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American and Russian-born Veterans Share Similarities, Differences in Military Experience

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VVS04E01

Host Intro:

Today we begin season four of Veterans Voices', stories about local military veterans produced by student veterans at Wright State University. The American military is very diverse, and it's where many men and women first learn how to build relationships with people from different cultures. Army veteran David Berry of Springfield was raised in America and Navy veteran Pyotr Dobrotvorsky of Yellow Springs was raised in Russia. Our series begins with a conversation between these two veterans about the differences and similarities of their native countries, and of themselves.

Host Outro:

That was Navy veteran Pyotr Dobrotvorsky and Army veteran David Berry....

Photo: Navy veteran Pyotr Dobrotvorsky and Army veteran David Berry. Photo courtesy of Berry.

Transcription:

Pyotr Dobrotvorsky: In Russian culture, there's a rite of passage, so to speak. There's an expectation that you're not a man until you have served in the military. Until then, you are a boy.

David Berry: So in Russia, there's a conscription?

PD: Russia has conscription. There's a standing draft. It's currently one year. It was recently lowered from two years.

DB: And does that matter which country's military, or just the military in general?

PD: It actually doesn't matter which country's military as long as you serve. I considered the Russian military, of course. However, right around the time that I was joining, the Russian military had a very large hazing problem. The other thing, the Russian military does not get paid. You get cigarette ration money, which I think when I was looking at it added up to around thirty-six dollars a month, or so, which is more than enough to smoke a pack a day in Russian prices. But at the end of the day, it was a financial decision to join the US military.

DB: What's the biggest difference between US culture and Russian culture?

PD: When you land in Russia, forget everything you know from the United States. The power outlets look different. There are no BIC lighters. It's an entirely different way of doing things. It's like landing in a human system that has been evolving in a different direction from the United States for the last one thousand years, which is exactly what it is. During my time in the US military, I wasn't allowed to visit because it would have been a huge problem for me as a dual citizen to go back and visit Russia. So the first thing I did when I got out of the military was I went back to visit Russia.

DB: And what brought you to that decision?

PD: First of all, I wanted to receive health care on a semi-permanent basis which was a lot easier to do as a simple Russian citizen than it was as a veteran at the VA here in the US. Yeah. It's sad, but it's true.

DB: So when you go back to Russia, do you announce to people that you're US Navy, or is that something you avoid?

PD: You know, I generally don't. To be perfectly honest with you, I tried to blend in. I keep a low profile. To be honest with you, I do the same thing here in the United States. Most people in passing do not know I'm a Russian citizen. They don't know I speak Russian.

DB: So why is it when you go back to Russia, you don't let people know that you're in the US military?

PD: To be perfectly honest with you, the reason I don't bring it up when I'm in Russia is the same reason I don't bring up being Russian here in the US. The moment you bring it up, you get asked a million political questions.

DB: So what about the mindsets? You got a good idea of what the mindset of our society is. What can you tell us about the mindset of Russian culture?

PD: Well, I don't want to make any blanket statements. People from both countries run the wild gamut. But, in general, I've noticed that society in the United States values ownership of things and appearance, as opposed to survivability and happiness, if you will. Russians have a very grim survivalist outlook. They know the very, very fine difference between need and want. You need food, water, and warm shelter. Anything else is a want.

DB: How was it being a dual citizen for you in the US Navy?

PD: One of the things I learned when I was in is that the struggles that a lot of soldiers, sailors, and marines worldwide face are very, very similar. I've had discussions with Italian soldiers, and French soldiers, and Russian veterans, and we complain about the same things: inspections, the food, the uniforms are stuffy. It's the same things. And it sort of reinforced my idea of military

service as a rite of passage because I think joining the military, any military, has a positive affect on a man's life.