

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

**Onohkin, Sergey**

U.S. Army, SGT 11B

*Interviewer:*

Interview conducted by Justin Smith, Salem State University, on 4/2/2018

*Summary of transcript:*

Sergey was born on November 16, 1985, in Belarus. His family immigrated to the US in 1991 and lived in Boston for a time before moving to Epping, NH. He joined the Military in 2006, where he was deployed to Baghdad and Basra in Iraq. During his tours of duty, Sergey experience extensive combat and witnessed tremendous danger, but speaks of how eventually he got desensitized to the high-stress situations. He returned home in 2009, where he encountered difficulty finding work and decided to enroll in higher education. He is now pursuing a master's degree in finance at Salem State.

Justin Smith: Hello, today is April 2nd of 2018. My name is Justin Smith. And with me is your summary veteran, Sgt. Sergey Onohkin. Thank you for being here today. So you were born in Belarus. Can you tell me what it was like growing up there?

Sergey Onohkin: Well, I was only there until I was six years old. Now I don't really remember too much. It was during the Soviet Union. It was- I mean, it seemed normal to me. I don't really- can't really tell you a lot about it. I just remember it here and there, like when we lived in kind of like a village. We had- we lived in kind of like a, maybe like a townhome you would say. So basically my grandfather, he had a house and he built an addition onto it so then we could live on the other side of it. But we had a farm, we had like pigs and we just grew some potatoes. I remember picking strawberries, cherries and stuff like that. And we had a church in the back of the- that we built, or not me personally, but that my family built. So yeah, that's pretty much it. I think too, I guess like another thing, it was very like low-tech, though. There was no, like- like I said, we lived in a village. We didn't have running water or anything like that. We'd have to go to like a well to bring it back. So we didn't have like toilets or anything. We had to go outside, like that kind of, like living. Compared to now it's like living in the Stone Age, I guess you could say.

JS: Wow. So when did you move to the United States?

SO: In November 1991, around there.

JS: Was there a reason why?

SO: Yeah. So, see like the story changed so many times because I asked my friends a lot and I guess there was a couple of reasons. So like the original, one of the reasons was because we lived near Chernobyl, the Chernobyl area. So where they had, like, the fall out. It was one of the heavier impacted areas. So that was one of the reasons, and another reason was because we were Christian and it wasn't- in communist Russia, religion wasn't really acceptable. So I don't really remember any kind of like- anything bad happening to me, but I guess that my family had a church in the back and a lot of them were preachers and everything like that. So like, my great-grandparents and my grandfather. So that was one of the reasons that my parents told me that they decided to move to the US, which was just because there was a kind of a persecution. So, like my great-grandfather he spent, under Stalin, he spent like a lot of time in jail because of that. And yeah, but I guess- I guess because we had that church the KGB would always come in and kind of like do inspections or raids to see if they could find any, like, evidence that we had, like, any kind of contraband like religious materials and stuff like that. That's what my parents tell me, so. And if they did then they'd send, like, the men to, you know, to jail or whatever.

JS: Must be different compared to stuff here in the United States. So speaking of that, what were some of the changes you had to adjust to from Belarus to here in the US?

SO: Well, when we first moved here, we moved to like the Boston area. I don't remember, like, where, like maybe Braintree or something like that. And it was- I mean it was just like a bigger city, like that was like the obvious difference. The other thing obviously was language and stuff, like the language barrier, because we didn't know anything. And I mean from my parents I would assume it was difficult just because I remember my dad saying that after they sold everything, all their possessions in Belarus, they had like \$100 worth of stuff basically, which is crazy. But so, they came here with \$100 and did well for themselves so far, compared to what we had. But yeah, I mean we lived in just- the first apartment we had was like in a basement. I just remember watching, like, Sesame Street all the time and doing that. And that's how I pretty much learned English, was through that, through like watching shows on PBS, all the shows on PBS. And after that, then we- I think I started school, maybe first grade or something that, in Medford and, you know, kind of transitioned into that. Yeah, some more differences I guess, well, we had water finally, running water. I guess I remember one thing is that everybody used to say, like in Belarus, was when you come to America, you would get, like, refrigerators full of food and like basically like you'd have a bunch of food, which wasn't necessarily the case. But it was just a- that's the only thing that we were kind of like- because like everybody used to say like, "Oh, you're going to, you know, America. You can get all this food and all this stuff." It wasn't the case, I guess. So yeah, that was actually another thing that I remember, like, when before we moved from- before we moved to America because like people started, like, blaming- like, my parents tried to keep it a secret that we were moving. But then some of the neighbors found out and they basically robbed us. So like they- myself and my mother and my sister were gone, but when we came back and they, like, tied up my dad to a chair and they robbed the house, too. So that was kind of like the- because there were just jealous they thought, you know, they'd get whatever they can from us- [inaudible] They came and took from us, whatever they could take, they took it. I guess that's like the other difference is it's a lot safer here.

JS: So what's life now in Epping, NH, where you live?

SO: Well Epping New Hampshire. It's-

JS: Is it a quiet town? Is it-

SO: I mean, yeah, it's quiet. So, when we first moved there, it was about in 2000, 2003, something like that. It was actually a very small town. And shortly after that, maybe around then 2003, beginning of 2004, they built a Walmart and it kind of just started expanding. So right now it's a lot bigger than when we first moved there. So, after I came back from the army the town expanded a lot, but yeah. So, there's definitely, you know- it's kind of like living in a, how should

I say this, in a, not necessarily a village because we basically live at like a end of a cul de sac and there's a lot of land in between the houses and we have like access to a river. And my parents, like, still kind of like basically have like a big garden. I wouldn't say like a farm or anything like that, but it's a big garden where they grow a lot of things over there. No livestock or anything like that, but yeah.

JS: All right. So why did you enlist? Were you living in Braintree? Or were you living in Epping?

OS: No, I was in Epping at the time. And so it was in March I went off to basic training, March 20-something like 26 of 2006.

JS: So did you always aspire to be in the army or was it something that, you know, just came-

OS: Yeah, so I mean my childhood, it was like- I don't know, like I always felt like I was kind of like an outcast I guess you could say. So I just never had any, like, kinda like a lot of friends or anything like that, you know what I mean? When I was growing up in high school, all throughout school actually, just because kind of like everybody was always like, "Oh, you're just like, you're like the commie kid" or something like that, you know. Because I didn't really have like a name that was, like Mike or, you know, so it's always like Sergey and even the teachers were like, "Oh what kind of name is that?" you know, so like all the time I'd get stuff about that. So I think I kind of like went on to like- the kids kind of saw me as different. So basically like, so what I'm trying to get at was like, I started kind of rebelling, you know, early on. I never really graduated high school. I went to- like I finished ninth grade and then I kind of just went to work. I started doing construction. I never really thought about- so, I mean when you're a kid you play like, you know, army or things like that. But I didn't really know exactly why I wanted to go into the army. Like when I actually went to the recruiter, I didn't even know. I didn't know anything about the Army. I was just like, you know, I just want to do something that's cool, maybe something that you see on TV and the movies. So that's what I told him and he suggested going into the infantry. That's kind of how, you know, I chose that MOS [Military Occupational Specialty], or job, or whatever. But yeah, and that was pretty much it. I mean, when I decided to join the army was probably like a few years back, so prior to that. It was- I remember seeing some, kind of like, either something on the news or something, some kind of documentary about, about Iraq at the time. And it was about like contractors and Iraq. It was just showing what life, you know, basically in Baghdad in the Green Zone. So, and- I don't know, I just remember because I was, like, sitting in the living room and I'm just like, I'm not really doing anything. I think I was, like, maybe doing some kind of like carpentry work or something like that, like at that time and just not really going anywhere in life. And that's kind of like when I started thinking like maybe I should do something, you know, something along the lines of going into the army. That's kind of what that- or that was kind of like the point where I decided. Or started

like actually considering that as one of my options. And then the moment, I actually decided to, my cousin went to the Marines and he came back from basic training and it was just kind of like, well if he can do it then I can do it too, you know. So that's where- I tried to go into the Marines. But I, like I said, I didn't graduate high school. So at that time the Marines had a higher standard. They were not accepting anybody with a GED. They wanted somebody with a- wanted people with only high school diplomas. So then I tried the Army and the Army accepted me with the GED, so.

JS: So how did your family react to your decision to join the army?

OS: Like, I didn't really- I didn't tell them until pretty much until I was, like, maybe a week before I was supposed to leave. And they were- they were fine. I mean, you know, my mom was a little bit scared but that's her. But kind of, you know I feel- I felt like, like I said, when I was a kid I just screwed around. I wasn't like the perfect kid. So I felt like they were actually, like, finally proud of me. So it was- it was pretty big deal for me, and yeah. But I remember having, like, probably like maybe the weekend before I shipped out or whatnot- maybe day before that date- we had like a big dinner with like family and friends that came over. So basically yeah, they were proud.

JS: How much did you prepare for boot camp at Fort Benning?

OS: Nothing at all. No, nothing.

JS: Was there a reason why?

OS: So I don't know. I mean maybe, maybe I was just lazy, like- I don't know. I don't know. It was just- okay, so when I first went to- when I was going to basic training- the only things that I really knew about basic training was A.) from either older people that were in the Russian army or people- well, like my cousin, but I feel like my cousin just, like, lied a lot about like the difficulty of it because it wasn't that difficult. It was just basic training. In my opinion basic training is supposed to be challenging, but it's supposed to show to the individual that, "Hey, you can do this if you put enough effort into it." But yeah, I mean I wasn't, like, in bad shape. I think when I went to basic training I was about- I was skinny. I was like 140 pounds, maybe something like that, and just I didn't think it would be too difficult. Like well before I joined, I remember the recruiter having me do, like- it wasn't even like the- because there's like the APFT test where you have to like- the Army Physical Fitness Test, I think that's what the acronym stands for. But it was like the- usually, so when you're actually in the army, you have to do like two miles, push-ups, and sit-ups. And, you know, however many you do, like, for the sit-ups and push-ups and how fast you can run that determines your grade out of 300, 300 being the best. But he had me do, I don't know I forget, like maybe like 10 or 20 push-ups and 10 or 20 sit-ups. So it wasn't like

anything crazy, which is not even, like, a passing grade in AFPT. It wouldn't be a passing grade. But yeah, it wasn't that difficult. And then when I got to basic training, I mean, like I said, it wasn't that bad. It was just I wasn't, like, strong for like strength. I didn't really have too much upper-body strength. But it was like, after that- I mean the first day, I don't know how many push-ups we did. Well the first- well, let me take that back actually. So the first kind of, like, couple days or maybe a week, you're kind of in this in-processing phase where nothing really happens. You're just there kind of getting shots, getting paperwork done, all that stuff. And then once you transition from that, you kind of go into, like, this other like holding area where they get ready and put you into, like, when they're going to bring you to whatever, like what company you're going to be in. So, and then when we finally get to the company it's like, you know, you have all your stuff and they have you either hold out your stuff for something- basically they put you in a circle. They make sure you don't have any contraband- stuff like that. Then when- like most of the time, I would imagine that probably people had contraband or they'll find something and then they'll make you do push ups or, like, remedial training or whatever you want to call it. That first day you definitely started, like, increasing your strength and stuff like that because you start doing a lot of push-ups.

JS: Did you have like a daily routine or like a specific role that you played at Fort Benning while you were there?

SO: So, a daily routine? I mean, I mean it was just like everything else. So it's like, we would- I'm not sure when we woke up. We woke up early. I mean for me, because back before the army, I just slept until whenever. I woke up pretty much whenever I wanted to or whenever I had to work, you know. But it was definitely earlier than that. But then the biggest thing that I remember and the thing that like kind of really at least got to me, it was just like, it was a sleep deprivation portion of it because we would have to do, like, fire guard it was called. So fire guard is basically, like, you're just watching the barracks and making sure, like wherever everybody's sleeping, and you're just making sure that everything is fine. That's pretty much the basics of it. And then, so you would do that, and I think I wanna say we had two people doing that. I think it was two, maybe it was a little bit more than that. But anyways, so it would be me, somebody would be like sitting down, then they would have like a roaming one where you just roamed around in a circle. I'm not sure if we did that all the time, the roaming one. But we definitely had two people up. I'm pretty sure it was two. So, and then they would kind of- so when you would go through that training it would, I'm not sure how to say this- so I mean my actual kind of role, I don't think I had, like, a specific role. It was just, you know, somebody in training or whatever you want to call it. But, I mean, there was a time, like- so I mean I wasn't, like I said, I didn't know anything about the army. I never held a gun before the army. I never did anything like that. When I went there I think I might have been like a team leader, or like a squad leader, for like a day or something like that, maybe a week.

JS: How was that?

SO: I mean, it wasn't anything. It was just basically like you just have to be- I think at that point you just have to make the guys get all their gear and, you know, all their whatever they needed for them to wake up at the time. But I mean I wasn't ready for anything like that at that time. I just didn't really- I didn't really care too much. I just kind of wanted to get it over with because like I said, it was easy, but it was just kind of one of those things like where- well, I don't want to say it was easy, it was just, it wasn't as difficult as I thought it was because actually I- to get back to how I thought, like- so basically, everything that I knew about the military, about basic training was from my older generation. So in my head, I thought when we would get to basic training they would, like, hit us and do all these things, you know, like crazy things like that. And it was nothing like that. So that was why, to me, it seemed a lot easier maybe because I was expecting like a level of difficulty a lot higher than what it was, which it wasn't.

JS: So, you can say it didn't really meet your expectations?

OS: Yeah. Yeah.

JS: What kind of role did you have once you were deployed in Baghdad?

OS: So I was a team leader, so I was like a fresh team leader. So my original unit was, I was- so right after basic training I went to Fort Irwin, California and I was in the 11th ACR, Armored Cavalry Regiment. And so I spent like two years over there and then I went to- I reenlisted to go to Fort Drum, and when I went to Fort Drum I was there for about two weeks and then I went to Iraq with them. And I just picked up my specialist and then when I got to Fort Drum and I got to Iraq, they didn't have enough team leaders or like NCOs, non-commissioned officers. So they gave me a, what is it, like a lateral promotion to corporal. So I was a corporal with them and just like, so it kind of changed. So, at first I was like a dismounted team leader. Then I was a truck commander. And those are pretty much the roles I had over there.

JS: So how much weight do you think fell on your shoulders once you reached the rank of sergeant?

SO: Well, so sergeant actually- so I got sergeant, it was kind of like one of those- how do I say this? So basically I got promoted, like, right when I was getting out. So sergeant- I wasn't really like in that rank for long.

JS: Okay, so what about corporal then?

OS: Corporal, I mean it was- so basically, like a corporal is kind of like you have the same duties and responsibilities as a sergeant, but you don't get the pay and then you don't get like the

recognition. That's what a lot of people- it's like, you deal with all the shit but you don't, you know- like, let's say, because a lot of times because it's still an E4, and so and so when anything comes down, like, like there's some stupid detail that needs to be done. They're always like, "Well, let's get an E4. Let's get a corporal do it. Like because none of us, like the higher sergeants or whatever, want to do it." So that was- but I do remember like, so like it wasn't like the first patrol that I was in, but it was, I remember it because my time in Iraq, it wasn't, it wasn't like crazy. And I was there in '08, like around- when did I go- like, man I don't remember, like April-ish- around this time I went there, or even May. April-May. But it wasn't bad. It wasn't like, you know. But so it was the first time when, like, we got like shot at and I just remember getting out of the truck because we were like getting ready to either like figure, like- because like we were getting shot at and we're like shit, are we going to assault this place or like this building or whatnot. And I just remember that time, like it was just kind of like, like, I don't know like something like just was- like that was the weight. That was like the biggest thing. It wasn't like the duty like, like the- the whatever extra shit that you had to do. It was just like, the stuff that, like, I realized like the, like- because I had guys, you know. I have like a team and, like, if I was just like, shit, they die on me and I'm like, like- I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, you know what I mean? But like- but at the same time I remember, like, we were- so Oakley, he was like- he was the other corporal, like me and him were just promoted, and he- he ran up to me with his team and he was like, "Dude, what are we going to do?" And I'm like- like I just remember that feeling and I'm like, "Shit I don't know." And then all of a sudden, like everything just, like all the training, just went into play and I was like, "Okay, we're going to do this and this and this." And like after that it just kind of went smoothly. But, you know, so it was just kinda like one of those- like, I feel like that's like the weight on my shoulders was like always like thinking about that. Not necessarily you know, like the extra responsibilities or whatever. But yeah.

JS: So what was your- what was your first day like in Baghdad? Do you remember?

SO: In Baghdad- okay so we flew in on, like an AC 130 or something like that, from Kuwait. I'm just trying to like- it was still daylight out, I remember that. But we flew into, I guess- what would you call it- Victory Base Complex, VBC, which is kind of like in the Baghdad airport. I flew in there, like, these buses came, picked us up. [laughs] Like, I was expecting like we were going to fly in, there was going to be like rockets coming in and all that. [laughs] But we just flew in there and it was like, nothing, you know. It was just, that was it. Like we flew in, they picked us up on these buses. They're like, "Hey." It was kind of like in-processing, basically to like another unit. Like they- they were like, "Okay" I don't know, I don't remember exactly, but like they just told you like, "Hey, this is what you're going to do this and this and this," Like where you're going to stay. So we got in the tents. I think, I think that first day though, I think there was like, like a rocket attack or something like that and that was about it. But when I say, like a rocket attack I think it was just like one rocket or something like that and it was like, in the far distance.

JS: Did the media portray it [the war] in a way you feel was accurate? Did you ever watch the news and see news coverage of the war going on? At that time during the-

SO: At that time, during-?

JS: During that time or before, even.

SO: Honestly, at that time I'd- we had such a busy schedule during that time. I didn't really, like--literally we slept for a little bit. We always, like, ran patrols or something, so we didn't really have time to do anything like that during that time. I probably didn't really give a shit what they were saying, honestly. Before that- yeah, like I've just never really paid attention to them to be honest with you.

JS: Was it just for- you know, did you just not pay attention for certain reasons? Obviously, you said you didn't really have time for it-

SO: Yeah during that- like just in general. I mean, I do have that like idea of the media, like, they do- there's probably a lot of stories. Well, okay, yeah. So I guess if you really want to get into that, like, there's definitely shit that they- but that's like the whole government, I feel like that they- they don't tell people what's going on. And like there's definitely things that are not said to the public. And I don't know, because I feel like sometimes like if people find out maybe they'll be like, "Hey, like, you know we're not really like the best people, like the best country" You know? Well, like our ideas of what's right and wrong is not really what we believe, or like what's actually happening. Sorry, not what we believe. But yeah, so-

JS: Can you describe the IDF for me and, you know, how that may have strengthened or changed your view on how the war was going?

SO: The idea of how the war was going?

JS: Sorry, so can you describe the IDF?

SO: Oh, IDF?

JS: IDF.

SO: Oh, like indirect fire.

JS: Yeah.

SO: I mean a lot of times. So basically what happens is there's just like some kind of siren that goes off and there's- ah shit what is it called? Damn, I don't know. But it's basically this huge, like, mini-gun and they just, like- they have like their own little sensors that they kind of triangulate where there's a rocket coming in or a mortar or something like that. And then they just, like, fire off that. One of the things that because we had like also, like our- so, I was on a task force. It was task force vigilance and one of our roles was kind of like perimeter security. So whenever something like that would happen, there's usually like they would send us out to wherever. So like, let's say a rocket lands. So you would find out where the rocket lands and then you would fill out, like do a report and then use that report to kind of like figure out, like, where it came from and then you go in, you know. Or somebody else would go and figure out if the people are still there that shot. So that was pretty much my experience. I mean honestly- and then like after a while, like you just- there wasn't- I think you kind of just get desensitized to it because like, there's a lot of times, like, it just goes off, you know, and nothing happens, like for me at least, like nothing happened. A lot of times it was just kind of like, it would go off and like it might- because it was like a big base and would go off and maybe it would hit somewhere, somewhere really far and that was it. After awhile you just kinda don't care, you know? Because you're kind of like, what's the- what are the odds if haven't hit us yet. So, you know.

JS: Yeah, so you just wonder, "Are we safe?" You said you become desensitized to it. Do you ever worry that, you know, maybe one of these days or one of those times you weren't going to be safe from anything like that?

SO: I never thought about it, personally. No, I don't think I ever really thought about it to be honest with you. Because it was, like I said, at the time that I was there, there was like maybe like a handful of things that ever really happened that were like really, you know, you would say they were bad. So it was just like, in my mind- I don't know because it was kind of like it was a part of the job I guess you could say. Like, that's what I always thought about it. Kind of like that.

JS: So when did you finally leave Iraq?

SO: That was, like, around like May or June 2009.

JS: How did it feel getting on- I'm assuming you were on plane coming back? How did it feel getting on a plane and coming back?

SO: Well actually no, we were on- so when we left there, like we were on Blackhawks- [inaudible] We kind of just like, because at that point we were in- so what happened was, in Baghdad, like so in January 2009, they sign, like, that some basically like new ROEs [Rules of Engagement]. Like the president of Iraq and I think the president of, like Bush or maybe

whoever- I don't know who made the decisions, but you know. So basically they said something either about like, not necessarily like a draw down, but it was more or less kind of like, they restructured our rules of engagement and like what we were able to do. And basically, I mean they were winding down Baghdad at that point already or they were initializing the wind down of Baghdad I believe. Or like kind of like bringing it back to- because I think how it worked, I wasn't there for that portion of it, but I think they brought everything down, like, kind of like from all the way from the city, from the country down to Basra. And so anyways, we went to Basra and because there was nothing really going on in Baghdad anymore especially. I think that happened like around January. So it was after, like, my leave I took leave around January-ish and then I came back. Yeah. And then shortly after that we were like, "Hey, let's hop down to Basra." And it was only like a small group of us that went initially. And then after that, yeah, so when we ended up leaving, we just went on Blackhawks to Kuwait. In Kuwait, we kind of have this time where we, should I say, this- basically like a cool-off stage, you know. You kind of met with- like we kind of met with some psychologists, maybe some medical people and I think that was maybe something like that. And then it was just basically relax. I remember spending the whole time at, like MWR, NWR, at that base and we just, like, played video games the whole time. For like, let's say like a week. And then after that, we got on the plane and either went to Germany or England and then hopped over to Fort Drum.

JS: Wow. How was the reception when you came back?

SO: I mean it was just people in the army. I mean like, it was very quick, like they just grabbed our guns, and like our rifles and that was it. They kind of just, like- there were people, like, waiting there like, "Hey, sign your leave papers and get outta here." Well it wasn't leaving. It was a four day pass that they gave us. Four day pass. Then I got home, I called my parents and they drove up to pick me up. I spent the week, or at least a couple days back home and then I went back and that was it.

JS: Was it hard re-adjusting back to civilian life?

SO: I mean, here and there. Like when I was like- when I first got back I think, like it was kind of just weird. It was just like, because the things that we did. It was like, it was so engraved and those things, yeah they're hard to like, hard. Like, you have to like, think about it. You know, like, "Okay, I'm not here or I'm not there." But it was kind of like- like driving, let's say, like whenever we would pass through like an overpass. So we would also always try to vary our- so like if we would come in on the left side, we would swerve going to, or exit on the right side. Or, you know, vice versa. And that was done. So basically because there was, like, a lot of people or there were reports of people like dropping grenades, or something like that, from overpasses or some kind of explosives. And so that was done so they couldn't really guess where we were doing that. So it's just, like, stupid stuff like that that we would do. So it's like, when you kind of

get used to things like that, you kind of just do that. And then it was just a lot of times when we were driving around we would be like vigilant for certain things that, like, we were like, “Hey, this might be something, this might be something.” So those are the things that like- so basically like hyper-awareness I think that that was the thing. That was the biggest thing. That was a difficult thing to adjust and, you know, being in crowds. I remember that was, like, a big thing for me, too. It just takes time and kind of, you know, get to live life. I don’t know, just to go out and do stuff. [inaudible]

JS: So on your bio form you wrote that you worked in loss prevention in 2014. Can you tell me a little bit about what that is?

SO: So yeah. So, I worked at Nordstrom, Nordstrom Rack, in Boston, Boylston Street. And so basically it was just guys- so basically we were just kind of in charge of protecting store assets I guess you could say, and so if anybody- I mean a lot of times, so basically they were just like shoplifters. Catch shoplifters. That was the basics of it.

JS: Can you tell me about your college career so far and, you know, how it might or how it will lead you into the field of finance?

SO: Yeah so, so far so I mean- I guess college was kind of like- I told you about my history with school. It wasn’t really- so when I first left the army I kind of wanted to go into, like, contracting or some kind of work like that. I didn’t really- so I left in like the end of November, I was out of the Army in 2001. And I didn’t really have anything else to do and I was applying for these contracting places but, or companies, and nobody was really, you know, responding to me. So I knew that I had the GI Bill and my cousin who was already out of the Marines, he told me he was like, “Hey, you know you get some money if you go back to school. Like you get a statement every month so it can hold you over until you find something.” So I kind of went with that. I went to North Shore Community College and took some classes. I didn’t know what to expect because I didn’t like school, you know, at least from what I remember in high school I hated that stuff. But it was fine. It was even fun, I would say. And so I kind of just continued with that. Yeah, so on the- at first, so I went to- so I finished at North Shore Community College. I went to Bentley, had like, some personal problems. So I guess like it was still like kind of like, you know. Like at that time, like when I was first getting all, like, I don’t know, I just wasn’t- so I guess I should have, I don’t know if I should mention it, but well- so after I got back from Iraq we didn’t have, we didn’t have any casualties when we were in Iraq. But after, when we got back one of our- so one of my guys, basically one of my guys who was on my team, he ended up killing two other guys, two of our other guys. So it was Hunter, who was my saw gunner and then, or my dismount saw gunner, and I had, when we were mounted was my machine gunner. So it was- so he killed him and he killed another guy who was from a different platoon. Yeah both, so I don’t really know why. But he did that and that was hard. That was hard because, you

know, it was kind of like the day before he did it, like I kind of knew something was up, but it was just, I didn't really do anything about it. So yeah, so that was like a hard- a hard pill to process. But so yeah, when I got out the army it was kind of like that was like mostly, like, what was really fucking me up. It was kind of like not taking action in those situations. In that situation, and yeah. So I did, like, have like- I started drinking a lot, started doing stuff like that. So basically I had, like, an OUI [Operating Under the Influence citation]. I had other run-ins with the police and that's why I ended up, like, leaving. Well, one of the reasons why I ended up leaving was because it was just kind of like- things weren't, like, perfect, you know what I mean. So, I withdrew from there and then later on- so I took some time off from school, I don't know, like five months or something like that. Then I came over here because I have, like, a friend that was going here, too that was pretty good, so you know. And there's actually things that are good about, kind of schools like this. What I would say, like a school like Bentley, what it really lacked was, like, the veteran community. So I think I was like maybe one of, when I first started going to Bentley, I was one of two veterans and then after like- you know, when I left, I think I was like one of four. And when I was at North Shore, that's actually what made it easier for me to, or what made me like going to school was because like every time before class and after class I would go hang out at the Veterans Center over there. And so I kind of like- it was like an easy transition because I was just talking with people that like knew, you know. That were like in the military, too.

JS: Can say you had a support system at each university, right?

SO: Right. Well, besides Bentley. And yeah, so- but you know, like I came here and like I said, I knew people here, so it was good. And then I finished up my bachelor's over here, and went on to my master's.

JS: Would you encourage anyone coming, like from your story, you know, coming from high school to enlist in the military? And what advice would you give them?

SO: Yeah, no I definitely would. I think- I mean, I would not, I don't know what I would be doing if I didn't go into the Army. I mean, like- I mean I was doing construction but that, you know. It's good money, but it depends on, you know. But yeah, the army was just like- it's hard to explain. But like I guess, like, maybe like the best, maybe like generic kind of thing, I mean the Army kind of gave me like, structure. I didn't really know how to prioritize, like things like goal setting, you know, things like that. But the Army definitely kind of teaches you, like, there's a mission that needs to be done. And I think that's kind of what I've been- what I was lacking. Definitely. Let's say prior to the military when I was in high school and, you know, other school like that. I think that was like my biggest thing. I just either didn't go to class or if I had assignments, homework, I wouldn't do it. But now with that, you know, I learned that skill set, I

guess through the military where it was just like, "Hey, there's a mission and you gotta do it." There was homework and you got to do it. There's this project, you've got to do it. I definitely would recommend it. I mean there's- it all depends on the individual basically, you know. Some people don't need the military, I think. I mean some people- it's kinda like this: like I feel like a lot of people say, like, you know you need to go to college, or you need to do this, or you need to do that. Like some people need to go into the military. It helps them out. Some people need to go to college, you know. It will help them. And some people don't need to go to college. Maybe they might need to go to trade school and maybe they're like Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg that don't need to go to college and they'll be fine. Everybody's different and I think people just need to evaluate their case, like their situation, like case by case and figure out like if the military is something for them. And I mean, have like a legitimate reason to go, I guess. You know, it is a commitment at the same time. There was definitely a lot of people that kind of, that I saw in the military, that kind of go into the military and then they either they got weeded out in basic training or they got weeded out in their first unit or something like that. But it's just because they're not- it's an organization and just like any other organization, any kind of big business. Like, some people make it and some people rise through the ranks. Same thing with like, I would say, if you work for, I don't know, maybe like big organization, Google or something. Some people might come in as like, I don't know, like engineers, software engineers, but they can't cut it and then they get fired or whatever. They leave. Other people can and they rise through the ranks, too so it's just like another place like that. I think that's like the biggest thing though. It's people- like the fit. It's like people need to kind of- it's not just like a job, it's more of like it becomes part of you. Like, that was the other thing that I felt like when I left, I felt like something was missing, you know, because I wasn't- like, it sounds- so I was always like, you know, I was never one of those people that like, looked for praise. I was never one of those people that like- I never even was like, "Oh, do you guys have a military discount?" I've never said stuff like that. Like I didn't really care about advertisement and stuff, but it was just, it was like- it's hard to explain, but it was like I was, you know, I was Sergey Onohkin who was, you know, an infantryman in the army. Like that was my identity and then it was just kind of like after I left the army I was just like, Sergey Onohkin. [laughs] What the fuck is that? After so long, you-

JS: Would you want your kids to enlist in the military or would you steer them away from it?

SO: I wouldn't steer them away from it, but yeah I mean I, like I said, I think it's a great, like it just depends on a person, but I think it's great. But I wouldn't specifically say, like, stay away from it. I don't think I would tell that to anybody. I think, you know, just evaluate your needs and what you, you know- why are you joining?

JS: What about your opinion on the war? Has it changed ever since you left Iraq? Being on the outside rather than being on the inside.

OS: How- you mean like was it, were like, should we have been there? Is that what you're asking?

JS: I suppose so, yeah. Has it changed? Like since, you know, before you joined or after?

SO: I guess I don't want to- okay so, before I joined, I thought that we, you know, yeah we should've been. I think at that point everybody thought, "Okay, we need to go into Iraq." I mean like, and then, you know, I hear reports and things, like that that say, you know, things were falsified or things were not really as they seemed. And that's hard to think that there's so many people that died for nothing, that I think it's just better to think that- I don't know. It's just- because it's like at the same, like I have had friends that died in Iraq that, you know, it'd be kind of fucked up if, you know, they died for no reason. Which I mean most likely is, yeah but you never know.

JS: Would you ever reenlist? Consider it?

SO: Yeah! Oh yeah, you know, like, right now- I mean like I'm still looking for work right now. And that's one of the options I'm considering right now. I'm trying to see what I can do. I'm just hoping that, like, any kind of legal issues that I had in the past they won't kind of come back and bite me if I decide to do that because I feel like I've learned a lot of new skills after, you know, from college. So I feel like I can definitely utilize those in the Army or- [inaudible]

JS: Would you go back into the infantry or take up something new?

SO: You know, I just- I can't imagine doing anything else besides that to be honest with you. Like that's like- you know we have this saying, like basically there's like infantry and then there's everybody else in the Army. Or like, there's basically like infantry is the only job in the Army. And the saying was something different and I kind of butchered it. But anyways, because I think it's probably a little longer. But yeah, I don't know and I thought about that, but it's just nothing really would appeal to me in the, in the army, like doing something else. But yeah.

JS: So if there's one thing you'd like to tell anyone who watches this recording about services and military, what would it be?

SO: Service and the military- I think for me, in my case it was just, like, the best experience of my life. I think it's not, it's- like I said before, it's more than just a job. It's also you meet awesome people there. Some of the best people that I've ever known and it's just- yeah, I think like there are bad times in the military, there was good times in the military, but I don't remember any of the bad times. Like I don't remember any of the bad times. About the war- I

mean, even I don't know, like, about Iraq. Iraq was just like- it's a country just like anywhere else. I mean that's what I remember. I mean we drove around all over the place. I went through- I mean, yeah there's completely different than America, I would say. But basically it's just people everywhere. I feel like, I don't know, that there's a lot of stuff like in the media maybe right now about like, what's it called- but I feel like there's just too much negativity in the media right now and like just, we're all people at the end of the day and it doesn't matter where you're from. Even that there were, there were good people in Iraq, there were bad people in Iraq and I've seen what bad people can do in Iraq and I've seen what good people can do in Iraq.

JS: Well Sergey, thank you so much for your time and the amazing opportunity for this interview.