Toni Simovski Oral History Interview

November 22, 2014

Interviewed by Jerrod Howe

Howe: Today is Saturday, November the 22nd. I'm downtown at the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in Chicago, Illinois. My name is Jerrod Howe and I'm on the phone with...would you pronounce your last name?

Simovski: Simovski.

Howe: Mr. Toni Simovski. And you're in Dearborn Heights, Michigan presently, correct?

Simovski: Yes, that is correct.

Howe: Well, thanks for taking some time this afternoon. We appreciate your willingness to share your story.

Simovski: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Howe: Thank you, sir. We're gonna dive right in. So, when and where were you born?

Simovski: I was born in Detroit, Michigan in November of 1974. My parents had immigrated from the former Yugoslavia in 1972 and we had—I had grown up Michigan most of my life. We originally lived in Detroit, then moved to a city within Detroit called Hamtramck where we had lived from 1982-1986. And that's when things got interesting, where my parents decided to move back to—when it was still Yugoslavia, still kind of a shaking turbulent time. But they decided to move back in 1986, and we had lived there until 1989. Then, things got really unstable there, beginning with a couple issues that popped up. And this was before...well, before the Bosnia conflict and the other wars with Croatian and Serbia and everything else that unfolded in the Balkans in the Nineties. My father had seen that coming, and we had seen that coming. As a family, we decided to leave because we were able to. My dad still had resident alien status at the time that we were able to come back. And then in 1989, we had come back and lived here in Dearborn Heights. Pretty much near where I had—since we came back and occasionally moved here and there, but I've come back to Dearborn Heights where I presently still reside, and I've been here since 1989.

Howe: Okay. What did your parents do for a living?

Simovski: My dad was a butcher until he lost his job in 1985 and that's sort of what spiraled his decision to make us go back to Yugoslavia. He just wanted to live there. The banks at that time were getting outrageous amounts of interest on the money, which attracted lots of commerce. But some knew what was coming. My dad and others were still in the belief “no, nothing's gonna happen.” And, of course, the banks collapsed right on the eve of the war breaking out in 1991. He was able to live off the interest, which kind of, oddly enough, was the way that we stayed there for three years in Yugoslavia. We lived in what is now Macedonia, but back then, Yugoslavia kind of had this interesting way of reimbursing people very highly with a lot of interest. But the folks here put their money in the banks and were able to just stockpile it with interest. My dad decided to use it, and we lived back there, and we had a house there. My mom worked in a plastics factory where they made parts for cars. When they came back, my dad was pretty much trying to work in—bouncing around jobs, usually out working as a cook. My mom was in a plastics factory up until she decided to retire a few years ago. At one point, we owned a restaurant, too. My dad honed his skills about being a butcher, and using his cooking stuff that he learned as a cook, so you kind of combine that and they owned the restaurant until they decided to retire, and that's where we’re at with them. And in my case, I decided to go to school. I wanted to obviously pursue better a life based on what I saw them going through. I was really passionate with social studies, and that's how I got into University of Michigan-Dearborn initially. And then, I also went to University of Michigan Ann Arbor, where I ended up getting a double major in history and political science, kind of because of where I grew up in the former Yugoslavia. We travelled quite a bit. When it was still Yugoslavia, I had learned the languages pretty well, actually. I knew Macedonian from my parents, but then I learned Serbian because one of my favorite things I used to do was listen to soccer matches from Belgrade and Serbia—which were broadcasted on the main channel—and that's how I picked up Serbian. My mom's family actually has the Serbian ancestry, so that was kind of an easy way to pick it up. And then, eventually, I learned Albanian because a lot of my teammates from the soccer and handball teams were Albanian, so I had to pick it up. We lived in a village which we did have Albanians—kind of a multi-ethnic village, which wasn't the case all throughout Macedonia because a lot of the cases were—some of these villages were kind of homogenous where you only had one group, ethnic group, living. There was a couple that were mixed, but the ethnic groups kind of kept their distance from each other, especially in that part of the Balkans there. So, that's what kind of drove my passion into getting my double major. Eventually, I got a teaching certificate, so just to make sure...that was kind of my minimal expectation. Let's see how things pan out, but I just wanted to make sure I had that. But I always kind of

knew in the back of mind that I would be teaching, so eventually, I did become a teacher after I worked with the military.

Howe: Awesome. Do you have any siblings?

Simovski: Yes. I have a brother. He's three years younger than me. He currently is a manager at a weapons parts factory, actually, here in Michigan. So, that's kind of interesting how that all panned out, but he never really pursued a degree. School wasn't his thing and he worked alongside my dad, at one point, especially the family restaurant. So, he wasn't academically inclined to say, but he did have—his one bit was that he was very good with people skills, and that was how he ended up—After my parents left the restaurant business, my brother then pursued management careers. First at Sam's Club, and then, eventually, he found this company through just his ability to work with people. I think that's why it's worked out pretty well for him. So that's what he's doing right now.

Howe: Okay. So, you mentioned some of your academic interests. I'm just curious…what was it like growing up in Michigan in the '70's, '80's, '90's?

Simovski: Well, there were times when the economies were going alright. But I do remember the late '70's…granted I was like five or six. Economically, with oil embargo going on with OPEC, and the car industry having a very difficult time. I do remember a lot of my relatives struggling, and my parents did too, for a little bit. It was not an easy time in the late '70's. Things perked up a little bit in the '80's, but then by the mid-80's, once again, some of the car issues came up in the industry. So, there's been a lot of ups and downs in Michigan. Especially in the '90's. We did have a boom with the auto industry, so a lot of things were going really well here. And then, of course, the gas prices started going up, and you can kind of see a lot of Michigan's economy is tied to the auto industry. So, when things are going well with them, things are going well with every sector of jobs here in Michigan. And then, of course, if they're going down, especially in 2008, when we had the prices—GM applied for the auto loans—there was a lot of tension, a lot of issues going on with the economy, and people losing jobs, and it was a very difficult time. So, I've seen it all from like the late '70's. From what I remember as a kid, it was the down cycle, up cycle, down again, up again. I mean, it's been kind of hectic, more so than I'd say from others places that I've visited across the U.S. It's all tied together. We've kind of become a one-industry state, and it's kind of beholden to it, unfortunately. Unlike if you go to Florida or something. You go to states that have multiple industries, and one area could be not being doing so well, but the other one is doing alright because that industry is upholding it. And that's not the case in Michigan where everything is almost

exclusively tied to the auto industry, which that's kind of what happened with these up-and-down cycles, and we kind of witnessed it.

Howe: Understood. You mentioned living in Yugoslavia for three years, so forgive me if—I'm trying to articulate this question.

Simovski: No problem.

Howe: What did your community look like as you were growing up and knowing that you'd spend a number of years here before…you're about ten, twelve years old before you moved to Yugoslavia ...

Simovski: Yeah, about eleven when I moved. We did travel quite a bit before that, starting in the late '70's and the '80's, and sort of building our house in what is now Macedonia, but back then was Yugoslavia, obviously, back in '81. And my Dad completed it in '85, '86, so he kind of had it in the back of his mind to have it as a backup plan, in case things didn't work out well. But we blended in pretty well with my family because I didn't have any academic issues because I actually was bilingual coming from here, because my dad had taught me how to read and write. And I actually picked it up pretty quickly. As soon as I got there, school began, so I didn't have that many issues blending in with some of the kids. I do remember couple kids that grew up here and went back, and they had difficulties academically, where I didn't seem to have that. I kind of blended in really well. Part of it was socially; I blended in really well. I played sports and I guess you could say, academically, I did really well. I excelled especially in the social studies area. I definitely excelled, which isn't surprising, as I'm a social studies teacher, now. But I kind of saw that I was able to really accelerate in geography, and history, and all these subjects. I competed in a lot of subjects, back when I was in Yugoslavia, and did really well, especially in geography, where I placed very high in both my region and at the republic level. So, I did pretty well, and that passion drove—the driving force behind it was just learning all the different cultures and languages and everything else that was going on in Yugoslavia, and just growing up here, too. I grew up in a lot of communities that had a lot of Macedonians and Serbians in the area, so I was always around that culture. So, that's why it wasn't so much of a difficult transition for me when I went back to Macedonia/Yugoslavia, and came back here, and readjusted fairly quickly—actually, coming back in ‘89 in the high school settings here. I remember counselors were trying to hold me back a grade, saying, "You know you haven't had any English-type courses in three years and you might not do academically well." But at the end of the first semester, they were like, “Okay, well, we apologize that we even contemplated that.” I did exceptionally well

that first semester. Okay, that would've been a mistake. Yeah, that's why I think I had an easy time transitioning back and forth. There's this term I always remembered learning in sociology class called acculturation, where you kind of mastered both cultures. I think I've kind of done that. It's kind of easy for me to transition in and out of both cultures.

Howe: Alright. What sports did you play?

Simovski: I played soccer, handball, and track. Those were my three kind of sports that I kind of excelled at—especially in soccer and handball. I was a goalie. And in track, I was really fast and could do the long jump and triple jump pretty far. I could definitely compete in those events. That got translated into here, as well. I competed in soccer and track growing up here in Michigan, as well. I remember when I was in eighth grade, I was kind of leaning towards possibly signing up with a pro-club team there, and I did, but unfortunately, I couldn't stay there because we were moving back. But that's sort of the way that things worked back in Europe, is that—here we're used to having sports in our high school settings and college settings, and in Europe, you go there, and it's like everything, you want sports that's separate. It's not connected to school, that's totally separate. You gotta sign up with a club, or you gotta pay for it, or you get paid. Actually, they pay these kids well even before eighteen. If you were playing for a professional club team, they paid you a stipend to keep you in the system. Things were kind of operated differently, definitely on the sports end there.

Howe: So, coming back from that atmosphere…a different kind of setting, in your high school years...

Simovski: Yeah.

Howe: Did you choose to focus on one area or another, or was the fact that sports was more prevalent in schools kind of conducive to allowing you to do a little bit more?

Simovski: Yeah, I kind of didn't always fit in because, culturally and ethnically, I was kind of different. Even the kids that were Macedonian and Serbian here, at times, kind of looked at me like “okay, this guy’s very ethnic and he can speak the languages really well.” I did have some transitioning issues, but the sports thing definitely kept me in line, I guess you could say—just being able to fit it. But that definitely helped a lot, you could say, playing sports. But I could also tell I definitely enjoyed my social studies class, as well. I definitely excelled more than my classmates did, so I could definitely tell that that it helped me out in high school. A lot of the kids liked having me as help, you could say, to help out in the social

studies classes. But definitely the sports angle—from which you brought up earlier—that definitely helped transition me coming back from Yugoslavia here.

Howe: Sure. I'm curious...if you don't mind going into it a little bit, and if it's uncomfortable or if it's not something you want to talk about, I understand. You mentioned transitioning issues… So, people in military, sometimes when they're going from a military life into civilian lifestyle, they also experience some of that. It's interesting that you experienced some of that challenge so early. So, I'm curious, what kind of things you experienced?

Simovski: Well, you know, just...how can I put it this way? I definitely liked to hang out with the kids that were kind of the same, ethnically. I kind of a hard time my first year, too, coming back, kind of hanging out with the non-Macedonian, non-Serbian kids. It's kind of a cultural thing. Even going back to my days living in Hamtramck and Detroit, I was always around kids the same ethnically as I was. So, they were able to relate to a lot of the things that were going on, so that helped. The high school that I eventually went to had a lot of kids that were Macedonian, Serbian, so that helped my transitioning. It wasn't until college that I kind of broke out of that bubble, you could say, that I started to expand and was able to deal better with people that were not just Macedonian, Serbian, or from the former Yugoslavia. I still hung out with them, but I was able to break out of that mold a little bit. And maybe that was a lot of my dad being protective; being younger definitely probably played a part in it. Then, going back and living in the former Yugoslavia definitely probably hardened that shell a little bit. Yeah, that was a little bit of a transition there for a couple years. Late in my high school, around my senior year, that's when my shell started to really break, ya know, that bubble, you could say, where I started to mingle with kids that weren't just from the one ethnic group. I was able to play sports, but just hang out with kids that weren't the same. I know with military folks, coming back that transition it was hard. Even the translator job, which we'll get into later, I sure had some transitioning issues, as well, which we'll probably address later. Yeah, I definitely could see how both those things kind of played a role, kind of made it a challenge, as well. So, I think that's what helped me out later in life. I was able to transition a lot better because—you're right—I kind of experienced that kind of at a younger age, so I was better able to deal with it. Whereas, if you're older and you had to deal with it, probably would've have been a little more difficult.

Howe: Right. Learning new things when we're older is much more difficult. If you have the previous experience to call back on, it's muscle memory.

Simovski: Absolutely.

Howe: Psychological memory. So, I'm curious if anyone in your family or close circle of friends had decided to join the military before you yourself got involved with the government.

Simovski: Yeah, my father was in the military. Military conscription was mandatory in the former Yugoslavia. He had been part of the military and was part of Tito's elite guard units; they called it “Titova Garde”. It was kind of a ceremonial position, too. He actually was in line when Nixon came. It was part of that group of soldiers that would greet the foreign dignitaries and leaders of other countries. He remembered Nixon passed right in front of him. So, that was back in, like, '71, I want to say. I kind of had that background. My great-grandfather and grandfather both fought in World War II. My great-grandfather was in World War I. So, we kind of have that family background. My mom's side, as well. We had people that fought the Second World War, and then, post-Second World War. A lot of my uncles were conscripted in the military. But when you grow up here, and it wasn't mandatory, not too many of my friends and relatives did join here in the U.S. It was more of kind of the Old World; that's what happened there. We kind of left that, didn't want to be a part of the military. So, when I decided to do this, it was kind of different. Actually, oddly enough, it's kind of is looked down with some of the ethnic groups that if you're working—joining the U.S. military, ya know, do the volunteer thing and become a member of the military, it's because you have nothing else going on and you're hopeless. It's kind of an interesting perception that I've learned from some of the ethnic groups, like compared to what they did back in the ethnic homeland, where it was kind of mandatory and expected and kind of a prideful thing. And you come over here, it wasn't viewed the same way, shall we say. So, even when I was working as a DOD contractor, I could sense the tensions that were going on between what was going on in the Balkans and here with the families. I could definitely sense that it wasn't perceived, kind of, in the most positive way, initially. So, I have that background where the family was always kind of involved with the military. All the stories I remember my grandfather and great-grandfather had told me when I was five. I kind of vividly remember, at the time, some of these stories—especially the post-World War II retribution cycle that was going on with so many ethnic groups—was kind of fascinating. As far as me getting involved, you kind of have that from both sides of the family. But that was all there, it was not here. This was something totally different when I got that opportunity. Seeing it with different ethnic groups that I've noticed, it is kind of interesting to see how it's perceived back there and here.

Howe: Interesting. Yeah, I'm curious. Well, I'll let you do the talking. We're going to get to that experience shortly. I'm just curious… After you graduated high school, what'd you do next?

Simovski: Well, I went right into college. I did go straight into college. I pursued degrees in history and political science. I pretty much did that. That was my main thing. My dad expected me to go to school, graduate, and I did. That was kind of my main focus. I mean, I really hit the books hard for four years there. I graduated with high honors, high distinctions— basically Summa Cum Laude—from Michigan. So, I mean that was my driving force to do well. The job with the DOD came as I was graduating and preparing to go into teaching. I did bounce around thinking about maybe going into law, maybe doing something else working with the government, but not necessarily with the military. So, I had all these options of exploring, but I had teaching in the background with the student teaching—just to make sure that it was there.

Howe: Okay. So, you've graduated from college, you have a degree in political science, and there's still that certificate that you're looking to get for that security, trying to...

Simovski: Yep, trying to have that teaching certificate.

Howe: So, did you get to work on that at all before you found about the job with the DOD?

Simovski: Well, it's kind of interesting how that unfolded. It was 1997. I had just basically done everything. The only thing I had left to do was student teach. So, it was in...what was it? November of ‘97, early November of ‘97, and I was student teaching, and that's when I found about the DOD job, which was told to me by people that said, "Hey, they're recruiting people. They're looking for someone exactly like you." Like I said, it was in the middle of my student teaching, and I sent in the resume and all the stuff about my background. And I got the call and they said, "We'd like you to come to D.C. We'll pay for your experience." But what happened was, during student teaching, it's almost like it's impossible to drop it because if you drop it, you have to do it again. What was really cool was, my supervising teacher—my supervisor from the University—said, "You know what? We can't stop you from having this experience. It would be wrong of us to do this. Normally, we would tell the kids, it's not like you’re gonna make up this week that you're gonna lose; we might have you do this all over again." But they let me do this. It was a one week thing that I went to D.C.; I did the whole test and everything, and came back, and I couldn't initially take the job on the spot as they were trying to hire people right on the spot. But I couldn't do it initially because I really wanted to go back and finish this student teaching, because I didn't want to start all over again. So, I came back, finished it, and oddly enough, that opportunity almost happened immediately after I finished my student teaching, which is probably another month or two after that I got the call to go. It's kind of interesting how it all played, but I wanted to absolutely

make sure I had that teaching certificate kind of in my back pocket—in case things didn't work out there, or I came back here and didn't pursue whatever the field that political science would let me do—that the teaching thing was always in the background.

Howe: That makes sense. So, you got the word about the process in November of '97, applied, tested. When did you finish student teaching?

Simovski: December of '97. So, about a month and a half later.

Howe: Oh, that's not bad. So, describe the process itself. There's testing, there's background checks, probably interviews...

Simovski: Oh, yes.

Howe: What was it like for you?

Simovski: It was…oh, my, it was eye opening for how intensive it was. It started with the Standard 80 Form, do a complete background of you for the last ten years. You know, everything like where'd you go to school, where'd you live. They wanted to basically know everything. And then, of course, they had to do all these tests. Physicals to make sure that there wasn't anything going on. And then, we had an interpreter test, which those weren't a problem for me. Then, we had security background interviews with the FBI. I still tell that story to my students about that experience, which was kind of fascinating because they have the folder sitting right there on the table—basically your FBI file. They keep them piled together as they're doing the interview, so basically, they're kind of hinting at you, "You better be telling the truth if you want to get this intelligence clearance," which I did. That was kind of an eye opening experience, dealing with the FBI interview process. So, that whole process lasted for about a week and it was a really great experience because I also met people that were from all over the country that were applying for that position. Between the Macedonian and the Serbian folks that were all trying to get translator jobs for the U.S. military in Bosnia and Macedonia, there was about a thousand people hanging out in that area of McLean, Virginia, where this company was at the time. It was BDM, which eventually got absorbed into TRW. And I don't even know if it's still in TRW now, but it was a government contracting firm, and they were the ones running this whole translator job fair. It was a kind of a recruiting job recruiting thing that they had done, but it was a very intense week of just tests and interviews. One of the former presidents of—actually, not presidents, but he was one of the executive council members of Yugoslavia, from Macedonia. His wife was the Macedonian tester, basically checking your language skills, which was kind of fascinating. I'm like, "Oh, my goodness. I know your husband." So, it

was kind of bizarre how that played out. It was an awesome experience—something that I definitely enjoyed; there's no doubt about it.

Howe: Understood. What else was going on in your life at this time? You spoke about the student teaching and trying to work towards that certificate, but socially, emotionally, what kind of things were going on?

Simovski: I wasn't dating anybody and I didn't have any plans or anything beyond just maybe leaving and looking for a teaching job. So when this opportunity came, it was at a perfect time. It was like a perfect transition. I graduated college; I just finished it. I just started doing a little permanent sub job for a month, month and half, and that's when the call came to work for the DOD. And I said, you know, this is the perfect time. When they gave me the call, I had to decide. I had to go and get my equipment and everything—which we'll get to in a second—but my dad and I had a conversation that lasted maybe for, like, three minutes. I told him "This is it. This is the opportunity, because beyond that, I knew I didn't have much else on my resume." This was the perfect opportunity to get something, I mean, to add something big. For me, I understood how big this would be. Like I said, relatives didn't really understand how big it was at the time, but years later, we look back and it definitely turned into a great opportunity. Something I'm glad I definitely took it and ran with it.

Howe: What did they tell about the job you would be doing? I mean, submit your application, goes through all this testing, but...

Simovski: They basically said this is a great opportunity. You're working with the military. Your job is to interpret everything, and not just interpreting newscasts and newspapers, but you're gonna be going with the soldiers out and about on missions. They sold it as a very exciting opportunity and it sounded great for a 22-23 year old kid at the time. It definitely was a great opportunity when you think about it. Like I said, I didn't have anything else planned at the time, other than maybe teaching. You're looking at the prospects of teaching or doing something exciting like that; that definitely was eye opening. They sold it pretty well. Also, the other selling part was the salary that they offered was pretty significant, too. Compared to what you would have been starting off with as a beginning teacher, and compared to what they were actually offering, that also was very enticing as well.

Howe: Government work tends to be pretty stable.

Simovski: Yes, it does.

Howe: In that regard.

Simovski: Yes.

Howe: So, do you remember anything specifically...words exchanged between you and your father after you got the phone call?

Simovski: The only thing that he said to me was, "Are you sure?" I'm like, "Absolutely." That was about it. That conversation was pretty brief. The guy that was running the translator program, who's Slovenian, of all things, I found out later, which was kind of interesting. But he was from the former Yugoslavia too, had a background in it. He called and said, "I'm going to give you a couple of minutes, or if you want to take up to a day think about it." It didn't even take me a day; it took me three minutes. Literally, I think I remember timing it three minutes. I called him right back and our conversation was brief. I'm like, "This is it." My dad…the only thing is, he tried to play devil's advocate for a minute or less than a minute, like, "Are you sure? Maybe…what about this teaching thing?" I said, "You know what? This is just a temporary thing. It's a permanent sub job. It's not anything permanent." I go, "What's gonna happen when April comes around and the contract is up, and they may or may not hire me?" It was a risk, and this was a sure thing, and that's why I ran with it. And like I said, I have not regretted running with it ever since. Let's put it that way.

Howe: Alright. So, the guy running the program, you call him back, and what does he tell you about the next steps?

Simovski: The next steps were basically here's your email, all the itinerary, where to go, the pretty airplane, what else you need to pack. They were very specific. We kind of had a laundry list of things that you had to do. So, that was the next step, which basically, you went to the airport a week later. I got my stuff together and I was on a plane off to their headquarters in Washington D.C. Then, after that, that's when it got really interesting. Then, I got shipped off to Fort Benning in Georgia, where I was there for about ten days getting my military equipment, getting extra training. They were just trying to get a lot of the guys from Bosnia training being sent over. I was the only guy going to Macedonia, but it was a great time. I met soldiers that were going to Bosnia and soldiers that were going to other missions in the Middle East, as well. But it was a fantastic week. It was about ten days of just training and getting your equipment together. My most memorable part was when I had to get a gas mask. They said, "Well, normally for civilians, we have this banana smell thing that we do, but unfortunately, we're out of it. So, buddy, you're going into the gas testing chamber with what we usually do with half the potency, I guess." My first mask didn't work, and I remember vividly because I was gagging a good ten minutes or so after. It was painful, but luckily, my second mask worked. It was one of my more memorable things as I was getting ready. Every day we did the

training, but every night we would actually go out with the soldiers. I started to get myself prepared for this kind of military life, which I had never experienced before. And it was very interesting being with the soldiers and seeing how they get their bags ready. They had adjusted to the lifestyle. Everything that they have to do from the morning when we get up to just the traditional, basic, day to day routines that they did definitely got me ready in those ten days at Fort Benning there—which was a great experience, and we had a lot of fun. Let's put it that way.

Howe: What was the most surprising part of that experience for you?

Simovski: Of getting ready? Well, the gas mask thing scared me. I'm like, “Oh, chemical weapons and stuff.” Just how thorough everything was. One of the things that kind of woke me up and scared me a little bit was while we were going and signing all these contracts to go, and the next thing there's, like, “Oh, by the way—so, here we come to the uncomfortable part—basically, what happens if you die or you lose a limb.” And they're showing me all these contracts through Lloyd's of London, like this insurance policy that they have. Because I was a civilian, it was up to a hundred thousand dollar policy that they had taken out. So, that kind of woke me up. Like, “Oh, this could be bad.” But luckily, the people from the company were like, "Listen, you're gonna to come to this contra thing." And they warned me before I went to Fort Benning, they're like, "There's gonna be this contract thing you're gonna have to sign." But they told me, "You're going to Macedonia. It's not as dangerous as Bosnia, and in Bosnia, we have not spent one dime of that insurance policy." So, they kind of relieved my fear of, like, why am I signing this thing that may cost me my life, and it's only a hundred thousand dollars, and I lose a limb at forty thousand? It was things like that that kind of surprised me about the contract part. But then, the physicals, and how extensive they were, and at that time I really didn't have any health insurance. I had just got off my mom's health insurance when I turned 21, and I had a dental issue going on, and they took care of that. I mean, everything was taken care of, although they gave me one too many vaccines, and they got my white blood cell count high, and they had to keep drawing blood. By the time I left to go to Macedonia on a mission my arms were, like, black and blue from so many vaccines and just drawing blood, things that they did. So, that was one thing. What surprised me the most, though, I will say—I can't still talk about this, even as a teacher with my students—is when I went to Fort Benning, I didn't realize some of the bases were open, and you can travel on them, and you have MPs running around as the police, instead of actual police. But I remember we were at the—there's two things that happened. We went to watch a movie. I remember we were getting to watch *U.S. Marshals* with Wesley Snipes and Tommy Lee Jones. And I remember as the movie is

beginning, we all had to rise and do the national anthem, which caught me off guard. I'm like, “Wow, they do everything like this on the military base.” I didn't realize we had to do the salute before we watch the movie, but we did. Also, what caught me off guard was the Schools of the Americas, which was there, which I know they renamed it to something else, which was at Fort Benning. I did witness some protestors there, which I did not fully understand. I kind of knew about it, but I didn't realize it was at Fort Benning because that's still an infamous one that, supposedly trained all these guys that were eventually sent to be leaders and military people down in South America and in Central America. So, that was the other eye opener for me. So, the testing: the physicals that we had to do and everything else. Those couple things, and the culture of military lifestyle, and the base was kind of surprising. What also caught me off guard was how many of the young guys were actually married, and how that was incentive that they got paid more. And I always kind of look back at it as kind of bizarre...you know? I’m 22, and at the time, I wasn't dating anybody, and I'm looking at that, and I'm like, that didn't seem like that massive of an incentive. But looking back at it now, I could see it. If you're young and you're in the military, I guess that was some form of stability there to have at least somebody there for you. And you got the added benefit by getting paid for it as well, I guess you could say. That kind of sums up all my experiences that kind of caught me off guard or kind of surprised me, you could say.

Howe: Gotcha. Were there any... Let me back up for a second. Lot of times, working with the military—very strict, very regimented, disciplined, very standardized.

Simovski: Right.

Howe: So, this is the way it's gonna be. During that process, was there anyone there that gave you a couple of tricks, maybe some gouge that made it a little easier, helped you out along the way?

Simovski: Oh, yeah, there were several. I remember this guy from Massachusetts said—who taught how to pack up the bag because the duffel bag was...that was kind of tough. I'm like, I got all this equipment; how do I get this in there? And they kind of taught me. There was another guy from Chicago, as well. They were telling me about the routines like what they do on a daily basis. So, they prepped me, and those ten days definitely prepped me. That was a crash course for sure. I do remember one time, after I had a dental procedure done. I was waiting outside for the van to pick me up, take me back to the base, to the part where we were getting together, and where all our stuff was. One of the drill sergeants yelled at me for having my hand in my pocket and I turned around, and he realized, “Oh, you're a civilian. Then, I apologize." So, that kind of woke me up, like, “Woah, yeah, they do take things very seriously.” One time I do

remember, it's kind of an entertaining thing that we did. The guys that were with me—this is a good group of seven or eight of us that kind of hung out together consistently. They ended up getting these insignias and they put one on me like of the top, what is it? GS14 or 16 insignia. And they started getting all these privates at the mall to salute me. It was kind of entertaining that they were kind of showing me how serious the saluting thing and everything was. So, definitely, these seven or eight guys that I hung out with quite a bit, and got close with, they definitely got me ready for what was coming when I got shipped out.

Howe: So, were you shipped with the same seven to eight people?

Simovski: Yeah, we all were shipped out together. Where we all deviated was we all got on a civilian flight, all our equipment was taken on the civilian flight, but it was kind of a charter flight. It wasn't your standard Delta or Northwest. It was some charter company. And we all went from Atlanta to Frankfurt, Germany, and that's where we all kind of parted ways because Frankfurt's got—they have the civilian part of the airport, and then they've got that military part. And then, some of the guys—eventually, some of them still stayed with me close. But I met with somebody from the company in Frankfurt who took me separately and went to lunch to just where the medical facilities for the U.S. army is in Germany In Landshtul. So that's where I was for a couple days before I went out to Macedonia, until they got a flight on a C130 to Macedonia. But the guys that all were going to Bosnia, we all went our separate ways in Frankfurt. So, I was kind of on my own after that, but with this guy that I met with from the company that was with me.

Howe: Okay. What do you recall about that journey? Anything specific that stands out?

Simovski: Yeah. The one thing that stands out about that whole process was when we got to Frankfurt, I met this guy. Now, the guy I met, I actually—he was at our week long thing when they were recruiting people. So, I actually knew who he was, so that made it a little more comfortable, and actually talked to him quite a bit. He was actually a former military guy that worked with the U.S. military. He had actually retired as a military veteran and he was actually working for our company at that time. But what stood out for me, was when we were getting ready to go we had this procedure where they put me up in this kind of...it was like a motel-hotel type of thing where we had to wait for a couple days but I remember when we got—actually it wasn't a C130 we went on a C2, one of the big ones, and I remember how long it took to climb up to the elevation and I remember him telling me like, "We're going to 60,000 feet and this is what the military does." Why 60,000 feet? And he goes, "No turbulence." That's the one thing I always remember there was absolutely no turbulence on the flight and

then looking out the window I'm like, woah things look a lot more tinier at 60,000 feet than they do at about 36 or 37,000 feet which that was the one unique part of the journey. Then I learned about how the Concord flew at that height and I could see why. I go, wow if people flew like this they'd fly all the time. No turbulence at 60,000 feet which was kind of bizarre. That was the one thing about the journey that caught my attention was flying on that seat at that height.

Howe: I've never been up there. Do you see a change in the atmosphere?

Simovski: No, you don't see any cloud patterns up that high. Like I said, there's just no turbulence. I guess it's above the jet stream or anything like that and that's why they fly so high. All I remember is, like, when we took off at Frankfurt that it just kept going up and up and up. I was like, "We're still climbing up." And he told me, "Yeah we're going to be climbing up a bit, quite a bit up to 60,000 feet." That was my one experience was it didn't—I remember doing the C130 a few times when I had to go to Germany to get an update on my IED or when I had to come back home for vacations where sometimes I actually took a C130—and a C130 only went up to 14,000 feet. And, yeah…every time we hit a cloud bank in a C130, it's like, oh boy here we go. It's rocking back and forth. I do remember there was a lot of flights like that. I did have to do a lot of connecting flights, especially on my way back. When I was done with the job I actually had to take a lot of flights, so many connecting. I think I flew every type of airplane that you can fly in a civilian fleet—basically from the tiny little propeller eight-passenger one to a 747. I literally think I flew every one of them during my job.

Howe: Wow. So, when did you put boots on ground in Macedonia?

Simovski: It was early March of 1998. I don't remember the exact date, but I remember it was probably March 1st or 2nd. It was very early in March.

Howe: And where in Macedonia were you stationed?

Simovski: We were stationed at Camp Able Sentry, which was right next door to the airport in Macedonia outside of Skopje, the capital—which, by the way, that was something else that caught me off guard. We were at Ramstein Air Base in Germany and they kept calling it "scope-gee," which is incorrect, it kind of caught you off guard, but it was in Skopje. The base was within a Macedonian base, which was also surprising for me that we had a base within a base. So, we had to go through a Macedonian gate to get to Camp Able Sentry, which was right next door to the airport—which the airport is now been renamed Alexander the Great International Airport, which, of course, is not sitting well with the Greeks.

Howe: Nice. So, what is the United Nations Preventative Deployment Force?

Simovski: They were actually called UNPROFOR—which is the United Nations Preventative Force, and then, they became the...I'm trying to remember the acronym here. UNPREDEP, which was—I had my little jargon here, basically, it went from Preventative Force to Protection Force, so that was kind of the transition in the name. So, it went from UNPROFOR to UNPREDEP, so it was UNPREDEP when we were there.

Howe: Okay, and what was the mission?

Simovski: Our mission was basically to make sure that Macedonia was not attacked by Serbia. So, that was their big fear. That was the issue, was watching the border between Macedonia and Serbia, which, for me… I'll be honest with you, even during my interviews, which caught their attention, I'm like, "I don't know why there is a border that you guys are watching between Serbia and Macedonia, because the Serbians left the country peacefully." Unlike Croatia and Slovenia and Bosnia where war broke out, the Serbians packed up, left town. Ethnically, the Serbs and Macedonians are probably the closest of all the ethnic groups because we're Orthodox Christians, the language is pretty similar, we use Cyrillic alphabet. So, to me, it was kind of a shocker that we're watching this border, which I kind of knew in the back of my mind—I'm like, Serbia is not going to invade us. It was something that we had to do. That was kind of the main thing, so I was kind of conflicted about it at first, but then I kind of understood what the deal was. But then, eventually, when the Kosovo conflict kind of starts erupting, then it became clear to me it wasn't just about Serbia and Macedonia. It was also about the border of Kosovo.

Howe: How close were you to that border?

Simovski: We were about twenty, twenty-five kilometers away from the border. We had three or four...I think it was like three outposts that we had. One right on the main highway, then we had another one a little farther away, and one way up in the mountains, more towards Bulgaria. So, we actually had about three or...was it four? I think it was three or four outposts that we had, besides the main base.

Howe: Let's see...What was going on when you arrived there?

Simovski: When I just got there, things had just started to heat up in Kosovo. There was this massacre of a family—the Jashari family in Kosovo. So, that was kind of what I was walking into, was like there was this tension already building up in Kosovo. In Macedonia itself, nothing in particular was going on at that time, nothing earth shattering. Yeah, there was some tension between some of the Macedonian groups and the Albanians. Actually, what was interesting was the

summer before I got the job, we were actually in Macedonia vacationing and the tensions between the Albanians and Macedonians actually got pretty intense because the mayors of two of the cities where I'm from, Tetovo and Gostivar, basically refused to take down the Albanian flag, and they were arrested because they had them on government buildings, which the Macedonian government said that was illegal…and they arrested him. So, that whole thing was sort of still going on in the background, and they were actually asking for the release of the Gostivar mayor. The Tetovo mayor was actually released, but the Gostivar mayor was not. I remember some of the early missions we went on…I remember there were posters about having benefits to raise money for his legal defense to get him out of jail, so that was going on still. So, that was about the most tense thing going on, but as far as, like, day to day routines as far as, other things, it was just routines that we had to do. We had to go on and watch the outposts. Now, one of the things is I never got to stay at the outposts. I always returned to the main base, but that's where I kind of started to learn about the soldiers and the loneliness at times when they went two weeks on and two weeks off at these outposts. One of them was way out in the mountains where they didn't really have much to do, so I kind of felt bad for a lot of the soldiers, but I understood. That was kind of their lifestyle of being part of the military was you didn't have the ability to leave the base whenever you felt like it. That was kind of the other wakeup call. Like, oh, you can't leave when you feel like it. You've got to get permission.

Howe: Right. So, do you remember your first day or first few days showing up?

Simovski: Yeah. I definitely do. It was cold. I was greeted by the officers that were my bosses and they kind of walked me through everything. I just remember the massive amount of stuff you had to remember, like codes to call. We had these things we had to refer to as—when you called in on the radio, you had a specific pattern that you had to call. When you left, we had all these things. Then, my other job was to monitor some things that were a little different than the soldiers. So, we had to go in town and monitor—well, one of my main things was—they did tell me that my main responsibility when we went out in town was to monitor the soldiers when they were on leave from the base because that was something that I didn't realize was a big issue. But I found out quickly that, yes, there were people that had to watch the soldiers for their own safety; I guess because they were sometimes—they didn't know better at times because they were in another country and they had to just be watched for their own safety.

Howe: So, they made that part of your duties?

Simovski: Oh, yeah, that was one of our duties. We would go out and scope the town. Well, my main overall duty besides the translating part—I'll never forget the reference that one of my training officers told me is like you're the eyes and the ears of the base because you're the guy that has the connections here. You're the guy who's got these cultural connections. You know the languages. So, that was the one thing. Part of my office that I was a part of was we had to go and mingle with the locals, as well. So, that was something that we had to do, was to talk to people to kind of figure out what was going on to get a pulse, to be aware that something was about to break...anything like that, anything dangerous that that was gonna affect the troops or the base. That was something else we were kind of in charge of.

Howe: Interesting. Curious, what were the—can you describe your living arrangement, your office? Where would you show up to everyday?

Simovski: We had an office in one of the buildings. Basically...I'm trying to remember the exact name of the office because there was a couple of us. There was the military intel guys that we were the guys next to them. I was actually with another translator. There was three of us that were civilian translators and we actually shared a room with him, but we were in the building with the officers, so we didn't live with the actual day to day soldiers. I guess one of the privileges that we had that the regular soldiers didn't was we got to hang out in the officers' lounge, so that was actually pretty cool. That was one of the benefits that we actually had. We got to mingle with our Lieutenant Colonel, our Sergeant Majors, and all these other guys that were there, like the head officers. So, we got to hang out with them quite a bit and played a lot of ping pong. I remember we did play quite a bit of ping pong.

Howe: That makes me laugh. I'm sorry.

Simovski: No. Yeah, there were many times where we had to burn time and ping pong was one of those things, especially when it was colder. When it got warmer, you played a little volleyball. Some of the guys played softball. There was a basketball court. We had stuff to make sure that the soldiers had something to do. You definitely wanted them to be active and doing stuff instead of sitting around and watching TV on Armed Forces Network (AFN). Yeah, you definitely didn't want them to just sit there and do nothing.

Howe: The Armed Forces that worked with the very weird PSA commercials?

Simovski: Yes, absolutely.

Howe: I remember I was in Guantanamo and just these weird…like you would never see these on ABC or other channels here.

Simovski: Yeah, I love the infomercials. Like, if you're in Italy and you get into an accident, make sure you give the guy your driver's license. Those were kind of...they kind of took me aback. I do remember those.

Howe: You're kind of treading some of the same territory, but I'm gonna ask in a different way. Can you describe a day in the life?

Simovski: Oh sure. We wake up at about 8 o'clock and go get something to eat at the mess hall, and then we would go and start our day: basically, from nine to about five or six—and do what we need to do. Sometimes our day extended beyond that, especially if the soldiers were out on leave or just going out to the capital. So, sometimes we wouldn't get back until, like, 11 o'clock and we'd do it all over again. Then, there were times when some of the officers came from Germany, and I had to know people, and we had to have access to clubs. So, we took them around to see the nightlife and there many times when we'd come back at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and I had to wake up at 8. There was a time there a stretch there where it was a lot of fun—no doubt about that.

Howe: You get paid to know people.

Simovski: Yes, that was the benefit.

Howe: You said the leadership at camp was expecting you to be the eyes and ears of the base.

Simovski: Yes.

Howe: Putting a large responsibility on you. Had you had any previous experience with the local population?

Simovski: Oh, yeah. What's interesting is we did travel a lot with my parents before that. So, I was very familiar with the terrain, and where we were going, and the folks we talked with. Now, where we were stationed at—I didn't really venture to that part of Macedonia that often. I knew about it; I've seen it, but I didn't venture that much outside of the capital. I was in the Western part of Macedonia, which, by the way, the way the UN mission was broken up, the Swedes, the Finns, and the Danes actually patrolled that part of Macedonia, which would have been my ethnic homeland part. The other part was where the U.S. was part of the border of Serbia, but I didn't venture out that far when I used to live there. So, that part was a little unfamiliar to me. But once the people got to know me when we used to mingle with the population, they got a lot more comfortable. The Macedonians, especially the Serbian Macedonians, kind of had an eye out on me. Like, okay what's this guy really up to? And then, of course, the Albanians kind of took me as: okay, look there's a Macedonian

guy working for the U.S. military. They always had suspicions about me, so I always had to deal with that part of the job where I could tell the Albanians were kind of apprehensive. Like, why's this guy working for the U.S. military? He's Macedonian. They definitely did not like that. I could tell by a lot of their body language, by a lot of the discussions that we had. That definitely played a major factor there for a little while.

Howe: These were the Albanians that had problems with it?

Simovski: Oh, yeah. I remember specifically some of the Albanians would always make comments, look at the soldiers like, "You guys know he's Macedonian, right?" But basically, trying to egg him on like, "You really shouldn't trust him." One of the worst incidents I think of my whole tenureship, as far as dealing with that issue, was there was a commanding officer—a captain for a squad or battalion from Germany—and we took him out to the villages, and we were talking to some of the Albanians that we knew, and one of the guys basically was…I guess trying to test me, see how much I could take, and told me to translate to that commanding officer that, hey...tell him... he was having a good time and tell him, "Hey, you know why he has a good time. We Albanians are more..." what's the phrase...I have to translate this in English...basically, that they were better at accepting guests and being more...I can't think of the exact word, but basically that they were better at receiving guests and entertaining their guests than Macedonians were, and he knew that I was a Macedonian trying to relay that to them. That, to me ,deep inside, didn't go over very well, but I knew the job and had to put aside that little comment and backstab, basically, and just translate it back at them. Then, later when we got to the base, he's like, "You really held pretty well together after he said that." I'm like, "Yeah, I did. I didn't like it, but I had to deal with it."

Howe: Wow.

Simovski: Yeah, those were some of the little ethnic side issues that I had to deal with every once in a while.

Howe: So, was there a greater sense of respect once you kind of had been put through the cold on that one?

Simovski: Oh, yeah. I developed a lot of trust with even some of the Albanians. They started to trust me a lot more when they saw that I held it together. I didn't crack. Even the local Serbian Macedonians, who were always skeptical of the U.S. presence there, they kind of accepted me and they saw me as the guy they could talk to because they considered me one of their own. Like, hey he's one of us. He can talk to these guys, make a difference. So, both sides kind of played up

to me, I guess you could say. They definitely tried to see the good and the bad, I guess.

Howe: Interesting. Do you recall any other challenging scenarios that either side might've put you in between?

Simovski: Oh, yeah. There were two major incidents that kind of broke—well, one broke out where one of the American Humvees flipped over into a farmer's field and we had to go fly a Blackhawk helicopter out there to one of the observation posts, and the locals were not happy. Some of them knew me and they still were not happy. And they let me know that this is not the first time it happened and they're destroying crops. So, we almost had a near riot break out in one of those instances and somehow, some way, I was able to calm that situation down. On the other end, I had a really ugly incident with a set of commanding officers that had replaced my other ones. The other guys were there from March to about...I want to say August. In August, we got these new guys, who we—the three of us that were working as interpreters called them James Bond. Basically, because there was one of these missions and they put me in a really bad predicament where I told these Albanians I didn't know Albanian in an Albanian café, and then they threw a newspaper at me, an Albanian one, to translate right in the middle of the cafe when this guy that they were talking to left. They kind of put me in a bad predicament that I somehow wiggled out of it the next time we met him because he let me know. Those people in the cafe definitely told him about it. Not a very smart move on those officers' parts. Part of it, is I think they were kind of oblivious sometimes to the ethnic issues, which you always kind of try to warn them about. Sometimes they either knew it, and they were having fun with it, and didn't realize how serious it was. Or sometimes were just completely oblivious to it, basically.

Howe: Breakdown the cafe scenario for me. I'm curious; how exactly did that play out?

Simovski: Well, basically what happened was we were meeting up with a guy, who was an Albanian, who owned the cafe in the Albanian sector of the capital. Basically, he was arguing about what's going on in Kosovo or what's going on with the—I mean, the primary focus was what was going on in Kosovo. And what happened was, he was not happy about something. He was showing them an Albanian newspaper, and of course, my officers didn't know any Albanian. They knew some Macedonian, but they didn't know any Albanian, so that's kind of what led to it. He got called in the back to do something, and that's when my officers grabbed the newspaper and basically said, "Hey, what does this mean?" I'm like—even then, right there on the spot, I said to them, "That really was not a smart move." I just told this guy who was like a kickboxer, a really big guy, that I didn't know Albanian, and then the next thing I know my officers are asking me

to translate a newspaper for them right there in the cafe. So, like I said, the next time we ran into him, I mean, he basically let me know, like, straight up, like, "Hey, I know you know what I'm saying to you and the next time you lie to me, we could have consequences and stuff like that." Then, I had to talk back to him like, "That's not the way we do things here." So, it kind of got a little ugly, but we somehow corrected that situation after that.

Howe: Sure, sure. They weren't...your officers weren't backing you up? They weren't helping you out?

Simovski: No, they did when they saw what was going on. They basically had to admit to him, like, "Yeah, it was us. We told him not to do anything." They diffused it; otherwise, yeah, it would have gotten really ugly.

Howe: So, they put you in that position, I guess?

Simovski: Oh, yeah. They definitely did, yeah.

Howe: Yikes.

Simovski: Oh, yeah. I guess one of the things I always remember is when I came back from my leave in September of ’98, I remember my dad was kind of in shock when he saw my dog tags. And I told him, I go, "There's a reason I'm wearing these." Because we were in dangerous situations along the border; anybody could open fire at us, kill us, and we had to wear our dog tags. And he was kind of taken aback by that. My dad initially thought I was just gonna be in this translator gig where I sit in the office and just translate stuff every day, which kind of—I didn't tell my dad the whole story, so—because I don't think my dad would have let me pursue that job if he knew everything that was entailed with it.

Howe: So, was there a period of time where you felt you were in immediate danger?

Simovski: Well, that time that was pretty dangerous. I'm trying to remember...well, the near riot that broke out in one of the villages. Those were really about it. I always had to watch my back because you just never knew because of the whole ethnic issue. I was always cognizant of what was going on around me. So, that was something I had to make sure that I definitely had to watch my back—especially going out in the nightlife scene and here and there. We did have an ugly incident at one of the hotels. It's a long story, but basically, we had a gambling issue where one of the officers was doing really well, and the casino wasn't about to let him go, and basically, we were threatening to call in our unit to come in and get us out of there, and they backed down. But, normally, no, there wasn't anything beyond that. Like I said, those were kind of some interesting little things that popped up.

Howe: You just avoided a very long story there. There seems to be a whole narrative that we're—that's okay, that's alright.

Simovski: There was always that moment where it could have gotten worse, but it didn't. That's kind of the narrative, right? It could've gotten worse, but it didn't. So, I kind of lucked out. I guess you could say I did luck out quite a bit, that some of these things didn't get out of control or didn't get ugly or they didn't open fire for whatever reason. I mean, I guess that's a positive when you look at it. It's the mentality.

Howe: Okay. I'm curious. What do you think you attribute that to? Is that something that you picked up along the way? Is that just part of your inherent nature?

Simovski: Yeah, I was always trying to avoid being put in bad predicaments and trying to wiggle out of them. I guess you could say that was a trait that I kind of developed, even as a young kid. I was able to diffuse and knew how to diffuse them pretty well. But I think also what attributed to that was at the time, Macedonia wasn't going through any of the same things with Kosovo. And it doesn't break out until March of ’99, so I think we were just in that period where nothing really was going on, per se, so that kind of helped, I think. That's why I think there was always that...that's why it didn't get nastier than it did.

Howe: Okay. Were there other forces that you collaborated with besides the U.S. military?

Simovski: Oh, yes. We met with UN forces there. We had Irish officer. I remember—actually, the two officers that we had to collaborate with from the UN that was overseeing a lot of that mission UNPREDEP and UNPROFOR, which was run by the UN. We did collaborate with an Irish officer and he left in August or September, I think it was, and we had another Irish officer...another Irish guy who was the officer that was kind of the commanding officer. We met up with them every once in a while. At least once a week or once every other week, we met with the UN...kind of the UN other forcers there. And we did collaborate every once in a while with the SCANBAT forces. But we did actually play a couple soccer tournaments, which was pretty cool to see the Norweigans, the Finns, and the Swedes all there, so it was kind of interesting. Because you don't normally think of SCANBAT being this very active military force, but it was actually pretty cool to see them actually participating in this UN mission.

Howe: I'm not familiar with this force. Who is it?

Simovski: The Scandinavian Battalion is what SCANBAT means. So, you had Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway. You had, like, four countries participating...I don't remember if there was an Iceland unit or something like that. But I do

remember those four countries in particular because I remember we played a soccer tournament and those four countries had their units with their own soccer team. We had a soccer team in this tournament that we played twice. And Malaysians…I forget about them because they—and the Indonesians—because they were participating with the UN as well, so they had a team together, too.

Howe: What was your interaction with those forces like? Everyone get along pretty well or...?

Simovski: Yeah, we didn't have any issues with them. They patrolled their part of Macedonia and we patrolled ours. Like I said, there wasn't any incident, per se, where we got into a disagreement with them or anything. During my time there, we didn't have anything that popped up that could've put us in conflict with each other. One thing is we definitely we were not allowed to go into their zone of operation, which made things difficult for me because being part of the U.S. military, you wanted to go back to your ethnic hometown, you had to get special permission. You had this whole bureaucracy thing to go through. There were times where I'm like, "Should I bother or should I not bother?" But you definitely—I didn't want to put myself in jeopardy of that.

Howe: Sure. You work for a company, but ultimately that's in service of a government.

Simovski: The U.S. military. Right. My contract stated yes, your company is paying you, but while you're on this base, you are under the supervision of these officers and you are employee to the Department of Defense and working for us. So even though the company is paying you, we are actually co-employees. That's the way it kind of worked.

Howe: Got it. Anything else you recall about the time that you served in Macedonia?

Simovski: I'm trying to remember. I told you a big overview of a lot of the stuff. One of the big things I do remember was the African embassy bombings that took place in Tanzania and Kenya—took place in August of '98. And I remember our ability to leave the base was hampered quite a bit, especially the soldiers. The everyday soldiers definitely had a hard time leaving the base, where we still had access every now and then to leave the base, but it got a lot more restricted. So, I do remember that. I remember there was a show of force one time when there was a lockdown, where I guess the U.S. and NATO forces were gonna to fly over to Serbia. There was some incident in Kosovo and they wanted to show Russia some strength, but we didn't—but I guess they were up there high up there. But other than that, we had some restrictions that took place for incidents that were pretty ugly. We were concerned, you know, about what could happen. Was Al-Qaeda gonna hit something in Macedonia? There was an incident in

Albania that took place where a guy was trying to get in the U.S. embassy there. I do remember during that time where I started to see how keeping secrets was going to be much more difficult with the internet, where we had a meeting that we were gonna—this was happening at the U.S. embassy in Albania, and we got to keep this under wraps. And as my officer is telling us about this whole story and how we got to keep it under wraps, I'm watching the news broadcast and I'm like, "Guys, it's already on TV." Because some AP reporter was sitting right there with a laptop and a satellite phone and posted the article from Albania. So, that kind of revealed to me that keeping secrets was going to be a lot harder than it used to be. What else that I could share with you? So, those were some of the more interesting things that took place. We had William Cohen and Madeleine Albright come through our base a few times, especially William Cohen. Hugh Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff came— which those were my two frustrating moments because I did collect some souvenirs with the military. I do have 'em, but one of my more frustrating things was dealing with William Cohen and Hugh Shelton, who didn't gave me these challenge coins that you're probably aware of that I did learn about at Fort Benning, which was a big thing that the higher your coin, the less likely you were to pay for drinks. So, you had to show your challenge coins when you get called out. They never gave me coins. William Cohen's Secretary of Defense team gave me a pocket knife, but they gave everybody else a Secretary of Defense coin. I'm like, "This is all I get?" They bursted out laughing at me. They thought it was kind of hysterical and Hugh Shelton—I did a couple of things with him up at the observation post, you know. I was there to translate for him and I asked him, "Hey, why don't I get one?" and he's like, "You're a civilian, son. All you get is a handshake." So, that kinda bugged me, but I understood. I was a civilian. I don't get those kind of things. I eventually did compile some souvenirs and things like UN medals that I got from some of the soldiers. And one of the UN people felt bad for me that you've been here all this time and you're not getting a medal—here, we're going to give you a medal, so they did. Some of the Macedonian officers gave me some mementos and stuff, as well. I've definitely kept a lot of that. So, I did learn from the military guys how they kept mementos and things. I was keen about doing that, but then I got frustrated that I was treated differently. I'm like, wait a second, I'm with these guys in uniform and you're still treating me differently. So, I didn't partake to that well for a little while there, so I was kind of perturbed more than anything else.

Howe: That's understandable, especially when you're given a huge responsibility by the commanding officer in saying, "Keep us informed. You really are our first point of contact when it comes to understanding what's going on." It's a huge responsibility, and then feeling like you're not being recognized for it.

Simovski: Yeah, and then they turn around and they're like, “Nah, I guess you're not going to get one of those.” Which, like you said, it was kind of frustrating to see that happen. But I eventually dealt with it because I'm like, “Alright, I see what's going on here. I'm going to be treated a little differently.” One of them was like, "You don't have to get up at five in the morning and do the mile run that we always have to do or be tested physically." I'm like, "No, I don't have to, but you definitely need me when you leave that base, don't you?" So, yeah, they definitely understood that. By the way, I just found my little album, which is sort of what you were hearing in the background. They gave us these albums, like yearbooks, for every mission that came in—they would spend their six months there, so they would make these little booklets. I'm trying to remember my exact department's name, which I'll tell you in one second here. We were—It was a very interesting time with this stuff. Hold on one second. We were—our office was called MISE—the Military Information Security Element. That's what we were. So, that was our job was to go out there and keep a vigilant watchful eye on the communities and just deal and talk with folks. Looking at my yearbook, I'm looking at a picture of me standing over some guy as we were up in the mountain collecting information. We did fly the Blackhawk helicopters, which was one of the coolest things we did.

Howe: As a result of these experiences...you are 24-25 years old when this happens...

Simovski: 23.

Howe: 23?

Simovski: 22-23, yeah. Yeah 22-23 when it's all going on.

Howe: So, how did that change your perspective? How did that...

Simovski: Oh, well, that's a great question, because up until that point, I never left home. I never had to do just laundry. Even when I went to college, I was still living at home. It was my first time of actually growing up and becoming a man. You're out on your own and gotta wash your own clothes. So, that kind of woke me up and definitely—I did learn a lot of this stuff in political science class and visiting D.C before that. You thought you know how everything worked, and then you got in, and then you realized there was this whole other world that operated totally differently, at times, than what you ever knew about. One of the things that woke me up was the whole military contracting, with my company alone. But for the first time, that's when I heard of the name Halliburton, and then their subsidiary Brown & Root, which was part of them, and how they just—the massive amount of military contractors that were around. It kind of woke me up a little bit just to see the military and how much money they've spent on things. I remember when I was younger, hearing about the 600 dollar toilet, and I

laughed about that back in the early '90's when that happened and the story broke. Then, I saw firsthand how that happened. You've got these contractors that were overcharging the government. And whether that all got situated—I never—I don't know if that's still been situated, to be honest with you. I mean, you still hear the stories about this plane that Lockhead Martin made that—the F22 that hasn't seen combat and all that stuff. That's the experience that kind of woke me up. Besides leaving home and going out on my own for the first time, seeing the behind the scenes and seeing how everything worked and, you know, learning about—one of the things that I just told my students, and the movie Argo reminded me, when I got taught about why we have cross-cutting shredders and why we burn documents, because of the Iranian hostage crisis, because we had straight-lined shredders. The movie Argo reminded me about that conversation I had with my commanding officers of why we have this burning pit on base. So, it was very interesting of how all that came to be. You learn stuff in textbooks and I always told my students you learn all this stuff, but there's all this other stuff that you could never learn through textbooks, so you're just going to have to experience it yourself. And that's what happened there.

Howe: Got it. Yeah, growing up we all go through a certain experience. I feel like getting close to the military and government, in some aspect, forces us to do some reflecting, self-realization. Even if we're not aware of it we grow up quick.

Simovski: Oh, we did. I definitely grew up quick. There's no doubt about it. There was no time to be like, alright, I'm just this 22 year old kid that's just left home and I'm oblivious to the world now. It definitely woke you up. One of the other things we did was they gave me diplomatic plates to follow. One of our jobs, too, was keep an eye on the Iranians. I remember one time we had to stop the soldiers from going to the club. That was another interesting thing I forgot to tell you about. So, we had been watching these Iranian agents that had been watching a club that—you know, we would let out 50 guys to go on leave for the night and they basically would all go to this one club. And we got the club taken off the list because we saw these guys and that was something that we had to do. That was definitely something that we had to kind of keep an eye on. You know, you weren't aware of this stuff.

Howe: Seeing some of the soldiers that you're serving with and being given the responsibility that you're given...you said you had lived in Officers' quarters. You were socializing more with Senior Officers, but then looking at your peer group, looking at people who are the same age.

Simovski: Right, yeah. And they were just regular soldiers, right. They're Privates, they're Corporals, they're specialists, right. So, you're looking at them and, of course,

they looked at you. One of the things I didn't notice, which you're getting at, they definitely—they were stuck with just the general body of being just an everyday soldier and you're hanging out with the cream of the crop, with these Officers. One of the things I remember when we went into lock down, they were always trying to be like, "Well, are we gonna ever get out of the base?" and they were always trying to get that information from me that—like, “Is there anything you can do to get us out? We can't stand this.” And I was going through that phase. I can't stand being on this base and asking for permission to leave all the time. It'd get to be a drag a bit. I totally was able to relate to the 21-22 year olds. The 18-19 year old kids that were on the base and like you said, you're a peer with them, but yet, you're with the elite of the elite, right? So, you're with the Lieutenant Colonel, you're with the Sergeant Major, the Master Sergeant. You're with all these guys that are running the base and you're hanging out with them. You're right, it's a totally different perspective and looking back at it, I do remember that. And I remember the younger guys being…not envious; they understood why I was there, but you could tell that they're like, "Okay, you get to leave and we don't. We're all on the observation post and you're still hanging out, you know, checking us out, and then you're coming back into main base." So, I definitely could see how that was different, and how I definitely experienced it differently than somebody my age and was in the actual military itself.

Howe: As a result of that experience there's time when the control of information someone confides something to you...and clearly, some of the junior guys are interested in knowing some of these things. You're able to relax. I guess my question is: how did you balance that? Being able to relate, but then also controlling the information.

Simovski: Well, I mean, that was the growing up process, right? You had to understand that you're part of leadership, in a way. You have to show it. There were times I had to say, "Guys, I understand you're upset at this, but listen, we're doing this for your own good." Especially when that nightclub thing happened; some of them got mad at me for getting it off the list. I'm like, “Guys, we're doing it for your own good.” This is part of the gig, right? You don't want somebody to throw a grenade in there and then all you guys die, basically, because there was no emergency exit in the club. That was the part you also had to kind of—that's where I guess where I got my teaching experience. I almost felt like I was the teacher because I was explaining to them what was going on, who these different groups were, why things were the way they were. So, you know, what… In a way, looking back at it, that was really my first teaching experience besides my permanent sub job. And my actual student teaching was doing this

thing with a lot of the younger soldiers. That's a great way of viewing it. There's no doubt about that.

Howe: I can relate. I was Junior Officer at 23 years old and looking at my peer group who were enlisted, there was always this divide. They could see that I wasn't a Senior Officer; I wasn't 40-50 years old and they wanted to reach out. They wanted to relate to me in some way, but because of my position, because I had a leadership role, the system said you can't step that boundary. You can't overstep to become familiar—what they call fraternization.

Simovski: Right, exactly. With my teaching profession, where you're a teacher and then become an administrator, you gotta know that that line is now—there's a different line in the sand now. You're right, that whole fraternization part, you gotta be aware of it because to them—then, your position of power or your authority would be weakened.

Howe: Right. I mean, personally, how do you feel about that? How do you navigate that? Because everyone approaches it a little bit differently.

Simovski: I don't think it's an exact science because if you always try to show that line that you'd never cross, that line then—that's not the way the world operates. And you also want to seem human instead of just being—I mean, you could end up becoming like a robot and be like, "No, this is the way it is. You're going to have to deal with it." I think there was always that search for that human element of being in leadership, I guess, which still goes on in most professions, when you look at it. You've got your managers that act like robots that never fraternize. They never hang out with their employees or whatever, and then you've got the ones that are probably too social. You have to find that balance. There's no exact science to it.

Howe: I like how you put that. So, talk to me about the end of your tenure as you're coming close. Is this the end of your contract?

Simovski: No, the contract was indefinite as long as I wanted to serve. It's complicated. What happened was I met my, now-wife when I was back on my leave. When I came back, we were dating. And at that time, I had done like 6-7 months or 8 months and I'm still debating about whether this goes long-term. The problem was the situation in Kosovo deteriorates in October of ’98, and what happens is, you have the massacre that takes place—which, to this day, we're still debating whether it was a massacre or not. But a massacre supposedly took place and they started to use our base quite more frequently. I did notice General Grange—who was a two-star general at the time, who’s now on CNN and all these major news networks—was coming up quite a bit. There were rumors that General Grange was going to be running any operation against Serbia from

that base, so my antennas go up like, “Alright, we're only 23 miles from the border tops and we're within firing range.” If anything like that happens…so, that's one thing that happened. The second part that kind of deteriorated for me about leaving was my new officers that had come in. I referred to them as the James Bond-like characters that wanted to always do something on the edge, right. They wanted to do something more interesting. My relationship with them started to deteriorate, starting with that incident where they almost got me in trouble with the Albanian cafe owner, among other things. That also didn't help. Then, third thing that played into that was they couldn't get any Albanian interpreters ready in case the U.S. attacks Kosovo/Serbia. They have to get these Albanians in. As I'm finding out, credit history was a big issue when they were doing these interviews for the FBI. A lot of these people that they were trying to get as Albanian interpreters didn't have a credit history, which I did not know was a big issue with the FBI interviewees, at the time. But I guess they could buy you off if you didn't have a credit history—was the concern that I guess people in Intel had. So, the company and some of the folks told me, like, "Hey, if they go in, you're going to have to go in because you're the guy who knows Albanian." I say, "Okay, under one condition; I have to cover my name up." And they gave me no assurances that that could happen, and I said, “Do you realize the danger that I would be in, having my Macedonian-Slavic name on that uniform, and I'm doing interpretation jobs in Serbia and Macedonia and Albania?" I go, "That would put me in grave danger." So, that right there was kind of the beginning of the end where I started to say, “You know what? This is getting out of control here.” I decided to put in my resignation after that...after that whole thing that was starting to unfold. I said, “You know what? I've done my time, made a lot of money; I got introduced and I'm talking to this girl. I want to come back and I've had enough." So, that was kind of the beginning of the end there, which did not go over well, I will tell you that. My officers got very angry. The company wasn't too happy with me because of that. They found a replacement pretty quickly because there were people always in the back of the line wanting to do that job, but the fact that I had all these language skills and I had built up this reputation there, that they were not happy. And that's when the increase of my salary—this discussion began and I'm like, "You know what? I'm on my way out. I'm not dealing with this again."

Howe: I'm curious. The answer is probably very obvious, but I have to ask the question anyway. You go out, things get heated up, you start doing more of these jobs and you're wearing your name. What are you concerned about?

Simovski: Oh, that they didn't trust me. That the Albanians in particular didn't trust me, or I also did meetings with the Serbian officers before the situation with Serbia deteriorated. That we actually met with these guys. I think it was every month

or so that we met with them in Nis, which was a big city in Serbia, where they had this big base there. The third Serbian army was there. I remember having this conversation with one of the Serbian generals there that he told me as the situation was starting to get worse and worse, and he goes, “Hey, listen, if they found out everything about your father it may not bode well for you.” Eventually, that's what—the word got out that yeah, my dad was one of Tito's guard, and they did not like that at all. They kind of viewed me as a traitor that, you know—your dad was in Tito's army and here you are wearing the American uniform. They did not like that at all. He kind of warned me, like, “listen, anything that explodes, he goes and if we capture an American, we're not releasing you.” He kind of told me flat out and that's what kind of woke me up. I'm like, yeah, that's not good. So, that's when it kind of all boiled over for me. So, those three things and that thing in the back of my mind with the Serbian army and then the Kosovo situation with the name. I mean, look, the name, the ethnicity thing; that's such a big thing there. It's just something that growing up, it's just in your face all the time. Even when I was young, I always remember my grandfather—great-grandfather telling me stories about when the Albanians did this, when we were in World War II fighting in Trieste up there in Italy, they ransacked our villages. Never trust them. It's, like, embedded in like kids. So, it's really difficult to break that cycle, I guess you could say. Even though I grew up here most of my life, I was very well aware of what was going on ethnically and politically, and everything else that was going on there. So, I was very well aware of the dangers.

Howe: When this general gives you this bit of advice, did you feel it was coming from a friendly place or was this more aggressive?

Simovski: I think kind of...I think kind of both, but there was also a Macedonian officer that kind of—when we were meeting with him once right before I left, he kind of gave me the heads up to like: "Listen," he goes, "You guys are doing patrol by the border. You know there's going to be a situation where someone's gonna get angry and may turn you over to the Serbs." And lo and behold I was watching the news one year after I left when the whole thing with Kosovo and Macedonia became front page news that we had troops captured and it kind of brought me back to that conversation I had with both of them—the Macedonian and Serbian officers. The Macedonian officer was kind of coming from a more friendly perspective. I couldn't really take the Serbian guy either way. I think it was kind of in between. He was being sort of aggressive, but also, like, giving me a heads up like, "Look, for my own good, just get outta here." The Macedonian officer from the border battalion told me, like, "Listen, there's going to be a slip up and if you get caught, I'm telling you right now the Serbs are not gonna let you go." So, that kind of woke me up a little bit.

Howe: Understood. So...

Simovski: He basically told me that I would be made an example of. There's no doubt about that.

Howe: Do you remember his words specifically?

Simovski: Oh, yeah. I do remember that whole phrase that, "You know what? You're gonna get captured and you're going to [be] made an example of anybody that has a Slavic background that works for the Americans."

Howe: And in your mind, what did that mean?

Simovski: That they were going to either detain me or do something worse. Your imagination can run wild with what they could do in the Balkans. No doubt about that.

Howe: Sure. Well, you said that later coming back, you were stateside and you saw...

Simovski: Yep.

Howe: So, what was that? What did you see and how did you see yourself in that?

Simovski: Well, one of the things that bothered me though—when I came back, I was doing a little Monday morning quarterbacking. I'm giving them warnings like, “Okay, this is going to happen, this is going to unfold,” and the whole refugee thing with Kosovo has happened. They thought that that wasn't going to happen and you're like, “I told you so.” One of my learning experiences has always been that the younger you are, you may know stuff, but it always seems like the older crowd will never take you seriously until you get older, and that was kind of my learning experience. I gave them all these heads up like, “These things are going to happen.” And it was like, who was I talking to? So, that was kind of my learning experience from that whole thing.

Howe: Sure, but you said that some people were captured. Were any of them interpreters?

Simovski: No, there were no interpreters. From what I remember of the story, there were four guys that were looking for drinks and what happened was supposedly—this is the thing—is the Serbian Macedonians had captured them and gave them to the Serbian army across the border. So, they were a little too close to the border. I don't know if they crossed over; they didn't cross over, but they were close enough that the locals turned on them. And when the U.S. started to bomb Serbia in March of 1999, that's when things got really heated between the Serbian Macedonians and the U.S. army.

Howe: Got it. Do you recall whether or not these four individuals were returned safely?

Simovski: They were. Actually, the infamous Rob Blagojevich, the former—the disgraced Governor from Illinois—was a member of the U.S. House actually went there and negotiated a deal to get them released. I think him and Jesse Jackson went to talk with Milosevic. So, that was kind of interesting, now. I have flashbacks of Rod Blagojevich and that hair.

Howe: Not all bad, I suppose.

Simovski: No, until he made that deal or tried to make a deal for President Obama's Senate seat.

Howe: Were there any other opportunities for you to continue your work as a contractor?

Simovski: Yes. When I came back they offered me to do other things with the company. I thought about doing—working there in D.C. and I turned it down because I started to look around, you know. They said to take a day, look around, and I did. The housing prices in the Beltway were just astronomical. I mean, it was like, "Okay, you're going to pay me a lot more money, but it's almost like I'm going to be working only for the house." So, I kind of made an economic decision to come back home and my wife, at the time, was not really a big fan of that culture. Well, at the time, she was dating me, but now my wife—but she definitely did not like the atmosphere of D.C. You know, that whole cutthroat culture, and just so expensive, and she was actually closer with her parents. I wouldn't have had an issue living in D.C. at the time, but she definitely didn't want to and I decided to come back home, mostly because of the housing prices. When I saw some of those homes were 800,000, 1.2 million, I'm like, those homes aren't even 200,000 back here in Michigan. So I said, "No, no, no". So, I turned them down, and then they offered me a chance to get involved again in 2001, when they were collecting weapons from the Albanians when the crisis emerged in Macedonia in February of 2001, there was Operation Harvest, I think was the name of the operation where they went to collect weapons from the Albanians—that the company contacted me again and said, "Listen, you know, we lost contact with you. We'd like you to come back." So, they definitely extended—several times, actually, and my wife was not having any of it. At that time, we were now married and she was like, "No, nope, nope." And at that time, I had started teaching, too, and I'm like, "You know what? No." Now, I got stability teaching, that there was no way I would go back and do this again.

Howe: You ever play the *what if* scenario? The *what if* game?

Simovski: Yeah, I have. I've played it in my mind—especially with what's going on with the current state of teaching. It almost feels like we're always under attack and you're like, “What if I just stayed there and worked with this company and how many doors could have opened, and I could've probably worked in the State Department, and on and on,” and that's all true. My relatives, by the way, have never let me forget about it, too. My students even. They're like, "Why would you do that and go into teaching?" I still get asked that question quite often and until recently, I didn't even give it a second thought. But now, with everything going on with what's coming down the pike, with—it almost seems like we could do—and no right in public schools and it kind of frustrates me. And at times, I do a lot of that *what if*.

Howe: Yeah, the grass is always greener.

Simovski: Yeah, it always is, right? As of right now, I don't have any regrets with what I did. The *what if's* only recently have started to come back up.

Howe: Yeah, I can understand. My fiancée is a Chicago public school teacher.

Simovski: So, you know. You guys are not probably fans of Arne Duncan like we are. Yeah, you know all about it.

Howe: Yeah. I'm curious. You return from Macedonia. What was that experience like? Where'd you go?

Simovski: Well, I came back home. My parents still had a restaurant. And I will tell you, I probably had a six-month period there where I was like, what did I do? I really did. I'm hanging out with William Cohen. I'm hanging out with these elite politicians and officers and Joe Biden, and what was it? At the time, it was Senator Biden. And Carl Levin, my Senator, had gone to Macedonia, and then Senator Warner, the guy was married to Elizabeth Taylor, from Virginia, etc. I had met all these people, and then I came back home and was helping out the restaurant. And then, I go to my now wife and go, "You know, this stinks." I was on such a power-trip when I was working as an interpreter. You felt really important. You come back, and then you're like, now I'm working in a restaurant. Now, I'm trying to find a teaching job—which I didn't find one immediately right away—but it was kind of a humbling experience, I guess, in a way, you could say. It was easy to leave, and then all of a sudden for a few months after that, you're like, “My god, I had it really good.” And then, “Where am I now?” So, it was kind of an interesting view of things that unfolded. So, I can see where a lot of the soldiers, when they've come back, especially if they've done something really cool where they're coming back and doing mundane, everyday jobs. They're probably like, ya know, “It was so much cooler over there.”

Howe: Sometimes I've related it to that really awesome story, and then you end the story with, "I guess you just had to be there".

Simovski: Yeah. The prevalent feeling was all this experience was great. You're flying on Blackhawk helicopters; you're riding in Humvees; you're doing all this cool stuff: hanging out, and maybe doing a little Intel stuff here and there. And then, you come back home and you're like, “Now what?”

Howe: Were you able to convey any of that to family and friends?

Simovski: Oh, yeah. I've been able to convey some of the stuff. Obviously, you can't reveal everything. I had a five year contract where I couldn't specifically say certain things. That has expired, but there's still stuff that, to this day, couldn't be revealed. But yeah, I've been able to relay a lot of that. My relatives—a couple of them saw me there, doing the—watching the soldiers, mingling out with public at the time, and seeing me in uniform. So, some of them remember me—that are here that remember from there, and they were able to understand that. There's no doubt. Now, getting it across to my students—at times, that has been kind of a challenge because a lot of the students are still like, "Okay, we don't get this. Why?" Why? That's their biggest question. Why? So, question that is the prevailing question with a lot of my students—especially my advanced ones.

Howe: What age groups?

Simovski: We're talking...I usually teach juniors and seniors.

Howe: And this is high school?

Simovski: Yes.

Howe: Okay. Well, I mean, brains are still developing. You're talking about trying—it'd almost be like having a conversation with yourself before you graduated high school.

Simovski: Yeah, you know what? That's a great way of putting it in perspective. You're right. You don't know what you're in for until you experience it.

Howe: What were some of the first things? You said you were working in the restaurant. How did you find your way back into education?

Simovski: Well, immediately, one of the first things I did was I started doing a subbing job, and then, eventually, I got a permanent subbing gig for a few months. My former high school teacher, who taught me U.S. History, his wife got sick and he's like, "You know what? You just came back. I know what you..." He knew

what I did, and he remembered me from being really good at social studies, and he was like, "You know what? I'm gonna give you your first little gig here. I gotta go; she's sick and I need somebody to take over my classes—especially my AP U.S. History class." he goes, “I can't just have a regular sub in there." So, that was my way back in.

Howe: How did that—sorry, go ahead.

Simovski: I did that until the end of the school year in 1999, and then that kind of opened the door, and then I did a lot of interviews. At that time—which was really weird how it played out in Michigan—there were a lot of openings because a lot of the folks that started teaching in the ‘60's were retiring, so all these openings came up. And oddly enough, I had maybe ten or twelve interviews, and I literally had three or four job offerings. I literally got to pick where I went, instead of where teaching is now, where you basically have to find whatever you can. I literally got to pick where I went and oddly enough, I replaced a Vietnam veteran who taught government in our school—which, talking about all ironies, I ended up replacing a guy who was a Vietnam vet. A former Green Beret to boot.

Howe: Did you ever get a chance to communicate with him?

Simovski: Oh, yeah. Yes I have. He always found it strange himself that, like, “Oh, my God.” He goes, “I thought they would never find a replacement anywhere near what I did." But he goes, "You kind of surprised me." So, it was actually a really cool kind of pat on the back from the Vietnam vet guy that I replaced.

Howe: Well, that's a good Segway. How do you feel your experience with the DOD prepared you for teaching now?

Simovski: Well, like I said, that whole—I basically got that training by education people about different cultures, teaching about what's going on. I think it definitely disciplined me enough to be prepared for the job. Now, teaching obviously is totally different, I guess you could say, from the military point of view—especially with the whole regimented thing, but we do have a regimen. You gotta be up at 5. You gotta be there at 7. I start at 7:20 every morning, so that whole getting up, doing a routine—I mean, that continues to this day. So, that discipline has always kind of been there. I'll never forget the line that a couple of the soldiers said. They always told me, "You know what? You aren't full military, but just experiencing this gave you a taste of enough of what we go through, and it will be with you for the rest of your life." And it really has.

Howe: I hear them a lot when I'm talking with people and with people who experience the military—veterans who've served. I don't know why it's so canonizing in our lives.

Simovski: I don't know. It's just one of those things that…it's so different; it's so unique. But it gets you to be able to—I think more than anything, the challenges that you face with the military—you get all sorts of different scenarios or things that pop up that almost prepare you for challenges that pop up right in front of you in your everyday life, I guess. That's the best way to equate it, is that you're used to all these things kind of randomly appearing in front of you and dealing with it that it kind of prepares you for life.

Howe: Yeah. Do you maintain contact with anyone that you've worked with?

Simovski: I did for a little while but I kind of lost touch with a lot of them. A lot of it I think is because we didn't have social media back then. Had we had social media like Facebook and Twitter and all that today back then, I think we would have been able to stay in more contact. I stayed in touch with a few of them with email here and there, but so many of them went their separate ways. It's just, I guess, part of the way the world operates sometimes if you don't get really super close with people, and the lack of social media definitely played a part of that.

Howe: Sure. So, there's no Camp Able Sentry Facebook page?

Simovski: Unfortunately, no. Nobody has created one. Maybe you might have inspired me to make one. Maybe I might get that rolling a little bit because eventually, they shut down Camp Able Sentry when Camp Bondsteel was created in Kosovo. There was no need to have a base in Macedonia. So, it's been turned over back to the Macedonians.

Howe: I think I stumbled on a page. Maybe 50-60, maybe 70 pictures of the facilities there in Camp Able Sentry.

Simovski: Right.

Howe: It seemed as though there were some of the normal fixtures of a normal town, almost if you had to pick up and install a town.

Simovski: Yeah, we had a PX store, we had a mess hall, we had—there was this lounge place that we had. We also had some Macedonians selling food that was optional beyond the mess hall. It kind of operated...You're right, it kind of had this own little town feeling. We had facilities to go work out and play softball or play basketball or workout. We did have special quarters for the Air force guys because they were very important, especially because you needed them for the Blackhawk helicopters. I'll never forget the biggest incident that occurred within the base was when we went into lockdown when the Afghanistan—I mean, not the Afghanistan...actually, we hit Afghanistan after the African embassy bombings. But I remember our commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel shut

down the base and the Air force guys were trying to go out, and they're Air force guys, right? You don't tell them no. Well, our Lieutenant Colonel was like, “No, you guys are not leaving the base at all.” Literally the next day I think the commanding officer of the Air force pilots came from Germany and got into a shouting match with our Lieutenant Colonel like, "Hey, you want pilots for your helicopters? You better back off." I did not realize how intense the relationship was between the army and the Air force, and that perception of the Air force. They got all these special privileges that they got to bring their families wherever they went, whereas the army guys didn't. That was kind of eye opening to me. And you could feel that tension with that Air force situation that popped up. Yeah, we had to treat those guys a little better. They had their individual quarters and they were treated totally different than the everyday soldiers. Even our commanding officers—they still shared a room, but the Air force guys got their own little pods and stuff.

Howe: The Air force guys in Macedonia—they brought their families with them?

Simovski: No. That's the one catch, but they rotated them out quickly. They didn't get to stay there that often, unless they were single. Some of the guys opted to stay a little longer.

Howe: Got it.

Simovski: I do remember this one guy who was there more frequently than the other officers—other pilots. They weren't officers now that I'm thinking about it. In the Air force, it's the opposite. The higher the ranking, the more you get to fly. That was the one thing that they told me about their families. They went back to Germany—their families were right there. Where some of the other soldiers were like, "No, my family is back here or over there." So, yeah. But they did rotate the pilots more frequently than the everyday soldiers. So, once again, the perks of the Air force.

Howe: Yeah. I guess I'll ask this one. What's your most memorable experience from those few months that you spent there?

Simovski: The longest-lasting moment? Just being able to just witness—what was it? Well, there really wasn't a single moment that stood out and said to me, like, “That's the moment!” The whole experience in itself. I think my most memorable moment was probably on the C130 when I was leaving, and that was all coming back to me as I'm leaving Macedonia. It was raining and actually, it was the first rainstorm in months. And I'm leaving in the C130 and as we're going over the city, and all those memories just came back, like, it's over… This experience, it's over. And it kind of was—it was also kind of a depressing moment, too. I had all this fun, but I realize why I was leaving. But that image of seeing the city from

that C130 flying back towards Germany, that to me...I think now that I am thinking about it it was that moment where it kind of hit me, like, it's over, but this experience has been great.

Howe: I like it.

Simovski: It's kind of odd that, yeah, that's the moment when I'm on the C130, and I had all my gear and everything packed up. And coming back and looking out the window and, like, yep, it was a great experience, but it's over and time to move on.

Howe: Do you still have some of your gear?

Simovski: I have my boots. Actually, that was the one thing I did keep was my military boots. I actually—I do have some of my actual uniform itself; I do have a couple of pieces of it...like my top and bottom; I do have that. They let me keep one of them and there were some other things I kept like patches and stuff that I had for my uniform. I did have these very expensive gloves—the military ones. But they eventually wore off and tore up, and I had to get rid of them. But I do have my boots still—both my winter boots and my combat boots.

Howe: Hey, they last.

Simovski: Oh, they do. I mean, yeah, you take care of those things, they last forever.

Howe: Do you have any particular perspectives, insights, feelings about service to your government, to your community?

Simovski: As far as the idea that you wish...I always keep talking about this in my AP gov. class that you just wish people would be a little more aware of their civic duty. To me, I think I just did—granted, I was in the military, but I think I did something positive. I was trying to help out the situation in Macedonia. You get the press release and see how low the voter turnout was for these midterms, and just the apathy that I've noticed around the country when it comes to civic responsibility, and just the lack of awareness I think of what some of things the government does and why it's important. And you see a lot of this anti-government stuff and it has brought a different perspective. I'm trying to get this one lady who's the Head of the FDA here in Michigan, which oddly enough, I was at this—I did this thing in July; I was in D.C. for something, and I was flying back, and this lady that's the Head of the FDA chapter in Detroit is on the flight. And I'm like, I should have you come and tell them why you're important. Just this idea of, like, people don't see the importance of what the government does, in general. Granted, you can always talk about—there's a lot of negative stuff, but just this whole anti-government sentiment in the last few years and lack of

civic responsibility is really starting to bother me a lot. I've been trying to encourage that with my own students. One of the things I make them do is go to city council meetings and school board meetings. I'm like, “This is how it starts, kids. You've gotta be active from a young age, and be your own advocate, and be aware of what's going on around you.” That's the one lesson I've been trying to get my students to understand, besides voting and being responsible that way on the civic perspective—but just being aware of what's going on is ultimately the biggest factor. And thing I would promote for people is just like, “Come on, wake up and see the big picture and see what's going on.”

Howe: Got it. I'm curious. I think a great way of passing it on is because you're in a classroom and you're able to share your experiences and views to your students. Have you found a way...the voting age is 18, but have you found anything that you can do to involve the students, even where they're at?

Simovski: Well, yeah, the city council school board meetings has been very key. Just having them go. I make them get—there are things assigned, so that way I know they went. But just tell to them get active, participate, volunteer. I promote volunteering in the community, as well. Election day—usually, the clerk comes around saying, "Do you think you have anybody who’s around 18 that would like to work at the polling station?" I'm not sure, but I'll find some kids that get involved that way. For their age, being 16-17, for them, even waiting a year to vote is like an eternity. That's what I've found with this new generation; it's the “now” generation. Everything has got to be now. A year is like an eternity away. Getting them to just go to school board meetings and city council meetings is a great start because it lets them see what's going on right around them, and gets them involved, and makes them feel like, “Okay, this is how it works. This is a way for me to get active.” And eventually, that hopefully will translate into them voting and being more responsible.

Howe: Well, said. So why do you feel that it's important for you to share your story?

Simovski: I think, in the grand scheme of things, like I wrote in my pre-interview, a question there—I've noticed, especially with the Middle East situation when we couldn't find interpreters, just how important the job of an interpreter really is. It's not just translating the news stories. It's just like that phrase that my officer told me: “The interpreters are the eyes and the ears of the military forces, wherever they are.” I think they play a vital role. Think about if we didn't have those Middle Eastern interpreters, and how hard it would be in the Middle East. They have it a lot harder than I did because they have gotten—literally gotten threats about being part of the U.S. military or had family members being abducted trying to get them to leave the military. For them, it's even more dangerous than what I experienced, but I think the role of interpreters with the

military is a story that needs to be shared with everyone. Going back to World War II, and you hear all the stories of how they used Navajo Indians to have the code that the Japanese never broke. These stories need to be told more, I think. Yeah, we always talk about the battles which are important, of course, because that's central to winning, right? The behind the scenes stuff and the interpreters are right there. They play a vital role, especially in the global world that we live in. I always have students ask me, "Well, why did they pay you so much money for Macedonian?" I go, "Because Spanish and some of these other languages are more well-known and they don't really need to go and hunt for these people. Where trying to get somebody to speak Farsi to go work for the government being able to work with this whole thing with Iran going on, that's a much more difficult task, you know, getting them involved, and then trying to get them to work for the government." So, I think these stories need to be told and shared with— especially—more and more. Eventually—hopefully, you guys get to the Middle Eastern interpreters who's stories are probably a lot worse, a lot more intense than what I actually went through, and those stories all have to be shared. I think the public would get a better understanding and better feel for what working as an interpreter for the military is.

Howe: Thank you for that. So, is there anything that you thought we would talk about or anything that you wanted to add?

Simovski: Actually, we've gone over a lot of it, a lot of what I thought we were going to cover. The one aspect of it is, like I said, just the tension at times that I could feel with my own family members when I was working, and it was a very intense time. The bombing of Serbia hadn't started yet. My mom's family has Serbian ancestry, so that would have been a much more difficult time for me to stay with the military when that whole situation unfolded. So, I think from that perspective. On one hand, especially if you're very ethnic and you come from those regions; it's something that you have to do if you're working for the U.S. government. You're working for your, now, homeland and it is trying to put those two things aside. And trying to be in the middle of both of those issues is pretty tough. It was tough for me even back then. Somehow, I managed to balance it, but like I said, I can't even imagine what these Middle Eastern interpreters are going through, what they're experiencing, and trying to put working for the government, loyalty to the government, and loyalty to your family members and ethnic homeland...that is a very difficult thing to do and hopefully, I expressed that through the interview. That was kind of a rough thing—for a while there—to do. But somehow, I managed to do it because there wasn't anything going on. But like I said, the other scenario with the Middle East…yeah, that I can't even imagine. There was something else I wanted to add, but beyond that, I think we pretty much covered a lot of what I

anticipated and I kind of let you in on a bit. I can't go over every single incident that took place. We could be spending another two-three hours talking about everything. But as far as the big picture stuff, I think we covered it pretty well.

Howe: Nice. Well, and it's a great opportunity to get a very different perspective. People who've kind of shared a military experience, but didn't commit in the same way, and how that affected your life, and now you're doing something—I feel you're giving back. You're imbuing some of things to the future generations, which is what we hope those things will do.

Simovski: Yeah, and I'm glad I'm doing that because, like you said, that perspective that I have that I'm able relate to kids is invaluable, and you're right. I'm proud that I've had the opportunity to do that.

Howe: Regardless of what's going on and how the rest of politics wants to view education presently, you know.

Simovski: I totally agree.

Howe: You're still the one in the classroom who's doing the hard work.

Simovski: You can't find everything in a textbook. I even told that to one of my nephews who was trying to debate me on some topic about what happened in Yugoslavia, and I always threw this line to him. I go, "You were in diapers. I was a teenager. I was there. You're reading it in a book." So, that's the best analogy that I've been able to give to even my students when I have this conversation with one of my nephews, who tries to debate me on some situation that pops up there. Like I said, "You were a toddler. I was a teenager. I was there. You're reading about it." So, that's a perspective that you're not gonna read. The students—no matter what you give them, unless you experience it, they'll never be able to put it all together.

Howe: To that point, part of the reason why we're doing oral histories is because so much knowledge is available on the internet and through books—this is just another way to get, not only more knowledge if someone's doing research, but there's the human factor. That's the fun part about history, right? Is whose side is it being viewed from?

Simovski: Right, and telling stories. Just trying to put it all together, and that's why I think I've been pretty successful with my students, is if you're able to tell it to them in a story, that makes sense, and it flows, and you're able to tie it all together. That, to them, is more powerful than just sitting there reading through a primary document.

Howe: Right. Well, awesome. If there's an opportunity for you to swing by and visit us in Chicago, if there's more stories you think about, please feel free and contact us to share some of those things, and we'll just turn the tape recorder back on.

Simovski: Absolutely, and if you want, because that way I'd be in video instead of on audio. I think I would be able to go through some of these other things. And if there's something that you think of that we didn't address now that you think of when you go through documenting all this, ya know, put that aside, note it up. And sometime next year, if we swing by at some point in Chicago, I'll be able to address it that way, because I think this is just the beginning of the journey.