

A conversation of Richard Hayden and Ard Morina on their work:

The Global War on Terror Oral History Project and the upcoming *Conflicts and Resiliency Oral History Project*

New York, September 5, 2016

Richard Hayden is an Iraq veteran and graduate of The New School's Graduate Program in International Affairs. He is the creator of the *GWOT Oral History Project* (www.gwotoralhistory.org) and cofounder of the upcoming podcast *Conflicts and Resiliency*. He currently lives in Los Angeles.

Ard Morina is a graduate of The New School's Graduate Program in International Affairs and works in international trade and development. He is cofounder of the upcoming podcast *Conflicts and Resiliency*. Ard was born in Kosovo and currently lives in New York.

Ard Morina: What is the *Global War on Terror Oral History Project*?

Richard Hayden: *The GWOT Oral History Project* is a project that I started in early 2015 and I am interviewing veterans of the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It's mostly veterans. It's veterans, family members, Iraqis, Afghans and others who are involved with the two conflicts.

AM: How did you get involved and what inspired you to do it?

RH: Actually, there's kind of a roundabout way that I came to it. In late 2014 my wife and I took a trip to Vietnam and we were eating breakfast one day in one of the hotels in Ho Chi Minh City and I noticed that there were a lot of US Vietnam veterans who were coming back and visiting Vietnam again and taking some of the tours of some of the places they were. Vietnam is very peaceful right now and pretty open to Americans. They were all in their mid-sixties at this point and it kind of occurred to me that I need to start getting our stories down. I'm a veteran myself – I was in Iraq in 2005 – and it occurred to me that we needed to start getting these veterans,

the veterans of my generation, we needed to start to get their stories down. One day we're going to be in our mid-sixties and eventually we're all going to be gone so somebody's got to get them now.

After I got back, I went to a fundraiser for my professor Anna Di Lellio's project. She's working on an oral history of Kosovo. This is about a week or two after I got back from Vietnam. I saw that she was doing it and it just seemed like the perfect medium and the perfect avenue so in January of 2015 I had my first interview and I've got over forty at this point.

AM: OK. You might have partly answered this but why are you doing this project?

RH: I think that our stories are really important. All veterans from all wars eventually start getting older and someday we're all going to be gone. I think getting these stories down now while we're only about ten to fifteen years out – less than that in the case of Afghanistan – is really important so that there is a nice record and we have to something really good and concrete to reference and look back on.

AM: Who are you interviewing?

RH: It's primarily US veterans but also family members. I want to make sure to get the stories of family members. I've interviewed a couple of military wives and one woman who was an Air Force brat. I've interviewed a number of Afghans. I have one Iraqi man so far. I would definitely like to interview more Iraqis. My goal is to put this all into a book and I'm going to do a chapter on September 11. I interviewed a New York City firefighter whose first day on the job was September 11 and he gave me a great story so I'm trying to get into that as well. Basically, anyone who participated either in September 11 or Iraq or Afghanistan and who has made a contribution and has a good story to tell.

AM: Why are you doing this now?

RH: Why not? I think that getting the stories now while we're still only a couple of years out and it's still fresh in everybody's mind I think is very important. I'm working on another project, a podcast, with you Mister Ard Morina who is interviewing me, and I interviewed a World War II veteran. While she had some great stories, she didn't remember everything which is understandable. She is in her nineties. So I wanted to get these stories now while they are still fresh in our brain.

AM: What do you want to do with these interviews?

RH: I have three goals, number one, I have the website which I post the interviews in whole on. Eventually I do want to publish a book so I'm just starting to work on that, just starting to compile the materials and put them together. Finally, I want to donate all of the unedited interviews to a university archive so that scholars can view them fifty, a hundred or two hundred years from now. I'd love for there to be a really in-depth first-person account of the conflicts that scholars can reference in perpetuity.

AM: Who are your main influences?

RH: There are two big ones: Studs Terkel and Svetlana Alexievich. Studs Terkel did a great oral history of World War II called "*The Good War*" and Svetlana Alexievich did a couple but, specifically, did one called *Zinky Boys* which is about the Soviet war in Afghanistan from the Russian perspective. The thing about *Zinky Boys* that really opened my eyes is that if you just change out a couple of the real specific Russian details that are in there, it could have easily talked about our experience in Afghanistan. Just the things that the Russian soldiers had to do, some of the challenges that they encountered, talking about the terrain and talking about Afghan society, I was really struck by how similar their actual experience of combat in Afghanistan was to the American experience. I thought that was a really great connection so her book, I think, is absolutely fantastic.

AM: What is your interviewing style like?

RH: My interviewing style is simple. What I do is I pick the questions, I ask the questions, and then I shut up. I let the people go ahead and tell their story. My job is really just to bring their best story out of them. Each interview is usually an hour to an hour and a half long and I do a buildup. I start with basic information and then begin their workup through boot camp and how they got into the military. Then the meat and potatoes is their deployments and what happened in Iraq and Afghanistan. I finish with a discussion of somewhat big picture issues and talk about how their military experience influenced their lives.

Just pick good questions and be open to hearing what they have to say. If they have some really interesting stories or details, just follow that and take it from there.

AM: What have you learned from it and gotten from the interviews?

RH: I've learned a lot about interviewing in a technical sense but, also, what I've learned is that everybody's experience is similar but then just a little bit different. I think that the thing I've learned now that we're ten years out is that one of the very striking differences about the American experience in Afghanistan and the Soviet experience in Afghanistan is that in the Soviet experience, when the Russian veterans came back, they seemed to be treated very poorly by the rest of Soviet society. It was kind of like Russia's Vietnam. In contrast in the US, by and large the Afghanistan and Iraq veterans in America have been treated very, very well. A lot of veterans have been wrestling with PTSD and a lot of other challenging post-military issues but very few have really been rejected by society or treated as outcasts.

Everybody, for the most part, looks back on their experience fondly – not all of it and certainly there are painful parts but I don't know if there is anybody that I interviewed that was really angry or bitter or mad about the situation in the country. Some people came back and ultimately didn't agree with the war but I didn't find the anger and bitterness and this feeling that America turned its back on us in the way that the Russian public and the Soviets turned their back on the Russian Afghanistan vets in the 1980s and 1990s.

AM: OK. Can you discuss *Conflicts and Resiliency*?

RH: Alright. So *Conflicts and Resiliency* is a new podcast that I am starting with you, Ard Morina, and we're working on a podcast about conflict issues and it's going to be much broader than the GWOT Oral history project. We're going to interview people who were involved in any conflict in the world that's either ongoing or historical. We're working on a couple of episodes right now. The first episode is going to be about Kosovo. We're working on an episode about the Responsibility to Protect. We're definitely going to do Iraq and Afghanistan episodes and interview US veterans but I'd also like to get some different perspectives. I'd like to do an episode on some of the conflicts in the Sudan. I'd love to do some Vietnam episodes and do it from non-American perspectives or perspectives of those who are in it. For example, the Sudan. I'd love to speak to somebody, a Sudanese person, who was there and could share their experiences and really look at conflict from the ground-up level. We're focusing on resiliency so with everyone that we're speaking to, the big question that we're going to have is: how did you deal with the experiences and how did you move forward?

AM: How did the theme of resiliency come about?

RH: It came about in two ways. The first was going back to the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, a lot of guys do come back with PTSD and carrying this burden of what they went through. I'm really fascinated by how, when people come back, how do you process it and how do you move forward? Ultimately if you're going to solve any conflict issue, it's about how you deal with the after effects. Wars really are not won on the battlefield. Wars are won after the fact when a society moves on and heals and takes its next turn in the direction it's going to go. So that's number one.

The second is working with you, Ard, and after my experience in Kosovo and hearing your stories. Let me just back up for a moment. I did a graduate study program in Kosovo in the summer of 2012 with The New School and with Anna Di Lellio. It was my first trip to Kosovo and I learned the history of the war and what led up to it. It was really eye-opening visiting a place thirteen to fourteen years after a conflict and

to see how far the country has come but also to see how much farther it still has to go and really seeing some of the challenges it has to go through. The Albanians in Kosovo are hard as nails, dude. They're really, really, really tough people and the picture of resilience. But I don't want to overstate that because there are a lot of challenges ahead and it's really interesting seeing where they are. Iraq is in a very different place and I think that Iraq's got a much longer road to travel than Kosovo does. So seeing my experience in Iraq and trying to look at Kosovo as, if not a model for what Iraq could be, certainly an inspiring place where there was terrible disruption between ethnic groups and terrible conflict that has bounced back and is doing much better now.

AM: How do you think *The Global War on Terrorism Oral History Project* connects with the *Conflicts and Resiliency* project?

RH: I think they're similar. They're very similar thematically in that they're both dealing with conflict. I think that *The GWOT Oral History Project* – obviously it's about Iraq and Afghanistan so it's two very specific wars – but it's talking about people after they've had their experiences and how they've moved on and what the wars have done to their lives and I think that's very relevant for what we're doing with *Conflicts and Resiliency*.

AM: Last question. Do you see yourself in those interviews?

RH: I definitely do. In *The GWOT Oral History Project* interviews, the way I pick my questions is I looked at my experience in the military and trace the arc of that experience. Most people have similar experiences. They come to boot camp, they train, they deploy, they come home and then they get out. That's sort of the general outline of an enlistment so I was able to follow that.

But also, I've been really motivated by a lot of the guys – men and women – that I've interviewed and hearing how positive they are now. Hearing that that their time in the military for a lot of them – even though it was very difficult – was a positive experience. It taught them a lot about faith and hard work and really dedicating

yourself to something. And it taught them about fortitude. Not just fortitude to get the job done but to really apply themselves to life and apply themselves better. One of the questions that I ask everyone is: has your deployment experience changed your perceptions of life and death? A lot of them say, “Oh yeah. After going through this I’m happy to be alive and I’m happy to be talking to you.” And that’s exactly how I feel. So it’s really nice to see that some of the experiences that I have are shared by everyone else.

AM: Great! Thank you Richard.

RH: Alright! So Ard, now I have some questions for you. You have also done some oral history and interviewing. Why are you interested in *Conflicts and Resiliency*?

AM: Overall I’m really interested in understanding war and peace and *Conflicts and Resiliency* is a project that lets people from different backgrounds speak about their experiences with war. There’s a special focus on resiliency which exposes how those people turned some of their toughest experiences into a positive mission that pushes society towards peace. To me, the idea of war and peace is really these people overcoming conflict and working for something better. That’s really why I’m interested in this project.

RH: What do you hope to achieve with it?

AM: Personally, I wish to see two things. One, by interviewing people who have experienced different conflicts I want to show the commonality of war. I want people to have all these stories from different war zones, from different conflict settings like the Ukraine, the Sudan and Syria, Iraq, Vietnam and so on and to have all these stories and judge what war means and how it affects people who go through it regardless of their backgrounds. The second thing I want to achieve with this is to show the power of resilience through living examples.

RH: What other interviews have you done?

AM: I have interviewed Shekip Fazliu and Seranda Bogujevci – both from Kosovo and both are people who have been deeply affected by war and who have also inspired me with their resiliency. Saranda has had close family members killed and was seriously injured during the war by Serbian forces. When I interviewed her she was leading the Ministry of Culture in the municipality of Pristina. Shekip is a rare hero who joined the KLA, fought alongside Adem Jashari and defended him and his family as they got raided by Serbian forces. He recently ran for elections in Skenderaj municipality [in Kosovo]. So to me, both of these are living examples of heroes who have transformed their most negative experiences into something positive and are helping Kosovo move forward. So in the next interviews I'm excited to see similar stories in different conflict settings.

RH: Do you recognize yourself in those interviews?

AM: I can say yes and no at the same time. Yes because I experienced war myself. I am always listening to the stories of those I interview and see the common struggles between others and myself. And then no because at the end of the day, everyone's experiences are unique. They've experienced things that are their own and I feel like those are precious moments for them that define their individuality. So it's a yes and no answer.

RH: What is your interviewing style like?

AM: It's a work in progress but I prefer the conversational style of interviewing. I want to balance between listening as much as possible while getting deeper into conversation. I'm really always finding myself finding questions I didn't intend to ask because the conversation gets interesting and I always try to pull myself and say, "Now it's time to just listen." But it's always a balancing struggle.

RH: What is your experience with war?

AM: As I grew up in Kosovo during the 1980s and 1990s, there was a linear progression of conflict and that's all I knew as a child. During the late 1990s, like most of the people in Kosovo, if not all, I experienced poverty, vilification, violent demonstrations and, lastly, war which led to forcible expulsion from my house and life in the refugee camps of Albania. So I can say that war affected me and pushed me to pursue studies and work in international affairs.

RH: How does your experience with war affect how you approach interviewing for *Conflicts and Resiliency*?

AM: I feel that my own experiences help me better appreciate the people I interview. They give me the motivation to want to interview more people, to listen to them and be able to tell their stories to the world. Some of these stories might have been heard already and it but I think there is something special about the project because we are trying to approach it globally and we're focusing on the perspective of resiliency.

RH: Why do you think the theme of resiliency is important and why do you want to highlight it?

AM: It's really important to focus on people who have overcome conflict. Conflict and war experiences, I think, are some of the toughest that people can go through. They've had family members killed, they've gotten wounded, so when people overcome those experiences I think that's really powerful and it should motivate others to work for peace and to also appreciate life more. So I think focusing on resiliency really gives a firsthand account of people who have gone through conflict globally from different regions. It really gives people this opportunity to see a positive transformation so I think that's really the goal and the reason why we focus on this.

RH: Last question. What have you learned from your interviews?

AM: I think the most important thing I've learned is that people are stronger than they think they are. When they overcome war, they know their strengths even more and can use that to bring positive change to society starting with themselves but then they can really be a positive influence.

Note: The podcast *Conflicts and Resiliency* will debut in January, 2017.