

Borne the Battle

Episode # 156

Daniel Sharp, Marine Veteran, CEO PopSmoke Media, Podcast Host

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/63923/borne-battle-156-marine-veteran-daniel-sharp-ceo-popsmoke-media/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Music

[00:00:08] OPENING MONOLOGUE

Tanner Iskra (TI): Aaahh, let's get it! Wednesday, July 31st, 2019. *Borne the Battle*, the podcast that focuses on inspiring Veteran stories and puts a highlight on important resources, offices, and benefits for our American Veterans. I am your host, Marine Corps Veteran Tanner Iskra. This is vacation episode, part deux. Number 2. I recorded this before I left, about a week ago. I'm out camping, fishing, so I won't be getting into any previous show feedback, ratings, reviews, or news releases. We will get back to our regular programming next week. In the meantime, I can guarantee that you all out there in podcast land are getting closer to that bonus episode with Air Force Veteran Adrian Cronauer of *Good Morning Vietnam* fame interviewing the one, the only producer, actor, comedian, and Army Veteran, Mel Brooks. All you gotta do to hear that episode is leave a rating or review on Spotify, Stitcher, Google, or Apple Podcast. When I left, you were all pretty close to that goal of one hundred. As for news releases and other VA, you know, interesting nuggets, I'm sure a couple have dropped since I've left and if they're not in the main carousel in [blogs.va.gov](https://www.blogs.va.gov) [link to VA blog page], there in the ticker at the top of the home page. So, just go to [blogs.va.gov](https://www.blogs.va.gov), there's always something good on that blog, anyways. Alright, so I met our – so I met this week's guest, back when I went to Bourbiz, we struck up a conversation and we've been talking ever since. He's also the CEO of Pop Smoke Media and he is behind either developing or promoting some of the funniest military theme memes that you've seen either on Facebook or Instagram. Because if you're a Veteran, you're probably following, or one of your friends are following Pop Smoke on either Facebook or Instagram. So, we talked about how he got his meme empire off the ground, why he started his podcast, his own relationship with the VA, combat stress, and – since he was a grunt, and support networks that can help mitigate those

stressors. So, without further ado, I bring to you Marine Veteran and owner of the meme empire, Pop Smoke Media, Daniel Sharp. Enjoy.

[00:02:42] Music

[00:02:49] INTERVIEW:

Daniel Sharp (DS): Okay, I'm – I'm picking – I'm opening, like, to – I barely use that, I know I should. I – alright, I just sent you a – uh, a connection.

TI: Okay. Uh, my network added one, Daniel Sharp, accept. What did it say, contributing editor?

DS: Yeah, for American Military News.

TI: Oh, okay.

DS: Yeah, I've – I've written a few stories for them. Um, I did an article in – on location in Havana, and I did one on location in Moscow.

TI: Oohh, okay.

DS: I also did an exposé on Quantico, because they – uh, for over – for over six months, Marines have been complaining about having brown water – uh, coming out of the faucets in the barracks. And –

TI: In Quantico?

DS: Yeah, nobody was doing anything about it, so I – uh, started contacting – uh, public affairs and – uh, you know, and Quantico and the Pentagon and then, like, the next day there was a work truck there. And the Marines said that the water quality was getting better.

TI: Did it?

DS: Yeah, and I wrote an article on it and it was just, like, it was just sad that it came to that. That, like, you know, like – um, a journalist had to call and be, like, hey, why these Marines had brown water for six months and they're like, oh yeah, we'll fix that.

TI: [Laughter] That's – that's our Marine Corps.

DS: I – I posted the article and I was honestly overwhelmed with the – um, the amount of people who messaged me with pictures and videos of either, you know, brown water in their barracks or mold and – and it was – it was kinda the point where, like it was – it was almost too much to take in. Where, like, I know at some point in time, when I know that I have like a good month or two to dedicate to all this, that I should do something about it. It's just like I – I just feel like I can't half step that and it's been a problem for so long.

TI: The brown water?

DS: Yeah, not only that, but, like, the – the black mold in the barracks too.

TI: Oh yeah, yeah. Those –

DS: Cause, like here, my apartment, like – um, or, you know, if you own a home or whatever, like, if you have – um, you know, black mold all around your vents, like you take care of it – it gets done.

TI: Yeah. You –

DS: But, that's not the case in the military. Like, I remember I had black mold for the entire, like nine months that I lived in my barracks before we deployed.

TI: Yeah. No, I'm – I'm right there with you. I had black mold and, you know, you always get the – I was in that condemned, it's now condemned barracks on – uh, Henderson Hall. Before they could take –

DS: Oh yeah.

TI: And the – it had – it had cement catwalks, it didn't have the metal catwalks, it had – with the – the metal railings. It was like cement railing; cement catwalk and it was cracked so there was, like, a downward slope.
[Laughter]

DS: [Laughter]

TI: But, uh, they finally condemned it, they finally moved the Marines over to – um, Fort Myer, near Arlington. And then I had to go bug my Marines over there. But, by that time I was married, but. So, let's not – you know, okay, let's move on. [Laughter]

DS: Yeah. [Laughter]

TI: Um, So, Dan, finally, after a lot of back and forth, we've – we're finally making this happen, man.

DS: Yeah.

TI: So, it – it happens, man. Um, but I'm glad we're able to finally do it.

DS: Yeah, likewise. It's – um, it's definitely exciting.

TI: So, this is my first remote, remote. Um, I'm actually housesitting out here near Naval Base Dahlgren.

DS: Yes.

TI: Which is quite nice, since my remotes are usually done in my in-laws' basement.

DS: [Laughter]

TI: My point is, no matter what, we were gonna make this happen.

DS: Oh yeah, totally.

TI: So –

DS: Yeah, improvise, adapt, and overcome.

TI: Exactly. Um, you know earlier in a – in an earlier conversation you asked if I had any social media for the podcast, to which I said no, because government. But I do appreciate you trying to – trying to find us on social media.

DS: Yeah. Um, and I just redirected from there to your guys' website and just kinda like going over the list of the guests that you've had and, you know, your tenants and the reach and scope of what you guys do – are doing. It's pretty awesome.

TI: Appreciate that. But when you asked that, the first thing I – I did was I went and I told my boss. I was like, see? There is a need for –

DS: [Laughter]

TI: This podcast to have a social media presence on its own. You know? Everyone does stuff like that. You know, ESPN, their shows have their own social media presence.

DS: Oh yeah.

TI: I'm sure as a social media aficionado, you would – you would agree.

DS: Yeah, I would – um, exceedingly – uh –

TI: [Laughter]

DS: [Laughter] Enthusiastically endorse – uh, the idea of having a social media. Especially, you know, for the fact that – um, you know, the – one of the larger demographics that we were trying to target is the post 9/11 generation –

TI: Absolutely.

DS: Which, you know, all have either, you know, one form of social media or another, cause like, I'm on – uh, Twitter, Snap Chat, Facebook – uh, LinkedIn, Instagram – uh, a few – YouTube, a few others that – um, I'm – I'm not even aware of. [Laughter]

TI: Yeah. But I mean, not just – uh, not just, like, big VA – you – you would – you – it's also, like, hey you have the big podcast and you have your own personal one. You kind of –

DS: Yep.

TI: cross market content those. I – I – I'm always trying to – to tell my listeners, go ahead and – and make a Facebook group or make a group chat or however you wanna do it and we – I'll engage.

DS: Oh yeah.

TI: You do that with your – with your listeners?

DS: Um, to an extent. We – um, we have – uh, a small Facebook group but we're – we're very – uh, proactive in responding to messages and – um, and getting feedback. The – the podcasts – our podcast, the Smoke Pit, has its own – um, Instagram and Facebook page, and then – uh, Pop Smoke – uh, proper, has their own Facebook and Instagram.

TI: The Smoke Pit, you know, that was the reason I actually came up to you at Bourbiz – uh, when – when we were there –

DS: Yeah.

TI: Because, [laughter] when I realized that the first name I ever came up for a podcast is now – has now officially been taken, I was like, I gotta talk to this dude.

DS: [Laughter]

TI: I gotta talk to this dude. But – um, yeah so, a couple years ago, well actually probably – it was probably when I first got out, 2015, I wrote a whole manifesto on the smoke pit. And we had this group called The Coalition, it was all these Combat Camera types, all these public affairs types. Yeah, so, the – the smoke pit was something I thought about in 2014, and then when I saw you and I was like, welp, there it went because – uh, because it's already started. And – and you got it rol – rolling, you got it going – rol – rolling pretty good, so.

DS: Yeah, we – um, we kinda went back and forth and trying to decide what we should call it and it kinda went into the spirit of what we tried to bring to the – um, the podcast itself is that one of the – the things that I hear the most people say that they miss about the military is the comradery and, you know, whether you smoked or you didn't, everybody went to the smoke pit –

TI: Absolutely

DS: And that's where you told stories and gossip and, you know, got the – uh, the Lance Corporal Underground or the E4 Mafia gossip, you know.

TI: Absolutely. If you wanted to know anything about what's going on anywhere, you went to the smoke pit. [Laughter]

DS: Yeah, for sure. And – um, [laughter] even more so if, like, you know, you saw that one pretty girl who smoked, like, ten guys who didn't smoke were –

TI: [Laughter]

DS: You know, were not smokers.

TI: [Laughter] Absolutely. So, what year did you join the military?

DS: I came in 2004, and I served through 2016. They – um, deployed me a handful of times: Iraq, Afghanistan, Jordan, Cuba. And –

TI: So, math in Marines says that's about 12 years?

DS: Yeah, yeah.

TI: Alright.

DS: Just about. And, you know, much with – uh, with other things that we tell ladies – uh, it was actually eleven years and, like nine months, but I round up.

TI: Yeah. Uh, the previous host said, you know, a little over, and then you say the – you say the number cause I always – wha – if you're listen to the archives to – to – uh, where the previous – uh, host interviewed me, I always had that struggle. Like, so how do you actually say that. Cause you wanna say over that – that amount of years, like, hey, I did more than this amount of years, but you don't wanna say something, like, I did twelve years and five months and four days. It makes you sound like a – you know.

DS: Like a – like a toddler who’s like, I’m – I’m five and a half or five and three quarters.

TI: [Laughter] Exactly.

DS: I figured my time in the – um, the DEP program, when I was a poolee, that should kinda count.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: And then, just like, the pure amount of emotional stress and turmoil that was put on my soul from pointless endeavors – um, that was removed from my life. Um, I – I figure that should count for something too.

TI: Yeah. Yeah, but again, like you said, you don’t wanna sound like a petulant child, so. If you –

DS: Yeah.

TI: If you could – just go with a little over and then say your, you know. A little over twelve years, I think. Uh, when you said that, I was like, that – that actually kind of sounds like, you know, I did my – I did – I did, I want that extra credit, but you know.

DS: Yeah. Yeah, twelve years is – uh, is [laughter] is a good round number. I was – uh, in 0311 infantry, I was a combat instructor at Quantico – uh, range NCO down in – uh, Chesapeake, then I was a liaison between the Navy and the Marines at Guantanamo Bay –

TI: How cool.

DS: Uh, which was – uh, super cool billet. The – uh, the Navy where was actually in charge of me and they – uh, they treated me with this – um, we – we don’t use this word in the Marine Corps so I may not be saying it right, but r-r-r-respect? Is that – is that a real word?

TI: [Laughter] What – uh, where did you find respect?

DS: Uh, from the Navy.

TI: Oh, okay.

DS: Um, yeah, yeah. They actually treated me very well. And – uh, it was – it was definitely – it was kinda like being a beat child and, like, somebody offers you, like some sort of kindness and you, like hiss at the light.

TI: [Laughter] Cause there's that – well – there's that – there's that mystique about the Marine Corps. That's one of the reasons that they did it. They're like, oooh, Marine. Okay.

DS: Yeah, you know, they found this devil dog that had, you know, been clearly abused for the last decade.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: And, they're like [laughter] it's alright, nobody's gonna hurt you here. You know, they lured –

TI: [Laughter] Go – just go do your thing. Just go do your thing.

DS: Yeah, they lured me out with – uh, [laughter] with tobacco and energy drinks.

TI: [Laughter] So, why did you join the military to begin with?

DS: Uh, short and sweet answer: 9/11.

TI: Okay.

DS: Uh, I was in high school when that happened, I had family that lived in Manhattan, and uh, you know, really cut to the core of me.

TI: When did you graduate high school?

DS: Well, I actually, technically didn't. Uh, the day I turned eighteen, I – uh, dropped out, took my GED test, and – uh, went to the recruiting office with that, because it actually saved me about nine months.

TI: Oh wow. Wanted to get it on real quick.

DS: Yeah, cause I figured, you know, I could just sit around and, you know, just wait, or I could just take the most direct route. Cause I honestly didn't expect to – uh, to – to come back from those deployments. You know, joining, you know, the Marine Corps, especially the infantry at that point in time, like Fallujah had just happened –

TI: Yeah.

DS: And – um, then, you know, twelve years and five deployments later, I'm like, you know, like, what do I do with my life now?

TI: So, when you were – when you were in, who was either your best friend or your greatest mentor?

DS: As far as mentors go, I would probably have to say my squad leader. He's a pretty righteous dude. He – uh, he was in – uh, the Swedish – uh, I – I don't know what the direct equivalent is for, like how it would translate, but they're pretty – some pretty high-speed mountain unit.

TI: Okay.

DS: And then he came to the Marine Corps, he got promoted to Sergeant before three years. He was the honor grad at Ranger School, then he went MARSOC – um, just –

TI: What's his name?

DS: Uh, Sergeant Lyborg, Michael Lyborg.

TI: Gotcha.

DS: And, he was – uh, he was a real intense dude and he – um, he's tact – tactically and technically proficient and really taught me pride as an infantryman because, you know, a lot of people like to say, that, oh, they're just knuckle draggers or, you know, they're idiots and stuff. And, honestly some of the smartest people I've ever met were in the infantry. I mean, you must not be that smart if that's the route you chose, but, you know, I scored a ninety-four on my ASVAB, [laughter] and –

TI: [Laughter]

DS: Um, you know, that's what the recruiter told me. I must not be that smart. But, the idea that, you know –

TI: Uh, you know, you kinda got – you kinda – with a ninety-four, you would have been qualified to do any job in the military.

DS: And, brother man, I'll be honest with you, I'd spent the entire night before playing – uh, PS2 –

TI: Yes.

DS: WWE Smackdown

TI: Yes! Yes! That was my jam, dude!

DS: Yeah, I'm – I'm sitting there with Kane, you know, choke slamming people through tables, all night. And it's, like, seven a.m. and I'm like, oh crap, I gotta go take my ASVAB.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: And –

TI: I was a – I was a Jeff Hardy dude.

DS: Yeah. [Laughter] Swanton bomb?

TI: Yes, yes.

DS: Yeah, so I – uh, I had a lot of pride in the fact of, like, being an infantryman and so he, you know, put me on to, like, different books about tactics and – uh, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 Warfighting* was kinda like, like I had a copy of that in my – in my pocket for about a decade. Until they put it digitally and I could finally download it to my phone, because, you know, it's one thing just to kinda like charge the enemy and shoot, it's another thing to repel a complex ambush while, you know, setting a base of fire, maneuver element, calling in – uh, you know, medevac and – um, coordinating with adjacent units and, so, like to – to be a good leader in the infantry, you have to have some level of intelligence, you can't just be –

TI: Exactly. Absolutely.

DS: You can't just be physically fit and loud. Like that, that might work – work for some aspects but to actually be a good leader, I feel that –

TI: There's a lot of stuff you gotta know.

DS: Yeah. And you have to be able to think quickly on your feet, and I –

TI: Setting up a proper fence and all that – everything, you know.

DS: Yeah, I absolutely loved it. It was – it was one of my – uh, one of the most proud moments of my life, was leading Marines in combat cause I was on my second deployment and I was an E3, I was a Lance Corporal and I was leading deployments as a twenty-one year old. Oh, I'm sorry, leading – uh, patrols as a twenty-one-year-old, in Iraq.

TI: So, you did that for twelve years, why did you decide to get out?

DS: Well – um, I had did five deployments in the first – uh, ten years and then the last two years I was at the range and then they tried to send me back to the same unit I had just came from, in beautiful Twentynine Palms.

TI: [Laughter] Where, you know, there's not a palm in sight.

DS: [Laughter] Nope. Just meth-heads.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: And, they – uh, they sent me back to 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, and I was like, dude, like I literally just came from there, like you coulda sent me to Hawaii or –

TI: Anywhere.

DS: Pendleton –

TI: Anywhere.

DS: Or, you know, literally, anywhere else. And at that point, it was just kinda like, I really felt like a disposable hero. Like, I had just gotten passed over for selection because they said that I had never – I had never done a B billet like recruiting or drill instructor. Uh, I had just, you know, constantly –

TI: Was this for staff – was this for staff sergeant?

DS: Yeah, yeah. I just constantly done deployments, so they passed me over selection and then they were gonna send me back to, you know, the – the most dismal base that, you know, they have for infantrymen and I – and it was just really offensive. Just, like after everything I've done, after everything I've sacrificed, like, I just felt like a disposable hero. And I was like you know, there's – there's better for me out there. I've already given enough.

TI: Yeah, and that's a – that's a tough – you know, like you talked about not having that extra billet – uh, you know, you were coming up on what? You said, over eleven years, you wouldn't had many chances – uh, to be – to be looked at again.

DS: No. No, if – If I had fought it, I coulda got one more, but the thing was, is they didn't –

TI: What year – what year was that again?

DS: 2016.

TI: So, that was, kinda, when they were pairing down, too. And getting really competitive.

DS: Yeah, and so, like the thing was, is if they were like, oh, hey look, you're not getting promoted because of this but we got you orders to – um, you know, recruiting school and a waiver, cause we want you to get promoted, I would be, like, okay, well that's something.

TI: Yeah.

DS: But they're like, no, you not getting promoted because you deployed too much. Oh hey, by the way, we're sending you back to a deployable unit and I was like, well how – how – how am I supposed to get promoted next year, then?

TI: Yeah. Yeah. You're just doing the same stuff. Man, that's – that's tough. That's real tough.

DS: And it's – it's one of those things where, you know, despite everything that I did in the Marine Corps, like I still felt guilty for leaving.

TI: Sure.

DS: And, I feel that – I've had a lot of people tell me that they – uh, they feel less of a man or less of a woman, depending on who they are, because they didn't do as much as other people. Like, maybe they didn't deploy enough or they didn't see as much action as they wanted to or they think their service doesn't count because they didn't do as many things as other people, and it's kind of hard to – to get your head around that, but at the end of the day, you have to remember that even if you were just, like a paper pusher in the Reserves, like you still did more than, like ninety-nine percent of people did.

TI: Absolutely. You know – you – you stopped, and you rose that – you raised that – that right hand and said, I'll go. I don't care what – it might be five deployments, it might be sitting in an office for – for four years, but at the end of the day, you're the one that volunteered and – uh, there's – there's – there should be a certain amount of pride for that.

DS: Yeah. And, I've – I've noticed that throughout – um, you know, all different MOS's and jobs and rates and branches, and even the different countries. You know, we have allies in Australia that they – uh, or – you know, different countries in England. Like, I have good friends who are in – in foreign militaries and they have expressed those kinds of concerns to me. Uh, because there isn't the same kind of recognition in other countries that there is in America, for Veterans.

TI: Oh, of course. Yeah, absolutely.

DS: In America, you know, like, the – the word Veteran is a real hot topic. Like, any time you see it on the news, people, kinda like, you know, focus a little bit more.

TI: Yep.

DS: Um, and, but it's – it's not necessarily like that. Like, I have a friend in Australia who – she went to Afghanistan, she was a combat medic and she, like she saw action. And then, like she'll, you know, be out on, like – uh, their version of – uh, Veterans' Day which is Anzac. And – uh, people will be like, oh that's, you know, that's – um, you know, they wear their medals, like on – on suits and stuff, kinda like we do?

TI: Yep.

DS: And she'll be like, oh – they'll be like, oh, that's nice. Are those your dad's medals or are those your husband's medals?

TI: Oh. [Laughter] Geeze.

DS: And, you know, she's like –

TI: Which country was this?

DS: Australia.

TI: Noted.

DS: And so, I'm actually heading there next week to do a – a meet and greet with – uh, a lot of – uh, a lot of my followers out there.

TI: Good. Good. Yeah, I heard on your – uh, your Drinkin Bros podcast that's like your second most listened to – uh, country is Australia.

DS: Yeah, which is – uh, well this – as far as cities goes, but – um, yeah, it's –

TI: Gotcha.

DS: It's wild. Because, we have listeners in fifty-five different countries, and –

TI: Yep.

DS: For the podcast and, you know, the idea that whether, you know, you wore Marpat or ACU or Multicam or, you know, tiger stripes from another country, the – uh, experience of being a Veteran is – or serving the military is pretty universal.

TI: You know, this – the *Borne the Battle's* second country? Most listened to country?

DS: What's that?

TI: Thailand.

DS: Thailand?

TI: Thailand.

DS: Wow.

TI: Uh – uh, there must be a lot of ex – expats out there, or something. But yeah, the official VA *Borne the Battle* second most listened to country is Thailand. Which I wouldn't mind going to, to be honest, to go see the – my listeners. I mean, [laughter]

DS: Oh, yeah. No doubt. I watched a – uh, a special on – it was one of those, like, sleepless nights where you're just, kinda like, going through the different streaming services trying to find something to distract you from the voices, you know?

TI: Yeah. Absolutely.

DS: And, I watched – um, a documentary on – uh, military training in Thailand. It was pretty intense.

TI: I love your humor – uh, I – I caught ya – I caught ya hear – talking about the small voices, there. Um, for – if people listen to your podcast and – and go on your Instagram, the – the Pop Smoke Media – uh, sometimes the humor's pretty dar – pretty dark, right?

DS: [Laughter]

TI: And this is – this is a clean lyric show, but –

DS: Yeah.

TI: But, for those civilians that are listening, and airmen – uh, why do you think dark humor resonates so well with the rest of the military community?

DS: I feel because – uh, whether it's modern day warriors or if you, you know, read books – um, and/or historian accounts of militaries of – uh, ancient history, specifically, like, Spartans and stuff – uh, dark humor has always really resonated through – uh, military service where there's a – there's a really great book called – uh, *Gates of Fire* by Steven Pressfield –

TI: Yes.

DS: Where it's kind of like the – the account of the Spartans and – you know, there was a point where they're in the – uh, they're trying to infiltrate an enemy camp and they look over at one guy and he's just like hey, don't look so miserable, you know, they were all miserable and he's like, the only way I could, you know, be more miserable is if – uh, a snake, you know, crawled up my rear and had quintuplets.

TI: So, it's always – always been there –

DS: Yeah.

TI: It's always been there.

DS: And then, not – not to mention that but just – uh, recently – uh, something came out where – uh, eighteen hundred years ago, Roman soldiers – uh, drew [laughter] obscene things on – uh, on walls.
[Laughter]

TI: Ah, what – what's the – what's the clean lyrics way we can say this?

DS: Uh, we'll just say –

TI: There –

DS: Ob – obscene things.

TI: Okay. Alright.

DS: A – a – a spear of sorts.

TI: A spear of sorts, absolutely. Um, [laughter]

DS: A short sword.

TI: Very good. [Laughter]

DS: [Laughter]

TI: Um, so, this – that’s the kind of humor you – you’re obviously into and you’ve got a pretty good social media following, especially on Instagram and on – on Facebook. Um, how did you find your way into this? I mean, it’s kinda turned a little bit of a social media empire, now that you got going with the podcast and some other things – uh, some video work. How did you find this, what was your transition like when you got out in 2016?

DS: Well, I did the transition training and I said, you know, I – I – uh, don’t wanna be a cop or security guard. You know, those are great professions but, you know, that’s kind of the whole reason I’m leaving this life is I don’t wanna have to carry a gun and body armor for the rest of my life.

TI: Sure.

DS: And – uh, they said, alright and they looked over my training and my qualification and they said, well, if you don’t wanna do that then – uh, you’re qualified to be a crossing guard or a janitor.

TI: Really.

DS: And I was, like, alright cool – cool – cool – cool.

TI: That’s – that’s what they said in TAPS?

DS: Yeah. A crossing guard or a janitor and – yeah, I’m at this point, I’m thirty, like I don’t wanna go be the high school janitor, you know, like – um –

TI: That’s super weird cause a lot of the infantry guys I – when I was in TAPS, they were – they – they focused on the soft skills like they should have been. And that – but that – that was in 2015 when I got out.

DS: Yeah, it’s – it’s kind of – it’s kind of – um, I – I’d say a little bit of snake oil because, you know, they – they try to tell you, like, oh yeah, you know, your leadership and – uh, decisiveness, and dependability, like, you know, companies are after this. And it’s like, alright, well, like that’s not – that’s something that’s mutually exclusive just to infantry, so, you know, you have a couple million people who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan and they’re all –

TI: Two-hundred-fifty thousand getting out every year.

DS: Yeah. And they’re – they’re – uh, you know, they’re all vying for the same jobs and if you – and if you don’t have a – um, a degree and if you’re like me who, I didn’t even get a high school diploma.

TI: Sure.

DS: Cause I figured I was gonna get swacked – um, you know, despite my best efforts and all of my Medal of Honor runs that I [laughter] –

TI: [Laughter]

DS: I – I – I just have to say I’m very disappointed in the – uh, the marksmanship instructors, cause I’m not a small target.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: [Laughter] I’m a pretty big guy.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: A couple got close, but –

TI: You – you’re a big guy now but you weren’t so big back then.

DS: I mean, I've always been – uh, the Marine Corps is kind of like – uh, napoleon syndrome –

TI: Sure.

DS: Where, especially with females, like most people join the Marine Corps because someone told them they couldn't do it.

TI: Sure.

DS: And so –

TI: That's one of the reasons I joined.

DS: Yeah, yeah. You know, so at five-eleven and, back then, two-hundred pounds, like, I was usually the biggest guy in my squad. And –

TI: Really. I looked at a photo on Pop Smoke and I was like he didn't look so big when he was in. Didn't know you were that –

DS: Yeah, yeah. I've –

TI: Didn't know you were that big.

DS: Yeah, I've gained a little bit of weight since then. That's –

TI: I call that – I call that freedom weight, man. It's freedom weight.
[Laughter]

DS: Yeah, cause, like, the thing is, is like, somebody said something, like oh man, like, you know, you got fat. And, I'm like, alright, so, like at what point in time do you deserve respect for your service. Like, would you walk up to a Korea Vet and, you know, just tell them that they're fat and – uh –

TI: It's – it's interesting how our generation does that.

DS: And, like my first deployment was, like back in 2005. That was fourteen years ago.

TI: Yeah, yeah.

DS: And, you know, it's like, at what point in time, like are you allowed to relax and enjoy life?

TI: I wonder if social media has – has made that a thing, too. I wonder if that's, kind of, an influence, you know. They can still –

DS: Yeah, because –

TI: View a photo of you – a really nice digital photo of you from, like, '03, '04, '05, and then they – they look at you now and they're, like, wow, it's changed. Well, yeah, that was, like fifteen years ago.

DS: Yeah, and especially because – uh, a lot of Veteran owned companies are tailored towards either fitness or fitness apparel or –

TI: Sure.

DS: It's something that – which is perfectly fine, you know, and so everybody's like hey, you know, like, did you – um, post your time for your Murph on Memorial Day and I was, like, I spent my Memorial Day locked in my room trying not to kill myself. Like, I wasn't out doing burpees.

TI: Mmm. Mmm. [Laughter]

DS: [Laughter]

TI: There's that dark humor.

DS: Yeah.

TI: So, I did listen that you actually did go to the VA for help in some of that – that – that area – uh, in your *Escape the VA* episode.

DS: Oh yeah.

TI: And your guest was a great guest. Uh, the story how Climb4 came to be is pretty cool. And I get it, man. In an organization as large – as large as the VA, like every service or government entity, for that matter – um, not every experience is gonna be the greatest. And I – I remember – I listened to your episode and – and – and listened that you didn't get the greatest experience at that time, at the VA. And if – if they wanna – if our – if my listeners want to know what that experience was, they can go ahead and listen to your episode. Um, I was there too, man. My first experience with the VA, they – I almost felt like I was being blamed for my injuries. Um, but I can tell you, man – uh, there's a lot of civilians and there's a hell of a lot of Veterans out there that work in the VA, that truly are doing their best to help each – to help, you know, fellow service members. Um, So, but I do get that – that experience at the VA. And it can –

DS: And I feel like –

TI: And it can – and it can always be better.

DS: I feel like, at the end of the day, whenever you find fault in something you should do two things. One, you should see how you can make things better. And so, you know, people that may have something negative to say, it's like, well, you know, like what have you done to make things better. And, you know, there's lots of different things that you can do –

TI: Yeah.

DS: Especially in your local area. And then, two, you have to point the finger at yourself and see where you can hold yourself accountable and if people that have issues with wait times and like, ah well, it took, you know, x amount of time for me to get an appointment but then they're the same people that when it is time for their appointment, they'll either not show up or cancel last minute. And it's like, you know, you can't in good faith complain about long wait times when you're missing your appointments because somebody else could've had that spot.

TI: Sure. Exactly. Exactly.

DS: And there's been times where the VA has called me and they're like, hey we have an appointment for you, you know, twenty-eight days from now but something just opened up tomorrow, can you make it? And I'm like, yeah, I'll – I'll clear my schedule and I'll make it. And –

TI: Mhmm.

DS: So, you know, being able to know – identify a problem but then also try to identify solutions, and then hold yourself accountable. I think if every Veteran who walked through the doors at the VA held themself as accountable as they would have held their subordinates when they're active duty, I think it would be heads and tails better.

TI: Sure. And I – I – you know, with the Mission Act coming out and – uh, and – and appeals modernization, I – I see the VA's really trying to make – uh – uh, they're really trying to improve what they're doing. Uh, even from the past couple of years that – that I've seen – um, have you seen any – have you gone back since that experience on your – on your – on your episode?

DS: Yeah, I've – um, I've been back and I, you know, starting – um, I went in and I had – uh, an evaluation or an intake – uh, to be assigned to a different – uh, primary care provider and it was – uh, it was an intense experience. It was one of those things where going into it, I knew that they're gonna want to get to the meat and potatoes of things. They're gonna want to rip open some scars and I – so I knew that it was gonna be intense so before I went in there, I got ahold of, you know, a couple of my closest friends and I was just like, hey, like I need you guys, you know, to follow up with me around this time. Because, like I knew that I was gonna need a good support network when I walked out of those doors because it was going to be an emotional experience.

TI: Gotcha.

DS: Um, another interesting book that I've read is – uh, *On Killing* by Rex Grossman who taught – uh, psychology at WestPoint. And –

TI: Okay.

DS: You have World War II Veterans who saw, arguably, some of the worst combats ever to be seen, right? Um –

TI: Absolutely.

DS: You know, Battle of the Bulge, Peleliu, Iwo Jima –

TI: Yep.

DS: And, you know, they came home, and they were called the greatest generation, ticker tape parades, you know – everybody, you know, re – re- reveres and adores them. And then, so you have Vietnam Veterans who, you know, arguable saw, you know, some of the worst combat that Americans have seen, maybe not to the same size and scale because what a lot of people don't realize, is we dedicated the – about the same amount of manpower to – to the entire Vietnam conflict as we did to the single taking of the island of Okinawa in World War II.

TI: Sure.

DS: So –

TI: Yep.

DS: People that, you know, say that we, you know, lost the conflict – that's very frustrating because we never lost a major battle – um, and –

TI: Yeah.

DS: Only a fraction of the resources that we dedicated to other conflicts were dedicated to this and it wasn't a war, you know? It was – and just – it was helping – um, you know, Monroe Doctrine and trying to keep – uh, a sovereign state free from communism. But I digress – um, they saw, you know – uh, Hué City and Khe Sanh and stuff like that, bad combat, they came home and they were, you know, called baby killers and spat on and you know, disgrace and –

TI: Yep.

DS: A lot of them were ashamed of their service. Now, what – uh, what the – the book says is that the stressor itself isn't indicative to one's injuries. Um, it can either be – uh, multiplied or mitigated by the support network that they have when they return home. So, World War II Vets come home, you know, they get parades, everybody loves them, great economy, easy to find a job, they're not worried about stress, like, the stress about, like, that as much as when you compare that to the Vietnam Veterans and that's why the suicide rate is staggeringly different.

TI: Yeah.

DS: Because you can see that even though they both went through, you know, large scale battles and, you know, had a fierce combat, one had a good support system upon return, one did not. And, you can look at the numbers and see how important it is to have that support network.

TI: Dropping truth – you’re dropping truth bombs there – uh, Daniel. This is – uh, did not expect that. [Laughter]

DS: [Laughter]

TI: From a meme generator, you know? [Laughter]

DS: [Laughter] Well that’s – that’s why I had to start the podcast because it’s – it’s kinda hard to, you know, change somebody’s perspective on something through, you know, twelve words on a picture.

TI: What’s the goal of your podcast?

DS: Um –

TI: Obviously that’s different than what you’re doing with your memes and all your – all your jokes. It’s kind of a –

DS: I mean, whether –

TI: Something – you got a different direction.

DS: Whether it’s with the memes or, you know, the – the nonprofit events that we do or the advocacy or the journalism or the podcast, you know. It really is all the same goal, just mainly chasing women, and –

TI: [Laughter]

DS: Nah, I’m – I’m kidding. And, but –

TI: Gotcha

DS: It's – it's mainly just – um, just to foster a sense of comradery in the community. Like, somebody who, you know, served their four years honorably and they got out and they go back home to middle of nowhere, Iowa or, you know – uh –

TI: Yeah.

DS: Uh, a place that may not be as promilitary as one would like.

TI: Or, military's not as prevalent.

DS: Yeah.

TI: You know.

DS: Maybe there's not as many Veterans there or, you know, the – you know, the – the people there aren't necessarily as considerate about it. You know, they can come to –

TI: The – the military-civilian divide's pretty wide, some areas.

DS: Yeah. And even if – and I – I think the – the divide is kind of – it's kind of like the Grand Canyon where some areas are wider than others but there's still a divide. And –

TI: Yeah.

DS: I feel that some civilians through their best intentions, they want to be supportive, but they just don't quite know how. Like, I had, you know, civilians call me and say, you know like, hi, Dan, like I just wanted to say thank you for everything you've done for this country and just Happy Memorial Day. I just really hope that it's a great day for you. And, you know, I kind of grit my teeth and, you know, I'm polite. I'm like, well, thank you for, you know, thinking of me because I –

TI: Yeah.

DS: You know, it – it was considerate of them, they just didn't go, you know, good initiative, bad judgement.

TI: Yeah, they don't know exactly how to go about that. You know, I had a –

DS: Yeah. And so, they tried –

TI: I had a – Yeah, I had a professor in Syracuse – uh, you know, he – it was an all military – uh, with Combat Camera and public affairs, - uh, our advance training is to go be a student at Syracuse University for a year. And, so it's a joint program. There's four from each service and we're all in this class, and we have this professor and he's trying to use military terms in describing things and talking about things. And it was super irritating. It – you – you know, he was probably a nice guy, but it immediately turned us off.

DS: [Laughter] Yeah.

TI: [Laughter] He's like, you know you, check roger that and we're just like, stop, just stop –

DS: Yeah.

DS: What you're doing. Just be you, you know. And – and we – we'll adjust f – we'll adjust, but don't come at me with all this jargon that you heard in *Saving Private Ryan*. You know, it's –

DS: Yeah. So, the idea that, like, this guy who – um, you know, works in a blue-collar job or maybe in a white-collar office where, you know, the – you're not able to have the same experience and stuff. They can, you know, if they're having a stressful day and they go on their lunch break or smoke break or whatever, they can, you know, open up my social media and see new content posted, almost daily. I –

TI: Yeah.

DS: I create a lot of the memes that I post and, you know –

TI: Now, you share a lot of others too.

DS: Yeah. And, if it's good I'm gonna share it.

TI: Yeah.

DS: Uh –

TI: Yep.

DS: People send me some hot garbage and I'm like, okay, that's – might be funny to like, the three guys that, you know, are – that were in your shop, but, like [laughter] –

TI: [Laughter]

DS: I try to – um, make things more general, because when I first started off it was real combat heavy cause that's all I knew. You know –

TI: Sure.

DS: It was all about stacking bodies and this, that, and the other, but then, like I – I had – would have people who would message me or would comment and they're like, hey look, I don't – I don't mean to be rude but I just don't understand what this means. Can you explain it to me? And I was like, alright well, if I want to grow my following, I need to make it not job specific, not branch specific and not even country specific in some cases.

TI: Exactly.

DS: Where, you know, people who, you know, were a mechanic in, you know, the – in the Norwegian Army and – or somebody, you know, special forces down in – um, you know, in – in New Zealand, like they can both relate to this one experience that I post on something. So –

TI: Mhmm.

DS: Whether it be, you know, through that or listening to the podcast while they're working out or whatever, they can bring – bring 'em back in the fold. And then, so first and foremost, is to entertain because comedy and laughter is the best medicine, you know, by some adages. But then also to tell people that it's okay to, you know, to have pain or it's okay to, you know, have issues. It's okay to be sad occasionally. The important thing is, is that you do something about it. You know, it's okay if your straps sticking to your shoulders while you're on a hike as long as you keep walking.

TI: Daniel, I can – I can hear your passion while you're talking about this. Is – uh, is some of this self-therapy for you?

DS: Yeah, it's very cathartic for me. I – um, I got back from Iraq and I saw a lot of my – um, my guys turn to alcohol or, you know, self-destructive behavior and that was kind of their way of coping and I – I saw all this destruction and carnage around me, people, you know, killing themselves –

TI: Yeah.

DS: left and right, or getting divorced or ruining their careers and I decided that that's not the path that I wanted to take so I started getting certifications in suicide prevention and combat stress management and suicidal interdiction and I made it my initiative to kinda be like the – the, whatever unit I was in – uh, the representative for that. Like, so I taught the – uh, the suicide prevention classes, I taught, you know, the combat stress management classes and – and so it was really cathartic for me.

TI: Is this – is this while you were still in or as you got out?

DS: Yeah, this started in – uh, 2007, so for about nine years.

TI: Oh, interesting. Interesting.

DS: Yeah, so for about nine years I taught – um, you know, the – the mandatory classes and I tried to make it fun and entertaining because – uh, contrary to popular belief getting a suicide prevention class is not supposed to make you wanna kill yourself more because of how boring and dry it is.

TI: [Laughter] Yeah, right.

DS: So, within the parameters of the curriculum that I was certified in, I – you know, I did my best to keep it entertaining, you know, to keep it short, keep it to the point, get a good message and I – um, I kinda turned that into the social media because first and foremost, you know, you wanna entertain, you wanna make people laugh – um it – it feels good when people say that, you know, you're funny or that they enjoy going to your – your – your pages, but then inherently you have a responsibility to be a good shepherd of – um, that following that you have. You know, to be responsible and ethical to – um, kind of steer in direction that, you know, morally that you see fit. I'm not saying that, you know, I'm morally superior than anybody else but at the end of the day everybody knows at least a basic premise of right from wrong. So, if I identify something that is, you know, coming up in the community and through the message boards, in the memes or things that people are talking about and posting, that I don't agree with it, you know, you either have the – the option to say something or do nothing. And that's kind of –

TI: Sure.

DS: one of the hardest things that you have to decide because if you do nothing – um, then you're not getting the message out there. But also, at the same time, it's not giving publicity to negative things. So, it's kind of a double edge sword because, you know, people will message me and be like, what's your perspective on this and it's almost like –

TI: Mmmm.

DS: You know, like, almost like a small-town politician. Like, whether you say something or whether you don't, you're saying something.

TI: Yeah. Yep, they want you to endorse it or – yeah, that's –

DS: Or speak out against it and, you know, if you don't speak out against it something, that's a message in itself and –

TI: Right?

DS: And, you know, so it – it kinda comes full circle as towards, you know, the – the mental health aspect because there are a lot of people who feel that – uh, you know, humor helps – uh, prevent, you know, Veteran suicide more than, you know, a push-up challenge or a hashtag challenge or anything like that can, you know?

TI: Uh – one thing I think that would help you with that, is a – is a thing called “the seven pillars of journalism” and it’s on – it’s on Google, you can look at it. But it – you as a, now, media entity – uh, there are ethical pillars in – in journalistic integrity that are supposedly still in existence. Um, take a look at ‘em. Maybe – maybe it’ll help you with some of those things that – that are coming to ya.

DS: Yeah, and I – I definitely appreciate that cause I – I have done some journalism. And –

TI: Yeah.

DS: I’ve gotten some really cool opportunities – um, I’ve been able to travel to Cuba and Russia and – um, events all over the – the country.

TI: Who – who are you – who are you writing for? What’s your – who are you doing journalism for? Is it video, is it writing?

DS: Mainly writing and it was for – um, for American Military News. They, you know, they – they do some great things and they – um, they have –

TI: Yeah, they got –

DS: A huge following.

TI: I share their stories – I share their stories all the time. It’s good stuff. So, you got some – you got some articles with – with them.

DS: Yeah. And I did some gear review for them, I did some exposés and then on top of that, being able to give, you know, publicity to – um, you know, Veteran nonprofits and – events and – um –

TI: Absolutely.

DS: Different organizations, I – I do a lot of work with – uh, an organization called Bourbiz. It's a nonprofit, it's – uh, bourbiz.com [link to the Bourbiz website], like bourbon and business put together. They – uh, I believe that's where, you know, you and I first met.

TI: That's where we met. [inaudible]

DS: Yeah. And so, you know, the listeners heard about that a few episodes ago and – uh, being able to use the – the social media following to direct more people to those kind of resources.

TI: Yep.

DS: Because it's not just, you know, getting – uh, funny pictures or, you know – um, earning, you know, adoration and praise from – from messengers. Like a lot of the – the messages I receive are people just, like, pouring their guts out to me because apparently, like you know, it's easy to find me so, like here's this guy, like he seems knowledgeable, let me, you know, tell him about how, you know, everything's going wrong in my life and now I feel like, obligated to help this person and so I'm trying to find resources –

TI: Heavy lies the crown –

DS: Yeah.

TI: Heavy lies the crown. Uh, yeah – you – um, one of our previous – uh, podcasts in the archives – uh, Brett D'Alessandro. He's the CEO for Backpacks for Life –

DS: Yeah.

TI: Founder. He's like twenty-six years old, or whatever. But he talks about the same exact thing that, hey, you almost feel obligated when these – when these things come to your doorstep. Um, heavy – heavy lies the crown. Um, so now you have that – this – this – this media – uh, entity, I guess, through Instagram and Facebook – um, where, you know, you shared about memes and then you have your podcasts. What are – what is Pop Smoke Media's future goals?

DS: Well, our future goals are to – uh, to continue to grow our following and continue to find new and inventive ways to bring people together and to entertain and – um, help publicize good messages and help steer people towards getting the help that they need.

TI: Very good. Uh, so what is one thing that you learned in service that you apply to what you do today?

DS: I think it's about constantly improving your position. Um, I –

TI: Okay, interesting. Haven't heard that one before.

DS: Yeah, there's – there's – uh, an old movie – uh, I – I for – forget the name but basically it was a – a small platoon of British soldiers and they were about to be attacked by a large indigenous forest. And the – uh, the commanding officer is just like, you know, what have you – what have you guys done today to im – im – uh, improve the battlements. And they're like, oh, we did this, this, and this and he's like, well do something else. Like, you know, there's always something you can do to fortify your position, advance your position – uh –

TI: Mmm.

DS: Shape the battlefield, get to – get to a point where you feel more comfortable dying on that hill. And, you know, there's – that's an expression that, you know, is very common in – in the lower ranks of the – uh, the infantry. It's like when people are seeking cover and concealment, when you're setting in, be like, are you ready to defend that piece of earth to the death? And, like, no.

TI: Sure.

DS: Well, get to a better position, then. And, I think that when you get out of the military, people don't quite realize, nobody cares. If you go bankrupt and die in a ditch, that's on you. Or they don't –

TI: Even if you are in the military, I always told my Marines, nobody cares more about you and your career than yourself.

DS: Yeah, that's – that's very true. But, in the civilian aspect, you're not required to be anywhere. You're not required to be at of formation, you're not guaranteed a paycheck, you're not gonna have a corporal or a sergeant that's gonna come bang on your hatch if you're late for formation or –

TI: There's no next rank, there's no road map, none of that.

DS: Yeah, and nobody cares and so, a lot of people get out expecting to have a chief or, you know, a petty officer, someone there to kind of direct them and that's just not the case. And, in order to be successful when you get out, and I don't mean that in monetary aspect because a definition of success is different from person to person.

TI: Sure.

DS: One person's definition of success might be being able to give his, you know, his wife and his kids a good life. Another person's definition of success, is making all their ex-boyfriends jealous, you know, it –

TI: Absolutely. [Laughter]

DS: Mine is happiness and – um, these days and, you know, for guys like us, it's – it's kind of hard to come by. So, for me, my definition of success is happiness and the social media, being able to help other people, being able to entertain and see something that I've created, and craft grow and be appreciated. That's success to me. And, you know, being able to, you know, travel and go to – uh, different events and – um, have a comfortable life, those are – those are secondary. Because I've been happy in a rainstorm in a dirt hole, I've been happy, you know, it a penthouse suite, surrounded by models. Like –

TI: [Laughter]

DS: I've been happy either way. And –

TI: Sure.

DS: It's – you know, it's a very broad definition so whatever your definition of success, you have to work for it. You have to earn it daily. You have to continue to improve your position. You have to continue to see what you can do to advance that and if you are not happy with your position in life then, you know, you need to work for it. If –

TI: You need to make a change. You need to make a change.

DS: Yeah, exactly. And, I mean, one of – one of the things that I keep reminding myself is that, you know, if – um, if you surround yourself with good people and you have realistic expectations and you work towards those things, things are obtainable, but at the end of the day –

TI: Absolutely.

DS: You know, if you're – you get to write your story and each day is a new opportunity to advance that position, and if you're not happy with where you are then that just means you're only at a checkpoint. You need to put your backpack on, you need to continue walking.

TI: There was a – a previous – um, guest, his name was Carol Harris and he talked about being uncomfortable. His happiness was being uncomfortable cause he knew that's where the adventure was. And I just – I thought that was a great – great quote. You know, it was like hey, if you're comfortable, that's not homeostasis. You know? That's – if you're – if you're not happy but you're comfortable, you need to start doing something to be uncomfortable – uh, in order to advance your position.

DS: Yeah, to a – to achieve personal growth.

TI: Exactly. Um, and – and happiness is hard to attain a hundred percent of the time. I mean, I – I – I've gone back and forth on that as well. It's like, happiness, well you know, there's gonna be times where you're not happy. But can you find joy in every day of your life? You know, can you find the joy of who you are and where you're at? I think, looking at it that way. Cause, God, it's – it's hard to be happy all the time. And no one likes a dude that's happy all the time.

DS: Yeah, cause what a lot of people forget is that, like, they – they look at themselves and they look at other people and they try to compare their success to other people to define their happiness. And that's kind of the – the dark side of social media. And, you know, you have to remember the days that like, you know, you're out in the field and the only bit of happiness that you had was, you know, was that you were lucky enough that the skittles in your MREs weren't expired.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: Or only slightly expired.

TI: Or someone didn't open the charms in the field.

DS: Yeah, exactly. You know, there's – you know, some of the happiest I've ever seen people in their life was, you know, on a rooftop in Iraq and, you know, some, you know, some boot was – um, dumb enough to trade, you know, his brownie and jalapeno cheese spread for, you know, some expired Skittles.

TI: [Laughter] That's awesome.

DS: And you know, so that – the greatest – you know, the greatest joy in that person's life at that moment was, you know, holding that jalapeno cheese spread and, you know –

TI: That's awesome.

DS: You know, the – the sweet taste of jalapenos [pronounced gelapanos] on their tongue.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: And then you get out and you have people who, you know, they have – uh, a thousand dollar phone in their hand, they have a vehicle, a roof over their heads, a dry bed to sleep in, and they're not happy. And –

TI: Yeah.

DS: It's not – it's not things, it's not materialistic things, it's not – uh, tangible things that make most people like us happy. It's those intangible things, like being appreciated, being valued, feeling proficient in whatever your job field is.

TI: Knowing that you helped someone, maybe.

DS: Yeah.

TI: You know? Yeah.

DS: It's one of the best things about the military is, you know, when you're wanted to be somewhere, granted, yeah, like it maybe to either help carry stanba – sandbags or, you know, to stack on the point man before you go into a very dangerous house but, you know, so it may not always be, you know, the comfortable feelings but it's great to feel wanted. It's great to feel that – uh –

TI: Knowing someone has your – knowing someone has your back.

DS: Yeah, and then –

TI: That's – that's a great feeling –

DS: Not only that, but somebody wants you to have their back.

TI: Yes.

DS: Because to me, I, like I didn't really care so much if I came back from my deployments. I – the only consideration that I had, the only reason why I really always tried to advance my position and have proper cover concealments and be a hard target was that I didn't want anybody to have to carry my large self to that medevac. [Laughter] Like –

TI: [Laughter]

DS: Being the biggest guy in the squad, like I would be a burden if I got shot. And, you know, so it was mainly – it was a sense of self preservation, I was just like, man, like I don't want people having to complain, you know like, aw Sharp, you're, you know, you're – you need to lost weight, like while they're carrying me as a CASEVAC, you know.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: Like, I – I didn't want that.

TI: No. Nobody wants that. Nobody wants that.

DS: Yeah, so it's like, not that I cared about myself, I just didn't wanna be a burden to other people.

TI: Mmm.

DS: And – and also, you know, you wanna keep the guys to your left and to your right safe and, you know, if you get a DUI or if you pop on a drug test or if you break your leg in training, that's one less rifle in the gunfight.

TI: Yeah.

DS: That's one less person to repel the enemy. That's one less set of eyes that are scanning for those, you know – um, those IED indicators.

TI: Yep.

DS: That's, you know, one less – uh, you know, Marine or soldier or airman that's there doing their job to, you know, keep everybody alive. And so, the idea that, like I wanted to be there cause I felt like I had something to contribute, then once the sun had set on that chapter of my life I still felt like I had something to contribute, just in a different way. And so, the people who are in that position where maybe they don't feel satisfied, go out and find something to get that satisfaction.

TI: Did you do anything between – uh, Pop Smoke Media and the military? Like, was there any kinda transition job thing?

DS: Yeah, I – um, I – I don't wanna go too much into it because, like I said, I – I make a lot of inappropriate jokes on my podcast and my social media.

TI: [Laughter] Yeah.

DS: But I – uh, I did smart – I did – um, start a small local company in my area – uh, while I was on terminal leave with the exclusive- uh, goal that I would only hire Veterans and their family members.

TI: Oh. Very noble. Very noble.

DS: And I – I started the – the social media kinda casually about a year or so before I got out.

TI: Yeah.

DS: And then once I got out, I was just like, wait, hold up, like this is actually going somewhere? [Laughter]

TI: [Laughter] That's really cool. So where – where can people find your social media? Where – where can people find you? Um, and if you had to sum up your podcasts, *The Smoke Pit*, what it's all about, you know, take one minute, take two minutes – uh, let our listeners know what they might hear, and –

DS: Okay.

TI: Remember – okay, remember clean lyrics. [Laughter]

DS: [Laughter]

TI: Um –

DS: There goes the first six words so [inaudible]

TI: Yeah. [Laughter] What might – what might they hear if they tune into *The Smoke Pit*?

DS: Well –uh, you can find us on Facebook and Instagram – uh, on Pop Smoke Instagram is Pop Smoke official with underscores in between the words. Uh, Snapchat and Twitter as well. If – uh, you wanna listen to the podcast, we're on iTunes, Spotify, YouTube, most podcasting app. Uh, it's called *The Smoke Pit* and basically, it's myself and my cohost – uh, Mike Sency. He – uh, he's an active duty Navy guy with a lot of experience under his belt. And basically, what we do is we just go on there and we make fun of each other – um, tell embarrassing stories and just kind of relive that comradery that you would hear, like in the back of a seven-ton or, you know, in the field around the – uh, the Jetboil. While – you know, one guy who was the only one who actually brought his Gore-Tex to the field, is making everybody coffee, you know?

TI: [Laughter] Awesome. Awesome.

DS: And it's just kind of like a lot of craziness – um, a lot of dark humor and – um, and then a little bit of advocacy and – uh, resources sprinkled in there just for flavor, you know?

TI: Yeah, absolutely.

DS: Yeah.

TI: Um, you know, we've talked – we've been talking for an hour and I don't – I haven't asked you if it's Dan or Daniel. Like, which one do you prefer?

DS: Honestly, it's kinda weird when people call me by my first name because I –

TI: Right?

DS: Was called by my – by my last name for, like the first year of my service and then once you actually get promoted, like nobody calls you by your last name anymore because, like the Marine Corps is super young. Like seventy-five percent of the Marine Corps is E5 and below which is crazy compared to the other branches so, by, you know, by the time I became a team leader, like ninety-five percent of the platoon were – were junior guys with boots so it was always Lance Corporal. And then, you know, when I picked up NCO, it was always S'arnt.

TI: Yeah.

DS: So, like I'm barely even used to hearing my name cause it – it was always, like, oh hey S'arnt, you know [spelling] S-apostrophe-a-r-n-t.

TI: Yeah, you – you haven't even finished you first, like civilian enlistment.

DS: Yeah, not even. [Laughter]

TI: [Laughter] If – if we can call it that. Um, is there anything else that I didn't think of or might have missed that you think would be val – of value to the listener?

DS: Yeah, it's – it's definitely inherently important to ask yourself what you can contribute to the community, whether it be a local event that you can support, you know, maybe joining a Veterans' club or, you know, reaching out to, you know, social media pages that are in the – uh, in the Veteran sphere. And really telling them what your opinions are because, like I can only make so many jokes, I can only come up with so many original ideas. Some of the best episodes that I've had, some of the best memes that I've made have been ideas from people that have messaged me. Because my perspective and my slice of the pie of the military is so small compared to the overall arching theme. And so, to really keep an open mind and realize that just because someone didn't have the same military experience as you, doesn't mean that it wasn't valid.

TI: Exactly, absolutely.

DS: So, you know, just keeping that open mind and being encouraging of – uh, of other people, cause in the military it's so easy to tear each other down. But once you get out, you have to find that it's much more difficult to try to build things than it is to destroy things. And so, if you're unhappy with something that's going on, have you tried to change it? If you don't like the way something is, have you tried to change it? And if the answer is no, then shut your mouth and figure out how you can fi – how you can do it better.

TI: That was one of the reasons I joined the VA, honestly.

DS: Yeah.

TI: Uh, you know, before this I was with NASCAR and my wife – uh, she noticed, and – and people, if they wanna listen to this, it's – it's in the archives. But, long story short, my wife saw I was taking Marines to the track, Combat Camera Marines, and showing them things that you wouldn't learn in TAPS –

DS: Yeah.

TI: You know, in our field and she was like, hey, you have an interview Monday. I was like, for what? And she was like, you're gonna be telling Veterans' stories if you get the job. I was like, you – you – that's cool, abs – absolutely. –

DS: Roger that.

TI: Yeah, let's do it. Um, she saw that I still had that – that passion there. You know, for people that, like you said, that complain about the VA, it's – you're absolutely right – um, what are you – what are you doing? Do something about it.

DS: I don't know it off the top of my head but there are probably dozens if not hundreds of VA hospitals across the country and the world, right? Um, you –

TI: Yeah.

DS: You have the, you know, the ones that are in U.S. Territories and – and – and such. You have to – you have to kind of look at it that it's not, like yeah, it is one overall entity, but each hospital is going to be different.

TI: Oh yeah, just like any –

DS: And –

TI: Any huge bureaucratic organization that you - whatever service you were in or whatever federal government organization it is, or – or even if it's a Fortune 500 company – um, there's gonna be differences in that company. Whether you're on the left side of the company or you're on the right side of the company.

DS: Being – uh, able to identify that and then, so you look at your hospital and you identify a problem, well let's work to fix it. It's – it's easy enough to present a problem but without presenting a solution all you're doing is distracting from people who are trying to present a solution. And, so you take your individual hospital and whether it be writing a politician, emailing whoever is in charge of the area, talking to your local news – uh, working with Veteran groups in the area, like –

TI: Do something. [Laughter]

DS: Yeah. Instead of just, you know, sending me a – a twelve paragraph long essay about how, you know, the, you know, the nurse wasn't exactly gentle with your – uh, with your prostate exam.

TI: [Laughter] Or, yeah – or the – man, we get those on the Facebook all the time. Just, these long comments and – and we do have things like the – the Veteran Experience office that does pick stuff up on like that – or that does pick that up. And you have the Whitehouse – uh, hotline that's in West Virginia, you know. There's an entire call center that's dedicated to hearing stuff like that and directing it to that – that – that level where it needs to go.

DS: Yeah, and at the end of the day it is a federal organization. Federal organizations are oversight and managed by people who were voted into office. And so, you know, if you wanna – if you want something done, you know, do something about it. You have plenty of Veterans who are in – uh, Congress and the Senate and – and various different local state and – uh, federal positions and, you know, that's a great place to start.

TI: Yeah, some things can't change until law – until laws are made, you know? Like – like –

DS: Yeah.

TI: Like the Mission Act. You know, people were – people were – uh, there was a lot of feedback on – on the – the way remote care was done. So, now the VA's trying something else.

DS: It's just like in high school when everybody said that, oh, this guy's a jerk but, like, oh well, what did he do? Well – well that's just what people say. Okay, so, you've based your entire perception off of rumors. And you're just regurgitating the opinions of others. Like, form an original thought. If you've never walked through the door, you just – you don't know. There have been people – plenty of people whose lives have been saved by the treatment that they've had. Myself, included. Like, I had three blood clots in my lungs – uh, like a month or so after I got out of the military.

TI: Oh wow.

DS: And – uh, I had three pulmonary embolisms and I went into the VA and they're like, oh snap, boy, you're about to die.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: [Laughter] And they put me in the ICU and, you know, pumped me full of the right drugs and got me stabilized and, you know, like literally saved my life.

[00:59:24] Music

[00:59:32] PSA:

Man 1: Getting out of the military, I was missing this comradery.

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: Came to a point where I was like, okay, I really need to talk to somebody about this.

Man 4: Family more or less encouraged me, you know, go – go to the VA.

Man 2: It's okay to go get help, it's okay to talk to people because it takes true strength to ask for help.

Man 5: Hear Veterans' real stories of strength and recovery at maketheconnection.net [link to the Make the Connection website].

[01:00:02] Music

[01:00:06] CLOSING MONOLOGUE:

TI: Really, really, really enjoyed that. I wanna thank Daniel for coming on *Borne the Battle*. And you can find more of him either at Pop Smoke on Facebook [link to Pop Smoke's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pop.smoke.official/>] or at pop smoke official, and like he said, each word – each word with an underscore, on Instagram [link to Pop Smoke on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/pop_smoke_official/?hl=en]. So, July 20th marked the 50th Anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. In honor of that historic event, this week's *Borne the Battle* Veterans, plural, of the Week are Navy Veteran Neil Armstrong, Air Force Veteran Michael Collins, and Air Force Veteran Buzz Aldrin. Those three Veterans accomplished one of the greatest feats in human history and it's an honor to recognize them here on the podcast. 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 and let us know why you would like to see him or her as the *Borne the Battle* Veteran of the Week. For more stories on Veterans and Veteran benefits, check out our website, blogs.va.gov [link to the VA's podcast page], and follow the VA on social media. Twitter [Link to the VA's Twitter page: https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor], Instagram [Link to the VA's Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/deptvetaffairs/?hl=en>], Facebook [Link to the VA's Facebook page: [Facebook.com/VeteransAffairs](https://www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs)], YouTube [Link to the VA's YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBvOzPLmbzjtpX-Htstp2vw>], RallyPoint [Link to RallyPoint: <https://www.rallypoint.com>], Dept Vet Affairs, 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 will see you next week.

[01:01:39] Music

[01:02:06] AFTER THE SHOW SHOW:

TI: So, if you're still listening to *Borne the Battle* right now, the music has ended, the – the outro's done, and this is the show after the show. It's a little bonus just to say thank you if – thanks for listening this far into the podcast.

DS: Yeah.

TI: Uh, what has been one of your craziest stories since you've started this Pop Smoke journey?

DS: Um –

TI: I know you mentioned – I know you mentioned one about Cuba –

DS: Yeah.

TI: And on – on – on – uh, on Drinkin Bros.

DS: Yeah, so – um, I was in Cuba and I – I brought a crew down with me to help me, you know, do the article and I get back – I was out for, like a nice walk and it was a beautiful city, like everybody was super nice to me and I spoke, you know, a little bit of Spanish. And the – the most Spanish of – of anybody in the group. And so, I get back to the – uh [laughter], the – the – the apartment that we had rented, and the proprietor is furious. She – um, uh – she – uh, had put a sign over the bathroom that said don't flush paper down the toilet because of the embargo, all the infrastructure is really old.

TI: Oh, okay.

DS: And, you know, cause everything has been there since the fifties and so you're not supposed to flush toilet paper cause it will clog the pipes and be very costly and very difficult to repair.

TI: Yeah.

DS: And so, there's little sanitary basket, you know – um, as you would see in like, a lot of older homes. And so, one of the guys that was in the group, you know, was flushing toilet paper and the – um, the – the uh, lady, you know, saw a piece floating and she was really mad about it. And so, my buddy – uh, who was trying to use his high school level of Spanish to deconflict the situation cause we are in a communist country, and we are journalists [laughter], that's not a good – you know, that's not a good recipe.

TI: [Laughter] Sure.

DS: You know, we're trying to be there low key, and she looks over and sees, like our recording equipment and, like our notes and stuff. And – uh, and so the word for paper is papel, the word for potatoes is papas and –

TI: Mmm.

DS: Um, so you know, he was like no mas papas, pota la bano and like pointing to the toilet and she like, in her mind, she was like wait, he just said that they won't wipe their butt with potatoes anymore –

TI: [Laughter]

DS: And flush it down the toilet. And in her mind, like the idea that Americans would just bring a sack of potatoes to wipe their butt with, like, it made sense –

TI: [Laughter]

DS: Because of all the rumors, you know, she had heard about the capitalist swine dog pigs and so she loses her mind and you know, she's threatening to call the police and she's demanding to see the sack of potatoes and so I come walking in and it is absolute chaos.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: And – and I'm like, you know, I'm like – like what's going on? And so, she, you know, and like I only – I only speak enough Spanish that I could understand maybe every four out of five or six words.

TI: Sure. Sure.

DS: And so, she's screaming at me, like you know, like your friends are wiping their butts with potatoes and flushing it down the toilet and I was like, do what? [Laughter]

TI: [Laughter] Excuse me?

DS: And she's demanding to know where the potatoes are and I'm like, there – there are no potatoes. [Laughter]

TI: [Laughter]

DS: And so, I'm like – I'm like, dude, like what did you say to her? And she – and he was like, and so he repeated the sentence and I'm like, dude, like you said potatoes. Like –

TI: Oh my gosh.

DS: The word for paper is papel and so, like I had to tell her, basically like it was a misunderstanding and that indeed, we were not, you know, using the – a hidden sack of potatoes that we brought with us.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: Cause their like – she's like they're not even indigenous to this area, and –

TI: Oh my gosh [laughter].

DS: And it's a communist country and so you can imagine what, you know –

TI: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

DS: What they think Americans are like that, you know, we just – that we're so rich we can just bring a sack of potatoes to wipe our butts with.

TI: [Laughter]

DS: And so, I was – yeah, I was half a heartbeat away from ending up in a Cuban gulag.

TI: So, did it – did it finally like, get squashed after you kinda like mitigated the situation?

DS: Yeah, begrudgingly – yeah, begrudgingly she – uh, conceded her demand to see the sack of potatoes.

TI: Like, she still doesn't believe it, like she still –

DS: No.

TI: She still think – like, to this day she still thinks you have a sack of potatoes.

DS: Yeah.

TI: That's awesome. That's awesome. So, if – uh, if you enjoyed this, let me know at podcast@va.gov and we'll do more stories like this with more of our guests.

(Text Transcription Ends)