the bucket. That's not anything. So after that, it was - I - you know, I saw a few people pass from, like, you know, just heart attacks and things of that nature. But I actually saw more people with worse traumas when I worked in an ER as a hospital technician than I did in combat, if you will but I - I missed out on one thing and that was going to Iraq with my best friend Chris. We had grown up together, he and - he and I joined at the same time, six months apart. Ended up in Camp Lejeune together, in Parris Island together, and then he deployed to Iraq and him - as he went twice and I did these two deployments and it was like our experiences were drastically different, you know. He was doing helo insertions into bases and, you know, kicking down doors and, you know, he was - he was living the dream that we had both trained for. And when I got out in 2007, he got out in 2008 - so we missed that boat.

AB: So what led you to leave the military?

BD: Well, I was told we were gonna do another deployment in six months and I'd already been out to sea for twenty-two out of twenty-four months that I was deployed or I was stationed in Mayport, so it didn't make - my younger brother was in high school and he was just about to graduate and I didn't really have a plan but I knew I didn't want to stay in the Navy. Like, I wanted to when I was with the Marines because they had an identity and a purpose that led them, and when I'm with blue side, I lost all that purpose and identity. I no longer had any interest in wearing the blue color, you know, the dress blues anymore so what - I had lost that - that motivation. I wanted to go back to college. I mean that was originally the plan anyways because most people join for the GI Bill and so that's the...[trails off]

AB: How did you feel leaving?

BD: Like the greatest and worst day of my life. I can clarify that. I didn't really have a plan. Um I'd been, we'd been docked for probably two months and I've probably been drunk for two months, still going to work still functioning, but at night sitting in my car. Like I didn't know how to deal with things that we had seen, that we had experienced, um and granted I haven't seen anything compared to other people. But it's not like a comparison game and that's why I try to teach that all the time. Your

story and how you deal with it its very different from everybody else's and when I got out I had probably 3 probably had 4 days. Because honestly, I had thought I would just stay in, I was selected in the e5 and once you hit that point in like 5 years, I was good, I was on a good track. But the thing I didn't want to deploy to South America again. It was cool I got to see some amazing experiences, I got see the Panama Canal and it takes like 18 hours to go through the Panama Canal. They have these R2D2 looking robots that they put in the lines on and they just pull you through this, and the Panama Canal is one of the greatest inventions of humanity. I mean this thing is incredible how two or three countries came together and created the modern ecosystem of modern shipping ecosystem. Like this is and this is back in the early 1900s like that's, it was an incredible experience. I got to go to the Galapagos Islands and see gigantic five hundred-year old tortoises that are there. I went to Peru got to go to the Machu Picchu. I never got to go to Argentina but i was able to hit the bottom, let me see "Tierra del Fuego", the Southernmost point of South America. I got to see some cool stuff, Columbia is one of my favorite places on earth. I was blessed I got to go to Russia, Germany, Sweden, to see the World Cup in 2006 I believe. I got to see some really cool stuff like I got to jump into the arctic ocean, excuse me the Baltic ocean, like who gets to do that. Like it was just like such a cool experience, crossed over the equator, we floated next to a pod of humpback whales that almost knocked us over from their water displacement. I was blessed, like went to 40 countries in almost what? Two years. like I was very very fortunate, however I'd forgotten why I was there, what I was doing it for and I didn't believe in our war on drugs, it didn't make sense. So I asked them to let me out and to give me an early release so I could go back to school, had to figure out how to navigate the chain of command. Because there's a rare, it's kind of obscure UCMJ law that says that if you have the ability to leave for school and a deployment is coming up or if you have some mediating reason that they'll they can let you out. So I was able to use that leverage, that they're like "well you've got three days to get out" and in three days I got out. I didn't have a plan in place. But I didn't care because I was free, put my sea bags in my car. At the time I had a Mitsubishi Eclipse Spyder convertible, that's a sweet car and then I drove home. I remember looking at the ship as they were leaving for an inspection and seeing some of my friends go away. But I hadn't been home for two years, home was a cot that somebody else had slept in like halfway you know through the day and we had to share those cot but that was home. I didn't know where my next home was, I knew I was going home to my "family" but like when you leave that institution what's next? Now they do a lot better job preparing people today than they did 10 years ago, 10 years ago we had just finished a surge and we were starting a surge in Iraq. Afghanistan was a full, you know, was a full OPTEMPO. They were everybody was just on such an OPTEMPO. That it didn't, one person didn't matter, the VA and the DOD don't speak there's a whole lot of problems with the whole transition issue as well. But when I left I was woefully unprepared for what the real world had. Because the navy had been protecting me, had locked me into my little fenced-in yard and I couldn't

see above the fence and then when I got out, it was okay I'm outside the fence. You ever seen a dog that just like sits outside and just barks and howls and it's like what is on the other side? Then they like get outside and they are like what the hell just happened? What am i supposed to do out here? Like put me back into my cage you know?

AB: So is that how you would describe your transition to civilian life? A difficult experience.

BD: Oh yeah! Absolutely. I lost my identity you know. I didn't have a uniform anymore I also didn't realize how much things cost when you don't have to pay for food and medical benefits. That's a shocker and also I didn't realize that my skill set were unemployable. So as a medic I was highly qualified and hiring managers would say "man you did some really cool shit out there however you can't do that here because you don't have the certification or licensure", but to get a licensure you have to become a nurse a PA a medical practitioner, nurse practitioner any of these other routes and that takes education, that takes school, that takes time. What do you do during that time because the GI Bill at the time did not pay the housing allowance that it does now. It paid 1200 dollars a month and school is \$8,000 a month. Like these things didn't add up and I wasn't prepared for that so I didn't have a plan in place. And often, I mean I tell vets all the time like if you're just leaving for the sure sake of leaving than that's not a plan. You need to have a like a strategic course of action because I've learned over the last ten years, how to do it the wrong way and so now I'm able to get back and say here's the right way.

AB: Has your experience in the Navy benefited or not benefited you in your college transition?

BD: Good question. Yes, and no. Of course the discipline of being able to do things on time, prioritize, be able to you know do all-nighters and still function. You know all of these things are part and parcel of it, I've been out for 12 years. My first time in college I went to Kennesaw State University, well I went to North Georgia College State University where my younger brother went. So I went there for a year and then I went for two and a half years to Kennesaw State University. We're skipping over a point of that, so in 2008 I had a back injury and I had it since the military but I didn't realize that it was bad. So I went to the VA and got it checked out they told me I need to get surgery and I'd already had this surgery one time before. But for about a year they had put me on opiates, so I was on Percocet and morphine for right at a year, year and a half and so heavily addicted to them. I had grown kind of numb to everything, hospital to everything so I was pretty grouchy to be around once not a nice person back then. But I worked third shifts, I worked two jobs at the time. And I had lost my identity, I lost my structure and you know was I think suffering through depression from these medications and they

finally said “all right we're gonna do surgery”, so we had the surgery and I was on my back for three months doped up I could barely move for about a month and a half. I had you know these tubes that are called Jackson catheters and they basically when your body's healing there's two stages of healing there's external and internal. And so the healing process to prevent an infection from happening with an internal injury is that they have to have something that's suctioning out all the bad stuff and so obviously I wasn't able to work. So I went heavily in debt, like you know had a repossession because I couldn't work. I couldn't work for four months and I was all doped up and I couldn't do anything and I was miserable and I had no identity, no purpose, no structure, no plan, I had no hope. And I think, I was like at the fourth month when they said “all right”, they took out the pin catheter or catheters and then they took me off the opiates and they did it in a two-week process and I basically lost my ever-loving mind. And I had gotten home I think it was 2 a.m. and my mom came over, to her, to my apartment and she never comes over at that time. She's asleep like normal people and I was, I was literally just put the gun in my mouth and was about to you know take that ride and she walked in and I was so doped up that I forgot to put to take the safety off. And then I was in tears because I realized that I have been willing to do this and she walked in and just said she gasped I remember her gasping. And I didn't know what it was it's bad but this isn't how we did this and so the next day I went off all the medications, all the antidepressants, all the SSRI's, all of the Klonopin, opiates everything and said I'm not going to do it again. I went cold turkey, which I highly recommend never doing that and I made a plan it was the first time I actually sat down and made a plan and wrote down and put goals down and said I want to do this. Two weeks later, I was invited from a friend of mine, through a friend, through a friend, through a friend, to a wounded warrior softball tournament and I saw all of these people that had much worse scenarios happen to them. And I was introduced to my now manager and very good friends and mentor and overall she's my superhero her name is Michelle Saunders and she's a LGBTQ purple heart recipient and she spoke congressional fairs for the VA and she worked at a nonprofit helping vets as they transition out. And she gave me my first job, now mind you I probably put in five six hundred seven hundred applications, interviewed several places this was the first time, I actually had an opportunity. Now mind you I still had all these conflicting thoughts about the LGBTQ, whatever it may be, women in the military because I'd grown up in a very different way. But she, she's a freaking superstar and I wanted to be her and so 10 years later, she's made one hell of a difference in my life. Every year same time that I met her, I post on Facebook this huge thing about our story together and I swear to God we get like a thousand likes and loves and all this other stuff, it's stupid but. So my transition out was pretty awful so now I actually talk about this, you know, that not every vet has PTSD not every vet has TBI but we all, we all have our challenges when we transition out.

AB: I think it's so interesting how you mentioned the LGBTQ friend would you say that she changed

your traditional conservative beliefs and religious beliefs?

BD: Yeah, because she's a freaking hero and a warrior and when you stop thinking that it's a choice and it's just something that's a biological imperative, like it changes the whole conversation. But also how she treated people, she treated me as someone that she wanted to help even though I was firmly against her lifestyle. So I'm against, let's put this in other words I'm against you falling in love and having the best life possible, you know not that love is the best life possible, but if I'm against that what do we have to connect on anything else. And I started to kind of recognizing that because I'm going to colleges that have, I'm in an all-white school in north Georgia there is very little diversity like everybody is a republican except for the weird liberal that's you know petting her cat in the front and now I'm in Boston and everything is a little bit different. Now it's conservative with orange hair in the front but yeah, our experience together, especially working together is that she was willing to, she was willing to give it all for everyone. So she taught me what true inclusion was and it didn't matter where and what you came from. Her belief was, if I can teach you a skill set then you will pass it on and she doesn't require anything else except for that. Now, did we get along all the time? Oh no, no, no but do I love, admire her, respect her, and then, and then all of the goodness she gets back, 100%.

AB: And you mentioned I think that your brother was in the military as well, were you guys close?

BD: He is currently active duty actually. He joined at 30 years old, last year and is an officer in the army. We weren't, we weren't as kids. We were not close, we were six years apart his father, my stepfather like put him on a pedestal that he could do no wrong and versus I got a very different end of that spectrum. You know, spare the rod spoil the child type of attitude he was very physically abusive quite often. But when my stepfather left when I was 18, Patrick was 12, our relationship dramatically changed. We didn't see him, we never saw him again, he actually moved out to Europe and we've never seen him since. But I became a pseudo father if you will, which was weird to go from, for being, for being responsible for someone like that and my mom worked three jobs. So I made sure that even when I was stationed in Parris Island or Jacksonville, I had opportunities to go to Japan to Germany but I didn't want to be that far away from him and so I would come home every two weeks. I would drive home, so in the weekend with him and head back. Over the last, so a couple years ago a company out here recruited me and relocated me to move out to Boston to work. It's a financial fortune 200 company and they heard me speaking at a veteran nonprofit conference about employment and the mitigation of suicide and it was like, it was the first time I'd ever spoken, first time I was ever asked to speak. It's weird but I got a call the next day that was like "hey we want you to come out here and interview for this role" and I was like "okay" so flew out to Boston never been here before. I didn't

know a single soul, didn't know how to get anywhere, it's a small place actually. But I moved from, I took the role, sold everything on Craigslist. I had an English masters by the time it passed the summer, put them in Suburban, so I ran the Suburban one way, my brother flew out and we took a road trip across country went to Niagara Falls. Ended up, back in, so we got to Boston the day before I was supposed to start and he was like you know what I'm going to join the army and I was like "okay, this is a series of rash decisions or..." and he was like "I've been thinking about this decision for like a year two years we talked about this for 10 years but if I'm going to do it I have to do it now" and so he did. Two months later he was accepted to go to Officer Candidate School and he went to boot camp which the Army's kind of strange like that, they make you go through boot camp then they make you go through Officer Candidate School. Then he went to a school in Virginia, it was a supply corps school in Virginia and then he got stationed in Colorado Springs, he was there for about a month and they deployed. He deployed in February of this year to Kuwait just got back in October

AB: Knowing everything that you know today would you still have joined the navy

BD: Hell yea! Yea one hundred percent. Honestly my whole career has been based around my military experience like I wouldn't be here. I mean, I wouldn't have traveled, I wouldn't have. My life would be different, don't think it would've been anything without it but it also gave me the ability to be persistent in the face of all odds and yeah, hell yeah!

AB: Awesome. What made you want to be a recruiter?

BD: Hmm if you think about what recruiters do and you think about as a medical practitioner what I did. Hmm, I change life's everyday whether if its someone coming in for a sore, sore cough or rash, sprained ankle. I was there to help and heal and guide them, guide them to their, to their best self and that's what I do as a recruiter every day. I looked holistically at somebody's story, not just their resume, not just their background but I get to look at their whole story and help them. Help guide them to their best self and that's what I do every day and that's why I have a start up in the recruiting space as well. That's why I'm completely open and forthright about my life is because authenticity brings so much more true than somebody does trying to sell you on a job.

AB: How did you come up with the idea of your start up?

BD: Hmm. This summer I was diagnosed, I have had a tumor on my ankle for about 10 years that

everybody said, I went to about five doctors they all said it was benign and then this summer I was running. Believe it or not I was down to like 215, I'm like 245 now, but this summer I was diagnosed with an aggressive, aggressive cancer called Synovial Sarcoma. And what that is, it's basically a joint cancer that can attach to the bone and when you have synovial sarcoma it metastasizes to the lungs very quickly. There were some things that were in my favor that. I'd had for as long as I had without any symptoms. however, they were really nervous about it so I had to quit my job, I took two months off and I had surgery this summer and the VA did a great job about a month later I was back on my feet if you will. But while I had time to sit there and contemplate what I was going to do for the next two years of my life because that's the sentence they gave me for two months was you have two years left. How's that gonna make a difference and every day I was just looking at my ankle and be like you have to make a difference and that's where we are at now. I basically looked at all of the things that were wrong with the recruiting space today and there's some great people out there working diligently on making the hiring process better and improving it. But it's all based on the wrong thing and that's the client's needs and the client's needs change 24/7 and instead I want to look at the candidate and how do we upscale people especially those who don't come from marginalized backgrounds and get them to the same place they need to be. Instead of, no offense I know this is an education system but if we can upscale diverse and marginalized groups we can help them get the equity that's needed for them to be not only diverse but also inclusionary positive so that's what I'm working on.

AB: Do you want to talk more about those nonprofits?

BD: Sure, so in the veteran's service nonprofit world you have about 48,000 nonprofits in America right now that are focused on the veteran, they would say problems, I would say challenges. Most of these are mom and pop shops that help one or two people, about 10 percent of these groups have massive human capital structures meaning they have a lot of people out there that all they do every day is talk to vets and try to get them into their best life. I personally think that we have moved so far to the right. Because you know for three generations, we are three generations removed from a true war like Vietnam, we are five generations since, you know we lost hundreds of thousands of people in World War II. But we have moved so far to the right of that that we have created this cast of people that go and serve and typically they come from marginalized communities, they come from places where there's a lack of means. And the pendulum has shifted so hard because we want to help all these vets but nobody wants to serve themselves and I personally think these nonprofits they may have a great mission they can't scale and they create donor fatigue. And so I think it's incredibly valuable to start to use technology to leverage what these VSO's do and that's what we're trying to do.

AB: Okay. Let's talk college, what has your experience been like and what are you studying?

BD: I hate to say this; I'm studying industrial organizational psychology. Which is basically the science of how people work on a macro level and how they can work better. So my focus, I would like to focus on talent development. I don't think that it'll be at, I don't I think this is going to be a longer process than I'm being provided here. But it's been interesting because I don't come from academia. I come from operations so there's, I come on, I come on campus and I've been fed the wrong information multiple times from PhDs who don't get me wrong they've worked their ass off to get where they're at. But if you haven't been operational with your, what you've been working on like it's just concept its abstract, its theory. It's when you're talking about people you're talking about a lot of different things that go into that and that's not just because you read it in a book that it makes it true because sometimes things aren't like that. Prime example my first day in grad school my professor at the time, or she goes you know this is a great, great career field to get into once you're done with this Master's Degree you will be able to make \$50,000 coming out and you know that's a base salary. And I was like one, I've been making you know, six figures like for seven years or six years and this doesn't make sense to me this doesn't add up. There's something wrong here and when I brought that up she goes well you know the base salary you know the median salary and I'm like, I get that ma'am but like maybe we should tell them there is a flex range you know there's quantiles that a lot of these people are gonna be able to match. And I, as a recruiter would never ever tell somebody with a masters in I/O that I'm going to pay you fifty thousand dollars a year, never going to happen and she goes like well you know that's what I, what I see and I was like yeah maybe because on campus but businesses need these skill sets they need these even more than MBA's. Like these skill sets you need to be talking to these kids about like how they can upscale their backgrounds and make sure they do internships and Co-ops and you know so I went into the whole hiring process and she was like *shakes head* it was in one ear and out the other. Because she spent 15 years studying this stuff and you know I'm a first day grad student, which I get, I totally understand but even an undergrad my favorite professor whom I am still very, very close with. The way she made a difference in my life was that she showed me, she showed be how academia operations came together. She's now a practicing attorney and she taught for like 20 years. She was just a fascinating person to be around and she was, she made class in school interesting. She made sure that we were passionate about what she was like, even if we didn't care about what she was talking about she made it fun. She made it like we should be interested in coming to school like we are paying to come here and I haven't felt that way in grad school. I've felt like basically I was given some regurgitated materials from the last ten, ten semesters and read these 80 articles and hopefully you will learn something because of that and you know honestly I can just go on google scholar and do the exact thing and not pay full price for it. So for me it's been disappointing because 8 out of the 9 professors in

my program are academics they, they have never been operational they they've never. They may have done some consulting work but they never had to make it from an AVP to VP to managing director level they never had to manage people. They never had to manage PNL's and budgets and figure out how to get you know a group of people to collaborate and work together outside of academia and I don't and I'm not disparaging my professors but there is such a disconnect between my ten years of experience and coming into academia. And perhaps, I needed to be more prepared for that because I didn't feel like that was, that's not on them that's probably on me but at the same time out of the ten people in my class, nine have gone from undergrad straight to grad school and I'm the only one that has any type of real life experience. And in fact three of these people came to my launch, my business launch and they're asking me how do I do this, how do I navigate this career search, it's so overwhelming they're not prepared for the real world, you know, though they had this education, so there's just a fundamental disconnect and the on boarding of someone into grad school. Unless they spent the last two years and they've done that natural transition, sorry if that was a little strong.

AB: No worries. If you could give someone who's leaving the navy and looking to go to college some advice or just the military in general. What would you have to say to them?

BD: Give yourself grace. A lot of us expect that when we get out were just gonna hit the ground running and you have to realize the military is great at a lot of things and it will accelerate your growth in a ton of different spaces. But it will also stunt you in other spaces, where other people have that time to grow. For instance, when you're leaving the military, you know, you've got this different world you have this different language, your mind is set a different way so you need to learn to give yourself grace and also give your family grace because its their transition as well. And there's two hundred thousand transitioning veterans each year that means 1.2, 1.6 million people are transitioning each year, and if you don't have a plan in place and a plan B and a Plan C you're not ready. But more importantly you can adapt and overcome, you know, the marines say "Semper Gumby", which is one of their sayings always flexible, always flexible and always faithful and that's an important piece of it because if you don't give yourself grace you can flex as much as you want. But if you start to hate yourself because you've failed and you haven't learned from each iteration you're not going to survive because you don't have the structure in place anymore. It's all on you, so give yourself some grace.

AB: Now before we end the interview, Bryan do you have anything that you want to say, anything that we didn't touch on any questions you think I've missed?

BD: Hmm yeah. Three things not every veteran has deep PTSD and TBI, so let's calm down on that. Now 9 out of 10 vets and support staff do not see combat and if they do they see it from a very far away, away. Number two, boot camp; our training these all create resiliency factors that are never considered and somebody's combat experience. Some people are prepared for combat this is the reality of the situation you go to this training for a reason, it's not like were going out there and were completely new to this world. Yes, we are but there is a piece of it, that resiliency piece that is often overlooked so just because someone as seen combat doesn't mean that they're all fucked up, excuse my language, that's America right. And then three, vets are the same as other people let's stop putting them on a pedestal and just start helping them out. If you have a vet in class, it's cool to tell them to get their story out but have them socialize and reintegrate in that class have them go and sit with a group of liberal you know liberal feminists and have them work on a project together. Because the only way that we can integrate, reintegrate into society is to allow us an opportunity and if we must remain cliquish, it's going to be every vet feeling they're alone.

AB: Well, thank you so much Bryan for coming.