

Borne the Battle

Episode # 123

William Daniels – Army Veteran, Actor

Hosted by Tim Lawson

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:11] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

Timothy Lawson (TL): Wednesday December 5, 2018. This is Borne the Battle, brought to you by the department of Veterans' Affairs. I am your host, Marine Corps Veteran Timothy Lawson. A happy Hanukah to all those who recognize the occasion. I know Hanukah started on Sunday evening, hope that you enjoy the festival of lights, as it is known. So the only thing I'm going to do, before we roll into the interview today, is I'm going to just respectfully request that any of you that may be listening to this on iTunes, Spotify, Google Play—um where else—Stitcher Radio. If you could just take a quick moment, leave us a rating and review. We'd greatly appreciate it, love to get your feedback, love to see the—this podcast go up the charts a little bit in those players, so we can ensure that these stories from these Veterans, including today's interview with William Daniels gets to more people, and people can learn about the great people that serve this nation. I do appreciate it. So, today's interview is with William Daniels; he is best known for his appearances on *St. Elsewhere*, he is the voice of KIT on *Knight Ridder*, and for those that are around the same age as me and grew up in the 90's, we know him as Mr. Feeny from *Boy Meets World*. He was recently in a news story, uh, that an intruder came into his home, and he scared off the intruder. And I was all like, "Oh yeah Mr. Feeny." I was looking around, I was reading up a little bit about him, and saw—When I saw that he was, when he was a little older than I expected him to be, "That's World War II era; I wonder if he served." And 'lo and behold, William Daniels was a, served, was drafted into the Army, and he was a—he worked at a radio station in Italy. He then came home and used his G.I. Bill to attend Northwestern. So, Mr. Daniels was nice enough to join me on a phone call; we were joined by his wonderful wife, Bonnie. And I talked to the both of them about his time in the army, his experience in... attending Northwestern and we learned a little bit more, just sort of about his service, his acting career and about his relationship with his wife. It was a fun little conversation. I hope you enjoy.

[00:02:51] Music

[00:02:56] PSA:

Man 1: I served in Vietnam.

Man 2: I served in World War II.

Woman: I served in Afghanistan.

Man 1: And V.A. serves us all.

Man 2: No matter when you served.

Woman: No matter if you saw combat or not.

Man 1: There are benefits for Veterans of every generation.

Woman: See what V.A. can do for you.

Narrator: To learn what benefits you may be eligible for, visit www.va.gov. That's www.va.gov.

[00:03:22] Music

[00:03:28] INTERVIEW:

(TL): We're just briefly gonna talk a little bit about your time in the Army during World War II. 'Cause I that's a part of your life people really don't get to hear about, and let them learn a little bit about that.

William Daniels (WD): Uh huh, well let's see. . . I was in, I think it was 12 or 15 weeks of basic training out in Little Rock, Arkansas, Camp Joseph T. Robinson. When I was in the middle of basic training when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. So, it was the end of the war after Nagasaki, and the uh. . . I was shipped out to Italy where I was pulled off a troop train by a fella who didn't tell me anything except, "Yo! Come with me," [Chuckle] And he drove me to a building that had been a Nazi headquarters. A two story building, nothing presupposing, where there was a radio station.

Bonnie Daniel (BD): Livorno

(WD): In Livorno yes, so uh they deposit me there, and I was in with a bunch of fellas who were in the actual war. And, they went home pretty soon. And, I found myself at what, 18, in charge of the station.

(TL): [Chuckles]

(WD): And it's uh, we had maybe six or seven fellas there, announcers and technicians. And, I spent the rest of my career in the Army there in Livorno in this radio station.

(TL): Very interesting, did you um, when you were drafted, right, into the army?

(WD): Yes.

(TL): Yeah, did you, was that—what was your reaction to that? Were you expecting that that late in the war?

(WD): Oh I was happy about it.

(TL): Oh good.

(WD): Yeah, it got me away from my family.

(TL): [Stifled snickering]

(WD): Which that sounds terrible, but we were just so very close together that it was a relief to be on my own in the army, and I enjoyed basic training very much. It got me into shape, better shape than I'd ever been physically and there were some nice guys there that I got to know, and then of course it was a shame to be dragged off the train in Italy and placed in the radio station, but there I found that I really belonged there because I was able to do radio announcing and then finally running the whole station. So, it was a pleasant experience for me. Uh, it was two years, and I enjoyed it all.

(TL): Yeah, so you said that the bomb was dropped when you were in basic, so the war essentially had ended at that point. Before that had happened though what were your expectations for what you were going to experience when you got out of basic training?

(WD): I had no expectations. I mean you did as you're told, go stand over there, go down there.

(TL): [Laughing]

(WD): Do whatever they tell you to do and you did it without thinking. And, half the time you didn't know what you were doing when you were being trained, you know. You did what you were told, you did the marches even though some of the guys fell off the marches out in the Little Rock hills of Arkansas, it was terribly hot in midsummer, but I got along with it. I was in pretty good shape as I said, I got into really good shape there...

(TL): Yeah.

(WD): ... and I enjoyed every bit of it.

(TL): Well let me tell you, uh, 70, 80 years later, the military has not changed. [Chuckling] That's still how we operate, go stand over there and just do what you're told.

(WD): That's exactly right. [Laughter] But you know, it's okay. You know, I...

(TL): Yeah.

(WD): ...enjoyed it so let's see.

(TL): Can, can you recall on either a close friend or a great leader that you had while you were in. I don't know if you can recall on someone that fits either of those two roles, but if you can tell me about that person.

(WD): Oh well we're going back so far that I . . .

(BD): You mean as a soldier?

(TL): Yeah, someone that, someone that he, yeah.

(WD): There was a man who you know got caught into his 35th birthday he was drafted, and he and I were bunkmates. And, uh, he was 35 and I was 18, so he was kind of a mentor. He was a very wise fellow from Delaware, I think it was yeah. Uh, and uh we, as I said I think I had the top bunk and he had the lower bunk in basic training in the barracks, and he kind of took me under his wing. And, we really had a very nice relationship, which unfortunately ended when he left and I left, and I wound up in Italy in the radio station in Livorno.

(TL): So, did you get a chance to explore Italy while you were there?

(WD): Not much no. Oh! I did go, there was a two-week vacation that was made to certain people if they applied for them. I applied for and uh it was like a group. A small group who were taken to Switzerland and stayed at all these really grand hotels, and I was on that for, I think it was a week or two weeks, and it was very pleasant.

(BD): And when you met the pope.

(WD): Oh yes, I talked them into me doing a radio show recording of the pope who was coming out of his self-imposed exile during the war. Now that it was over, he was returning to the Vatican in Rome. And I, I, I got an interview with several of the people, not the pope himself, but several people and recorded it. That was also a very interesting experience, like going into the Sistine Chapel when it was empty and all those beautiful Michelangelo painted ceiling that he did. It was incredible to be there all by myself.

(BD): But you did meet the pope.

(WD): I did meet the pope yes, oh yes. Then we were all in this big room, and the pope was I guess perform mass. Anyway, he came down the aisle, and I was seated on the aisle kneeling with a bunch of other guys and he started down at one end, and I was in the middle, and I noticed he was holding out his ring. And, the guys were kissing the ring. Now I got from my father this thing, about bugs and I avoided any bugs that I possibly could, and here these guys were kissing this ring. I didn't know; they may have had a cold. Who knows?

(TL): [Laughing]

(WD): So when he came by, I didn't actually kiss the ring. I kind of turned my head and the cheek hit his ring rather than my lips.

(TL): [Laughing]

(BD): But he blessed your rosary for your grandmother.

(WD): Oh and he blessed my rosary that I had bought for my grandmother.

(TL): Very cool.

(WD): Who was a very ardent Catholic.

(TL): Yeah. So when you, when you got out of the ... When you returned home from Italy, you went on to attend college, and you used your G.I. Bill, is that right?

(WD): That's right. The G.I. Bill got me through. That and me working there, uh, several years I worked at the cafeteria. You know for my meals because it didn't provide too much. It relieved you of what money?

(BD): Well the tuition and all the books.

(WD): The tuition, yes.

(BD): All the books, they paid for all the books.

(WD): Yes the books all that got paid. I'm the only one in my family who ever went to college.

(TL): Did you, was that your plan? When you were in Italy, were you planning, "Alright when I'm home, I'm gonna take advantage of this education benefit and I'm gonna go to college."

(WD): That's right.

(TL): Yeah.

(WD): That's exactly right, yeah. Where did I get the idea of Northwestern— No, my mother um. . . [Clears throat]

(BD): No, you got it from Howard Lindsay.

(WD): My mother was in Chicago with the kids and said it was up there.

(BD): Yeah but before that when you were in line for the Father, you got... Howard Lindsay told you what to do when you got out of the army.

(WD): What did he tell me what to do?

(BD): I don't know. Howard Lindsay. You said you want to be an actor and you're gonna be drafted?

(WD): Oh yeah, yeah. And, Howard Lindsay the star and author of *Life with Father*, and he came back into it after a year off because that play ran on Broadway for nine years, believe it or not. And, at any rate I was fortunate enough to be going from stage manager into one of the roles of the second oldest boy, there were four boys. When Mr. Lindsay was rehearsing, refreshing himself on his role.

(BD): Because he had left the play, and he came back.

(WD): Yes he had left the play for a year, and then he came back. At that time and so, uh, I was able to speak with him and uhm I said—I remember I knocked on his door, his dressing room door, and he said, "Come in," with his commanding voice. And I said, "Mr. Lindsay, you know I'm going to be drafted, and I was wondering what I might do after, after the. . ."

(BD): "Should I go to the American Academy?"

(WD): Yeah. I said, "When I get out, should I go to the American Academy of Dramatic arts?" And, he was kind of funny. He was putting on his makeup and he said, "Close the dressing room door," so I closed it and I went over and he said, "Don't go there," he said. "I'm on the board of that, and I don't think that's a good idea." He said, "I think what you should do is write the government for colleges that have a good theatre department." So I did, actually, and I got about four or five names like Yale, Catholic University, w-with uhm...

(BD): Walter Kerr.

(WD): Walter Kerr was and, uh, and Northwestern. So, my sisters were out in Chicago playing with Walter Huston in a play, and I went out there after getting out of the army. I was still in uniform, as a matter of fact. I flew out there with my dad, and met her and my mother said, "You know I think one of those schools, universities, was mentioned that day. It's just up north of here someplace." So I inquired, you know. I got out on the train and went up to Northwestern in Evanston, well it was gorgeous. I mean, the buildings the whole campus on Lake Michigan. I fell in love with just looking at it. And, I had no appointment or anything. I had to ask around about admission submission. They said,

“Well, they’re over there,” and I went in without an appointment. And, finally I sat down in front of this officer.

(BD): In uniform.

(WD): I was in uniform, yes. And I, and I said, and so in this admissions office he said to me, “Well what is your education?” Well I had a very spotty education. When he heard I’d been on Broadway he said, “Oh?! Well okay, as a matter of fact they’re having entrance exams over there.” I said, “Exams?” You know my education up until that point was pretty spotty. Anyway I went over and I took this entrance exam and well I only got through half of it before some instructor said, “Are you finished?” and I looked up and everybody else had left the room. And, I was only half done on this exam, which had these yes and no periods and I was thinking this could be yes this could be no; I don’t know. Anyway, he took my exam half-finished and I thought, well got on the train to go back down to Chicago where my folks were with my sister in that play and I thought maybe I’d blown it. But at any rate, I got in; they accepted me.

(BD): I think because you’d been on Broadway...

(WD): Yes.

(BD): ...and because you were a soldier.

(WD): Yes, yes.

(BD): You were, you’d... you’d...

(WD): Yes, I’d...

(BD): ...been in the army.

(WD): Yes. And, they were interested in somebody that had been through what I’d been through. But that’s much as I know to answer your question.

(TL): Sure, sure that’s fine. Uhm, uh, I wanna be mindful of your time. I just got a couple more questions for you, sir.

(WD): Yes?

(TL): Some people may recognize you from *St. Elsewhere*. Some people may recognize you as the voice of KIT in *Night Rider*, but some of us, those of a certain age, those that grew up in the '90s of course remember you as Mr. Feeny from *Boy Meets World*.

(WD): Yes.

(TL): Yes, what, before I get on my question. I'm just curious, is that the... Of all the things that you've done of your illustrious career is that what you're most recognized in public and such as is Mr. Feeny?

(WD): Uh, yes, I would say yes.

(TL): Yeah.

(WD): It was the last big thing I did there.

(TL): Yeah.

(WD): Yeah.

(TL): Did you find at all while you were getting into acting, as you were auditioning, as you were getting hired, as you were building your career, uhm, did you notice any benefits from your time in the service? Like any skill sets, any experiences you had that was contributing to your success in acting?

(WD): This was a long question, what was it?

(BD): [Laughter]

(TL): [Laughter] Alright, let me shorten it for you. Was there any experience or anything that you gained in the army that was contributing to your success as an actor?

(WD): A lot of discipline yes.

(BD): I think just getting away from your family, breaking away.

(WD): Oh yes with my family and all. I, you know. My sisters and I were performers, we were very close and everything, so getting out of the army. . .

- (BD): Being on your own.
- (WD): I was on my own, and so going to Northwestern was kind of a break for me, a difference for me and even though I was probably not a very good student certainly at the beginning—having been only in professional children’s school where, you know, you didn’t do anything except appear and then say, “I have an appointment.” And then, go down a chock-full of nuts, and have a coffee, and read the New York Times. So...
- (BD): No it was. I will interrupt here because it was like he’s always said that going to the army was the best part of his life because it got him on his own, and uh...
- (WD): Mhmm. Yeah.
- (BD): ...and then it got him into a college he probably wouldn’t have gone into.
- (WD): No.
- (BD): Never would have gone to college.
- (WD): No, my family...
- (BD): They had no money.
- (WD): I’m the only one that went to college actually, in my family.
- (BD): They didn’t even graduate from high school.
- (TL): Yeah.
- (WD): No they didn’t, a working class family.
- (BD): So the army was a very lucky thing for him.
- (WD): Yes it was.
- (TL): Yeah.

(WD): Not only did I enjoy it, but it was lucky that it allowed me the G.I. Bill when I got out. So, I went to Northwestern where I met the lady who's on the phone with me. She helped me a lot to get through because as I said, my education up until then was an apartment in 54th street with a guy who barely knew what he was teaching me, we both tried. . .

(BD): It was bogus, bogus

(TL): Yeah.

(WD): Yeah it was a bogus education.

(BD): For professional children.

(WD): Yeah.

(TL): Right.

(WD): And [Clears throat] you didn't learn very much, so meeting Bonnie was important. She taught me how to. . .

(BD): Heh, you're just very lucky, though, the way it all worked out. You are one of the luckiest people I know.

(TL): [Laughter]

(WD): [Laughter] Yes I am. I am lucky.

(BD): You really are.

(WD): I know. I see myself stumbling around from one thing to another and settling down in Northwestern for... Bonnie got us through in three and a half years. She was very anxious to get back to New York. I wasn't; I was enjoying Northwestern very much, and I knew what awaited for us back in New York. She had wanted to get an acting career, and I had been an actor. And, I knew that neither one of us had representation in terms of an agent that it was gonna be a tough road to hoe.

(BD): You know thinking about it now, it's like structure. You really do well...

(WD): Hmm?

(BD): ...in a structured way. The army is structured...

(WD): Oh, I see.

(BD): ...you know?

(WD): Mhmm, mhmm.

(BD): School...

(WD): Yeah.

(BD): ...is structured.

(WD): I see.

(BD): Northwest is structured.

(WD): Ok.

(BD): But, you're not very good on your own.

(TL): [Laughter]

(BD): You need pushing; you need somebody to help ya.

(WD): That's true. I'm a little lazy, actually.

(TL): [Laughter] Well very, very.

(WD): Bonnie isn't.

(TL): Yeah.

(WD): So we were inseparable all the way through Northwestern, and when we graduated we got married.

(TL): Very good, is there anything, I mean you've had a very illustrious career. I mean, do you have anything pending in 2019 that we can be excited about, or are you just enjoying a retired life there with the family?

(WD): Oh I'm enjoying... I'm enjoying retired life.

(BD): No he's going, he's on uh what's uh. . . Lewis and McCarthy have a movie coming out that Bill is doing KIT...

(WD): Oh, yeah.

(BD): ...the voice of KIT.

(WD): Yeah.

(TL): Oh yeah, okay.

(WD): Mhmm, I did that.

(BD): That'll be out in 2019.

(TL): I appreciate your conversation from both of you. It's been very exciting to, you know, one of the greatest parts of being a podcaster and being able to interview Veterans is you start learning about who is a Veteran that you didn't know before. When I learned that you were a Veteran the child in me was so excited to have an opportunity to interview Mr. Feeny for the podcast, so I appreciate your time, sir. Is there anything you'd like to say to the Veterans and their families that are listening?

(BD): That the veterans need a lot more support than they're getting, and Bill is certainly all for that.

(WD): Yes.

(TL): Yes, well very good. Well, here at V.A. we're doing our darndest to provide the care and serve Veterans in the best way we can.

(WD): Ok!

(BD): Good, good.

(WD): Alright, it was nice talking to you.

(TL): It was a pleasure talking to you, sir, take care.

(WD): Alright, bye bye.

[00:24:48] Music

[00:24:53] PSA

Man: My grandfather served in World War II. Spending time with him were the best memories of my life. I became a physician at V.A. because of my grandfather, so I can help others like him. I can't imagine working with better doctors or a more dedicated staff. I'm fulfilling my life's mission with the help of my team and thanks to these Veterans. I'm proud to be a doctor at V.A. and proud to honor my grandfather every day.

Narrator: Search V.A. careers to find out more.

[00:25:22] Music

[00:25:27] CLOSING MONOLOGUE

(TL): Whenever people ask me uh you know, "Hey what are some of the bigger interviews that you've done?" I think Mr. Feeny has to make the short list now, right? It was such an honor to be able to talk to someone that I looked up to as a kid, right? I mean I was... I was, what, probably 10, 11, 12 years old when *Boy Meets World* was in its prime. And, you know, Mr. Feeny was this nice little mentor we had on the television; it was great. A big thanks to Mr. Daniels for joining me and his wife Bonnie for helping with that conversation. It was a huge honor to be able to have that conve—to have that interview. Today, this week's Medal of Honor citation reading is for Herman Hanneken. Service is United State Marine Corps, rank of Second-Lieutenant. Division Gendarmerie d'Haiti, conflict the Haitian campaign, year of honor 1919. The citation reads, "For extraordinary heroism and conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in actual conflict with the enemy near Grande Riviere, Republic of Haiti on the night of 31st October to 1 November 1919, resulting in the death of Charlemagne Peralte. The supreme bandit chief in the Republic of Haiti and the killing, capture and dispersal of about 1,200 of his outlaw followers. Second-Lieutenant Hanneken not only distinguished himself by excellent judgement in leadership but also unhesitatingly exposed himself to great personal danger when the slightest error would have forfeited not only his life but the lives of the detachment of Gendarmerie under his command. The successful termination of his mission will undoubtedly prove of

untold value to the Republic of Haiti. We honor his service. That wraps up episode 123. Thank you so much for taking the time to listen. Please do follow us on Twitter [Link to VA's Twitter page: [@DeptVetAffairs on Twitter](#)] and Instagram [Link to VA's Instagram page: [@DeptVetAffairs on Instagram](#)] @DeptVetAffairs for more stories and images from our community. We are also on Facebook at facebook.com/VeteranAffairs. Also, as I mentioned earlier, would greatly appreciate a rating and review of your podcast of choice: Stitcher Radio, iTunes, Google Play, Spotify. Wherever you listen to a podcast, do appreciate that feedback. I'm Timothy Lawson, signing off.

[00:27:50] Music