

Borne the Battle

Episode # 165

Jeff Struecker—Army Ranger, Chaplain, Pastor, Author

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/66759/borne-the-battle-165-jeff-struecker-army-ranger-battle-mogadishu/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

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[00:00:00] Music

[00:00:09] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

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Tanner Iskra (TI):

Ahhhh, let's get it. Wednesday, October 2nd, 2019. Borne the Battle. Brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The podcast that focuses on inspiring Veteran stories and it puts a highlight on important resources, offices, and benefits for our Veterans. I am your host, Marine Corps Veteran Tanner Iskra. Hope you're having a great week outside of podcast land. I just got back from vacation. Uh, but I got sick on vacation. But, we're still here and we're gonna give it a go. Why? Because this week, specifically tomorrow and Friday, October 3rd and 4th is the 26th anniversary of the Battle of Mogadishu. And here on our media engagement team, we have a lot planned to honor those who fought in that battle. One of those things is a video. Retired Master Sgt. Norman Hooten, otherwise known as Hoot, was plaid by Eric Bana in Black Hawk Down. He is now Dr. Hooten and is a full-time healthcare provider at the Orlando VA Medical Center. He recently sat down and gave his account of the battle to our Digital Media Engagement team and I'm gonna play for you a quick preview. Here it is, check it out.

[00:01:22] Promo

(HOOTEN):

The events that led to the Battle of Mogadishu really started months prior to our arrival. When we got there, we didn't really think it was going to be anything of significance. Very quickly we realized that that wasn't the case. We were pretty sure that the target, which was Mohamed Farrah Aidid, was no longer in Somalia. We had shifted our focus more to his executive staff and, because we had shut down their communications so effectively, they had to have a face to face meeting. Therefore, it was a target of opportunity for us.

[00:1:54] Promo Ends

(TI):

That full video will drop tomorrow, Thursday October 3rd at 2:30 PM across all of our social media channels. Especially Facebook. Check it out when it does.

I also want to thank you for continuing to rate and review the show. We have- I mean we're up to almost 85 ratings and 3 new reviews came in. First one is from San Okey, 4 out of 5 stars- not bad. "I like the recap of the VA news and the Veteran focused guests. Keep up the great work." San Okey, I'm glad you like the VA news. I'm glad you guys are liking the news releases. I was- When I first started that, I didn't know if you guys would like it. It's kind of- Or if you'd thought it would be kind of boring. But I'm liking the fact that you guys are getting something out of it. Next one is from Eaglet12. "Good for retirees also. As a retiree working on an active Army post, I don't use VA benefits often. But now I have heard a few I might use. Keep up the good work." Eaglet12, glad to be of service to you. Glad that you're about to start using your VA benefits. And the last one is from Dan7- there's a lot of sevens- 0311. "Amazing guest. I love all the guests. Mel Brooks, Daniel from Pop Smoke. Just real insightful guys." Daniel, thank you for your feedback. I look forward to bringing you more guests that you will enjoy.

Got four news releases for you this week and I'm sure I missed some news releases during my absence and full disclosure: I never read every single one of them. Just the ones that I think would interest you. As always, you can look for news releases in the ticker at the top of blogs.va.gov [VA Blog Site]. Or for a full list, you can always go to www.va.gov/opa/pressrel [VA Press Release Page].

Alright, let's get to the news releases. First one says "For immediate release, the US Department of Veterans Affairs will implement new procedures by January 2020 for sharing medical information for Veterans accessing healthcare in the community. The Department is changing its procedures for electronic health information sharing in accordance with Section 132 of the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018, the Mission Act. The change moves VA from an opt in to an opt out model of electronic health information sharing." That means you have to opt out of this. "Veterans will no longer be required to provide signed authorizations for VA to release electronic health information to community providers for the purpose of receiving medical treatment. VA shares health information with community providers using a secure and safe electronic system called Veterans' Health Information Exchange. This electronic exchange of information provides patient safety, particularly during emergency situations, and allows for improved care and coordination for Veterans receiving care in their community." Basically, sharing your medical information with those- with those providers in your community that you want. "However,

Veterans who do not want their health information shared electronically can opt out by submitting VA Form 10-10164” -that’s VA Form 10-10164- “to the Release of Information Offices at the nearest VA medical center now or at any time going forward. Veterans who previously opted out on VA Form 10-0484 prior to September 30th do not need to submit new forms. However, Veterans who restricted what information VA shared by submitting VA form 10-0525, the restriction request, will need to opt out entirely by submitting Form 10-10164.” And I’ll put the link for 10-10164 in the show notes, in the blogs at blogs.va.gov. “VA’s committed to protecting Veteran privacy. Only community healthcare providers and organizations that have partnership agreements with VA and are part of VA’s approved trusted network may receive VA healthcare information. For information about VA’s healthcare information exchange, visit www.va.gov/vier [VA Healthcare Information Exchange Page].” Again, I will put the form in the show notes on blogs.va.gov. Please share it around.

Our next one says “For immediate release: VA provides Veterans fleeing domestic violence with housing and supportive services. October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month. The US Department of Veterans Affairs reminds Veterans nationwide that VA Supportive Services for Veteran Families, or SSVF, can grant and per diem, provide housing and other services for Veterans experiencing domestic violence and intimate partner violence. Additionally, in observance of National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, VA’s Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Program will gather with internal and external national partners this October to help promote the department’s mission to foster healthy relationships and safety. Veterans losing their housing because they’re fleeing domestic violence are eligible for SSVF Rapid Rehousing, which is an intervention designed to help homeless Veterans and their families quickly access permanent housing. The GPD program provides housing and supportive services to help homeless Veterans achieve residential stability, increase their skill levels and incomes and achieve greater self-determination. In 2017, Public Law 114-315 expanded eligibility for participation in the SSVF and GPD programs by broadening the definition of ‘homeless’ to include any individual or family fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other situations making it dangerous to remain in the home. Which includes situations that jeopardizes the health and safety of children. Eligible Veterans must have no other residence and lack both resources and support networks to obtain other permanent housing. Click SSVF or GPD to learn more about VA’s domestic violence assistance programs.” I’ll put this, um, link also in the show notes in the description.

Alright, the third one says "For immediate release: VA and healthcare lenders create a call to action to national suicide prevention taskforce. This focus is to raise awareness and drive change. The President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End the National Tragedy of Suicide, or Prevents Task Force, hosted a healthcare leadership meeting at the White House to bring together leaders across the healthcare industry to discuss the role and changing the culture around mental health, substance misuse and addiction. VA recognizes it must work with communities, faith based, and tribal organizations, private and public partners, as well as state, local, and federal government agencies to achieve this goal." There's a quote by the Secretary and then it says "VA and the White House Domestic Policy Council established the Prevents Task Force. In June, the executive order signed by President Trump in March. The interagency task force is charged with implementing a roadmap for Veteran suicide prevention at the national and community levels by March of 2020. As always, Veterans who are in crisis or having thoughts of suicide and those who know a Veteran in crisis call the Veterans Crisis Line for confidential support available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1. Or text 838255 or chat online at veteranscrisisline.net/chat [Veterans Crisis Line Chat Page.]"

Now for this next one, if you're in California, it's very important for you, listen up. "For immediate release: VA to approve GI Bill benefits programs in California. Effective October 1st, which is yesterday, the US Department of Veterans Affairs will serve as the State Approving Agency for California in fiscal year 2020. The Department will determine which programs of education are eligible for GI Bill benefits in California. VA is authorized by law to enter into agreements with state agencies, referred to as State Approving Agencies, to approve the qualifications of educational institutions and approve qualifying programs for the purposes of GI Bill education bill benefits. VA also determines whether SAAs are complying with legal standards and requirements and may assume the role of SAA in the state- in that state if an agreement is not reached with the state." As in this case: California. "The Department notified California State Approving Agency for Veterans Education school officials, GI Bill beneficiaries and other stakeholders on September 6th that it will not be entering into a agreement with California for fiscal year 2020. This decision was based VA's assessment of the California State Approving Agency for Veterans Educations performance over the last 3 years. Although, the CSAAVE sent a letter to California schools September 10th stating its intent to retain its authority to approve programs for GI Bill benefits, the CSAAVE will no longer serve as the SAA. VA will be assuming those duties as of October 1st. VA will provide additional notifications to key stakeholders

to ensure a seamless transition for GI Bill benefits and student Veterans. It is not uncommon for VA to act as the SAA for states during any given year and VA has performed those functions in 6 states since fiscal year 2017. For more information, visit benefits.va.gov/gibill [VA GI Bill Benefits Page].

Alright, this week's interview is also a Veteran of the Battle of Mogadishu. He's an Army Ranger, a former Ranger of the Year Competition winner, which is no small feat. He's an enlisted Army Ranger who later commissioned as a chaplain and upon exiting the Army, became a pastor, public speaker, and author. He is Army Veteran Jeff Struecker. Enjoy.

[00:11:52] Music

[00:11:57] INTERVIEW:

(TI): So, before Mogadishu, uh, you had a couple other deployments before that, correct?

Jeff Struecker (JS): Yes.

(TI): You were in Panama and Desert Storm, uh, what was the mission at those places at those times?

(JS): Yeah, I joined the Army in 1987. Um, became an infantryman and went straight to the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment. While I was in the Ranger Regiment, the US Army invaded the Republic of Panama, 1989. I was part of that invasion force and then, of course, about a year later, the US's involvement operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in Iraq and I was part of that as well. So, the United States had kinda been off-again on-again with some tensions between the countries later in Panama, Manuel Noriega and there was some- there was some escalating issues between the US and Panama. This was going on in the Fall of 1989 and I got, because I'm in a special operations unit, I got notified more than once: "Hey, this looks like it could be for real, we're gonna go down there. We're gonna invade."

(TI): Yep.

(JS): A couple of times, I was notified that my unit, I was in the Reconnaissance Attachment in the Ranger Regiment, that we were send the reconnaissance guys down there just to do some advanced surveillance and every time they got cancelled at the last second. Until December of '89, and by then there was, um, an attack by some local Panamanians on the US servicemen. The violence was kinda escalating down there and by December 20th of 1989, the US decided to go ahead and invade for real. And the Ranger Regiment, this was part of this larger special operations task force. First- Well the first goal of the 75th Ranger Regiment was to seize two airfields, (Name of the airfields – inaudible). They would become the place where we would bring the invasion force in. And second pressing, um, responsibility for the Ranger Regiment was defeat the Panamanian defense forces. But, the third and kind of the big goal for us was capturing the country's leader.

(TI): Noriega.

(JS): Yeah. So, we started to chase Noriega around the country and, literally, it was kind of responding to tips. I referred it to as a hunt for Elvis because for about a week there, it was every time-

[Laughter]

(JS): -every time somebody mentioned "He's over here" we'd go chase over there- we'd go chase over in another location and so finally, we cornered him at the Vatican Embassy and he surrendered himself to us in, um, late 19- Well, before the end of the year.

(TI): Okay.

(JS): So, a couple weeks into the invasion.

(TI): Okay, so you- He was on the run for a couple weeks. Kinda sounds like the hunt for Saddam, almost. Kinda like- Kind of a similar situation. You know everyone- a lot of my coworkers, they were in Panama and they talk about Panama and that was before my time. So, I knew it was about Noriega. I knew it was about, you know, changing the regime there but I didn't really know strategically how it went down. So, it's good to get some background on that.

(JS): Yeah. Um, then fast forward a year later, the US is in Desert Shield and Desert Storm and this, of course, as your listeners are probably aware,

is largely a desert battle. Which is not the kind of thing that special operations are accustomed or tailored to.

(TI): Mmm hmm.

(JS): So, there was some discussions going on and off for months about whether or not this special operations force would even be used in Desert Storm. And eventually, First Ranger Battalion sent some forces over there as kind of a "go find and destroy SCUD missiles" and later on as a show of force.

(TI): Some strategic key points.

(JS): Right.

(TI): Something like that? Got you. Why special operations? What made you want to go into special operations and the Rangers, uh, to begin with?

(JS): Well, that's a great question. I, uh, really didn't know a lot about the military. Um, I wanted to challenge myself so really what steered me in that direction was when I went to the Army recruiter's office, I just simply asked "What's the toughest job in the Army? I want to see if I can hang with the best of the best."

(TI): Got ya.

(JS): But I did have a person whose father had served in Vietnam who said "Jeff, there's really two types of people in the military. There's those that are in it for a paycheck and there are those that are in it because they really want to make the world a better place. Really want to do something, um, good for the world."

(TI): Yeah

(JS): He said "You wanna serve with those kind." And that's kinda what, I didn't know anything about the Rangers, but that's kinda what steered me in that direction.

(TI): Got ya. So, Jeff, um, walk me through the strategical setup and then your involvement in the Battle of Mogadishu. Uh, between October 3rd and 4th of '93.

(JS): Okay. Um, by '93, middle of the summer of 1993, the US was pretty involved in Somalia. We had started there late 1992, November/December with Marines landing on the beaches of Somalia and trying to provide-

(TI): -wow.

(JS): -food to a country that was literally starving to death. I mean-

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): -253/350,000 people had already died of famine by the time that the United Nations and the US showed up to start helping out.

(TI): Oh, wow.

(JS): The- We were- The whole operation began as a United Nations peacekeeping mission to provide food to people that were starving to death.

(TI): Mmm hmm.

(JS): Um, the country didn't really have a military. No real police force. And the capital city had some warlords, African warlords in the capital city who are kind of like gang leaders in the US.

(TI): Yep.

(JS): And these guys were basically fighting each other trying to become the most powerful man in their country. And one or two of those warlords really didn't like the fact that the United Nations or the US was there. But, one of those warlords, his name was Mohamed Farah Aidid, he ran Hobr Gidr Clan, and Aidid decided to start to target United Nations workers. He started to attack US supply convoys and by the summer of '93, he was escalating in violence on the peacekeepers.

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): The movie *Black Hawk Down* tries to explain this in the first 30 seconds with the print on the screen, but really-

(TI): -yup.

(JS): -it's hard to- it's hard to grasp.

(TI): Exactly, that's why I was like "Man, I got a guy that's actually been there, that can kinda lay that out." Cause you're right in the very beginning with that text but yeah, I- I figured you'd be able to explain it more than just that 30 seconds of text.

(JS): Yeah. What people really want to know: how did it go from handing out food to helicopters getting shot down? And the answer is Aidid attacked and ambushed 24 Pakistani workers at a food distribution site. Killed all 24 of them.

(TI): Wow.

(JS): United Nations Security Council meets together and they decide "Okay we've got to do something to respond to this but also, if Aidid continues to do what he's doing, there's no way that this country has a chance at peace and a future."

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): So, the US responded with Task Force Ranger. Which was my unit of company Rangers. It was some, uh, a helicopter unit from Fort Campbell, Kentucky and then special operations forces from all across the military. And our mission was- this is the part that I think many people who watch the movie miss out- our mission wasn't to go secure food and to help starving people. Our mission is to find Aidid and the high-ranking leaders in his clan and we're supposed to capture them, if possible. But, if not, kill them and take them out of the equation. And that's really what led up to, the steps, and that eventually became *Black Hawk Down*.

(TI): Got you. So, you had- Before you guys were there, you had the Marines there. And you had, what- 10th Mountain Division there as well?

(JS): Yeah, there were-

(TI): -They were the ones that were the helping out with the food and stuff, correct?

(JS): Right. There were US supply forces there. There was, um, US security forces that were there. But all of them were there as part of what's called United Nations Operation Somalia.

(TI): Got ya.

(JS): We were over there with a different mission and our mission is kill or capture bad guys.

(TI): Got ya. Makes sense. Makes sense.

(JS): Task Force Ranger does seven missions over there. But, it's the last mission that gets all of the media attention from what eventually becomes the book and the movie *Black Hawk Down*.

(TI): And then, uh, if you can just walk me through your involvement during the battle?

(JS): Yeah. I was a squad leader. My platoon had the responsibility for the Ground Reaction Force for all of Task Force Ranger. We had about ten Humvees, um, with us and my job was generally to be the first Humvee in and out on the city streets. I had my squad, uh, located on two of those ten Humvees. And generally speaking, Task Force Ranger went- We didn't always do missions by helicopters. But, when we sent in folks by helicopter, because we were in a very densely populated capital city, we couldn't get 'em back out by helicopter. So-

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): -the Ground Reaction Force would roll in. Our job was basically to provide some heavy weapons for the task force. It was to provide, um, the ride that would get the guys that flew in by helicopters out. But, also the prisoners that we were taking would go on the Humvees and would go out of the, uh, target building with us as well. So, generally speaking, all of those missions, we would launch the Humvees at the same time or immediately before the helicopters went in. Um, which is true of the big battle, um, on October 3rd, 1993. We would-

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): -typically stage at the target building or half a block away, a block away. And then, as the- As the, uh, stuff on targets started to wrap up, we'd

roll up to the target building, throw everyone on the vehicles, get everybody out of there. A couple of times we did helicopter-only, I mean Humvee-only assaults. But, generally speaking, that's how it went. And I was typically the guy who navigated the Humvees in and navigated them out of the city streets.

(TI): Got ya.

(JS): As our mission set progressed, they started to become a little bit more dangerous because the city was becoming a lot more volatile. But also because we were starting to really hit Aidid in the parts of town that he controlled and- The big battle on October 3rd, we were rolling in in the middle of the afternoon in broad daylight to the very center of his part of town and we knew this was gonna be rough.

(TI): Bakaara- Bakaara market?

(JS): Right. We just didn't realize how bad it was gonna be. I don't think anybody, even our best intelligence folks, understood how many bad guys were gonna be in that- there in that part of town that day.

(TI): Mmm.

(JS): The movie is pretty accurate. We assaulted the target building with special operators on Little Birds, Rangers flew in on helicopters, and provided blocking positions and then our Humvees rolled in to get everybody, um, right after the assault force wrapped up and get 'em out of there. We wanted to be in and out in less than 30 minutes.

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): One of the Rangers, when he was sliding down the ropes from the Black Hawk helicopter missed the rope. He was very seriously wounded, and I got dispatched immediately to take him back to the base. And it was on my way back that I came through this intense enemy gunfight and Sgt. Dominick Pilla was shot and killed right behind me. He was the first guy killed in action from our task force in Somalia. And he was the guy that caused all of us to realize "uh, we may not make it out of the city streets alive."

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): Um... After I made it back to the base, we had multiple helicopters getting shot down. We put our search and rescue force in at the first crash site but we- by the time the second aircraft crashed we didn't have anybody else to go back out there. So, I got sent back out into the city streets to go to the Mike Durant crash site. Ultimately spent the rest of the night on those city streets back and forth in and out of the city taking people back. And, uh, fighting with the rest of the guys from our task force until about 9 o'clock the next morning.

(TI): Mmm.

(JS): That's the PG rated version of it in thirty minutes or less.

(TI): Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. Um, you said it was pretty accurate, the film. Uh, who played you in the movie and did you- have you ever actually got to meet him?

(JS): Yes, I got a chance to meet Brian Van Holt. He's the actor who plays me in the movie. The guys that were portraying Rangers came to Fort Benning, Georgia and they were trained by some men from the Ranger Regiment.

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): And when Brian Van Holt showed up, some of my friends from the Ranger Regiment called me and said "Jeff, the guy who's playing you is here." So, I made a trip to Fort Benning to meet him and we spent about a day together before they started filming the movie.

(TI): Is there anything about that battle that you don't think got communicated clearly that you wish could have been communicated clearly?

(JS): Well, there's a few things that I think are hard for the people who watched the movie, or even read the book, to understand.

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): One, you know this movie's pretty violent but it doesn't even scratch the surface. I mean, in reality, it's probably one tenth of the real violence from that actual battle. And I don't think the average person could stand it if it was even close to as violent as the real deal. Secondly, the crowds that you see in the movie, they're about one

tenth of the size of the, you know, the numbers of people that we were fighting against. I mean-

(TI): That's amazing cause those crowds in that movie was huge.

(JS): Yeah. You know our estimates are we're fighting between 10 and 20,000 armed Somalians during the course of that night. And there's only a couple a hundred of us in the city streets.

(TI): That's amazing.

(JS): But, um, the thing that I think I really want your listeners to hear is: in the book and the movie *Black Hawk Down*, you have what a couple of key people did. I just happened to give an interview which eventually made it to the book which eventually became the movie.

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): But, in reality, almost everybody there fought heroically. This was one of those battles where uncommon valor was common that night. And, uh, even to the brand-new Privates, it was incredible what they did on those city streets that night and I don't think the average viewer of *Black Hawk Down* really grasps that.

(TI): Well, we'll leave that- We'll leave that battler there with just that. Um, so after the battle, let's just talk about later on in your career. You won the Best Ranger Competition in '96. Number one, what do you have to do to win that competition? Is it like today's Best Soldier Competition? I mean, is it physical? Is it- you do shooting? Is it a board type of thing? Or is it like a combo of all three.

(JS): Yeah. What we have to do to win the Best Ranger Competition? The easy answer is you gotta be a little bit crazy. A little bit insane.

(TI): [Laughter] Got ya.

(JS): Because, uh, the Best Ranger Competition typically for decades has ranked as one of the top three, top five toughest endurance competitions in the world.

(TI): Okay.

(JS): Not in the military but in the world. Best Ranger starts typically on a Friday morning. It goes three days nonstop, no sleep. Food is strictly controlled. And it is one tough physical event after another. The average Best Ranger Competition will start with about 50 two-man teams. You have to have a partner and both you and your partner are Ranger qualified. Um, it gets teams from all across the military and even from foreign services. And usually-

(TI): Oh, wow. I didn't know that.

(JS): Yeah, usually 50% of those teams will not even the first NIGHT. Um, I competed for three years in a row. 1994 and '95, my partner and I finished in fourth place both years. And then in 1996, uh, I was with a different partner. I had the privilege of winning Best Ranger and then coached some of the teams from 1997. But it's- There's no exaggeration to say this is truly one of the most grueling physical events in the world. And it's also highly technical, so the whole middle of the second day is back to back technical events when you're already physically exhausted. You know without sleep and running on no energy and no sleep. That's when they hit you with the technical events.

(TI): Of course!

(JS): -and wanna see can you think through problems at the same time.

(TI): What are some of the events?

(JS): Uh, it's- First night is a long-distance force march. Undetermined distance, undetermined time. Second night is a, uh, a long distance over the horizon, so to speak, navigation. There's-

(TI): Okay.

(JS): -multiple weapons events from pistols to all the way to heavy machine guns and everything in between. There's all kinds of technical events on the second day. There's, uh, the full array of physical events from carrying litters over a prescribed distance to running, swimming, you know, going through an obstacle course, through a water confidence test. I mean, you- Anything that a soldier might get thrown at in combat is typically thrown at them during the Best Ranger Competition. And usually, you go from one event to the next to the next with no sleep and no break.

(TI): Sounds like, uh- Sounds like a crucible on steroids.

(JS): It's, uh, it's pretty rough.

[Laughter]

(TI): So, after that, um, you commissioned. So, tell me about that journey.

(JS): Yeah, that's probably one of the most often asked questions that I ever got in my life is "Jeff, what happened? You went from Army Ranger and Best Ranger winner to Army chaplain? How did that- How did that happen?"

(TI): [Laughter]

(JS): And the easy answer, the one-word answer, to that question is it's the events immediately after Somalia. My faith really influenced me the entire time that I was an enlisted soldier. And it really- It really helped me when I was on the battlefield and I felt this, call from God is the language that I would use, and that he wanted me to do something different. So, I ended up going to college. I went to college when I was still in the Ranger Regiment. Did a degree. Eventually went to seminary and became an Army chaplain and I spent my last ten years on active duty as an Army chaplain.

(TI): So, you deployed a couple more times as a chaplain. Was there anything of note about those deployments?

(JS): Yes. Uh, I deployed-

(TI): [Laughter] Short answer.

(JS): -four times, five times to Afghanistan, nine times to Iraq as an Army chaplain. And that, um-

(TI): In ten years?

(JS): Yeah.

(TI): Oh, wow.

(JS): By now, obviously I had a multitude of combat experience, so I was kind of not just an old guy but I was an old guy with a ton of experience. But I was also the guy that most people realized “Okay, he’s really been there. He really knows what he’s talking about.” So, a lot of my soldiers were willing to listen to me the day that I walked in the door because they knew my reputation from *Black Hawk Down*.

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): Um, and some of those combat deployments were prescribed duration, prescribed location. Some of them were “Hey, drop what you’re doing, get on an airplane. There’s some bad guys that we need to send you” and most of those deployments were in the 82nd Division of the Ranger Regiment. And sometimes it was “Get on an airplane. We need to send you overseas because there’s some bad guys over there that we need you to kill.”

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): Um, and those were really rough. All of the deployments were rough on my family. But those unprescribed ones were really rough because it was “Kiss your wife goodbye” and don’t know when you’ll see her again. It may be six days, it may be six weeks, it may be six months- don’t know.

(TI): Gotta have a strong family for something like that.

(JS): Right. Yeah, and I- I would- If you don’t mind, I would say that at this point, this is one of the things that, uh, I don’t think the average American understands: what the military family gives up for their freedom.

(TI): Oh, absolutely.

(JS): They like to shake the hands of warriors and say “thank you” and I believe warriors deserve to be thanked. Can’t be thanked enough.

(TI): Sure.

(JS): But I really believe military families: those spouses, those children, those parents who put their sons and daughters on aircraft. Man, they deserve more attention and more respect than they’re given.

(TI): Absolutely. Uh, on an upcoming episode I'm gonna have there's a nonprofit that takes, uh, military family's children and gets them to meet, like, their sports heroes.

(JS): Ah, that's awesome.

(TI): Real quick, did you know that the VA also has a Center of Faith?

(JS): I did not know that. No.

(TI): Yeah, it's currently run by, uh, Marine Veteran- his name's Conrad Washington and its entire goal is to get VA information out to clergy of any faith so they can in turn help their congregation.

(JS): Well, that's good to hear.

(TI): Yeah. So, uh, that's gonna be- It's also in my archives and I can send you a link.

(JS): Yeah, please do.

(TI): We can put it in the notes for that. So, while you were in, uh- give me either a best friend or your greatest mentor.

(JS): I had, uh- I can't narrow down the greatest mentor to one guy because-

(TI): Sure.

(JS): -the guys that I showed up to the Ranger Regiment- While they were- Those old timers that were there when I showed up to the Ranger Regiment, a lot of those guys took me in and treated me like a little brother. They didn't have to, but they did. Um, probably they realized "This guy's an idiot and he doesn't know anything. We need to help him out a little bit." I think is probably what happened.

(TI): [Laughter]

(JS): But, I really believe-

(TI): -like many of newbs when we start.

(JS): Yeah, I really believe I became the warrior that I was because of the investment those guys had on me. One of them- I guess I'll single this guy out. It was Command Sgt. Major at the time I was a young sergeant and then newly promoted Staff Sgt., his name Command Sgt. Leon Guerrero. Leon Guerrero had been serving within the Army for thirty years at this point, had been serving, um, since Vietnam and had been investing in young sergeants like me. So, by the time I became a leader in the Ranger Regiment as a sergeant, he was coaching me and steering me along. And to this day, Leon Guerrero is one of those guys that impacted me. In fact, when I got promoted to Staff Sgt., he looked me in the eyes and said "Jeff, I remember getting promoted to Staff Sgt. in 1969 in Vietnam and it still stands out as one of the most memorable moments of my career.

(TI): Oh, my god.

(JS): Yeah, he was still serving at the time and was still investing in Rangers like me and still helping to, you know, make good warriors and those guys... Man, I can't say enough about what those guys did for people like me. There's another guy that stands out. If you don't mind, I'll mention him real quick.

(TI): No, absolutely.

(JS): Jeff Mellenger retired from the Army just a few years ago. The last enlisted US soldier in the US Army who was drafted in Vietnam and was still serving more than 30 years later and still investing in young guys and still loving on warriors and their families. Even though he's drafted, um, during the Vietnam era. And Mellenger made an impact on a lot of people. I was one of them.

(TI): That's awesome. If you were to name, you know, one of the biggest lessons you learned while you were in the Army, what would it have been?

(JS): Um, I became a weapon-

(TI): For me, they're one of these two general-

(JS): Sure. I'll tell ya, there was a moment where I realized I didn't know what I thought I knew. And it was when I became a Weapon Squad Leader in the Ranger Regiment and, uh, there was a moment standing on the machine gun range in Fort Benning, Georgia, where I'd been in

the Army for a long time and in the Ranger Regiment for a long time. And I thought I knew a lot. In fact, I thought I knew it all. And there was a day that I realized "I don't know half of what I need to know, let alone what I think I know."

- (TI): [Laughter] Got ya. And so those guys took you under their wing.
- (JS): Yeah. Those guys were the guys that kinda me took me under their wings and said "You're right, Jeff. You don't know what you need to know, and I'll help you."
- (TI): [Laughter] That's awesome. So, you got out in 2011, right?
- (JS): That's right.
- (TI): What was the transition like in 2011? Cause that was right on the backside of the recession, right?
- (JS): Yeah, uh- I'll tell you- I'll just tell your listeners honestly, I didn't believe I didn't think that this would be as difficult for me, but I struggled a little bit after leaving the Army. I enlisted at 18. I spent more than 20- almost 23 years in the Army. I loved every minute of it.
- (TI): Yeah.
- (JS): And when it came time to retire, I knew it was time for me to retire and I was looking forward to the future. What I didn't realize is how much I would miss. And I- There's still many days that I miss the camaraderie, I miss the urgency, I miss the, um, significance of what you're doing for the country and for the world. That's hard to, um- It's hard to explain to people who have never served in the military.
- (TI): Absolutely.
- (JS): Now, I'm still- Because I'm still in the ministry now, I've replaced that sense of urgency for, uh, a sense of making an impact for the kingdom of God. But, um-
- (TI): Yeah.
- (JS): -if it wasn't for that, I think I would really struggle. I would have struggled a lot more after leaving the military.

(TI): So, you rolled right into the ministry as soon as you got out?

(JS): Yes, the very next day I had- I didn't even have 24 hours between retiring from the Army and starting a ministry. I have retired in Columbus, Georgia right outside of Fort Benning and one of my goals is to stay in touch with warriors for the rest of my life. So, I still-

(TI): That's great.

(JS): -get opportunities to go to Fort Benning and to speak to audiences. Though, they call me a greybeard not because I have a beard but because I'm an old man and starting to turn grey.

(TI): [Laughter]

(JS): I want to make a difference like people made a difference in my life.

(TI): I saw you were also making a difference not too long ago during the government shutdown as well. I read an article. You guys helped out some, some federal workers?

(JS): Sure. We, of course Fort Benning is a massive military base and Columbus, as a result, has a lot of DA civilians, a lot of DOD civilians, a lot of contractors. And during-

(TI): Yeah

(JS): -that government shutdown, some people weren't getting a paycheck. So, I asked the folks from our church, who responded overwhelmingly, to give a donation so that we can just help pay their bills until the government shutdown was over.

(TI): That's- That's great things about- about local congregations that they can help out communities like that.

(JS): Yeah.

(TI): Um- So, uh, Jeff, are you still a pastor or are you currently taking a break?

(JS): I'm currently taking a break. Um, but still staying in Columbus, Georgia. Still trying to minister to people and still trying to stay connected with warriors.

(TI): You should- You know what I'm thinking? I think you should do a podcast yourself. Or something.

(JS): Yeah, I was- That's funny you would say that.

[Laughter]

(JS): I was just saying that to my wife this morning. Like, "I think I need to start looking at doing a podcast."

(TI): Uh, you know, have you heard of the Veteran Nation?

(JS): Nope.

(TI): Uh, Matt Eversmann started one.

(JS): Really?

(TI): He did. Or he did one. Um, I don't know if it's still going. But, man, it's a great arm to support some of your content. I see that you're blogging and stuff, but I see, on your Twitter, that you did one for the Fourth. Um, you know, podcasting's a good way to support your blogs and stuff. I- um, it's a way for us to get our stuff out at blogs.va.gov.

(JS): I think I may take you up on this. Any advice that you have or any suggestions you can send to me, I'd love it because I literally was saying that to my wife about an hour and a half ago.

(TI): Absolutely, I think you'd have a lot of great content that people would listen to. Especially with your history, your background, your contacts, um, your faith- I think that has a podcast written all over it.

(JS): Awesome, man. Thanks for the suggestion.

(TI): Absolutely. Um, you've coauthored now- You've coauthored five books as well. Um, one was about *Black Hawk Down* but there are four others that they're- Are they nonfiction?

(JS): No, they're fiction.

(TI): They're fiction? What- What prompted you to be an author?

(JS): Uh, well, great question. Um, right after the movie *Black Hawk Down* came out, I got inundated with requests to go speak to audiences all over America. And-

(TI): Sure.

(JS): -I was still in the Army. Couldn't possibly go to all of those. So, eventually, a couple of publishing companies approached me about putting my story in a book. And I was really reluctant to do it at first. But what won me over was the thought "I can't make it to 75 or 80% of the people that would like me to come speak to them personally. But I can put it in a book and maybe the book would encourage some people."

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): So, that's what led to the first book. The nonfiction book, my memoirs. And then I was trying to get this book into the hands of warriors. But I realized most warriors are not reading- not reading many books at all to be honest with you.

(TI): [Laughter]

(JS): But, they're really not reading much beyond fiction. So, I approached- I have a good friend who's a literary agent and I approached him and said "Look, I'm looking to write the kind of book- well, not write- but I'm looking to buy some books that are high impact, really action packed books but they have a good strong moral message and they're written for men." And he said, "That stuff doesn't exist, Jeff." So, his suggestion was "Why don't you write it? Why don't you start it?" And at the same time, four or five other authors were doing the same thing and it kind of became a little subgenre of men's literature.

(TI): Oh, wow.

(JS): That's how it all happened.

(TI): Got ya. So, um, a lot has changed in the writing game, I hear. I hear it's more difficult now to make a living as an author rather than it was, like, ten years ago.

(JS): Oh, man. The whole literary industry was turned upside down when digital print really became mainstream. And, uh-

(TI): Got ya.

(JS): I'm talking some of the biggest, most reputable booksellers and book publishers in the world went bankrupt and almost everybody is still reeling from the whole digital print, um, move. I think-

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): -it's a really good thing that we're doing all of these, um- that we're making the book- books available in digital print but it's challenged everything that has ever been established in the whole publishing industry.

(TI): For someone that's getting out and wants to be an author, what would be your number one piece of advice?

(JS): Yeah, my piece of advice- you just kind of alluded to it and I've said this to many aspiring authors: Don't write for income. If you think you're gonna be able to pay the bills writing a book, you're not. If you have something that is a burdening, that is a burden that you really feel like you have to say, then, and only then, start working on the book. So, the language that I use is "write for influence, write to influence people. But, don't write for income." Because if you think you're gonna pay the bills with the book, you're not. Unless your last name is J.K.- Unless your name is J.K. Rowling or Dan Brown, you're not gonna pay the bills by writing.

(TI): Tom Clancy stuff.

(JS): Right.

(TI): Someone with a TV deal or a movie deal. Yeah.

(JS): Yeah.

(TI): Um, Jeff, what's one thing you learned in the service that you apply to your life today?

(JS): Uh, the Army, specifically the Ranger Regiment, taught me how to focus and gave me discipline and I will spend the rest of my life benefitting from the focus and self-discipline that the Ranger Regiment gave me. Every day it helps me, um, not get sidetracked. It helps me follow the mission that I'm on and not get distracted. So, I can't thank the military enough and the warriors that invested in me for giving me, uh- for really molding me into the man that I am today.

(TI): Um, is there a nonprofit or Veteran in the Veteran community that you see as a shining example for others to emulate?

(JS): Yeah, there's about 15 of them out there that I really, really thought of and whenever I can, I try to support. Um, a couple of them are really working hard to minister or really to influence those guys and gals that are struggling real bad with PTSD right now.

(TI): Yeah.

(JS): I think the world of those. But, a nonprofit that I have always been a big of is the Fisher House. I don't think-

(TI): Oh, yeah.

(JS): -many folks realize the cost incurred to the military family for, let's say, a single guy who's going through an extensive hospitalization. If his parents fly to see him, it's gonna cost them perhaps their life savings. So, the Fisher House provides a place for people to stay whenever a loved one is in the hospital. And, uh- I can't, uh- I can't say enough about how proud I am of the Fisher House Foundation.

(TI): We, uh- We actually had the CEO of the Fisher House Foundation on the show. It's in our archives. So, for those listeners who are looking to see what the Fisher House is and what they do. They do amazing work-

(JS): Yeah.

(TI): -for Veteran families.

(JS): Think Ronald McDonald House for warriors.

(TI): Exactly. So, any of the listeners that wanna check that out, it's in our archives. Um, Jeff, is there anything else that, um, I haven't asked that you think is important to share to our listeners?

(JS): Well, I would just say to the VA and to all of the folks that are supporting warriors. The VA has gone through some bad press over the last several years and it's unfortunate. But, I wanna say as a tax paying citizen and as a patriot, I am proud of our country's Veterans administration for the many ways that they're supporting the troops. Thank you for what you're doing to take care of those old warriors and their families. Not just old warriors but young warriors and their families.

[00:47:31] Music

[00:47:37] 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: 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: Family, more or less, encouraged me, you know. Go to the VA.

Man 5: It's okay to go get help. It's okay to talk to people. Because 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].

[00:48:07] Music

(TI): I want to thank Jeff for taking the time to talk with us. For more information on what Jeff is up to today, or to book him as a speaker, you can go to www.jeffstruecker.com [Jeff Struecker's Web Site]. It's got all of his social media there. You can follow him and all that.

This week's Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week is Army Veteran, we talked about him earlier, Dominick Pilla. The following comes from NJRunForTheFallen.org and the Vineland Daily Journal.

Sgt. Dominick Pilla was born on March 31st, 1972. He was from Vineland, New Jersey. And he was assigned to the 3rd Battalion 75th Ranger Regiment in Fort Benning. He had zest, no smoking, no drinking. Vigilant against flab but a lover of fun.

"He was a real hell-raiser. He was a real card," said his mother, Diane Pilla. "He loved life."

His father, Ben Pilla, a Vietnam War Veteran, gave his son big shoes to fill. That's why Dominick chose the elite Army Rangers, his family said. Still, Pilla figured when he got out, and it would be soon, he would angle for a job at the FBI or the D- or with the DEA.

"He always wanted to be special," said his older brother, Frank. "He wanted to be one of the few, not one of the masses."

It had become a tradition in the family that had sent sons off to war. After Sgt. Dominick Pilla was deployed to Somalia with his Ranger company in August of 1993, the family put together of peppermint sticks and balls of provolone cheese. Dominick's father had gotten such a package when he was serving in Vietnam. His brother, Frank, had gotten one while off the coast of Kuwait during the Persian Gulf. Dominick's package was returned unopened to his parent's home in Vineland, New Jersey as he had been killed before it reached him. Sgt. Dominick Pilla was with the convoy taking an injured soldier from the October 3rd firefight in Mogadishu, Somalia to be treated. He was killed when the Humvee convoy was ambushed. Dominick Pilla was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star for valor. On April 5th, 2019, Dominick's hometown of Vineland, New Jersey dedicated the Sgt. Dominick Pilla Middle School. We honor his service.

That's it for this week's episode. If you yourself would like to nominate a Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week, you can. Just email us at podcast@va.gov. Include a short write-up or a link and let us know why you would like to see him or her as the Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week.

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

Rally Point [Link to VA's Rally Point page:

<https://www.rallypoint.com/organizations/veterans-affairs-va-department-of-veterans-affairs-va-washington-dc>], etcetera.

DPTVetAffairs, US Department of Veterans Affairs- no matter the social media, you can always find us with that blue checkmark.

Thank you again for listening and we'll see you right here next week.

[00:51:33] Music

(Text Transcript Ends)