

Borne the Battle

Episode # 147

Bret D'Alessandro, Alex Modero—Marine Veteran, Founders: Backpacks for Life
<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/60878/borne-battle-147-marine-veteran-brett-dalessandro-alex-modero-backpacks-life/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

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[00:00:00] Music

[00:00:10] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

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Tanner Iskra (TI):

Let's get it. Wednesday, May 29, 2019. Borne the Battle. Brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs. I am your host, Marine Corps Veteran, Tanner Iskra. Hope everyone had a safe and enjoyable Memorial Day weekend. I also hope that you are able to at least take a moment and realize why we have that three-day weekend. I want to address something from this past week, uh, one of my colleagues over there at, uh, *Rally Point*, uh, pointed out that I said on last week's episode that we, as a podcast, have a *Rally Point*. What I was saying about Jan Ohrstrom is that I was following the discussion on the VA's *Rally Point* and at the end of the show, if you listen, I promo'd the VA's *Rally Point*. This show does not have its own rally point as of yet, still trying to talk to my boss about that or any other social media. If you wanna find anything about *Borne the Battle* it will come through the VA's main Facebook, Instagram, YouTube pages. But, uh, hopefully, hopefully that can change. But I'm not opposed if you guys want to start your own group. I'll even join it. And, uh, we can talk about some of the episodes and have some good discussions. I am on Facebook, I'm on Twitter, I'm Instagram. So, uh, if you want to start some conversations, uh, I am more than happy to, uh, engage. As for us, outside of podcast land, we had *Rolling Thunder* come in for possibly the last time in DC. It's a pretty big rally. So, what did I do- So what did I do the Friday before *Rolling thunder*? Took my wife to go meet some bikers. I want to thank the Nam Knights for, uh, their hospitality and their frosty beverages. Appreciate that. On Sunday, I took over the VA's official Instagram and did some Instastory coverage of the *Eastern Armed Forces Memorial Day Shooting Match* out in Quantico, Virginia. They had service rifles, vintage sniper rifles, and, uh, Spring- Springfield 1903s out there. They also had shotgun, pistol, and three-gun matches. They had these very ornate trophies that were named after fallen service members and next year, the Quantico

Shooting Club and the Marine Corp Shooting Team promised me that they would read the bios of each service member that a trophy is named after and we'll put it live on Instagram. For all those that did follow the Instagram stories out there, uh, over the past weekend, whether it was my colleague at the National Mall or myself out in Quantico. Thank you very much for, uh, your engagement and your participation.

Also, some good news from last week, I finally got the green light: we are going to the World War II days in Redding, Pennsylvania on the weekend of June 7th through the 9th. Really excited about that. They're gonna have authentic World War II aircraft, authentic World War II vehicles. With those vehicles, they're gonna have, uh, a convoy go through the city of Reading. They're gonna airdrop World War II style in full regalia. They're also gonna assault through a French town that they've built out there in Reading. So, we're really excited to go out there. In addition, they're gonna have a lot of survivors from World War II out there to, uh, share their stories. They're gonna have survivors from Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Normandy, uh, they have a former bomber pilot that went over Indochina that's gonna be there, uh, a couple Battle of the Bulge survivors, someone from Patton's Third Army, a couple submariners, someone that survived the Battle of Midway. I mean it just goes on and on of all the Veterans they're gonna have there in Reading, Pennsylvania on June 7th through the 9th and we can't wait to be there to bring you the stories.

So, I received an email last week. This is from Gunnery Sergeant E, retired USMC, first time listener, wondering why: "thanks for the podcast." Gunnery Sergeant E, thank you for listening to the podcast. We also received one more review from FRG9: "great info, appreciate the VA news updates. I volunteer at the local VA. Sometimes your spots are the first time I have heard news about VA programs and can communicate them to veterans. I also enjoy the interviews very much, especially hearing why vets decided to join the military and why they decided to leave." Thanks. Well, FRG, I thank you, uh, and also thank you for your feedback. Uh, I always wonder if anybody hears or listens to the news releases or any of the promos I do before I actually get to the interview. And- So thank you for letting me know that you actually listen to that and your actually able to get that information out to veterans. That's- that's really awesome. That's good stuff. So, that was the only rating or review that we got this week which means we are at 74 people. We only need one more to get a snippet of the Adrian Cronauer/Mel Brooks interview that I've been promo'ing through the last, I don't know, ten weeks. Um, one more. All I need is one more listener out there to send in a rating or review and I'll give you a snippet of that interview. And then after that, we just need 25 more folks. 25

more. We're three-quarters of the way there. Once we get- And when we get to a hundred, we'll release the full interview of Adrian Cronauer of *Good Morning, Vietnam* fame interviewing legendary producer, actor, director, comedian Mel Brooks. And they talk about Mel Brooks's service, his life after the service, his time with the USO. So, uh, a lot of good things in there and I can't wait to bring that to you in full when we get to a hundred. But, you only one more to get a snippet of it for the next episode.

[00:05:54] Music

(TI):

In addition, if you are listening to this the day it drops, we have a Facebook Live on the VA's official Facebook page tomorrow, May 30th at 4:30 PM Eastern Standard Time. Dr. Kameron Matthews, the Deputy Undersecretary for Health and Community Care, and Dr. Jennifer MacDonald, the Director of Clinical Innovations and Education at the VA will be talking about the Mission Act. So, the Mission Act is upcoming changes about access to care from local providers in your community. The guests are gonna be talking about eligibility criteria, how to schedule an appointment and how to get care, uh, the billing requirements and- and how veterans will now have access to a new convenient option to receive care for minor injuries and illnesses. Uh, they're gonna talk about myths and, uh, some other things. You're able to view it at 4:30 and send in your questions. Engage. Cause our outreach department will be listening and monitoring those comments and, uh, hopefully be able to get back to you for the majority of those comments.

This is also the last episode we will be talking about Mental Health Awareness Month, which was in May. VA launched a new campaign called *The Moment When* in recognition of the resilience of those who have served our country, to honor their sacrifices, and to learn and be inspired by their amazing stories. Mental Health Month is also an opportunity to build awareness of mental health challenges and treatment options and to let people know that recovery is possible. This campaign is part of our *Make the Connection Program* where nearly 500 veterans have shared their stories of strength and recovery. *Make the Connection* also features a resource locator where veterans, their family, and their friends can find local support. To learn more, visit www.maketheconnection.net/mhm [Make the Connection website].

And next week we'll also have a veteran that shared his story during the, *The Moment When* campaign. He's on the website, his name is David Lucier and he'll be our guest next week.

And finally, I have two news releases for you this week. This is for immediate release: VA encourages veterans to quit tobacco on World

No Tobacco Day. Didn't know that was a thing. In recognition of World No Tobacco Day on May 31st, the US Department of Veterans Affairs will reaffirm its *Better Starts Today* campaign calling on Veterans who use tobacco to discover reasons to quit and take advantage of innovative VA resources to help them succeed. Then it goes into some histories- Then it goes into a little bit of history of *No Tobacco Day*. A couple quotes and then it says- and then it says "Veterans don't have to do it alone. VA National resources include *Quit VET*, a toll free national quit line at 1-855-QUIT-VET. That's 1-855-784-8838. For Veterans to speak with a tobacco cessation counselor, make a quit plan, and receive ongoing counseling after their quit date. Quit line counselors are available between 9 AM and 9 PM Eastern Standard Time Monday through Friday." *Borne the Battle* also has a full episode in our archives about the quit line. There's also *Smoke Free Vet*, a text message program where you text VET to 47848 offering veterans three to five texts a day with advice and encouragement to help them while they stop using tobacco. Veterans can also text the keywords URGE, STRESS, SMOKED, and DIPPED any time to receive an immediate tip for coping with an urge to use, a slip, or stress. For more information and resources about tobacco cessation and how Veterans families and friends can help, visit www.mentalhealth.va.gov/quit-tobacco [VA website for tobacco cessation].

And finally, this was for immediate release on May 23rd, 2019. VA now transplanting kidneys that are positive for Hepatitis C. How is that possible? Well let me tell ya, underscoring its mission of improving the quality of life for Veterans, the US Department of Veterans Affairs recently began offering a new option to patients awaiting kidney transplants. Organs that are positive for Hep C. How is that possible? Well, let me tell ya. In early- In early March, a team from the Iowa City VA Healthcare System successfully transplanted Hep C positive kidneys into four Veteran patients, then immediately began the treatment process to cure the viral infection that causes liver inflammation. You get another quote by our secretary and then it says, "Dr. Daniel Katz, Transplant Surgery Director for the Iowa City VA Healthcare System, said VA quick to understand the bigger picture and the long-term cost saving potential of this new procedure." And you get it, uh, uh, a quote from Dr. Katz and then it says "the Iowa City VA System Transplant Team has successfully conducted more than 475 organ transplants and is on track to reach 500 in 2020. The Hepatitis C virus is the most common bloodborne disease in the United States and VA has treated and cured HCV patients than any other healthcare system in the country and is on track to eliminate, that's right eliminate, the Hepatitis C virus in about a month. In about a month, folks, in all Veterans willing and able to be treated. That's amazing. As of March 3rd, nearly 116,000

Veterans started an all oral Hep C medication in the VA, of which 96,654 Veterans completed treatment and have been cured.” Then there’s a couple more paragraphs and then it says, “other VA transplant centers also Veterans the opportunity to choose to receive Hep C positive donor organs with post-transplant treatment.” Wow, that’s a mouthful but the important information is participating centers include the William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital in Madison, Wisconsin, that’s for liver and heart, the Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center in Richmond, Virginia for heart, the VA Portland Healthcare System in Portland, Oregon (liver), the Tennessee Valley Healthcare System in Nashville (liver and heart), and the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System for livers. For more information, visit www.iowaCity.va.gov [Iowa City VA site] for more info about the Hep C organ transplant team and for more information about the VA’s research in this area, visit [www.hepatitis](http://www.hepatitis.va.gov) (that’s H-E-P-A-T-I-T-I-S) .va.gov [www.hepatitis.va.gov] -VA website for information on hepatitis]. That’s really cool.

Alright, finally, today’s guests, that’s plural, is a Marine Vet and his longtime girlfriend. When this Veteran came home from deployment, he had a pretty hard time transitioning. It wasn’t until a chance meeting with a homeless Veteran, did he start to pick himself back up. With the help of his significant other, this Veteran started the non-profit *Backpacks for Life*. And has since developed and patented a backpack designed specifically for homeless Veterans. They are Marine Veteran Brett D’Alessandro and his longtime girlfriend Alexa Modero. Enjoy.

[00:13:33] Music

[00:13:42] INTERVIEW:

(TI): Now, Brett, you’re a Marine Veteran. Uh, Alexa, you’re- you’re a former or current military spouse. Are you two married? I see two different names.

Alexa Modero (AM): It’s a long story, no. We’ve been longtime boyfriend-girlfriend since before Brett deployed. So, I’m technically a military spouse if you wanna give it that role.

Brett D’Alessandro (BD): People have been calling her Mrs. D’Alessandro, and we Mr. Modero, We kind of just roll with it. They’re like “oh, go get your wife!” or “go

get your, uh, your fiancé.” You know, I stopped explaining. We kinda just go with whatever people think.

(TI): Sure, so you guys have been together for a long, long time.

(BD): Yeah.

(AM): Yes, yes.

(TI): Alright. How did you two meet?

(AM): So, we actually met at college at the University of Rhode Island. Brett and I are the same age, but he came to college a year later because after high school he went straight to boot camp. But I happen to be friends with some of his friends from home. We’re both originally from New Jersey. And, uh, we got introduced originally as friends.

(TI): But, uh, I mean you guys are all together now. How’d that progress?

(BD): We actually met--

(TI): I want to hear the love story.

(AM): It’s a funny story.

(BD): My girlfriend- My girlfriend dumped me like a week before the Marine Corps Ball and I was telling Alexa, uh, you know “she dumped me” this and that and “I’m not gonna, not gonna be able to go with anybody.” She’s like “oh, well I go with you.” And, uh, I think it’s kind of, uh, where it happened and, um, and then you know it was second semester at college and I was in a reserve unit up in Rhode Island and they were like “you know, who wants to volunteer to go to Afghanistan?” So, it was like me and fifteen others volunteered, we got attached, and that’s when we started to date when I got attached to a unit down in, um, Camp Lejeune in North Carolina called CLB 6, and- and literally when I started that, like, started I guess transitioning to, um, get deployed to Afghanistan Alexa once studied abroad so our first year together...

(AM): We spent apart, so-

(BD): -we spent apart.

(TI): I was in Spain he was at, uh, training down in Lejeune and then I came home. He got a two-week break to come home and then it was off to Afghanistan for seven months. So, it's kind of a unique way of how it all started.

(TI): Got you. Wow. I mean, you say unique, but it almost sounds like- almost like any other, uh, military relationship story. It's like, ah we started out very far apart and [laughs] and then we went through seven months of a deployment. Um, huh. Very well. So, uh, Brett, when and why - we're gonna- we're gonna ask you- Brett, we're gonna ask you the same question we ask everyone. When and why did you decide to enter the service?

(BD): I, uh, I mean I was always had a love for helping out people and, uh, I mean, to be honest it's kinda went in to college not knowing really what I wanted to do when- I checked out a couple colleges. But you know I really think the staple on it was, um, my Grandfather was in the Marines for 23 years, 2 Purple Hearts, you know, World War II. He drove the AmTracs and, uh, in the Marines and stuff. I mean, uh, just his story kind of seemed how he was as, uh, you know how he held himself and I just thought that was just- I was in awe. I was, like, looking at this person, this hero. So, I think that was definitely the staple on it. But you know I just- I truly love helping people. I mean it's the coolest feeling in the world. So, uh, I think those two things were a combination of why I joined the Marines.

(TI): Got you. Very well. So, uh, while you were in either give me a best friend or a great mentor that you had while you were in.

(BD): Uh, Omer Rafiq, he was a good friend, mentor, all around amazing person. He was at the reserve center with me, we deployed together. Um, he's actually- He went in as an officer now. So, he's an officer- I think he's in a Syria right now but, um, but-

(TI): -oh, wow.

(BD): Yeah, yeah, he was an awesome friend. I mean we have some crazy stories together. Done some funny things. But, you know, he's been a friend and, um, he was, uh, actually with me- He broke his arm in Afghanistan and he was, uh, on medical hold with me when we got back. So, he was a really with me through the thick of it when I was recovering. So, um, yeah, he was- he was definitely that person that comes to mind.

(TI): Got you. His name is Omar Raffiqi?

(BD): Omer Rafiq.

(TI): Got ya, Rafiq.

(TI): Yeah, we'd call him Rafiq all the time.

(AM): And his nickname was Spell Check because he was so intelligent and none of the rest of them could spell, but he was right.

(BD): He is literally like- He is- He's like, uh, a mad scientist brainiac. You know, we called him the Spell Check Nerd. You know all those kinda things. So, but a good kind. But yeah, he was our go-to for everything.

(TI): Kind of like the scribe in bootcamp, just uh-

(BD): Yeah, we should have called him the scribe. [Laughter] That would have been a funnier name, more prevalent probably.

(TI): So, um, and Omer is active duty right now currently in Syria?

(BD): Uh, yeah.

(TI): As an officer.

(BD): Yep. Yep. He, um, he was stationed out in California. So, he got lucky on that one. It's tough. And yeah, the Reservists, were uh, you know, enlisted and he went back in and did Officer Training stuff.

(TI): Got you. Now are you still a Reservist or did you decide to get out or how did- how did- how did that- are you, you know, did you make that decision to get out?

(BD): Yeah, I did. Well, I went 2010-16 so, yep, I've been out for a couple years.

(TI): Got you. What was the decision? Why did you decide to leave the service?

(BD): Um, I thought that chapter was, uh, was done and I was on to new and other things. And, uh, you know I wanted to start a company. I wanted to do things and, uh, you know I thought it was the right time to get out and- and well also, too, my unit was up in Rhode Island. I was in New Jersey. The travelling was a lot so, you know, I just thought- I thought I was done with that chapter and I wanted to do another on. And start a new one.

(TI): Got you. Uh, Alexa, now, uh, you are, for me, you are the first person that's on *Borne the Battle* that's not, uh, active duty.

(BD): Ooh.

[Laughter]

(AM): Uh-oh.

[Laughter]

(TI): No, you're fine. You're fine. But you are, uh, you aren't the first person in the history of this show. Tim Lawson, the previous, uh, the previous host had I think three other people that had- that were not- and I think two of them were military spouses. Um, what was your- Alexa, how did you prepare or handle his deployment when he left?

(AM): That's funny because I don't really feel like I did prepare, you know. The military world was sort of uncharted territory for me. Um, my grandfather also served in the Marine Corps during the Korean War. But, uh, didn't learn much about it as he died when I was very young. But, you know, I kinda just said "alright, let- let's do it" and didn't think much of it. Uh, I almost think that was a little bit more beneficial that I was a little bit, you know, naïve to what was going on or what is involved in a deployment. But, uh, you know when Brett got home, that was when it became super challenging and, you know, just saw a totally different side of, you know, the effects of war. But, um, you know, we're lucky that technology was in this state that it was that-

(BD): -yeah.

(AM): -I was able to FaceTime with Brett while he was overseas which we were very fortunate for.

(TI): What was the, uh, what was the hardest thing about that transition? About him coming home. I know he alluded to, uh, some challenges as well.

(AM): I mean, I think being a civilian first and foremost. You know, there is just something so unique and special about being in the military and just not knowing that from the civilian side. You know there's just something you can't understand. You know, the brotherhood of the Marine Corps, uh, you know it was something his best friend and I, you know, we were trying to wrap our heads around how do we help Brett. You know, he's having to have time coming back to this civilian world and really not knowing how to tap into that. It was definitely just challenging being a civilian.

(TI): Yeah. Now, Brett, what was your- what was your mission over through the deployment? What was the hardest- and then what was the hardest thing about your transition?

(BD): So, we were with, uh, CLB 6. We were, uh, we were in TS Company. So, mortar transportation. That was, you know, our specialty.

(TI): Okay.

(BD): I was Gunner for the majority of the time over there. I drove a little bit here and there. But, majority just Gunner. Um, I was on 240 in the CROW system. It was a robotic weapon system. And, you know, obviously the big thing over there was IEDs, mortar transportation company.

(TI): You were on convoys.

(BD): Convoys, yes, yeah. They go hand in hand. We went down to, um, we were at Leatherneck in Helmand Province. And we got fortunate enough to FOB Hop everywhere since we were Mortar T Company. So we got to go to Kajaki Dam, Dwyer, _____, Faisal. Faisal? Yes. Uh, Kajaki Dam actually- It's a funny story. I named my chocolate lab Kajaki. So uh-

(TI): Did you-

(BD): Yes, yes, I will- That is a very funny story how I got my dog and how I named him Kajaki but, um, anyways we, um, we went to all these FOBs and they were- during retrograde phase and just basically would just

tear the FOB down and bring anything that was relevant back and/or just hand it over to the Afghan Army so, that was what we did when we were over there.

(TI): Got you. Um, what was the hardest thing about your transition after coming home?

(BD): I mean, yeah it's, uh, you know, uh- A couple Marines went over there... died. You know- got hit by a couple IEDs and you know all that stuff. Yes, that stuff- the, you know, what you correlate to PTSD or Veterans having PTSD. I think it was more about I'd lost my purpose. I really- I had this, this job, this incredible job to serve our country, to help people out and came home and I was, like, like "I'm home" and it just kinda- I think after a couple of days it really hit me. I lost my purpose and I lost my way and I was like "what do I do now" and I think that's what really got to me. I mean, yeah, I mean other things that, uh, of course it is a collective of multiple things but that really hit in a way – and weighed heavily on me.

(TI): Uh, I think a lot of Veterans can sympa- sympathize with that. You know, when you first leave the service. Everything is so regimented when you're in. You know there's a certain schedule, there's a certain purpose, there's certain training. There's always that next goal that you have whether that's obtaining that next rank or the next certification or trying to advance your career in some sort of way. There's always this almost- there was always this- there's always those MOS roadmaps, right? That- To look at and- and when you get out, you have no road map. You're- it's a wide-open space. Um, so that was pretty much- that was the biggest challenge I'm assuming for you and probably for a lot of other Veterans.

(BD): Yeah, absolutely, and you know- you know people are like oh, Alexa, you know "civilian," you know "what could be her ties?" But, that's, you know, our big push with our organization. You know, it's not just the Veteran that deploys, it's the whole family. And really-

(TI): -yeah.

(BD): -we're all rehabilitating not just the Veteran, but the family. And in turns we'll help the Veteran that much more. And, uh, Alexa, I mean, she- she runs this whole organization now and how many Veterans and family members and children of Veterans has she helped? I mean, she- I consider her part of the crew, part of the- the military family. She's just

done so many unbelievable things and stuff. And, you know, we'll obviously talk on some of those subjects in a little bit.

(TI): So, Alexa, do you have any tie-in to, like, the Family Readiness Officers or anything like that while he was deployed?

(AM): No. I was, you know, just at home hearing from Brett when I did and that was kind of it. You know, it- you know being that we were in Rhode Island but not originally from Rhode Island and then Brett getting attached down in Lejeune. I mean there really wasn't a sense of community, uh, in a sense for me.

(TI): Yeah. That's tough.

(AM): So, um, yeah it was kind of like on my own and being that I was in college. You know not too many people our age could really wrap their head around what, you know, being on deployment is.

(TI): So how did you and Alexa come to make backpacks?

(BD): So, when I came back home, they put me on medical hold and I was up in Rhode Island. I was utilizing the Navy base up there in, uh, in Newport. Newport Rhode Island Naval Base. So, I was going to a doctor's appointment and I saw a gentleman with a sign that said "Homeless Vet, please help me out." So, I was like, you know, let me go back to my motel that they had me staying at, I got a backpack, filled it up with some warming layers and things that I had left over from Afghanistan, and went over and gave it to the guy. Had a little small talk, nothing more. And, that was it. And then three days later, I was driving to another doctor's appointment, I saw the guy again. But he was with a little boy. So, I pulled over to the side of the road and before I could get a word out, the little boy said "thank you so much for the backpack. I no longer have to go school carrying my books in my hands." And the dad-

(TI): -the little boy? The little boy said that?

(BD): Yeah. Yeah, the dad was, uh, walking his, uh, I guess his son to school or bus or I'm not sure where they were going but he had the backpack and he said, you know "thank you so much for the backpack." The boy said then "thank you for the backpack, I no longer have to go to school carrying my books in my hands." And the dad said "thank you so much

for the warming layers. They may keep my wife who's sick at the homeless shelter warm." And I kind of, like, almost had like a- like a sigh of relief like, almost like, like a guilty like. You know, because of this situation I had a sigh of relief. Like, it's not just me who is dealing with this. It's not just the Veterans and I who deployed in our little unit and I that were dealing with this. There's other veterans from other areas and other wars dealing with this. And I was like, "oh, man, like we're not alone." Cause that was, like, the biggest thing holding me up. I felt like, you know, I was weak, I was this Marine, you know, we're supposed to be tip of the spear and I'm dealing with these things. I can't even get a haircut without a mental breakdown and look, there's other Veterans dealing with this. At that point, I kind of felt like I found my purpose again. I was determined to make sure every Veteran out there, um, could get connected to the right resources and get their life back. But I had to, you know, get my life back first. So, I was really determined that- not so much for myself- but I wanted to get myself better at, in the beginning, for others, and then I, in turns, found to- you know, I wanted to do it for myself. And uh, so I set out on my little journey I call it to, you know, call every person, reach out to every organization and just figure out what it took to get better. I mean, I started using drugs and alcohol to cope with what I was dealing with. So, I went to military rehabs. I had so much anxiety, you know, I - um, linked up with an organization that taught meditation. I-

(TI): -oh, wow-

(BD): -healing waters, you know. Hiking, fishing clubs, things like that to, you know, get that, um, I guess- the camaraderie and the, um, and, uh, small leader unit and, uh, I guess traits and things like that and stuff. And, um, it was great

(TI): Got you. Did you, uh- Did you use the- utilize the VA at all? At any point?

(BD): Um, yes, yep. I, uh- so when we got back, it was like through the Yellow Ribbon. Yellow Ribbon right? And, um, and yes, I started to utilize the VA up there. So, I was a little weird because I was still on active duty. So, that's why I was utilizing, um, the Newport Naval Base and things like that. But, after that, yes, I transferred right over to the VA. I was, um, I was then- cause I was up in Rhode Island- I got a transfer to East Orange VA and I'm still going there. I was talking, uh- talking to primary doctors, psychologists and psychiatrists at the East Orange VA. And yes, it's been a community that has helped me and really got me to recover.

(TI): That's great. Um- you know, I – The reason I ask cause I know my former boss, she would always tell me that there's alternative methods that the VA- you can utilize through the VA. I mean, I work for the VA now and I don't know how to go about doing that. You know, there- I've heard about meditation and about, uh, acupuncture and other alternative methods and things like that that are offered though the VA and certain programs. I just wonder if you were able to navigate it and find a way to use all the alternative stuff that I've heard of but haven't actually seen.

(BD): Yeah, so I think there's like- there's a couple- I think it's like three or four, don't quote me on it, but I'm pretty sure-

(TI): -sure.

(BD): that they have like, alternative- alternative treatment centers at the VA that kind of work with these programs and I actually believe that East Orange is one of them. And, yeah, there's, I mean, mindfulness, transcendental meditation, cognitive fusion, there's AA and NA meetings. There's hiking clubs. There's fishing clubs. There's healing waters. They work, um, they do fly tying with Veterans who are dealing with anger management. And amongst other things, but primary anger management to get them to focus on- oh, like a low level activity and focus on the present moment by tying a little fly. That has been tremendously effective for Veterans dealing with anger management by not making them feel the- or get depressed by the past or angry or upset from the future and putting them right into the present. So, there's an abundance of programs out there and I think it's not necessarily a lack of resources that are really holding up our Veterans but it's a lack of the know how, navigating the resources-

(TI): -yeah, lack of how to get there, how to find these things.

(BD): Yeah, we've worked with like, I mean, hundreds of homeless Vets. We've given out 5600 backpacks nationally. But, every Vet, when I sit with them and console with them, they've talked to 30 or 40 organizations and they've just kind of given up, they're pissed off- "yes, Brett, I've filled 20 intake forms. Yes, I've already done meetings and appointments." They kind of just- they don't- It's so hard because they have to be that manager of these organizations they're talking to. They have to-

(TI): -yeah.

(BD): --kind of help them navigate through them, figure out, you know, okay I went to this one, then this one needs something from that one and it gets just so overwhelming where they say "I'm done. I can't do this anymore."

(TI): Got you. But you're trying to help mitigate that-

(BD): -yep, yeah-

(TI): -from what I understand. So, what- what is Backpacks for Life? What's the big idea behind it?

(AM): So, you know, after Brett had this encounter with this homeless Veteran and gave him the backpack, I remember the day very clearly. But he called me and said "what if we build backpacks filled with the right supplies? Toiletries to, you know, just help with that- daily essentials. And then give them resources. All the resources they need. But, not just give them the backpack and say 'see ya later, good luck.' But actually, coach and mentor Veterans through these programs." Kind of what we were just saying. So-

(TI): -yeah-

(AM): -uh, that's our primary program, which is distributing backpacks to homeless Veterans. Like Brett said, we've given out over 5600 backpacks in 14 states. So, we're at *Stand Down* events. We're working with other nonprofits, uh, in California and Maine. We're working with local law enforcement. Uh, we're actually distributing backpacks through the Iraq and Afghanistan Transition Center at the East Orange VA here in New Jersey and then we're just contacted by individual Veterans on a weekly basis who, you know, are starting a new job and need a backpack or, you know, maybe they just need some help with resources. So, that's our secondary program which is coaching and mentorship. So, like we were saying, we want to connect the dots. There are tons of Veteran service orgs and nonprofits doing amazing work and maybe there's a program through the VA or a Vet Center and the Veteran just isn't aware that they either qualify for the program or how to qualify. So, that's where we have a hands-on approach. We make it very personalized and we just try to listen to the Veteran's story first and foremost because we want them to feel like a person and not a number.

(TI): Yeah.

(AM): And that helps us, you know, break down some of those barriers, maybe some of their hesitations, and really give them an effective hands-on coaching experience to get them the resources they need. And that could vary from job coaching, resume assistance, uh, do you need a service job? Do you need equine therapy? Uh, it could be, you know, you need mental health counseling. It really varies, but we try to be that middleman and bridge the gap and help connect the dots.

(TI): So, a Veteran contacts you and says "man, I don't know where to go from here." How does the company- Now, is this a private company? You guys are, uh, for profit or nonprofit? Like, how are you guys- What's your business model?

(AM): So, we're a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Uh, and sort of the process when we're contacted by a Veteran is first to get on a call with them or if they're in our general area, we're based in New Jersey, we'll meet up with them and sort of break bread at a Burger King or something. But we just sit down and say "tell us your story, tell us what's going on" and we just listen in to some of the things they are saying and some of the things they aren't saying.

(TI): Sure.

(BD): I mean, you don't want to say "oh, would you need" if they don't- I mean, I just learned of an organization yesterday that does urns for Vets. How would you know what you need if you don't even know what's out there? So, we'll listen to their story. But, again, like Alexa said, we'll meet them at, like, a McDonalds and break bread with them. I compare it to, like, if anyone's seen Castaway, he went crazy and talked to a ball because he had no human interaction. You know, before you say- bombard them with all these resources "let's get you a resume and a job," you have to kind of pull back and see why don't they have a job or housing? And it's because- you- we have to rehabilitate their soul. And it sounds kind of silly nontangible but, you have to reignite that flame back in them and given them the will and want to get better and that's just-

(TI): -sure-

(BD): -hanging out with them. I mean, I'll hang out with them and we'll listen to their story and then we'll kind of start to draw a roadmap of organizations that might pertain to them and/or if they even qualify for to help, kind of, mitigate the process of them searching for the resources and knowing what organizations they qualify for or don't qualify for. But, really, you know, I'll call a couple buddies and go "hey, this Vet's, you know, he's dealing with this" and literally just have them talk to him or her. And, uh, maybe go hang out with them or say "hey, you're close by this Vet, you know "let's go out for breakfast or let's go to the movies" and bring them to the movie. That's the first part about rehabilitation. It's not "here's a bunch of resources, start filling out intake forms and things." It's that part, making them feel like a human again and then from there, you make that roadmap and you help them through the roadmap. You can't say "here's a bunch of organizations. Good luck." You know, it's not effective whatsoever. We'll literally coach them that- you know-

(TI): -sure.

(BD): Like Alexa said bring them to job appointments, help them fill out paperwork, do they have a little like twenty five dollars to fill out- to get your ID at the, uh- to just get your ID and, you know ,they might not have twenty five dollars. So, we want to pay for those little fees to make sure the ball continues to roll. And then at that point, you know we don't to be an enabler and you want them to take control of their own life so- but, you have to help them in the beginning and then at that point you kind of let them steer the wheel from there.

(TI): At what point do you know when you're not- when you start to become that enabler? At what point is it like "okay, you are- here is your roadmap and- and now it's time to go. Now it's time to fly."

(BD): Uh, it's- it's literally case by case. Um, it's-

(TI): -yeah-

(BD): -I mean, I- I fell down, you know, ten times before I, you know, got back up and fell on the correct, you know, path and stuff. I wouldn't say its failures, I tell these Vets you know, "it's like going to college, you know. You're going to learn to better yourself, to better navigate these resources, you know. If you fall, get back up and try another route." You know, it's people- Vets are all "ah, I wasted so much time on that." Like, "now you know what not to do and let's try another path and then

you try another one and another one. You're a Marine, Army, Air Force, whatever branch you are, you- you can do this and stuff. And you know what boot camp you went to or whatever you went through getting into the military and stuff. You know that it's not necessarily failure it's just, you know- I know what not to do now and try something else that might be more effective." And it really depends on the Veteran's unique needs and stuff. Is it flotation therapy? Is it equine therapy? Is it some form of meditation? Is it drug and alcohol counseling? So really depends on the Veteran's situation. And, you know-

(TI): -got you-

(BD): -I'm a recovering alcoholic and addict and stuff. You know, I didn't get it the first time, second time, or third time. It took me the fourth time, so it really depends on the Veteran's situation and stuff and- and you know, if it doesn't- if it doesn't happen the first time, try the second, third, fourth, fifth and keep going until you get it correct.

(TI): I love that you're making, uh, you know- from that- almost like the military MOS roadmap and you're brining back into the civilian world and you're giving it back to that Veteran to help find their purpose. I think that's really cool. Um, how big is your operation? Uh, did you guys just get started? Um, it seems like it's a very big mission that you guys are aiming for. Um, it's very involved process. What type of support do you guys have to help you and your mission?

(AM): Yeah, so- you know for a long time it was just Brett and myself. Uh, very much a grassroots operation. But, at this point we are nationally recognized and working with Veterans across the country. We've actually just brought on someone to help us with our project management and help us through our refine and build out our programs and make sure they're still effective for Veterans. But, when we're working on a Veteran case, we have a network primarily here in New Jersey of other VSOs that we rely on to, you know, work with, communicate with. Uh, about a year ago I actually quit my full-time job. I was working- well, Brett still works a full-time job outside of this.

(BD): This is my second full-time job.

(AM): Yeah, so-

(AM): -very much an entrepreneurial hustle. But, uh, I quit my job about a year- uh, a year ago and took on the organization full-time because we saw there was a need. So, uh, you know it's definitely at times a lot on our shoulders. But we've made really great relations with a lot of the state and local organizations here in New Jersey and across the country now. It's sort of expanding and we know who are the right programs, and the right people to connect our Veterans with.

(TI): Got you. Well, as an entrepreneurial, uh- my mindset- what is one piece of advice for Veterans who are wanting to start a business?

(AM): Uh, that's a- that's a loaded question but-
[Laughter]

(TI): -of course it is-

(AM): --there are so many times where Brett and I are about to throw the towel in and maybe we're thinking of giving up. But, you just gotta keep standing back up even if you're backed into a corner. And- and people who are Veterans have that mindset already, naturally.

(BD): Well, what President said that "if you're going through Hell, keep going?" You know it's that-

(TI): -yeah-

(BD): -it's on the tip of my tongue, but there's a nice little quote from one of the Presidents. And another little quote is- is, you know, "a smart person learns from their mistakes, a wise person learns from others." Go out there and absorb everything that you can. Look at what everybody's doing. You know, I say we- we- I had a little- I made uh- I patented something in High School and this backpack that we just made we'll talk about in a second we patented. But I didn't recreate the wheel. I just saw what's out there, took little bits and pieces that were super effective, put it together and made something even more effective. And those three things right there, but just keep pushing through. An entrepreneur showed the- you know, not the weak but the- from the strong, but people who don't continue to do what they're doing and the people who continue to do, there's nothing different than the people who continue to do it. They literally continue to keep pushing forward. And-

[Inaudible]

(TI): -not sure what that- that- that's- sorry. That second quote that you said: what is one thing that, uh, another person looking to get into- another Veteran looking to get into business can learn from what you guys have done?

(AM): I mean, we started very slowly and sort of took baby steps. If you take small steps you'll make small mistakes and learn from them. Instead of trying to bite off more than you chew. Taking large steps making large mistakes and I think that lent itself to us having this gradual growth. Uh, you know getting coverage, being able to spread our awareness and connecting, you know, with the Veteran network. Uh, that's another thing is, you know, get in touch with the network. Military Veteran connection community wherever you are if you're gonna take up entrepreneurship. But yeah, definitely start small and, you know, you'll get big but you gotta start small and you'll- you'll learn.

(BD): A little, like, quotes and things. That was the one I was tongue tied on but, uh- "if you start small, you make small mistakes-

(TI): Mhmm.

(BD): -and if you try to, you know, full steam ahead and you try to, you know, have this huge thing you make wanna make it really big. You can make a really big mistake and stuff so start small, you'll make small mistakes and the other one "a smart person learns from their mistakes, a wise person learns from others" and, uh, I think those two and just, you know, keep pushing on. Don't give up no matter what. If you really, truly believe in it that much then- then you know there's nothing to stop you. You know, just keep going.

(TI): Very well. So, the way- how I find you both was that video that you guys have about the Bowery Pack and I was on LinkedIn and I think one of your board members actually shared it on LinkedIn and I was "oh my gosh, this is a great program. It's got a unique message." It's, uh- you guys have a unique production about how you guys make it and, you know, it's just a really great program you guys are doing. So, first of all, tell us about what is the Bowery Pack.

(AM): We, about a year and a half ago, after distributing backpacks from outside suppliers for years and, you know, we started with a small really crummy backpack. It was neon yellow and we slowly started

upgrading and we accepted donations of backpacks. And then we started working with a company called Sandpiper of California and we were buying backpacks through them and they were really good backpacks, but we continued to get feedback from Veterans about things they'd liked and disliked about the packs we gave them. So, about a year and a half ago we said "well, what if we make our own pack and we design it specifically with a Veteran in mind?" So, the Bowery Pack is essentially a backpack fully engineered and designed with a Veteran in mind. Specifically, one that might be in a shelter or living on the streets. So, we designed the backpack. It's actually patent pending and we've included a lot of unique features to it to ensure not only quality and durability but also safety for the Veteran. So, we have reflective tape that runs along the backpack so the Veterans out at night, they can be seen. Uh, we've got a whistle clip that, uh, clasps at the sternum so if they're ever in danger and they can't scream, they can blow their whistle. Uh, the backpack's actually a sea bag inspired bag.

(TI): I saw that. And that was the biggest eye catcher to me was the sea bag design.

(AM): Yeah, we wanted to pay a little homage to the military.

(BD): Also, it's like, why we really- I mean yes, because it resembles the military but more so a lot of the Vets, they would overstuff- our homeless Vets that we worked with, they would overstuff their backpack and you know, the zipper would break. So-

(TI): -yeah-

(BD): -you cannot break a sea bag, you know, style top. And that's kind of why we made that little piece to it.

(AM): Yeah, so, uh, it's a drawstring style closure and the cord that draws- the drawstring cord actually, uh, is a locking mechanism so the biggest thing that we saw Veterans facing was their backpacks being stolen. So, how do you prevent that? We've made the backpack so it can be, you know, attached to a bedpost in a shelter or around a bench post if they're outside or, you know, just attach it to something. Um-

(TI): -yeah-

(AM): -we also have a detachable lid so the lid acts as, say your bag is hooked to something, uh, with the, uh, aircraft carrier cable, that's what the drawstring is, so, you know you can tell just from that it's a cord no one should sort of cut unless you're running around with a pair of pliers or something. But, uh-

(TI): -yeah-

(AM): -uh...

(BD): It keeps an honest person honest.

(AM): Yeah, there you go. Uh, and then our lid is detachable so say your backpack is locked up, you can still detach that lid, bring it with you to a bathroom, uh, and still utilize it. Uh, and then inside of the backpack, which is kind of the hero feature is an accordion style sleep mat. So, it's a closed celled foam mat that's, uh, folds up and sits in the back of the pack and we put in there because we want Veterans obviously to avoid hypothermia. So, just having a barrier between them and the ground and a little bit of padding could go a long way. So, we really just focused on a lot of the detail. We're using a lot of quality materials. Really durable. We wanted to focus on the craftsmanship and providing just a shell of a quality of a bag. You know, one thing that Brett always spoke to was, when he was overseas, he always felt his ammo cans against his back in his pack. So, we made sure that we had a really hard closed cell foam in the back so you don't feel anything pressing up against you.

(BD): And even though it's a thirty liter bag and because of the sea bag, it gives it gives it like a 15% extension and it's actually, uh, carry-on approved and we did that just kind of cause I wanted- I didn't want it to be too big. And I didn't it want to be too small. So, it's, you know, it's just right, I guess.

(AM): Yeah, and you know for some reason who might not be, uh, able to look at it, it's sort of a hiker's style bag. Uh, and, you know, we're building up this program and initiative behind the backpack that, uh, you know we're making it here in the US which we're really proud and excited about. Down in Boone, North Carolina. And we've actually [unintelligible]

(TI): -saw that. I just moved up here from Charlotte.

(AM): Oh, nice!

(TI): That was another eyecatcher right there.

(AM): Yeah, we're in the high country making our bag with a company that, uh, has experience in outdoor tents and workman gear. So, they are well versed in this industry and we're actually partnering with another nonprofit called OVAT which stands for One Vet at a Time where they provide, uh, employment opportunities and internship training to students at Appalachian State University. So, they actually get to go into companies like our manufacturer, who's one of their partners, to get a hands on experience in textile manufacturing and learning new practices like 3D printing and Stata cutting machines so that they either have the opportunity to gainful time employment or go on and say "hey, I've got this awesome internship experience." So, it's kind of bringing it full circle and allows us to touch the Veteran when they're a student and they're transitioning along with our other main programs. But we're hoping they get this backpack, uh, to a one for one model similar to Tom's Shoes. So, uh, you know we'll sell the backpack on our website and then for one that's purchased, a portion of the proceeds will go towards backpacks for Veterans that we'll distribute.

(BD): And we- we really wanted to do this model and, you know like "oh, nonprofit, how do you sell something?" It's like selling a shirt or whatever you might sell but we wanted to really create this model because like, okay if we go and do fundraisers, get the funds and get back, give them to the Vets. Yes, we're helping those Vets but the real thing we also wanted to tackle is getting the word out there. You know, getting the word of what's happening to our Veterans out there to the general public. And how do we do that? By also creating a revenue stream for our organization to create more backpacks. And that's by selling the backpacks out there cause we're getting funds by people purchasing a backpack and we're also getting the word out there. Somebody comes up to, let's just say Joe and says "hey, great backpack." He goes "oh, I got this backpack" and starts telling the story. That's really how we can really envision our mission and, um, really spreading the word about Veteran related topics and stuff. So, it's, uh, we're really super pumped about it. And the last thing on the backpack, we actually literally just talked to our manufacturer and we got it put in because a lot of Vets we're, um, kind of getting recommendations from about how they like the backpack is they wanted a waist belt. So, we actually created a little sleeve pocket on the backside of the backpack where you can put your own waist belt. And we actually have one that we developed that you can use as well. So, that's like the really cool new feature that we added to it. So, literally there's like- we can't think

of anything else that you would need to put in this backpack to really equip our Veterans to not only survive but also get off the streets.

(TI): So, you do eventually want to get to a one to one model. You're not there now. What is your plan to eventually go "hey, I'm buying a backpack from *Backpacks for Life* and I'll also know that I'm gonna be giving a backpack to a Veteran?"

(BD): That's with, uh- how do we make a dire casting of the iso mat or make it more effective to make the iso mat, that's the little mat that's inside the backpack. Buying bulk materials. Um, the Stata cutting machine or other machines to drop the costs. Um, getting- because of this mentorship, having some kind of donated labor. Expenses towards making the backpack. So, there's a couple different factors. Ones that I just talked about. Um, dropping the backpack costs down and obviously people buying bulk of the backpacks and things like that.

(TI): Got you. How close are you guys to that goal?

(BD): It is literally we're on top of that goal right now. Literally on top of it. It's like, you know-

(AM): -we're getting emails probably at least couple times a week about people reaching out after seeing the video-

(TI): -oh, wow-

(AM): -and saying "hey, I'd love to buy this pack." You know and they-

(TI): -so you're not even letting the pack go for sale with the- except for the campaign that you had last year. But you're not even letting that backpack go for sale unless you can make that one to one model.

(AM): People are definitely interested so we're just getting all of our ducks in a row to really launch it. And we think people want to buy our product that gives back and if this helps us to sustain our model-

(TI): -absolutely-

(AM): -of backpack distribution, you know we're really stoked for it.

(TI): Got you. So, you haven't released it yet. I thought you had- I thought it was, you know, when I saw the video, I thought it was already released.

But I think that was just for the campaign. That was just for the campaign.

(BD): We did a campaign on our website but before that we did a Kickstarter and then we-

(TI): -yeah-

(BD): -did an interview on Fox and we had also did something in the New York Post which kind of blew up and went viral and we had an abundance of Veterans reaching out to us looking for help. So, we were like we can't continue to 100% fundraise so we closed the Kickstarter down. And I think we were at like \$24,000 in like- in like less than two weeks of our campaign. So, we're--

(TI): -wow-

(BD): - definitely there. So, we- we just closed it down. We started to focus solely on the Vets that reached out to us and then after that kind of died down, we then opened up the campaign on our website for an extended amount of time, um, to hopefully fundraise and stuff. So, it's been definitely kind of a whirlwind experience, um, and we're just kind of, you know, that entrepreneurial spirit- just adapt and overcome and pivot and...

(TI): So, what is the- When is the- What's the goal for the release of the backpack? When are you planning on releasing it?

(AM): Uh, our goal is to hopefully by the end of the summer have the backpacks ready to go out and, you know, we go to-

(TI): -that's quick-

(AM): -*Stand Down* events and-

(BD): -for- for the Vets.

(AM): -we'll hopefully be able to distribute them for Veterans by the end of the summer as well. So...

(TI): Wow. That's coming up-

(AM): Yeah!

(TI): -quick.

(AM): We're both totally [unintelligible]-

(TI): That's great.

(AM): --but we've been...

(TI): That's almost perfect timing for the- for the podcast.

(AM): Yeah, yeah. I mean we've been working on it for awhile, it's like our baby. We sort of go to every single event with a backpack on our back. People call us "the backpack- oh, you're the backpack people." So, we've sort of built this whole laughing joke. But, all kidding aside, we're super excited. It should be here within the next couple of months and, you know, our Veterans are searching for a backpack like this and we're excited to bring it to them.

(TI): Got you. So, Brett, there's a question that we always ask every Veteran on this show. And it is what is one thing you learned while you were in service that you apply today?

(BD): Uh, we definitely, you know, talked about, you know, the couple things that I was, you know- keep pushing on no matter what. And don't forget your- Don't forget your- these are your brothers and sisters. You know, these are the people that signed on that dotted line that they're be your brothers and sisters not just for, you know, active duty but also when you EAS and I think, you know, really taking into consideration we're all just people and stuff. And no matter who- who they are or where they came, you know, just treat them with respect. And I think respect is a big, big thing in the military. And just keep that with you for life and stuff. And just make sure to have respect even the people that you might now agree with. You still have that respect for them because they're- they're people just like you and I.

(TI): So this last question is for both of you: is there anything else I haven't asked that you think is important to share?

(BD): I, um- We're actually- So it's the, like, online version of Alexa and I. But we, um, we're in the phase right now as well of creating a resource portal. Um, called *Roger*. The universal word in the military of "I understand you." And, um, and so, yeah - it's *Roger* which is gonna be,

like, Alexa and I but on an online format where the Veteran goes to this resource portal. We'll have thousands of resources already vetted on there. And the Veteran can simply filter the correct resources that they need so they can say "I'm a Marine. Honorable, you know, discharge. I did 6 years. I'm living in New Jersey." And it's gonna start to, you know- And then it'll have categories and they can click the categories and automatically start to populate resources that per- pertain to that Veteran and that they also qualify for. The second thing is we created a Veteran Business Badge and I'll let Alexa kind of touch on that but it's a really cool, unique way of having a Veteran Business Badge that shows that, you know, every Veteran is unique but also the same. I mean- Sorry. Every Veteran is unique but also different and different in a positive way that, you know, we're not- that's why our military is so advanced. We have all of these different backgrounds coming together for the greater good and the unique part is we all have that one purpose and it's to serve others. And so, we wanted to demonstrate that with a badge that has 32 different variations. And we have a type form on our website. You can go on there and click and say "you know, I'm a disabled minority or LGBTQ or- you know, I'm a business that I'm products in the United States." So whatever kind of Veteran you are or identify with, you click on this type form and automatically generate a badge that pertains to who you are but also showing every other Veteran with, you know, it's the skeleton of the badges is the same. But, the meat and potatoes are who you are and it shows whatever Veteran or whatever badge that you relate to, every other Veteran who has that similar badge will back you no matter what you do.

(TI): So that's the symbolism behind it.

(BD): Yeah, we'll, um, definitely I'll send you the link. It's a really cool, unique thing that we've been doing. It's really to, you know, show Veterans, you know, going back to- I don't want every Veteran to think they're alone, you know. We're a band of brothers and sisters.

(TI): Awesome. So, yeah, absolutely send me everything. Any links that you think- cause I make a blog with every episode. So, anything that you wanna share is a link. I'll-

(AM): Yeah, that'd be great. We'll- we'll share our website and the link to the campaign which everyone can sort of check out the backpack. But, you know, we're just grateful for the opportunity like this to share our message and that's what really resonates with people. And, you know, we recently recorded a podcast with a friend who just starting out and

someone reached out, said “hey, you know- I- My husband is dealing with X, Y, and Z. I listened to this podcast and it compelled me to reach out.” And that’s what we want, you know. We want to create a place where Veterans and their families don’t feel like they are afraid or, uh, unwilling to ask for help. So, we’re just grateful to have a platform to share our- our mission.

[00:57:54] Music

[01:07:59] PSA:

- Man 1:** Getting out of the military, I was missing this camaraderie.
- Man 2:** It’s frustrating when you try and talk to people that don’t understand.
- Man 3:** So, I still had the anger. I still had the addictions, but we didn’t talk about that.
- Woman 1:** It came to a point where it’s like “okay, I really need to talk to somebody about this.
- Man 4:** Probably, more or less, encourage me, you know. Go to the VA.
- Man 5:** It’s okay to go get help. It’s okay to talk to people. It takes true strength to ask for help.
- (Man 6):** Real Veterans. Real stories of strength and recovery. At MakeTheConnection.net [www.maketheconnection.net – *Make the Connection* site].

[01:08:28] Music

- (TI):** I want to thank Brett and Alexa for their time. Uh, that was a really, really great conversation. Learned a lot about nonprofits and how they interact with each other. If you’re looking to get your hands on the Bowery Pack, Brett and Alexa are currently on their first production run and it should be available late Summer, early Fall. For more information on *Backpacks for Life* you can go to BackpacksForLife.org [www.backpacksforlife.org – *Backpacks for Life* site]. And, of course, they have a Facebook [<https://www.facebook.com/backpacksforlife/> - *Backpacks for Life* Facebook page] and an Instagram

[\https://www.instagram.com/backpacksforlife/ - *Backpacks for Life* Instagram page] and all that jazz. But, go to BackpacksForLife.org, go there, find the splash page, and then from there you can navigate for their Facebook all their other social media.

This week's Veteran of the Week is Army Veteran Bill Hayes. This excerpt comes from MySanAntonio.com

[\https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local/article/One-of-the-few-remaining-Pearl-Harbor-veterans-13850979.php - MySanAntonio site]

"A native of Bristol, Tenn., William Haskell Hayes moved with his parents to Salisbury, Md., in 1934 and later attended Takoma Academy in Washington, D.C., and Southern Junior College in Chattanooga, Tenn...Hayes' front-row seat to America's entry into World War II started in 1938, when he joined the Army intending to serve in Hawaii." The man wanted to go to Hawaii. I don't blame him. "He completed basic medical training at Schofield Barracks in Honolulu before taking over as NCO of sick and wounded troops in the Surgeon's Department. He transferred to Station Hospital at Hickam Field in November 1941... On the day of the attack, December 7th, Hayes was entering Fort Shafter in Honolulu to play [some] golf...when he saw soldiers with combat helmets and rifles pour out of their barracks. Like so many soldiers, sailors and Marines, he didn't hesitate. He was the personnel sergeant major at Hickam Field's Station Hospital, adjacent to the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, and he drove there as fast as he could...[which was about] 85 miles an hour." Bill later wrote "and as I drove up the road, I saw a plane drop a bomb and into a large oil tank and it went up in smoke the sky was full of planes and bursts from anti-aircraft shells. When I came out of my quarters I stood on the fender of the car and watched them bomb a ship in Pearl Harbor. There were four planes attacking the ship in four directions. One plane came over my head about 50 feet high and I could see the pilot's face almost clearly enough to recognize him if I saw him again. He let his bombs go as he passed the ship. They didn't look very big, but they made a hell of a noise."

[From MySanAntonio]: "Five months after Pearl Harbor, he went to Officer Candidate School at Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania. He made warrant officer [that] May and was commissioned [as] a second lieutenant in the Medical Administrative Corps the next month. He went on to serve as chief of the Surgeon's Offices' personnel section in San Francisco. He organized medical supplies for Army troop transports in Portland, Oregon, and held a variety of roles in post-war Germany before becoming Medical Detachment Commander at William Beaumont Army Hospital on Fort Bliss. After earning a master's degree in business administration, Hayes worked in the Pentagon and later played a key role in the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the

Uniformed Services, better known as CHAMPUS. Decades later, as an officer, he served as Brooke Army Medical Center's comptroller in a career that spanned more than 39 years. Hayes and his wife, Laura, had five children." Sadly, Bill Hayes recently passed away at the age of 100 years old. And is known to be one of the last survivors of Pearl Harbor. He will be buried with his Laura who passed away in 1988 in Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery. Services are scheduled for 11 AM on May 31st in Shelter Number One. We honor his service.

Again, if you have a nomination for the Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week, you can always email at podcast.va.gov or you can leave a nomination in one of my blogs on blogs.va.gov. And as always, you can find the VA on social media, on Facebook , Twitter [Link to VA's Twitter page:

https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor], Instagram [Link to VA's Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/deptvetaffairs/?hl=en>], YouTube [Link to VA's YouTube Page:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBvOzPLmbzjtpX-Htstp2vw>].

Rally Point, that's our new one [Link to VA's Rally Point page: <https://www.rallypoint.com/organizations/veterans-affairs-va-department-of-veterans-affairs-va-washington-dc>]. US Department of Veterans Affairs. @DeptVetAffairs. Whatever the social media, you can always find us with that blue checkmark. Thank you again for listening and we will see you next week.

[01:02:49] Music

(Text Transcript Ends)