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Interviewee: Daniel Sullivan

Interviewer: Caleb Klaus

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Caleb Klaus: This is oral history interview with Daniel Sullivan. My name's Caleb Klaus, and it is November 24, 2019. We're going to be asking Danny about his military service and a couple different questions here. So why did you decide to join the military?

Daniel Sullivan: Well, I was 20 years old, and I had just done a semester in college. I wasn't a very good college student, even though I was a really good high school student. College just was not for me. So, I kind of only did one semester of college and then—

JK: What school did you go to?

DS: The University of Montana in Missoula. Yeah, I went as a music major and got a full-ride scholarship to be a performance major. I just, I wasn't a good student. So, I left and went back home to Billings and started working for my friend again, who owned a pizza place. I was cooking and driving. I did that for about six months and decided that that was not the route that I wanted to go. I knew that there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to be a musician and continue down that road. I was a decent musician, so I called up my recruiter for the Marines. I'd thought about it before, like pretty much all my life. I just never felt confident enough that I could even make it through boot camp.

So anyway, I call up my recruiter, and they're always excited to have musicians join because they get extra points and everything. Called him up and had an audition, and they said I was good for it. Then I spent a couple of weeks getting ready because physically I was never a runner or anything, and they had all these physical requirements. I'd just never been interested in any of that. So, it was about a couple of weeks before I actually left and went to boot camp.

JK: So did you have to make a lot of changes to do the physical part, or do you feel like it was just something in your head?

DS: I had to make a lot of changes to do the physical part. I don't think I'd ever run a quarter of a mile, like in high school or whatever when they would make us run a couple of miles. Yeah, I wouldn't run; I would walk. That was not my thing, but they took me out and started slowly and within a couple of weeks I was able to pass the initial—they have an initial test that you have to do. I was able to pass that—barely, but I did.

JK: Yeah. That's cool. Did you get better as you went through your service?

DS: I did. Even just going through boot camp. I kind of became one of the faster runner. I'd always done—grown up doing some farm work and everything, so I had some strength. That that really wasn't an issue. It was definitely the running. But yeah, I got a lot better. I became one of the faster runners.

JK: I can see that. How long did you end up serving?

DS: I ended up serving a total of 21 years on active duty.

JK: When was the start? Was—

DS: joined in September of 1996, and I retired in November of 2017.

JK: That's pretty recent. So, what was your job? What did you play? What was the requirements for it?

DS: My job in the Marines was to be a musician, a clarinet player. I played clarinet my entire life, so it was a fun job. It's kind of interesting because right after completing boot camp and Marine combat training, all the musicians go to a pretty intense school for six months. So, in the six month—I think it's six to eight months—but within that six to eight months, they basically cover everything you would learn in an undergrad music performance school. You have to go there with—it's not like you can go there without knowing how to perform or whatever because it's super intense.

JK: So, you already have to have music training—

DS: You definitely—

JK: a—to join that program.

DS: Yeah, you definitely have to have a music background.

JK: I don't really know what a Marine musician does. What would be your daily—

JK: Our main mission is just to provide musical support to whatever command that we're attached to, whether it be support for different kind of ceremonies that take place throughout the day or week or month or year. Every kind of holiday has a ceremony on a base or whatever. Then a lot of it was marching in parades across cities everywhere. It's kind of cool because you kind of really represent the entire Marine Corps to go to towns where there are no Marines there, people don't know Marines. Go to these towns and maybe do a parade, and they've never talked to Marines and they actually get to meet Marines and maybe form a better or different opinion for the services that they may have had before.

JK: That's cool. It's kind of like a PR thing.

DS: Oh, definitely a PR. Another part of it is just doing public concerts kind of like your local symphony would do, but doing them in different cities and towns, going to different countries that we might not have very good or any relationship with at all. Kind of speaking to them through the language of music.

JK: That's cool. That's cool. So, would you get to meet other musicians, obviously, through that?

DS: Yeah. A big part of what we do would be to go to help the youth. So, we would really often go to high schools, colleges even, and kind of do master classes. Do performances for students and then do master classes, help them out, get them interested in—kind of show them that if they are a musician there, there are options out there. It just happens that the military happens to be the biggest employer of musicians. Not everybody can make it into a symphony, so if you want to perform and you spend eight years, or six or eight years, getting your masters or doctorate in music, you're pretty lucky even if you can get into a symphony. There are opportunities.

JK: To make a living playing music isn't a foregone conclusion if you have a degree.

DS: Exactly.

JK: So, the largest employer of musicians worldwide?

DS: Is the United States military.

JK: Do you happened to have an idea of those number?

DS: Oh, I don't.

JK: I can look that up.

DS: I do know that the Marine Corps has about 600 musicians active duty. The Army had—used to have a lot more than the Marine Corps, and I believe that they still do and the Navy does as well. Recently, though, in the past, probably about 10 years—Well, it's kind of an ongoing battle, actually, that people are like, “Why do we have these bands? Why are we funding music in the military?” So, there's been quite a few cuts. Then we'll get some very strong support, and we'll gain more and it's always kind of up and downhill battle. People just kind of don't understand, oftentimes, our worth, and—

JK: Seems like there is a morale aspect as well?

DS: Yeah. You mean as far as us providing—

JK: To your other fellow soldiers or servicemen.

JK: Oh, yeah. Definitely, definitely. We did tours. I was in a band—we did tours even in the Middle East, and our job was just to go into the NCO club or whatever and play music for these guys. Sometimes we've got lots of different ensembles, so it wasn't like we're playing classical music for these people. [laughs] We do have rock bands and whatnot, so it's pretty diversified in what we could do.

JK: That's really cool. So, was there anyone that influenced you or acted as a mentor while you were serving?

DS: Oh, yeah. I had lots of mentors in the military. I think my first really—let's see, how do I put this? One of my best, first mentors was in my second band. I had just got there after doing three years in Okinawa and then went to Miramar, which is near San Diego. And the trumpet player there had just finished his intermediate music school, and he was conducting the bands and writing music. I was a fairly decent clarinet player. I was always considered the best clarinet player in the Marine Corps. But he kind of got me out of the comfort zone of just wanting to play the clarinet, because as you stay in the military, there's opportunities to grow and do something different to lead people in different ways. It's actually kind of expected. So, he got me interested in conducting and writing music. His name was Ray Martinez (?). He was a trumpet player. He gave me my first baton. Then he let me conduct the band in a few rehearsals and whatnot. Just something that I really enjoyed, and I kind of seemed to have a bit of a natural ability to do. You'd think that a conductor might not have that much control over the band or influence on how a band actually sounds or whatnot. But in actuality, they really do.

JK: They have complete control, right?

DS: Absolutely.

JK: They set the tone, the rhythm. They decide to pieces, don't they, too?

DS: Yeah, you decide the pieces—how do you rehearse people, how you treat them when you rehearse them, how you interact with them. A lot of conductors of major symphonies have really been known to be like tyrants. They don't have a good name other than that their orchestras were very good. They just happened to hire the best people. But it is really important how you treat people, and if you treat them right there, they're really going to respond the way you want to. So, that's one of the things I learned about or through being a conductor. But Ray Martinez was my first mentor.

JK: The management skills then. How to lead great people.

DS: Oh, definitely. Like I said, that's just one of the things expected of Marines is they kind of go up in rank through—you start out as a noncommissioned officer [NCO] where your job is basically to do what you're told, be where you're supposed to be when you're supposed to be there, and do what you're told. Then as you move up, you might get promoted, and you'll have people underneath you who you have to lead and you have expectations for them and of course they have expectations for you. So, you are managing people. Then what I think is really cool about it is we have a lot of—the Marine Corps and the military in general has a lot of training for their leaders as they go through the ranks. So, it's not just like you are put in a situation and you either sink or fail, or sink or swim. It's all about the training, constant training.

JK: They support you through that?

DS: Yeah.

JK: Then what was your promotion to by the time you left?

DS: By the time I left the Marines, I was a master sergeant. I got promoted to master sergeant in—I should really remember this—January of 2016. No, it had to be earlier because I stayed a master sergeant for at least a year, two years. It was 2015 I was promoted to master sergeant. At that time, I was stationed at Parris Island, South Carolina, and I went there to be the—it's one of the two bases where they actually do train Marines through boot camp. So, it was my last duty station, and I went there as the assistant director to the band. About six months later, the officer in charge of the band decided that he was going to retire a little bit early. So, the command decided that they didn't really have enough time—they weren't interested in getting another officer in to the band to be the director—so, I was placed in the position of being the actual director of the band. That was pretty neat and a good opportunity to show what I could do with the band, who at the time didn't have a great reputation for being a really good band. We just kind of turned things around in really short amount of time.

JK: That position would normally be a commissioned officer?

DS: It's actually—for musicians—the officer in charge, it's a warrant officer. Warrant or chief warrant officer.

JK: You felt feel good about like the progress you made with them?

DS: Oh, yeah. I felt great. It was a really, really great experience seeing the level of musicianship evolve.

JK: Do you feel like it was recognized?

DS: Yes, I do. I do feel that most of the time it was recognized. From the command, I guess it was expected in anyway. But it was definitely recognized that, hey, this band kind of wasn't very good at one point in time, and now they are. There are so many variables, but—

JK: Yeah, but this guy was one of the variables that made it into an excellent band.

DS: Yeah, I think that. Then the people who were there already—I think they always wanted to be good. Maybe they just didn't have the right push to be where they wanted, needed to be or wanted to be.

JK: Yeah, it takes guidance to get to—to excel.

DS: It really does.

JK: So that kind of leads me to—well, I guess, how does your listening work? Like how long you would have to enlist for, what's your contract like?

DS: Generally, in the Marine Corps, a contract is generally four years. So, you serve four years, and then within a year of your end of active service date, you can decide whether or not you want to re-enlist. It kind of changed throughout my time in the Marine Corps. When I when I was first in, I did my four years. No, I did three years and right at three years, I decided I wanted to re-enlist, and that enlistment was approved automatically. There really wasn't much competition or anything. But as I went through my 21 years, around the time I was about 13 years in, the Marine Corps kind of changed a few standards, and they started going through people's records and they cut a lot of people. So, there was a lot of competition of who could re-enlist and who could not. I think my last enlistment, I waited eight months to hear back of whether I was going to be accepted for reenlistment.

JK: That sounds stressful.

DS: It was a little stressful because at the time, I'd decided by then that I'm going to at least do 20 years. So, I really didn't have a plan at that time to get out. But I was approved for reenlistment and was able to get to over 20 years.

JK: Is there an incentive for 20 years?

DS: At 20 years, if you decide to retire and are approved to retire, then you will receive basically half of your pay—half of your base pay for the rest of your life. So, it's definitely a good incentive, and it's one that kind of led me to the decision to retire.

JK: So, yeah, and that leads us to why you chose to retire.

DS: That's one of the main reasons.

JK: Was just that you could?

DS: Was just that I could. You kind of get to a point where you've done something so long and whether you love it as much or not, it's like if you know that you're expected to work, you keep working as much as you have before. But you're kind of only getting 50 percent of your pay if you continue to do that. So, I could get out of the Marine Corps, do nothing and get 50 percent of the pay, which was not the only reason. But like I said before, it was definitely an incentive. I could have stayed—I could have tried to stay until 30 years, and if you do, you can collect 75% of your basic pay. However, at the time, the Marine Corps had just kind of undergone some changes to their standards, and that was kind of a big deal for me because they made a lot of changes to like physical fitness standards. So, as I turned 40 years old, the standard—they used to give me a break once you turned 30 and 35 and 40, you would get some kind of break. But my standard went basically back down to where it was when I was 20 years old. Not that you shouldn't always keep up and keep in shape, but age can kind of be a little bit of a restriction on what you can do physically. I just got to the point where I was in a leadership position and I could definitely train my Marines, but it became harder and harder when you're 40 years old and you have 18-year-old Marines to train and they're in really good shape. You don't want to be the person that can't keep up with them. So, I thought—that was one of the reasons. And I think that's probably one of the reasons a lot of Marines decide to retire at 20 years. It's very physically challenging.

JK: What's the way to get around that? To be a commissioned officer?

DS: No, they still have requirements. Yeah, they still have exactly the same requirements as everybody else. Really for them even more because a lot more is expected of them. But their physical requirements are the same. Not really a way to get around it.

JK: Did you have an idea though what you wanted to do when you left?

DS: I did. I had a little bit of an idea. At the time, I was a musician. I had taken a couple of bands and really good things with them. I decided that I wanted to go back to school and get a degree in conducting and then go be a college professor and conduct college bands. At the time, that's what I wanted to do, but that's not necessarily what I'm doing now.

JK: Did you do any schooling while you were in the military?

DS: I did. I did. I started—at my first duty station, I started a computer science degree. But I could only take one class here and one class there just because of our time restrictions. As I progressed through the ranks, my time became more valuable, and I just didn't have enough of it to do a lot of schooling. I'd maybe do a couple of classes a year. But there was a lot of internal training, like all of the academies that I had to attend, the leadership schools. I actually taught

at the Naval School of Music. I went to a couple of courses there, taught clarinet and conducting at the Naval School of Music. So I was always kind of being educated.

JK: That's really cool. I mean, I kind of had an idea about the ability to learn and take classes, but I didn't realize the level of it.

DS: Yeah, it's really nice because while you're in, the military does pay 100% of your tuition. So, if you've got the time, if people have the time to do it, then they really should. I've known people who on their off time can get through a master's degree. It takes them a lot more time because you're working more than full time. But I've definitely seen it done.

JK: Did you feel like, so the Marine Corps, did you feel like the Marine Corps prepared you for your exit?

DS: I think that they try to prepare you because you do have to go through some transition courses. You have to go through—they actually make you go through a lot of courses and do a capstone before you can, before they'll sign off for you to exit the military. One of the big courses that you have to go through is the transition readiness seminar kind of prepares you to—they spend a week or two on just writing resume and doing mock interviews. They want you to have a plan ready to give a potential employer or employers your actual resume. They kind of lead you through that process, even though when I got out, I wanted to go to school. I didn't really have any desire to get into a job right away.

JK: How did the actual process go from when you decided you were going to leave to actually leaving and then the reintegration? I know that sounded like a lot of questions right there, but—

DS: No, it is a long process because I applied to retire about a year before I actually got out of the military. They do require you to have all of your things done six months out. So, it is a long process because you have to go through that transition readiness seminar. You have to do the resume building, the job interview training. All of the medical work that you have to do is like, it's a couple of months of screening and going through your medical record. Teaching, learning about what the V.A. can do for you after you get out. Yeah, it's quite a long process. You get out all of those things done and kind of turn it into your commanding officer, and then he might give you the go ahead to be, "Yeah, you've checked everything off the list that we think needs to be done for you reintegrate and be a civilian again."

JK: How's that been for you—the processes, was it easy? Was it hard?

DS: [laughs] At first, it was easy, I think. Well, it's been both easy and difficult. I knew that I wanted to go to school, so I prepared myself and talked to all the professors and everything. I knew that I was gonna have to have a part-time job. When I got out, I was basically on leave for about 60 days, because if you build up your leave and you can take it. I got out and found a

place to live. Didn't have a job, but I had a good income for at least a few months and I had some savings and whatnot. So, it was easy to find a place to live, and then I was ready to go to school. But finding my job, my first job was actually the hard part. It was really difficult to find a job because I knew that I only wanted a part-time job while I was going to school. But I'm a musician. I've done music all my life. So, people don't often realize the, I guess, external set of skills that you might have as a musician. They think this guy's just been a musician his whole life. He's just been a Marine his whole life, you know? I mean, there was—I think I applied at gas stations and I applied at grocery stores, and I got no calls back. The only place that I did get a call back from was—before I got out. I applied at UPS, and I just wasn't in town at the time and couldn't be available for an interview. So, yeah, I think just being those two experiences on my resumé as a musician, whether I had leadership experience within that or experience as a supply chief on the on the base or whatever, I think just having musician and Marine on your resume is—makes it really kind of difficult to get a job in the civilian sector, unless you decide that you want to get a government job and that is not something that I was really interested in doing.

JK: What kind of government job?

DS: There's a lot of support personnel on any base around the country or even around the world where there are civilians that work right alongside the military, doing anything or even everything that they do.

JK: So that would be easier to get?

DS: It's a long process, but they're more willing to look at you than—to consider you than a civilian employer might be.

JK: I know that there was some requirements at one point for military preference for vets for jobs. Different programs. I'm not sure how that still is panning out. It sounds really frustrating.

DS: It can be really frustrating. I did get to the point where I knew I could get through at least a semester of college if I didn't have a job, but it was going to be difficult. I just happened to meet somebody randomly and we kind of got to talking, and he told me, "Oh, hey, we might have this opening in our warehouse and it's part time." So, I put in a resumé right away. I didn't hear back, and I didn't hear back from them for a few weeks. After a couple of weeks, I called and made sure they got it. It was actually—it was very shortly after Christmas. They said that they had got my resumé, and they'd be giving me a call or whatnot. I waited another two weeks, and I finally got a call from this guy to come in for an interview. Went in for the interview for a warehouse position at a nonprofit organization and got the job. Later on, this guy told me that because of my resumé, he had planned on hiring me before we even had the interview.

JK: Was he a vet?

DS: He was not a vet, but he's got a lot of veterans in his family.

JK: It sounds like you realized that you might need some more schooling in order to get a job to support you from then on.

DS: Yeah. I mean, I did finish a semester out at the music school, and then I kind of decided that I might want to do something different for me because going to the music school—I had a lot of opportunities, it was a great time, but I also realized that I would be chasing something that I had in the Marine Corps musically as a college professor and probably never be fulfilled in that aspect. So, I did decide that I should probably either start looking for another job or go another route with my degree. A position came open for a development coordinator in the nonprofit place that I worked for. A full-time position came open right after my semester ended, and it had to do with like managing their database and their website and working in the fundraising department. So, I applied for the position. To be honest, the CEO of the organization was really, really, really reluctant to hire me for the position for a couple of reasons. One, because I was a warehouse worker at the time, and her perception of 'this guy's working in the warehouse. He can't do this. All this other administrative stuff' and whatever. Even though my resumé had it all on there. So the development director kind of—I believe he really kind of persuaded her, and I was able to get into the position that I applied for and really enjoyed it for the first year, year and a half. But it became really apparent that there's not very many positions that were higher than me at the point, and unless those two people left or they created new positions, that that's where I was going to be—became very kind of unchallenging.

JK: But it gave you an idea of something you liked in the computer science realm?

DS: Yeah. I had started my computer science degree when I was in my early 20s. It had been something that I was always interested in.

JK: Re-interest.

DS: Yeah. I thought that was something that that I might give a shot to, and that's what I'm currently doing.

JK: Now you're a student at the University of Montana?

DS: I am a 43-year-old student at the University Montana, studying, trying to get through computer science.

JK: Have you had any difficulties with, say, the age difference?

DS: No. The age difference is fine. I don't think I've really had any problems with the age difference. I think what I've had problems with is being motivated to get this work done that's really difficult. I used to be the guy in the military in charge of people. If you were in charge of

people, you really have to have your stuff together and you have to have the discipline; otherwise, they're not going to look up to you or want to do anything you require of them. But for me, it's definitely been hard to keep myself motivated, especially when I have some of these classes that are pretty difficult for me.

JK: So, do you think that might be part of coming from such a rigid structure where you had expectations placed on you externally, whereas now your locus of control is internal?

DS: Yeah, I definitely think that's where that is coming from. There is nobody right now to hold me accountable except for myself, literally. I'm single, don't have any kids. I don't have any other responsibilities aside from being responsible for myself. I definitely think that's an issue where that comes from not being in the Marine Corps anymore.

JK: We discussed in our class that some vets had issues, problems with the reintegration, realizing that they no longer had a goal. And you have a goal of a degree, but I think it was like a sense of purpose where everybody around them was engaged in the same goal as well, that it was kind of had—there's almost an inertia to it.

DS: Yeah, it's a camaraderie thing, for sure. Outside of the military, there's almost nothing that compares to the camaraderie you feel to your fellow Marines. Of course, we all have brothers and sisters and relatives, but in the Marine Corps, we are all brothers and sisters and we're with each other every single day. There's always somebody who has your back. You're always going to have somebody else's back. I've found that that is not always true being outside of the Marine Corps, unless you just happen to find that. But you're really kind of have to look for it or seek it out or just happen to fall into it. Yeah, that's one of the hardest parts of not being in the Marine Corps is that not having those people have your back, no matter what.

JK: Have a vested interest in you being successful. Your success is that part of their success as well, whereas now it's only you.

DS: Right? [laughs] That's exactly how it is.

JK: How are you dealing with that?

DS: I think I'm doing okay. I think for a while I was kind of actually pretty depressed about it, especially when I would go to my job and sit in my office in front of my computer every single day and leave at the end of my eight hours. Nobody really cared what time I got there. Nobody cared when I left. Just as long as you're in your office working for eight hours, you leave. There's nothing else. For me, that kind of got pretty depressing. But I went back to college for this computer science thing, and I was doing okay at first. I think I was doing pretty good. Then I got to the point where it just got really kind of demanding in all of my classes all at once, and I just had all of this stress and really kind of no one to talk to about it. So, it's kind of rough, but I've been lucky in, actually, each of my classes to meet people and even groups of people in each of

my classes who are now studying together and whatnot. So, over the past month or so, that has actually made it a lot easier, a lot more bearable. I don't feel like I want to quit every day, or like there's not a purpose because there are other people. As weird as it might sound, there's other people who are struggling, and when you recognize that and go through this struggle with other people, it just makes it a little bit easier, I think.

JK: We discussed something in the class—I'm trying to think of the right term for it—basically like a communal experience, the camaraderie, the group experience where it's shared experience. When you have those shared experiences with others, you have a better connection. I'm glad that you found that.

So, are you happy with your decision to leave?

DS: Some days I am. Some days I'm not, and pretty much for all of the reasons that I've stated before. I really, really miss the camaraderie. I miss doing the music and leading groups of people. Now, it's kind of just me. In that aspect, I'm not. But then you kind of have to realize that everybody has to get out of the military at some time. There's nobody that does an entire—well, you can't—everybody's got to get out sometime. I think I'm generally pretty happy about it.

JK: Is there anything as civilians you think we could do to help the process for vets leaving the military?

DS: [pauses] Yeah. I think a lot of times civilians have all different kinds of ideas about their own perceptions of what service members are. A lot of them—whether they don't care for the military for whatever reason, they just don't want to give a military person a chance because they think that that's all they're good for or that they'll be too aggressive or something. But I think just kind of being open minded enough to give not just military members or service members, but anybody a chance to be—I don't know—treated basically as human beings, I think. Yeah.

JK: This is what the class seems to be about that I'm taking right now. Is about the veteran's experience, learning more. That's why I took it was to challenge, I guess, my own understandings and interceptions of it. This has actually helped a lot to talk to you.

Is there anything personal you'd like to add to the interview?

DS: [pauses] No. Like I said, just be open minded enough to be able to talk to military service members about their experience because there's been a few times when I mentioned that I retired from the Marines to people and sometimes people want to—that will spur a conversation, which I love because that was my entire life for 21 years. Then some people will be totally turned off by it and be completely dismissive. Like I said, those people really know nothing about me and probably lost an opportunity to maybe make a friend because they

judged me solely on the fact that I was in the military for 21 years. So, yeah, I guess that's about it that I would add.

JK: Thank you, Danny, for your time. I appreciate it.

DS: Yeah, thank you.

JK: Good interview.

[End of Interview]