



## VENERA FLORES

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Photography STEPHEN VON JETT

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During the early 1990s, Bulgaria was transitioning from communism to a free market economy and democratic government. The nation, diverse both in terrain and heritage, is nestled between Greece and Romania against the Black Sea. The confluence of broad socio-political change and multiple cultures provided unique opportunities for students during those years; opportunities to learn multiple languages, visit other countries, and even attend prestigious European universities.

A young woman, adept at language with an eye for marketing, flourished through this transition and eventually found herself as an exchange student at the Technische Universität in Kaiserslautern, Germany. While completing her studies she met an airman and this is how Venera Georgieva Flores ended up half way round the world in the United States.

Eventually her desire to serve and love of her adopted country brought her into the Army. We first met Venera at a Psychological Operations Open House recruiting event hosted by the Special Operations Recruiting Battalion and supported by members of 4th Military Information Support Group. Her candor, quick wit, and unique story caught our attention. She was on a tight timeline to deploy, but was gracious enough to carve out a morning and share with Spotlight a bit of her story. Excerpts of her interview follow:

FLORES: I joined the military originally as a 74D, which is chemical specialist, CBRNE [chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosive] specialist. I was in a great unit with great leadership. Got to go to some great schools do some great things but there came a point in my career that I was just getting bored. I wanted to do something different. Out of nowhere one day I got a phone call. It was recruiters from the CST teams, the cultural support teams. Previously known as FET [female engagement teams] teams. They wanted to speak to me because they had looked at my ERB [enlisted record brief] and something caught their eye. I was like, okay let me go try it and see what it is. I talked to a Special Forces Master Sergeant. I can't recall his name. We talked, we had a long conversation about life, my upbringing and my experience, my cultural expertise. And he was the one who said, "You know what, I called you here for the CST but I think you'll be a great asset to PSYOP." He was the one who referred me to go try PSYOP and I listened to him.

SPOTLIGHT: When was that?

FLORES: In 2013. The process was actually very quick. The CST recruiters put me in touch with the PSYOP recruiters. I went to the PSYOP recruiter, he looked at me, we had a little conversation and he said, "You're so perfect for PSYOP. Get me this paperwork, you're going to selection." It was extremely easy process. In the old MOS [military occupational specialty] I didn't feel like I could advance. I have to constantly challenge myself. I always look for the higher standard and that MOS had nothing for me. I felt like I was just stuck. I couldn't use my capabilities. I couldn't put my degree to use.

SPOTLIGHT: At this point, a couple of people have told you that you're perfect for PSYOP. Did you know what made you perfect for PSYOP?

FLORES: I think I did because I already had multiple languages on my ERB and having a degree in International Economic Relations with my second major being in marketing and management so I knew PSYOP is a lot like marketing. Influence people and change peoples' minds. Just like you do in marketing - you make people buy stuff. I understood why they were looking, but the biggest factor is that I was born and raised in a different country. I knew the culture, different cultures around the world so I could bring so much into the community.

SPOTLIGHT: So 2013 you went to selection and didn't have to do language training I assume.

FLORES: I actually asked for language training. I wanted to do a different language because I love learning languages.

SPOTLIGHT: And because five isn't enough?

FLORES: [laughing] Well, back then I had only tested in three languages. I speak Bulgarian, Russian, German, Serbo-Croatian and Ukrainian. I'm not 100% fluent in all of them, but most of them I am. But I understand and can communicate and know a lot about their cultures. Most of them are similar to Bulgarian. They use the Cyrillic alphabet, Serbo-Croatian uses half and half. These use half Cyrillic, half Latin. The Serbian language is Cyrillic, the Croatian is Latin. A lot of similarities but two different alphabets. It's a little confusing but not too bad.

SPOTLIGHT: Do you have a hard time switching between the languages?

FLORES: Sometimes yes. Sometimes it takes me a minute, I have to think about it.

SPOTLIGHT: You forgot to mention English.

FLORES: [laughing] This is my last language.

SPOTLIGHT: Comparing all those other languages and all their similarities except German which really doesn't fit in there...

FLORES: German was one of those languages I got while going to high school. I attended a very prestigious high school in Bulgaria. It's not private, you don't pay for it. Education is free there so we don't have private schools but you have to test in. It was a school for international economics and foreign languages. I picked German as my foreign language. Here, kids do four years of high school, I did six years. I did one "zero" year and one extra year because of the language. Going to high school like that opened a lot of doors for me. I was able to apply and get a free education in Germany. Over there the professors refuse to teach in any language other than German so I had to learn German. Since you are coming to their country to study and their government pays for university you should study in their language. It was great, another language never hurts. English was the easiest language for me to learn. In high school, English was my third language. I did Bulgarian and Russian. They just taught us some basic grammar and conjunctions. Once I came to Germany in my last year of college I had to do my thesis and the practicals, I was accepted to do my manager in-training exercise with Sports USA on post [Kaiserslautern]. Working with them helped me more. Coworkers would always correct me if said something wrong and help me with my English. That was a big contribution. I'm very social, I love talking to people. I have always told them that if I say something wrong to please correct me so I can learn. That's how I learned English.

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SPOTLIGHT: Fair enough. So you land in PSYOP, go through the school house which I assume is a set process that looks the same for everybody, and somewhere in there they determine where you will work?

FLORES: People that get a language go for six months, I didn't do language. I went straight to the PSYOP Q-course [qualification course]. In April of 2014 I arrived at 6th Battalion.

SPOTLIGHT: How has it been?

FLORES: My first rotation was in Special Operations Command Europe. That was a few months after the school house. A great rotation, got to learn a lot about PSYOP and how we work with the other parts of the SOF community with the ODA [operational detachment alpha] or CA [civil affairs] teams or the Naval Warfare Units.

SPOTLIGHT: What countries in that region pose an especially difficult challenge?

FLORES: Bosnia. Bosnia is one of the most complicated countries in the Balkans.

SPOTLIGHT: What makes Bosnia complicated?

FLORES: Well, it has three presidents. It is ruled by three different governments. Bosnia, after the former Republic of Yugoslavia separated, Bosnia and Herzegovina became a country that is comprised of three ethnic groups: Serbians, which are Christians; Croatians, which are Catholics; and the Bosniaks, which are Muslims. It's so complicated that they can never figure out how to have a mutual government so Bosnia is a country that has three presidents. Every president serves a term of seven or eight months with his government and then it goes to the next president. There is so much ethnic tension in this country because of their history, what happened in the Balkan wars and with Yugoslavia. Going to countries like that you have to be very open-minded. Many countries are so nationalistic they will challenge you and ask questions to see how much you know about their country. Because, at the end of the day you are guest in their country.

SPOTLIGHT: Do you think that growing up Bulgarian, in a once communist nationalist culture, made you more aware? Made you able to pick up on those countries' idiosyncrasies?

FLORES: As part of the education system in Bulgaria, growing up, when you study history or geography you don't just study only history and geography of Bulgaria. You start with Bulgaria, then Europe, then the United States. The school system teaches you about these other cultures so I already had a lot of the knowledge about Europe. In college I did research papers and theses on Europe. As a person, I've always been interested in different cultures and different people. I love learning new stuff. I think we have to be more willing to be open and try to become the experts that we should be. My favorite part of being in this community is getting to work with so many smart people. It has been amazing, we have so much potential. I was fortunate. I'm European, I went to the EUCOM [United States European Command] battalion. I've done a few missions in Europe. I've had very successful missions and was able to accomplish a lot because of both my PSYOP capability but also my knowledge.

SPOTLIGHT: Do you think you could be an asset to AFRICOM [United States Africa Command] or CENTCOM [United States Central Command] now that you have a good base of PSYOP experience so you can apply what you've learned in Europe to go and do that in other regions?

FLORES: Now that I'm more comfortable in PSYOP - you never know it well enough - I look forward to going to different AORs [areas of responsibility]. I'm excited to learn something new and put my experience from what I had to something new. I'm going to CENTCOM, I've been reading about the area. Going just for a few months to do some planning.

SPOTLIGHT: Can you describe the role of the planner?

FLORES: When I say planner as a PSYOP sergeant, I have done analysis of target audiences, I have planned my own series developments; I have produced products. I know how to plan and execute programs. I know how to help other people do this and advise and assist as necessary. There are different level of planners where you work with different commands like being a planner forward with ODAs in their headquarters or with SEAL teams, with special warfare units. You just plan different PSYOP tasks and develop interoperability. I'm not there yet but hopefully soon. I'll get to work with some very smart people that I've looked up to a lot. I'm excited about it, then I come back and go to the National Defense University to get my Master of Arts degree.

SPOTLIGHT: How did you come by the opportunity to do that?

FLORES: I have always wanted to get my master's degree. My OIC (officer in charge), Capt. Adams, she encouraged me to apply to get my master's. She was constantly on me to proceed with higher education. A year and a half ago the new MILPER message for NDU (National Defense University) came out and she forwarded it to me and offered to help me out to get ready. She encouraged me to submit my paperwork, to write my statement of purpose. When I went to NDU to apply they told me that I might not get accepted because I'm only an E-5 [sergeant]. Usually, the program is for senior NCOs and officers, but I didn't let that discourage me, and believe it or not, I was the first E-5 to get accepted to the program. I'm super excited about it.

SPOTLIGHT: Can you tell me a bit about the program itself?

FLORES: The program is a master's in strategic studies, which for me was perfect. Me as a PSYOPer, I thought that strategic studies, studying about conflict and negotiation, was a perfect opportunity. It's 10 months. Two years - ah whatchya call it?

SPOTLIGHT: Condensed?

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FLORES: Condensed. See, English! Condensed in 10 months, you go straight through. With in- and out-processing it's almost a year. You go to school and get to write a lot of papers. A lot of papers! [laughing] I'm really good at writing. I can write so much better than I speak English.

SPOTLIGHT: Well, it's a lot of pressure though?

FLORES: Oh, it is, it is. I feel like, I don't know, I can't mess up. I have to bust my butt to get good grades. I'm okay with it. I love studying, I'm a little nerdy sometimes. The school is part of the Special Warfare Education Group so that's where you go to classes. It is right here on Fort Bragg.

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SPOTLIGHT: So you go and finish and then you come right back to PSYOP but now you have a master's. What's next for E-5 Sgt. Flores?

FLORES: I don't know. Good question. We'll see, maybe points will drop a little bit and I can make E-6 [staff sergeant]. I enjoy being an NCO, I have always wanted to be an NCO.

SPOTLIGHT: Can you talk a bit about your experience as a sergeant and what that means to you?

FLORES: I take so much pride. I enjoy getting on the ground. I enjoy helping people. I enjoy working with people and taking care of different stuff, the NCO mentality. I don't like paperwork. I don't like sitting behind a desk and I don't like being stuck in an office.

SPOTLIGHT: Is that what you see from officers? That they are glued to their laptops?

FLORES: Yes! They have to do it a lot. I was fortunate enough in and out of PSYOP to always work with amazing officers that taught me so much. But, behind the scenes, seeing them, what they have to deal with and do to make us successful or make the mission successful - I'm like, "No." I will let you do that. I will do the ground work.

SPOTLIGHT: If you had to give advice to other Soldiers, acknowledging you've been very successful but have limited time and experience, what advice would you give to those thinking about PSYOP or are new to the branch?

FLORES: When people start asking me about PSYOP I am always very positive about it. I encourage people to join PSYOP. It all depends on the person but I think PSYOP has so many great opportunities. It is a great career field. We still have to deal with a lot of nonsense, but that's anywhere you go. That's life. I just always tell people to be open minded. I tell everybody I don't regret it for a second. I absolutely enjoy it. Go for it. It's great, you have school opportunities, and you learn different languages for free.

SPOTLIGHT: Looking long term, is Sgt. Flores in it for life? Have you made that decision yet?

FLORES: No. I haven't made that decision yet. I do enjoy being in the military. I like the structure, discipline and organization. But, I haven't decided if I'm going to stay for life. I have to do a couple of more years. The Army is sending me to get a free master's degree but I kinda have to pay the Army back by giving them three more years.

If I'm going to stay for long term? I don't know. It depends. It depends on so much. I think PSYOP has a great future and I think we have very smart and capable people. I think we can change so many people's lives around the world. We have already done it on a lot of the missions. I think PSYOP has a great future with the right people. We can do amazing things. I'm glad I'm a part of it. It was a good career choice. I fully enjoy it.

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