

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

Scarborough, Crystal

U.S. Army, SGT 89B (Ammunition SPC)

Interviewer:

Interview conducted by Mr. Shamus MacDonald, Salem State University, on 04/05/2018

Summary of transcript:

Crystal was born on October 18th, 1990 in Fitchburg, MA. She joined the Army after high school, and was the only student from her graduating class to do so. She was a Sargant 89 B, and was first stationed at Fort Knox in human resources, but then as an Ammunitions Specialist while stationed at Fort Drum, where she also held a position as NCO. She served in Afghanistan between 2010 to 2011 where she was part of a female engagement team. Of her experiences, Crystal appreciates most that the military provided her with the desire to “complete missions to standard” in all tasks including school work. Her interview portrays her desire to stay positive even when in a precarious environment, how she has balanced personal life with the military, and how her transition back into civilian life includes seeking a degree that will lead to a career in human resources. Crystal is married to another veteran, and they have a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter together.

Crystal Scarborough

Narrator

Shamus MacDonald

Salem State University

Interviewer

April 5th, 2018

at Salem State University

Salem, Massachusetts

Shamus MacDonald: Hello, Crystal. Thank you for coming in.

Crystal Scarborough: Hi, thanks.

SM: So, can you tell us a little bit about your hometown, and what it was like growing up there?

CS: I'm from Gardner, Mass, like in the middle of Massachusetts, and it's very kind of in the woods and [a] little old town with, like- they still have the old buildings everywhere. And no busses or like, for the high schoolers, no busses. Just quiet. And, like, my graduating class there was only me and one other person that was joining the military, and everyone else was going to school. And then that one person didn't even join the military. [laughs]

SM: So, what got you interested to join the military and specifically why the army?

CS: So, this might sound horrible, but at the time I had a boyfriend and he was going in, and I didn't want, like, to just be a tagalong, so I was like: "I'll join with you." And then he couldn't get in and I got in. So, then he was kind of the tagalong, but he went to go see the army recruiter, and if I'd had a chance I probably would have went [pause] Air Force or Navy. [laughs]

SM: How'd your family feel about your decision to enlist?

CS: My mom was excited about it. She wanted to do it when she was my age, and my dad was really upset. I was a daddy's girl, and he didn't talk to me for a while, until my mom somewhat calmed him down. And now he's just happy I'm almost out.

SM: So, what was boot camp like? How different from your expectations was it?

CS: I honestly didn't know anything about the military before I joined in. I thought it was one person stands on one line, and another, and you guys just shoot muskets at each other. So basic was a big surprise. I remember just counting "How many days left, how many days left." I was

like [groans]. This is, like, some of the craziest stuff I've been through. And they keep saying that they're supposed to break you down, and build you up, and it definitely felt like that. [laughs]

SM: So, did you -during boot camp, or any time in the military- did you feel or experience any unique challenges because of your gender?

CS: I think every spot I went to, especially when I deployed. My unit was already deployed, so I was a late deployer. So, they're already kind of in the rhythm, and it was an all guys, because munitions is mostly guys to begin with, so I went in as the only female. And they, they- I kind of had to, like, prove myself to them for like half the time that I could do what they were doing. Like, they would have missions with two people but they would send me by myself on, like, one mission. So, after a while they're like "Oh, okay, she's not just joking around" and I guess I proved myself [laughs]

SM: So, what was your first assignment after boot camp?

CS: My first assignment was Fort Knox, Kentucky, the infantry unit. And I was there for a month, maybe less, and then deployed.

SM: What did you do at Fort Knox?

CS: At Fort Knox I did human resources. Like all the making sure everyone was there, and updating records, and ...office stuff. [laughs]

SM: So, then you became an ammunitions specialist. What were your duties as such?

CS: Well, when I was deployed we worked in the ASP, we controlled all the ammunition there, Ammunition Supply Point. And then I didn't really get to do it much in Kentucky, but then I got stationed at Fort Drum, and that's all we did was ammunition. But we were an aviation unit, so it was mostly like driving ten trucks out to the range with a bunch of ammunition, and loading it on the birds, and not really any of the small stuff, just fun.

SM: How did you end up being an ammunitions specialist?

CS: I didn't know any jobs at all when, like, I joined. And then I had to take the ASVAB[Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] test, which is like a technical test you have to take for the military, and they said with my scores, like, they weren't, like, the highest or anything like that. So it was that, a cook, or a fueler. And cook and a fueler didn't sound as fun as playing with ammunition, so I chose ammunition.

SM: So, what was your deployment at Afghanistan like?

CS: It was challenging and exciting. It was definitely, like, it's just you, and you have to worry about yourself when you're there. So, I had to learn a lot about myself, that I could pretty much accomplish things I didn't think I could. I didn't think I could go and deploy, like that sounded crazy to me. But I feel like I got, like, I accomplished and yeah. It was different. I got to do some missions as part of the female engagement team, which is they separate the males and the

females, and a male military person cannot search a female, so that's when I would come in and search the females.

SM: And how did your deployment in Afghanistan compare to your expectations?

CS: I was petrified when they told me I was deploying. I was like "oh, my gosh," I didn't think it was actually going to happen. And I didn't know how it was, kind of- our FOB[Forward Operating Base] was situated with mountains all around it and we were just kind of ants just waiting to be stepped on. It felt like they were just- the first time I got there we got mortared seven times that day. And it was, like, run to the bunkers all the time, and check if everyone is safe. And then, like, if your outgoing, which is like shooting to them, and it's so much. The noise is scarier than anything I've ever heard. Like, just shakes your body the noise was so loud.

SM: Is that something you ever got used to?

CS: Yeah. Yeah, actually, I did. There's a lot of times, like, you're working a long time in the hot sun, and you're just so tired at night. You don't even sometimes hear it. Like, sometimes people didn't even, when incoming or outgoing, leave their rooms, because just so tired. [laughs]

SM: So how did you feel about the war in Afghanistan before you joined the military?

CS: So, I tried to keep away from reading too much stuff. I didn't want to scare myself. Like, I knew there was a chance. And I just got out of basic and AIT [Advanced Infantry Training], and so I didn't really have an opportunity to read up on it. I just knew, like, the week before I was supposed to leave, one of the soldiers that was deployed there, he got incoming and he got hit and died. So before I even got there I was like "Oh no, like, I'm just going in to be an ant like pretty much." So, yeah.

SM: So, it's fair to say that your military experience changed the way you viewed war in general?

CS: Yes, I definitely thought it was a lot different from, like, movies that you see. Like, when I see movies sometimes I laugh like "oh it's not like that." Like they just show you, like, going in these houses and walking on the streets and stuff like that and there are times it's like that. But then there's also times when it's nice. Like you just get to look, like, Afghanistan in the morning. Like, sun coming over the mountains and it's just calm. Or if you look in the sky at the stars, like, because there's not many vehicles you see, like, all the stars. It's like, you can almost touch the sky. So, it's nice to be able to make some positive out of something that's negative I guess.

SM: So, you think looking for the positive helped you cope with being over there?

CS: Yes. Yes, definitely.

SM: So, what was your main takeaway from the Afghani people?

CS: I thought they were like- well, the ones I got to talk with, they were really nice. They always wanted to have me to eat with them, and their food tasted so good. I was- probably shouldn't have ate it, like, but it's rude to say no, so. And it tasted amazing. I wish I could know what was in their food. And then they always want to give gifts and they don't expect anything back. Like

I would get, like, jewelry and I'm like "No, I can't take that." Or just flowers, or nice gestures. I don't know, maybe because I was a female, but they were always just so nice.

SM: Is there a food you miss the most, a food that stands out?

CS: Yes. The food. Like, they would- there was a time that they were building a pad for us, for our trucks. And, like, we always hired them to work. And, like, we watched over them, and it was my turn to watch over them and they would, like, crouch down and cooked their food and offer me some and so they'd be eating, and I'd be like "Yay, my turn to watch them!" But then there were definitely some other experiences. Like, they would just change right in front to you. And it's like, "Oh! oh!" Like no warning. But, they're very open too.

SM: So, your husband was in the army?

CS: Yes.

SM: What was it he'd do in the army?

CS: He was a fueler.

SM: Okay.

CS: Yeah.

SM: And how did you guys meet?

CS: We met at Fort Knox. At that time I was working in the office and I helped in-process him, and he needed his records updated. So, I was updating his records and calling him an "old man." And he had a question about a promotion. He was going to the promotion board and I was the person, like, that was running the promotion board, and he asked "Hey, when is it?" and "What time?", even though he knew, but yeah it was a way to talk to me. [laughs]

SM: So, did you guys serve in Afghanistan at all together?

CS: No, we didn't. So, I deployed, like, right when I got there. I got back to Fort Knox, and then there was another deployment that he went on, but I didn't get to go on. I was dealing with, like, divorce and stuff like that, so they're like, "Oh, hey, we don't need your MOS[Military Occupational Specialty] anyways. Stay back and take care of that." So-

SM: And you're happy about that?

CS: Yes. Like, it was sad that I didn't get to go, but I needed to take care of some stuff. And it would have been way crazier and more difficult to deal with it then.

SM: So, how do you feel that your military service training impacted your return to civilian life?

CS: So, that's- can you repeat that?

SM: Sorry [inaudible]. How do you feel the training you received from the military impacted your life afterwards?

CS: I'm definitely- I don't, like, have the correct political term to say it, but I don't half-ass my work now. Like in the military you learn to complete the mission to standard. And, like, I get below a ninety and I'm freaking out, asking the professor for extra credit. Like, I don't like to accept below standard I guess. And I think before I joined the military, like, I didn't really care. I just was waiting for school to be done, and now it's like something that, like, I put a lot of effort into, I guess.

SM: So, do you keep in contact with any of your former friends, or anybody you served with in the military?

CS: A lot of them. My best friend is in Kentucky. She got out, and she stayed there. And I can't even tell how many times we talk a week on the phone or message, or there's not one day we don't talk. And then, my unit at Fort Knox, they're- they try to do reunions because that unit deactivated, so they try to do the unit reunions for Lieutenant Welch. [He] was the person that died before I went there. They do, like, ruck marches for him. And it's also like a Fort Knox 204SBU reunion. And then, my unit at Fort Drum- I was the NCO [Non-commissioned Officer] when I went to Fort Drum, so they were kind of like my children. So, they, like, message me like, "Hey I went to the promotion board," or, "Hey I did this" and I'm always like congratulating them, and yeah. [laughs]

SM: So, what made you want to attend college?

CS: So, both with me and my husband both being in the military and having a daughter, he was about to- or I was deploying, he was going to deploy like in like towards the end of my deployment and I was going to be deploying again. And we have a 2-year-old daughter, so it was going to be, like, really hard for us to, like, see each other and also our daughter. So, we figured we both get out and do something, like, that we love. Because he was a fueller and he didn't feel like he was contributing, so he's going to school for nursing now. And then I felt like ammunition was a job that I really couldn't transfer to the civilian world. So I looked around Massachusetts and tried to see, like, the best veteran friendly [school], and Salem State, like, blew all the other schools away, so.

SM: What makes Salem State superior in that regard?

CS: Well, definitely the money. We get paid the same amount as, like, Boston would. They have the yellow ribbon program. Like, our tuition is paid for, books. We get a scholarship like every semester. It's like four hundred bucks but still nice. It's money. And then I didn't know about the veteran's communities that they had until I actually got here, and those were, like, the best thing ever. Because it's really hard adjusting from the military into the civilian world, and you have other veterans that are also adjusting, too. And I just felt like when I was transferring over, like, my emotions were, like, crazy. Like, the school really wants you to express yourself. And I definitely learned to express myself and it was nice to have other veterans to talk to and be like, oh. One of our things was a writing class, and it was nice to hear their stories, too. I didn't feel like I was- in other classes, it's not all veterans. Like, I have a creative writing class, and there's no veterans, and, like, I have to filter sometimes, like, what I say because sometimes it might upset somebody that's never been there or [doesn't] understand death or yeah. [laughs]

SM: So, what is the most difficult part of transitioning from the military to college?

CS: [pause] I think adjusting to probably, like, the students I didn't understand. Like, in the military you get made fun of if, like, you show your feelings and stuff. And then here there, like, was somebody that was offering hugs. Free hugs. And then, after Hill- Trump got elected, there was counselling for those who needed it. And I just didn't understand, like, how people can feel so passionate and upset about that. So, trying to understand feelings I guess sort of, because I've always just compacted them, and still compact them, and it's just difficult trying to express it I guess.

SM: Do you feel you have the outlets around here to help you emotionally reach out?

CS: There's definitely enough, like, support, stuff like that. I should use it more, but like I always get emails and it's just, like, let me find time, and- it just gets pushed on the back burner.
[laughs]

SM: So, what are your career goals?

CS: I am going for business, or majoring in business, with a concentration in human resource. And then I'm thinking a minor in finance, because I've been taking a finance class and it's like super exciting. It's like a puzzle. And I love doing it so, I might add that into there, but I really want to work in, like, a firm, like a big business. And I feel like in a lot of big businesses there's not people that are, like, happy and it's just like, "Ugh, another day." I want to be, like, able to brighten up people's days, and help people if there's issues, or hiring, and all that fun stuff.

SM: So, are there programs in place that would help you get jobs being a veteran?

CS: I'm pretty sure there are. I haven't, like, really focused much on it. I always get emails. I know there's so many, like, USA jobs. I look there a lot, because they have so many prior-military jobs. I know my professor, like, emails us, like, job offerings and, like, information stuff, so.

SM: And have you ever considered reenlisting? Or would you ever consider reenlisting?

CS: [Laughs] I've been dealing with that lot lately. I get out of the reserves- so from getting out of active duty was really hard, because the military was the only job I ever knew. So I was like, "Oh, I'll do the reserves" to slowly transition out and they're always asking me to reenlist. But if I didn't have my daughter, I probably would have stayed active duty. Because she's- yeah, she's my daughter and everything, so. But yeah, I don't think I would reenlist, unless there was no jobs for me. And then I probably would reenlist at that point, or when my daughter is older.

SM: So, what do you miss most about being active duty?

CS: I love being, like, scheduled. PT [Physical Training] in the morning was my favorite., like so many people hated waking up that early, but I'm a morning person and having that six to nine for PT was amazing. And ruck marches- I love yelling, and running, and going down the roads just trying to scream as loud as we can, cadences.

SM: So, if you could sum up your military experience in one word, sentence, or quote, what would it be? Or two is fine, too.

CS: [pause] Enjoy the ride. I think I just kept focusing on what was next, and there's definitely a lot of moments where I'd just sit and be like, "Wow this is super cool" instead of stressing about the next thing I had to do.

SM: So, the structure, the one step at a time helped you looking ahead?

CS: Yes.

SM: So, is there anything that you wish more people would understand about what it's like being a veteran returning to civilian life?

CS: I know a lot of people, like, don't want to ask veterans, like, "Hey, what happened?" or even ask them anything, like. I know I said I was a veteran in some classes and people like, switched their seats, and, like, didn't sit next to me anymore. And, I was like, "Alright..." Like, I'm not crazy, it's just I like to let people know that I'm a veteran because I'm proud of it. But I know some older- I went to a writing event, and this older veteran said that he doesn't like when people say, "Thank you for your service" because of the things he did. And I didn't understand it, because I like when people say it. It's nice, like, for people to say thank you, and- but I understand from his point of view because of the things he went through. But yeah, hearing that is nice.

SM: So, you feel sometimes like ostracized being- you said people moved away from you. What was that like to deal with?

CS: Oh I was, like, really upset. I remember, like, telling a few people, like, they don't sit next to me. I was going for education and it was a bunch of, like, students that wanted to be teachers and they, I don't know, just moved over. And like, like- I when I would, like, talk they would like be like, "Oh" Like, I had something- like, I was about to say something bad or something. Just like, "Nooo." Like, I usually just say, like, if they ask if I'm a veteran, but now I kind of just don't even say it anymore.

SM: Out of protection of their feelings?

CS: Yeah. I just don't like to be judged, I think. I feel like they, like, if you say you're a veteran people think you're crazy, or-. So I just- unless somebody asks, then I'll say it. But if, like, I just mentioned it to my professor for the first time today, because I have drill this weekend. But he didn't- he was like, "I didn't know you're a veteran," and he's like, "Well, this person's a veteran, why don't you act like him?" And I was like that's exactly why: because they think all veterans act the same way. Because this one guy talks about explosions and bombs and, yeah.

SM: So, you think people expect you to be a certain way because you're a veteran?

CS: Yeah.

SM: What's that like?

CS: It's really sad. Like, I wrote a poem about being a female veteran. Like, if you were on campus, like, if you'd be able to pick out female veterans. And I feel like female veterans try to blend in more. Like, I try to wear pink and be perky to blend in with the college students. Or when you see the guys with the camouflage bags or the *Nine Liner Apparel* shirt, or their dog tags hanging out, or the Oakley's, or they wear their boots. And it- I feel like I haven't seen any, like, females wearing the backpack, or the boots, or shirts that say *Nine Line*, or maybe some do but not many.

SM: So, you think writing is a healthy outlet for you to get your feelings out?

CS: Yes. There's a veteran's writing group, and it's just veterans. And it's like- it feels like therapy because you get to write, and they understand where you're coming from, and you don't have to explain the details, like, everything. Like, they understand, so-

SM: Do you ever have any desire to, like, publish that or expose people to maybe illuminate to the outside world looks like- share your writings or tend to keep them more private?

CS: I tend to keep it more private, but I know the veterans group is- they have a book that is going to be published. And it's just a mixture of things, poems, but I haven't submitted anything. [laughs]

SM: So, are you involved with any of the PFWs or -excuse me- VFWs [Veterans of Foreign Wars organization] or anything outside of campus but within the community?

CS: No, I'm not. There's one by my house, and I was going to, but I think, I don't know. I just expect I'd go in there and they'd be like, "Well, let me see your 214. You're not a veteran," or I don't know. I'd just rather not deal with that. [laughs]

SM: So is it something you think you might consider doing down the road or worry about that when you get there?

CS: Yeah probably worry when I get there I guess.

SM: And then our last question- but you kind of already answered it, but I think it's really interesting and it kind of sums up the spirit of the interview- is, what's your reaction, or you spoke of one other person's reaction, to the question about people thanking you for your service? Can you just elaborate a little more on that? It's really interesting.

CS: I really like it. Like when I first joined I would go to, like, the grocery store in my uniform to have someone say it [tugs at shirt collars as if wearing uniform], and I was just a little Private. There was one guy and I had to get dinner, and I was in my uniform after drill, and he said, "Thank you" for my service, and it was just, like, motivation I guess. But I understand other people and how, like, they've had issues, and thanking them for their service is difficult because they've had to kill somebody, and they think of that as, "Oh, thank you for killing that person." [That] is what another older gentleman told me before. And I told him that I enjoyed it. That it's just showing that there are people that appreciate veterans.

SM: So, you think some people kind of get triggered by it? It kind of- they're trying to just go about their day and get taken back to that- something that they may be trying to move on from?

CS: Yeah, that event that they experienced.

SM: Okay. So, to us what would you- should we be apprehensive, or what do we do as somebody who appreciates service but doesn't want to trigger anybody or make anybody uncomfortable?

CS: I would say, "Thank you for your service." Some veterans are just going to be unhappy. It's with anybody. They're just going to be like, "Uh..." not say anything, or there's going to be some that say, "Thank you," and they might not act like it, but they appreciate it. Because I just say, like, "Oh, thank you." But deep down I'm like, "Awe, thank you so much!" Like, you appreciate me and I'm actually, like, doing something good or feeling like I'm doing something good.

SM: On that note, thank you very much for your service. We really appreciate it. Thank you for coming in and taking time with us. I really enjoyed this experience to get your perspective

CS: Thank you.