

## *Borne the Battle*

### Episode # 212

Aaron Quinonez, Marine Corps Veteran, Operation Pop Smoke

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/79021/borne-battle-episode-212-aaron-quinonez-marine-corps-veteran-operation-pop-smoke/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

**[00:00:00] Music**

**[00:00:10] Opening Monologue:**

**Tanner Iskra:** Oh, let's get it. Monday, September 21st, 2020. *Borne the Battle*. Brought to you by The Department of Veterans Affairs. The podcast that focuses on inspiring veteran stories and puts a highlight on important resources, offices, and benefits for our veterans. I am your host Marine Corps veteran Tanner Iskra. Hope everyone had a great week outside of Podcast Land. You know, I always like it when the podcast drop days are on the 7th, the 14th, the 21<sup>st</sup>, and 28th, reminds me of football and it is the perfect month for that. Good to see sports and full swing. Got a recent email from another listener this week, this one coming in from Bravo Foxtrot. He or she sent an email in our inbox here at [podcast@va.gov](mailto:podcast@va.gov). It says, "Hello, Iskra. Can you do an episode on how vets can get started on joining modified sports, golf, swimming, et cetera, at the expense assistance of the local VA hospitals and healthcare." Bravo Foxtrot, because of your email, I just fired off an email to my contact at Sports4Vets. We're going to have an SME, and we're going to break down the programs and learn from them. In the meantime, there are some websites and some social media accounts that I want you to check out. The first one is [blogs.va.gov/nvspse](https://blogs.va.gov/nvspse) [Link: [blogs.va.gov/nvspse](https://blogs.va.gov/nvspse)]. That's November—Victor—Sierra—Papa—Sierra—Echo. That is the VA Adaptive and Therapeutic Arts homepage. On there, there are VA national competitions, like the National Veterans Golden Age Games and contacts and schedules for each. There are some fact sheets about the programs. Most importantly, and I think you'll want to know about this. There is the grants and allowances section on the right-hand side of the page that covers the U.S. Paralympic Athlete Stipend Program. If you're going—if you're going out for that. And most importantly, there's the Adaptive Sports Grant recipient list that lists all the local nonprofits alphabetically. I wish it was by state, but it's alphabetically, which nonprofits that received funding to outfit veterans for adaptive

sports. There are also social media handles I want you to check out: @Sports4Vets. That's all one word. Sports, the number four, and Vets. Sports4Vets on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Follow those and you'll receive some updates. So, I'll make you a promise. Bravo Foxtrot, you go to that website, look up some local adaptive sports grantees, maybe review this podcast, wink, wink, and I'm going to work on getting that episode together for you. Speaking of reviews, if you haven't yet, please feel free to leave one for *Borne the Battle* on Apple podcasts. The more that this show is rated reviewed and especially subscribed to, not only lets me know if the show is going in the right direction for you, but also puts us higher in those algorithms and allows more veterans to discover the information provided not only in the interviews, but in the news releases. As for this week, we did get one rating, 299 now, so close to 300, and one review this week. This one came from Blue One Ghost, love the name by the way. Five stars, simply said, "Thank you for this episode. It touched my heart. Thanks." This was sent on the ninth. So, I'm guessing Blue One Ghost that you're talking about episode 210, which was Tony Temerario's 9/11 episode. Blue One, I'm glad that it did. Again, if you lived anywhere in America on that day and had the wherewithal to understand what was happening and live through the days that followed, there's a lot of reverence for what happened that day, and the testimonies of that day should always be treated as such. Tony's story, and especially the bonus story, definitely left an imprint on me too. Thank you for that review, Blue One Ghost, and letting me know that, that the episode reached you. Okay. News releases: we have four this week. The first one says for immediate release. "The country makes a milestone committed to prioritize suicide prevention for veterans and all Americans. The president's role to empower veterans and end a national tragedy of suicide, otherwise known as PREVENTS office, and the US Department of Veterans Affairs announced recently that 42 states and one US territory signed the PREVENTS State Proclamation pledging their prioritization of suicide prevention for veterans and all citizens in their jurisdictions. Each state pledging promises to promote and amplify the REACH public health campaign that encourages everyone to reach out to those who are vulnerable and to reach out when they themselves are in need of help. As part of the implementation of the president's roadmap, the PREVENTS office is meeting with state and community leaders in all 50 states and territories to ensure best practice for suicide prevention are identified and applied. Efforts are coordinated within the state and federal government, and the public

health messages are promoted before the initiative concludes on March of 2022.” That’s a long sentence. “Additionally, the office is working with key community leaders, including veterans service organizations, military service organizations, business leaders, academic institutions, and faith-based communities. To date PREVENTS has held in-person visits in Arizona, California, Florida, Tennessee, and Texas, and virtual visits in Indiana and Oklahoma. PREVENTS was established by Executive Order 13861 on March 5th, 2019. The roadmap released by President Trump, June 17th, emphasizes the critical role of states and local communities in suicide prevention. For more information, go to [va.gov/PREVENTS](https://va.gov/PREVENTS).” [Link: [va.gov/PREVENTS](https://va.gov/PREVENTS)]

PREVENTS sounds like it would be a great future benefits break down because I want to go deeper on this program and with the VA so heavily involved in it. And maybe there is somebody listening that can help me do just that. What I do know is that it is Suicide Prevention Month. I wanted, I did want to talk about suicide this month, and that we are going to talk to a veteran on this episode who created something that could be an actionable step to prevent veteran suicide. All right next up, and you may have seen this, “The financial services center determined one of its online applications was accessed by unauthorized users to divert payments to community health care providers for the medical treatment of veterans. The FSC took the application offline and reported the breach to VA’s Privacy Office. A preliminary review indicates that these unauthorized users gained access to the application to change financial information and divert payments from the VA by using social engineering techniques and exploiting authentication protocols. To prevent any future improper access to and modification of information, the system’s access will not be re-enabled until a comprehensive security review is completed by the VA’s Office of Information Technology. To protect these veterans, the FSC is alerting the effected individuals, including the next of kin, of those who are deceased of the potential risks of their personal information. The department is also offering access to credit monitoring services, at no cost, to those who social security numbers may have been compromised. Veterans whose information was involved are advised to follow the instructions in the letter to protect their data. There was no action needed from veterans if they did not receive an alert by mail as their personal information was not involved in the incident. Veterans or veteran next of kin, that received a notification that their information is potentially at risk from this incident can direct specific questions to

the FSC customer helpdesk at VA FSC Veterans Support at va.gov. [Link: <https://www.fsc.va.gov/>] That's veterans with an S. Or in writing to VA FSC Help Desk, Attention Customer Engagement Center, PO Box 149971, Austin, Texas 78714-9971. Some outlets are reporting that VA had no comment, but on the 14th, our Press Secretary, Christina Noel did tell CNN that the VA's independent Inspector General is investigating the issue and in order to protect the integrity of the investigation, VA cannot comment any further.” So, there you have it. All right. Next one says, for immediate release: VA awards, \$1.3 million to support veterans at elevated risk of suicide from experiencing or being at risk of homelessness. The US Department of Veterans Affairs announced recently it awarded \$1.3 million in grants to 11 regional homelessness, nonprofit organizations to bolster suicide prevention services for veterans who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Recently our Secretary, the honorable Robert Wilkie, said “Our data shows that veterans are at particular risk for suicide within 30 days of an eviction or the onset of homelessness, especially when it is paired to other risk factors, such as financial instability and difficulty meeting basic needs. In response VA is working hard during this challenging time to ensure veterans who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness to have the support they need.” The funds awarded will be managed and disbursed by VA supportive services for Veteran Families Program, otherwise known as SSVF. Additionally, SSVF will provide supportive services, including rapid rehousing and homelessness prevention support to veterans identified as being at an elevated risk of suicide. As well as veterans facing extraordinary challenges during COVID-19 due to increased unemployment and unstable finances. The grantees that were awarded operate in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Nevada, Tennessee, and Texas. They were selected from a group of the highest ranked applicants for the SSVF program in fiscal year 2020. To read the full list of grantees and learn more about how VA is working to protect veterans during COVID-19, go to va.gov/homeless/ssvf. [Link: <https://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf/>]” All right. Last one says, “For immediate release: VA expands veteran access to telehealth with iPad services. The US Department of Veterans Affairs announced recently a new collaboration with Apple to increase veterans’ access to virtual care benefits. The VA's iPad program provides qualified veterans with cellular enabled iPads to access telehealth services, and currently helps more than 50,000 veterans across the country connect to VA healthcare services virtually. The VA study

found veterans who received tablets reported high levels of satisfaction with care, were less likely to miss appointments and found it easier and more convenient to access VA care. To standardize the program and provide veterans with a consistent quality experience, VA will exclusively distribute iPads to veterans. Not Samsung, not Asus, just iPads. The collaboration between VA and Apple was facilitated by the VA Secretary's Center for Strategic Partnerships and provides VA with Apple's expertise to help enhance the platform and ensure veterans and healthcare professionals have the best telehealth experience possible. As part of the VA's commitment to supporting veteran healthcare, patients can now also securely view and download their personal medical data using the health records on iPhone featured in Apple. Veterans who currently don't have a video capable device or internet service and are interested in VA's Telehealth iPad program should consult their VA healthcare team to determine their eligibility. Visit [connectedcare.va.gov](https://connectedcare.va.gov) for more information about VA telehealth." [Link: <https://connectedcare.va.gov/>] All right, this week's guest, considering all of the awareness months and our news releases this week, this guest fits right into all of those. Like I said, it is September, we're right in the middle of Suicide Awareness Month and we're right in the beginning of Hispanic Heritage Month. And this week's guest has been homeless. Once before the Marine Corps, and once after the Marine Corps. He's also attempted suicide, and he's pulled himself out of that pit with research, faith, a solid foundation, and a new purpose. He now helps other veterans who are in similar shoes. And he's even released a mobile app that aims to combat veteran suicide and is even being studied and considered by a healthcare group as something they can prescribe to their patients. It's an incredible story, and I'm going to get out of the way and just let them tell it. So without further ado, I bring to you Marine veteran, Aaron Quinonez enjoy.

**[00:13:08] Music**

**[00:13:17] Interview:**

**Tanner Iskra (TI):** I appreciate you taking the time during your anniversary trip.

**Aaron Quinonez (AQ):** Yeah, no, I - I appreciate the opportunity. I think it's a really cool story, you know, how we met and how this whole thing came to be. I think it's a really cool story, so I'm excited to tell it.

(TI): Yeah, I mean- I mean, you just kind of came out of left field - came from Washington state to Washington D.C. Was that - that was last fall, right?

(AQ): It was in December. It was in December- December. Yeah. There's like the first week of December. Yep.

(TI): Gotcha. Months are coming - running together, and - and we're going to get to that in a minute because how and why you came to Washington from Washington state was a - it was pretty ballsy, I gotta say.

(AQ): Yeah, man. I just, you know, I look back - I kind of been like that my whole life, you know? And then, in the Marine Corps when I was in ANGLICO, they really capitalized on that and they - they loved that quality in the Marines that were in the unit. And so, it just accentuated that part of my personality.

(TI): Absolutely. Well, before all of that, I want to go back. I want to go a little - a way back, before you even joined the Marine Corps. You grew up in Northern California and Oregon. You know, growing up in Grays Harbor and home tulips, sometimes we play the game of, you know, the game of hard times where, you know, where we compare childhoods and - and, you know. Aaron, I gotta say your story is up there. You might share it. You mind sharing some of it.

(AQ): Yeah, sure. It's, you know, growing up as a kid, you don't - you don't really realize it. It's not until you become an adult, you know, and - you start to see kind of how everybody else grew up and - and how your family's growing up. And you have a - more of an awareness and you think back and say, "Wow, you know, that - that really was hard." I mean, it seemed hard at the time, but - but when you start to compare it to everything else - it gives you a broader perspective. And so, when - when I grew up, I grew up in the mountains of Northern California on Highway 36 - a small little mountain town called Mad River. And so, Highway 36 runs East to West between Redding, California, and Eureka, California. And so, it's just high up in the mountains. There's just a small logging community that's up there, and then there's a bunch of hippies and outlaws, and then that's really it. You know, the logging industry was really big, which is what really created the town. I grew up on a mountain. It's - they call it Eight Mile. Cause it was eight miles from the green gate. To basically the end of the world - it just - the road just stopped and there was nothing else out there but forest service

land. And so it's the real Eight Mile, not - not where Eminem raps about.

Right. But this is the true Eight Mile. And when I grew up, I grew up in just a little two room cabin. We didn't have any electricity or running water growing up. And that was just normal for me. I mean, we had a spring that we tapped into and used a black hose to feed that into the cabin - into a giant bathtub. And that's where we'd get our water. We would heat our water on a wood stove, and we would use that for cooking or bathing. We'd heat it on the wood stove and then pour it back into the - the porcelain tub there. And that's, you know, that's just how I grew up. We grew up cooking on that wood stove. I think it's probably some of my fondest memories. Cause that thing, it -it was the centerpiece of our house. It was just a potbelly woodstove, but we would cook on it, you know? You would warm the house - you dry your clothes next to it, you know? So, it just - that - that was the centerpiece for our house.

**(TI):** Was that a, that wood stove?

**(AQ):** We didn't have electricity. We had a solar panel and a 12-volt battery. And so, we could charge a few things like that during the daytime. We had this giant antenna that my dad and I built, and so, we'd get a couple channels that would come in, you know, kind of super fuzzy, but that - that was really it, you know. I didn't grow up with McDonald's or movie theaters or going to the mall. That just wasn't me. I grew up like that.

**(TI):** That wasn't a thing.

**(AQ):** No, no, not at all. I mean, we'd go into Eureka maybe one time a month for groceries and that would be it. Yeah. And that was about a two-hour drive, so it was very rare that we went into town, but, you know, up there, it - you know, my - there was a lot of - alcohol and drug abuse and, you know, my dad was - was pretty bad into that. And because of that, you know, there was a lot of violence in the home and - I think I was 11 or 12 when my dad, he kicked us out of the house. And so, it was me and my mom and my three little sisters and we were living on the river and we lived on the river for about four months.

**(TI):** Like just straight living on the river.

**(AQ):** Yeah. Just living on the river, homeless, just camping. You know, we had what my mom called it, and she called it camping. And I think she did that because she was trying to protect us from the

reality that - that we were homeless, and I think to protect yourself, you know? But that's where we lived. Yeah. For about four months before my mom got enough money together to get us out of there and up to Oregon, to Coos Bay, where we - we got into a little one bedroom - a house just right down from the high school. But yeah, that living on the river, man. It was- it was tough. I mean, I was - I was young, but I - I didn't fully comprehend the - the - the fact that we were homeless, but I just - I knew it wasn't right. You know, so I used to try and spend a lot of time trying to visit friends and stuff like that. But - it was tough, man. All of our stuff was, you know, in these tents and in these like plastic garbage bags, you know, where our clothes were and everything like that. So, it was tough for sure. You know, cooking over an open fire was not easy. People don't realize like, when you're homeless, there's nowhere to relax, right? Like there's - there's no relaxation. So that's - that's kind of how I grew up. You know, we moved to Oregon and things definitely got better. Mom got a job working as a maid at a Best Western, and we didn't have a car, so she would walk across town. And if anybody's ever been to the Oregon coast, you realize that it always rains. And so, my mom, I mean, she was a super tough woman. She - she didn't care. She'd walk to work every day - every single day, which is a couple miles, you know, across town to go, you know, and she did that for years and years - my whole time in high school. That's - that's what she did. And so, I think I learned a lot of my work ethic from - from watching her. And I remember one of my - one of my most prominent memories is I remember I got on the school bus one morning and I was riding the school bus to - to school 'cause it was raining. I didn't want to walk. And I'm looking out the window and I see this lady. She's walking on the side of the road. She's carrying two big old black bags - garbage bags. And I thought, man, that poor lady she's out there in the rain. What is she doing? And as we rolled by, I realized that it was my mom and she was - it was her day off and she was taking our laundry to the laundromat. Wow. And I was like, dang. Like that - you know that - anytime I feel like life's got me down, like it's tough, I just think back to my mom and think, man, you know, I - if she can do all of that with four young kids, you know, I can deal with whatever I've got going on.

**(TI):** Is she still around, your mom?

**(AQ):** Oh yeah, absolutely. So, my mom has done phenomenally well. She started working for WinCo foods in Portland, and then she transferred to Washington, and then she transferred to Las Vegas. She retired from WinCo with - I want to say over a half a million

dollars in retirement. 'Cause it's an AESOP, so it's an employee owned, so she she's bought a house out there. She's doing very well. Wow.

**(TI):** That's outstanding. That's outstanding to hear. Now I want to go back to - when you were homeless during eighth grade, was that part of the school year too? Or was that just during the summer?

**(AQ):** So, I was out there for the last part of my eighth-grade year. So, it was in May. So, just the last few last like, months of my school year. So, May, June, July, and then, you know, toward the end, before school started up again, my mom had got us move and off the river.

**(TI):** It's tough. It's tough, man. it sounds like your - your - your growing up kind of sounds like my grandfather's way of growing up too. it's crazy. It's crazy. Now you also married young and joined the Marine Corps right out of high school.

**(AQ):** Right. Yeah. So, I - I was looking for - I just wanted to a better way of life and I wanted to - I want to be able to travel and do all the things that I knew I couldn't do. So, growing up, I grew up poor. I knew I was poor, right? Like in grade school, I would spend my time in the library, reading national geographic magazines, because I could get this - I could get to see all these really awesome places. That young of an age, I had that realization. Like, I'm never going to be able to see these things. You know, you're talking to like, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the Mayan ruins down in - in South America, in Honduras, you know, and I knew I would never get to go see those places. So, I just lived in a dream world in those - in those magazines, being able to read all about these cultures and stuff. So, I - I grew up knowing that - that I was poor. So, I saw the Marine Corps as a way out. And when I look at why look at the military like that, and then yeah, when I - when I decided to join the Marine Corps, I really didn't know much about the military at all. 'Cause growing up in that hippie environment, it just wasn't talked about, you know, it wasn't really a prominent thing that people were really talking about. I didn't even have any real action figures or - or, you know, tanks or army or anything like that growing up. So, it really didn't have a frame of reference. But when I started looking into it, the Marine - the Marine Corps, like the baddest news on the block, you know, I was like, all right, I want to be one of those guys. You know, that's - that - that was - my deciding factor was - was okay, who's the toughest? It's the Marines. All right. That's where I'm joining. And so, I did, I joined in 1997.

**(TI):** Okay. Now you were - you were calm with first ANGLICO. ANGLICO is kind of a unique unit in the Marine Corps.

**(AQ):** Yeah, it - it is. It's funny 'cause when I talked to people in - even in the Marines, you know, they've heard of ANGLICO, but they don't really know what we do or, you know, anything about us, but like, yeah, we - we've heard of you guys, you know, we're all. Well, I don't - I don't think they have the jump billet anymore. I think they took that away. But when I was in, we had a jump billet, and so I was a master parachutist and, you know, I got to wear those cool, shiny gold wings on my uniform, which is - definitely stood out in the Marine Corps. 'Cause there's not a lot of airborne units, you know. There's recon, ANGLICO, and air delivery. That's it. There's only three that have a jump bill that other people can get sent to jump school.

**(TI):** Yeah, we had a couple on combat camera that would do jumps.

**(AQ):** Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, the bill that you could only become a master parachute is - one of the requirements was that you had to be - have a jump billet. And so, I qualified for that and, you know, got enough jumps under my belt to become a master parachutist, but ANGLICO is very unique. It's the Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company. So, we do a lot of support - arms supporting liaison for arms. So, artillery, mortars, fast movers, attack kilos, will pull medevacs - stuff like that. We used to do a lot of Naval gunfire, but they really don't use a whole lot of that anymore.

**(TI):** Yeah. But that's still an option.

**(AQ):** Oh yeah. Heck yeah. Yeah. It's just -the trajectory is really flat. So, shooting over mountains and stuff is kind of difficult, but absolutely. But yeah, it was a really cool unit - small unit out there in Las Flores. It was just us and forced to recon that were out there. We used to share a pair of loft, so you know, where we'd hang all our parachutes and pack them. You just have one pair of loft for recon and for ANGLICO. And so, we worked side by side with those guys all the time. You know, our - our indoc and qualifications was not to the extent theirs was, but we did a lot of the same training together all the time. And I also became the Naval weapons security manager which sounds really cool, but all you're really doing is maintaining all of the secret and top-secret vaults - all the crypto gear. And then I'd have to make sure that everybody was qualified for a security clearance, you know, which was just a bunch of paperwork.

**(TI):** Yeah. So, you deployed with the initial invasion during Iraqi freedom. What - what do you - what do you - what do you remember most about that?

**(AQ):** I think when we breached the border was what I remember the most. Man, it was - it was scary 'cause you just didn't know what to expect. And I think that was the scariest part is - is the unknown. We reached the border and within the first - I want to say - 12 hours, we got hit with one of the worst sandstorms in recent history. And so, you couldn't even see in front of your face, you couldn't - you couldn't see six inches in front of your face. And we were trying to move this convoy forward, right? But we just couldn't. You just couldn't - you couldn't move. You didn't know where you were going. You couldn't see the vehicles in front of you. So, we had to just stop - basically halt and then just hunker down in your vehicles because you can't even really pull security outside. It was just so bad. In - in - in the morning we had to dig out all the vehicles 'cause all of the - and there was also a huge storm that came through a big dust storm that came through about a week later. And it was crazy because - for people who haven't seen a dust storm, it looks like a giant moving wall that's moving straight toward you. Like, you see it off in the distance. It's this huge wall is moving toward you. And then next thing you know, it completely envelops you, you know, and then it's gone.

**(TI):** Shabaab's or HSA newbs or whatever they call them.

**(AQ):** Yeah. It's one of the craziest things that I've ever seen - as far as like, a natural phenomenon - is that just, wall of dust moving through the desert and then it just totally enveloped you. So, I think those - those - those things, the environmental things - when I first got there were just shocking. Like, wow. This is - this is like a whole 'nother world. Like I'm on a different planet.

**(TI):** How far did your unit go into Iraq? How far did you guys push?

**(AQ):** You know, we went all the way up to - I only went as far as all nose area and then some of our guys pushed up into Baghdad, but we only pushed up. We were getting ready to send the rest of us up there, but everybody started getting sick. We pushed into Baghdad - remember - and they, you know, made that big claim that, "Oh yeah, we pushed into Baghdad." And then they pulled out - well, they pulled out because everybody was sick. Just got some sort of a flu, you know, and - so I - we never - they totally changed the battle plan after that. And then before we knew it, things were

winding down and they declared major operations over and yeah. It was pretty - pretty quick.

**(TI):** Very interesting. Now, Aaron, while you were in, give me either a best friend or your greatest mentor.

**(AQ):** Oh, geez. I - so many guys come to mind. I think - I think I have two that really stick out to me. So, I have George Wade who - he was in comm as well, but he was a tech. And so, when I came in, he was a sergeant and I was a lance corporal, and we ended up becoming sergeants together. I got promoted pretty quick. And I remember we were on the range. We were doing pistol qual and he's like, "All right, Q, you need to hurry up and finish your last, you know, your last set around." I was like, "Well, why?" He's like, "We've got to get you back to the - to the - to the unit. You're getting promoted today." I was like, "Wow, I'm getting promoted. All right." And so, he pinned on my sergeant chevrons for me. So, we were really good friends. He really taught me what it was to be a leader and be an NCO, you know, just by watching him and how he led me. And he taught me how to - how to be a corporal and how to start taking charge. And then again, you know, when I became a sergeant. So, he was a huge mentor to me. Another guy would be Leo Lazano. Leo - he used - your - your class, you know, old school, hard-charging Marine like this guy. I mean, he - he had fought in Desert Storm. And then when I was there in ANGLICO, you know, he was one of the older guys that had been around for a while, and he - he really knew his job. He knew his stuff. And he's just this short little guy that, you know, kind of that crusty gunny that you - you know, kind of just walking around with a cup of coffee in his hand and he's - but man, that guy was a wealth of knowledge. He had this really hard exterior, a - really gruff. But when you got past that, man, that guy would just - a wealth of knowledge, and he would just pour into you and teach you anything you needed to know. Like, I was really struggling with call for fire in the very beginning, being able to do target acquisition because we're looking at - we're looking for targets out there and I don't know what they look like 'cause I'd never seen a whole lot of, you know, tanks and stuff like that before in my life.

**(TI):** So, you mean no - no tanks out there in the Northern - the woods in Northern California?

**(AQ):** Yeah. No, I didn't even have any military vehicles or really watching the military movies. Like, I had no frame of reference for this stuff. So, on the battlescape I'm looking for - we call it target

identification. And so, I'm trying to find these towns. I'm like, "I think that's a tank out there. I can't really tell. I don't know if it's friendly or foe." And so, I'm really struggling. I was in an ANGLICO basic course which you have to pass in order to be an ANGLICO and I just could not - I could not identify these targets. I just - I was getting high marks and everything else, you know, but that I was really struggling with. And I remember he just dropped off this - a deck of basically flashcards that were silhouettes of vehicles. And I studied and studied and studied those. And man, I passed it and I did really well with target acquisition. And even still to this day, I can look at terrain features and be like, "Hmm, that doesn't look right. That looks like something over there." But in the beginning, I just had no frame of reference. So, I'd say Leo Lozano. I mean, he went on to, you know, he - he finished out his time in the Marine Corps and then he became a sheriff for LA County and then retired from the Sheriff's department. So, I mean, that guy is a hard-charging warfighter right there. I mean, that guy is definitely a guy that's had some trigger time and definitely a guy that you'd want on your sixth if something was to go sideways, for sure. So those two guys I think were - were great. Another guy would be Carlson Berger, you know, he ended up becoming - I think he was the sergeant major of the Wounded Warrior Battalion when he retired, you know. He was another guy that was very influential in my life coming up as a - as a young Marine.

**(TI):** Very good. Very good. Now, when did you get out, Aaron? Was that 2007?

**(AQ):** No. So, I got out - in oath in 2004, technically. So late 2003, 2004.

**(TI):** Wow. Wow. So, you were one of the first combat veterans from 2004 to get out?

**(AQ):** Right. Right. And so, when I came back, I started struggling with mental health, and I really understand why, like, I was starting to struggle a little bit when I was in country, but I just, you know, everybody struggles there, right? Like, it's hard to sleep. I mean, there's stuff, you know, just the environment. But I remember, I - I remember distinctly, we were standing there in line with all of our gear, and they're doing the inspection to make sure we weren't, you know, smuggling mortars on a plane or something. And they - they stood us all up after that, and we've grabbed up all our gear, and they had an announcement. They said, "All right, you know, you're getting on the plane here in a minute. So anybody who's having any mental health issues or nightmares or PTSD, go ahead and step

out of formation right now, and, you know, go see doc, and you'll get your - your mental health treatment right here in country. Everybody else get on the bird." And I was like, "Sh\*t, I'm getting on the bird, man."

**(TI):** Yeah. That's why I'm out. You're not going to self-identify in front of all your peers.

**(AQ):** Yes. Yeah, no - no way. And – and - and it's like, wait a minute, I got to stay here in country and get mental health treatment. Like, no, I'm not doing that. So, I didn't, I went home, and I went from the battlefield to my doorstep in like, 48 hours. We flew into San Diego, turned in our weapons, and then they flew me to Portland. And I processed out with the six engineers - Alpha Swan Islands, and they gave me a train ticket. And then I went home, and I was on my doorstep in like 48 hours.

**(TI):** You mean you were out of the Marine Corps? Or—

**(AQ):** No, no, I - it was on my doorstep. I still had to spend like another few weeks, you know, out processing and stuff like that with the six engineers. Yeah.

**(TI):** You know, you've - you've talked extensively about your post-military life, you know, and in many other forms of media. I think judging by your and many other experiences of that initial wave of veterans that were leaving the service in 2004 or 2007 - I think it's fair that to say that not only the VA, but the entire country wasn't prepared for such a large influx of combat veterans.

**(AQ):** Yeah. You know, I - I agree with you. It was a - it was really weird coming home. I - like I said, I went to Portland to process out with the six engineers, and - and I remember there were protesters. They had shut down the steel bridge protesting the war. And so, the police had to give us an escort to Swan Islands through a different route. And I was thinking, "Huh, that's strange." And then, you know, I remember they said, "Okay, well, we're going to do a parade through downtown Portland." And I'm thinking, "A parade? Alright." So, we gotta march. Yeah. And so, we're going to march in a parade, but all it was honestly, it was incredibly embarrassing because we're the six - I'm marching with the six engineers, you know, we're the units marching through the city streets. There was no parade. I mean, there were people like, going to work or eating lunch in the park, but there was no fanfare. There was nothing like that. I was just - I remember the whole time I'm marching I'm in uniform. I'm just thinking like, "Oh my gosh, I don't want to be here.

This is so embarrassing right now.” ‘Cause there was nobody like, out there cheering for us. No fanfare, no actual parade, nothing like that. It was just our unit - decided to march through the city for whatever reason, but there was no support from the city itself. That was really disheartening.

(TI): Interesting.

(AQ): Yeah, it was so bad, man. It was so embarrassing.

(TI): Who thought that was good idea?

(AQ): I have no idea, right? But it was so embarrassing. There was - it was not put-together well, there were no speeches, there was - yeah, it was just - it was - I walked through the city.

(TI): Interesting. Aaron, talk to me about those first couple of years. You eventually even became homeless again, briefly. Can you talk about those - those extra years? Those first couple of years when you first got out?

(AQ): Yeah, it was a - it was a real struggle. I was struggling with nightmares and anxiety. I was having audio hallucinations which is a weird thing, man. Like, you're hearing things, but there are things that aren't really there. Like, I'm hearing radio chatter or I'm hearing people talking or, you know, yelling, but it's not really there. And so, that was a huge struggle. And I don't have that as much anymore - every now and then - but when I first met my new wife, you know, that was something that she noticed right away. It's like, there's nobody there. Like I'm - 'cause I say, "Did you hear that?" She's like, "I didn't hear anything." It was a strange thing, these audio hallucinations that I was having. And then the anxiety, the depression. So, the anxiety was really tough - had a lot of anxiety about going to sleep. Like, falling asleep was really tough and there were nights where, you know, it'd been a stressful day or a hard day, and I'd lay - to lay down to go to bed, and I'd sleep for maybe two seconds. I'd fall asleep, and I would wake right back up, you know. Have like an exaggerated startle response where I would kind of jump out of bed a little bit, in my heart, got that shot of adrenaline. And so, I would suffer through that for, you know, night upon night upon night upon night. And it - it really - I didn't realize how bad that was until I had met my new wife. Now that we've been married 10 years, but - she's the one who really keyed me into that fact with my sleeping. I knew it wasn't good, but I didn't know how bad it was until there was somebody there who could - who could tell me. 'Cause those times, right after the Marine Corps, you know,

leaving the Marine Corps and then, you know, getting divorced from my first wife, and then I end up living in my car for about a year, you know, just kind of couch-surfing and hopping around from state to state - California to Oregon to Washington - trying to find work. And I just couldn't keep steady work because I couldn't sleep well. I was super irritable. You know, people would tick me off and I - I could do a really good job, but nobody liked to work with me. And I just thought it was everybody else. Like, everybody else is an idiot. They don't know what that, you know, it took me a long time. And to realize it - that I was the problem, that I had no patience for people - they didn't know how to talk to people that I was angry all the time. And a lot of that had to do with me not being able to sleep - I'm self-medicating with alcohol. So, all of that stuff went back to PTSD. And I remember when I first got the diagnosis - when the doc said, "Yeah, you - you have some PTSD here." I was thinking like, "Oh, and not me. I did one tour over there. Like, I couldn't be having these problems. Like, it's gotta be something else." Like, "What do you got, doc? They can fix me 'cause I don't deserve to have posttraumatic stress." And it took me a long time to get to the point where I am now - where I can talk to people about it because I felt very embarrassed about it for a long time.

**(TI):** Very open. You're very open about it - your symptoms.

**(AQ):** Yeah, I am now because I realized that the more I talk about it, the more it gives other people permission to say they have an issue.

**(TI):** Absolutely. You were using alcohol. Was there any other substances that you were using to self-medicate? 'Cause you said you quit taking the pills from the VA.

**(AQ):** Yeah, I stopped - stopped doing that. I didn't - I didn't get into drugs that - that wasn't something that I - I grew up around it all the time, and I just did not want to get into that at all. It just was not for me.

**(TI):** I - I completely - I completely understand that because I too saw that in my house. And I too had that same mentality of never going to be like that. How - how - how far down did you go before you hit rock bottom?

**(AQ):** Yeah. So, I spent time - like I said, she's struggling with - with - mental health and homelessness, and so trying to work, you know, jobs here and there. And I was - I was really struggling. Just feeling like life was never going to get any better. I felt very hopeless, you know. And so, you know, I'm a Christian now, but I wasn't at the - at the time. And so, I remember it was - I think it was either the 4th of

July or the 3rd of July. It was right around - right around there. And so, all the fireworks are going off. And so that's causing a little bit of stress and anxiety. I love the 4th of July. I just don't like the random mat going off at two o'clock in the area afternoon in a parking lot. Nobody likes that - the guys that wants to ban fireworks at all, right? I just - I just - I just don't like the random ones. Yeah. So that - that had sent me into a couple of panic attacks. I wasn't sleeping well. I was super depressed. I didn't really have anything going on for my life. It felt totally hopeless. I didn't have a real good job struggling that was living out of my car. And, I remember I - it was - it was a warm July day, and I drove into this vacant parking lot. And I remember - I can remember pulling in. And there was nobody in this big parking lot. And I just backed in like, to the side of the building, to where I could see the entrance and just parked there, and I could feel the sun, you know, kind of burning through the windshield there. And I was so tired and so exhausted. And I thought about committing suicide. And so, I was just tired. I was so worn down from - from all the symptoms and - and hopelessness. Yeah. And so, I remember I pulled out. I had a SIG Sauer, nine-millimeter, and I pull it out, and I set it like, on the - on the console and was - was getting ready to - to commit suicide. And I could hear these kids, and they were playing. I couldn't tell right where they were, but I knew there was a playground nearby. And so, I didn't want to commit suicide, and then have these kids, you know, have to deal with that. So, I figured I would wait until they left and then - then I commit suicide. And as I sat there and waited for the kids to leave, I just fell asleep. And when I woke up, those suicidal ideations were gone, and I was thinking to myself like, okay. Well. Alright, I guess I'll live another day going with my pistol.

**(TI):**

Yeah.

**(AQ):**

And drove out of that parking lot. So, it was - it was, it was a strange feeling 'cause I woke up, and the sun was kind of setting. So, I don't know how long I've been sleeping there - for a few hours, but I woke up and those ideations were gone. Wow. And - it was a couple of weeks later - I got invited to go to church. And I was really reluctant. I was like, I don't know, man, I don't - it's not for me. But I - I went. I did it, and I went to church, and I drove right back into that same parking lot that I was in just a week before. And that was a super eerie feeling to drive back into the parking lot that I almost committed suicide - and just a week before. So, I was like, okay, something's going on here? I need to take a closer look at this. So, I went in and started listening to what the preacher said

and started going for a few weeks. And they were doing a series about feeling lost, and it felt like the preacher was speaking directly to me. And this is a large church - we're talking, you know, probably 2,500 people. So - but it felt like he was talking directly to me because of the - no, the message, the sermon, these gambles that he was giving. Amazing. And so, I was like, all right, I'm going to do the altar call. And so, I did. I gave my life to the Lord and I thought, okay, well this is it. Like, all my problems are going to go away. I'm not going to have any issues like - you know, this is the turning point for me. But that didn't happen.

**(TI):** Right.

**(AQ):** I still had to deal with all of this same stuff. Nothing for me changed, but I knew that there was something there.

**(TI):** Right. And I had to know more. So, I just started reading the Bible - started asking a lot of questions. I joined a small group and did that for several years. I started volunteering at the church and just trying to - to unpack this mental health issue and how the Bible relates to it.

**(TI):** How much did your faith play in your climb from that rock bottom - from that parking lot?

**(AQ):** I'd say 100% - 100%. I didn't understand the Bible when I was reading it. I didn't understand it a lot. I did the - the terms didn't make sense. The references didn't make sense, but I knew there was something there. I knew there was something there. I just didn't know what it was. So, I kept investigating. I kept reading. I kept studying. I kept fellowshiping with other guys, and I always felt like an outsider. Always. I always felt like a butt turd in the punchbowl. 'Cause I would say inappropriate things. I would do inappropriate things. I just had a totally different mentality than - than the Christians that were there, you know. These guys are pretty well put-together, you know. They've got good jobs. It's, you know, they've got money and influence, and I just, you know, I don't have any of those things, and I'm super struggling with mental health. And so, I always felt like an outsider there, but that was my own issue. The guys from the church really embraced you, man. They really love me. Yeah. They embraced me. They loved me through it. I would do Bible study with these guys, and I didn't understand a lot of what they were saying. And so, I would write down notes all the time, and I'd read the Bible and write down notes. And about once a month - about every three weeks, they

would have a - a Bible study and they'd say, "All right, well, today we're not going to study these chapters. We're just gonna - today is for Aaron's questions." And so, I'd be like, "Alright, let me grab my book." I had a notebook, man at all these questions. And so, I would just pour through all these questions like, "I'm reading Romans, and I don't understand this." And they would help me research it and unpack it. And one of the guys bought me a MacArthur Study Bible and man, that really - really helped me a lot. I'm answering a lot of questions 'cause I could figure out what they were talking about.

**(TI):** How - what timeframe was this? After you got out, what year was this?

**(AQ):** 2009. Yeah.

**(TI):** So, you were - you were in hard times for a good five years.

**(AQ):** Yeah. I mean, I had so many different jobs. I mean, I was a sales manager for a car dealership, you know, from salesman to sales manager to being fired because nobody wanted to work with me. I was a jerk. I mean, my team, we did really well, but anybody else in the company - like, I was just - I was just a jerk. You know, I worked as a bouncer at a bar - all kinds of jobs.

**(TI):** And you talked about the VA was - was very difficult. A lot of - a lot of pill-driven, opioid-driven treatment. Do you see a change in the VA now from the time that you first went?

**(AQ):** I would - I'd have to say yes. I think that they're - they're more receptive to - I'd say alternative therapies and alternative treatments, than they were before. It was like, "Look, if you don't fit in this box, then - then you're out" kind of a deal. This is what we got. If you don't like it, tough. And so, they've really changed that. And I've seen that help a lot of guys. Like, I still don't go to the VA for treatment. I - I've created this program that works really well for me. I - I just - I don't spend a lot of time getting help at the mental health help at the VA anymore.

**(TI):** Gotcha.

**(AQ):** I remember I had a really bad experience. And so - I understand this is a VA podcast, so I don't want to bang on you guys too hard, but I just gotta be honest with the experiences that I had. You know, I was in a - I was in a group there, and there was a - it was a young group of mental health specialists that were, you know, doctors. And so, they were leading these - these groups, and I was

in one of them see support groups. And a lot of these guys were older, you know, Vietnam era - stuff like that. And I was in there and I was talking about the things - the problems that I was having. And one of the issues I had was with my sister's boyfriend. She was dating this - this Muslim guy who was like, very militant Muslim guy. And so, they - they really made me feel super embarrassed about having negative feelings toward this guy. And so, it's - It really turned me off to - to wanting to be part of that kind of stuff, just because of their - their attitude.

(TI):

It's amazing how one - how one experience can turn you off for years. And I've talked about this on the podcast. I had a similar experience where I felt like I went in for physical therapy, and the physical therapist made it feel like the reason I'm having issues - it was - it was my problem. Like, I was the problem. I was the reason that my shoulder, you know, was - was in the - it was as jacked up as it is when they didn't know the history of the shoulder at all. So, I walked away for four years. I - I - that was - that was it for me. I was never going to get a VA treatment again. Now I - since I got a job at the VA, I said, "Okay. Okay, well, I'm working for them. Try it." And I did what the - it's a new program. It's Office of Community Care or something like that. It's part of the Mission Act. And I - and I was allowed to get a physical therapist of my choice out in town if they - if they are a part of this program. So, I was able to research and find my own therapist. And I - and - and that, to me changed the - changed the whole paradigm of how I felt about the VA because I was able to choose my doctor. Right. And you talk - you talk about opioid usage and how that's changed. I just read a press release, and I think you'll find it in a couple of episodes ago. Maybe episode 202, 206, 207 - right around there - that opioid use has dropped by 64% since 2012. Ever since America has kind of woken up to that, the VA has changed that, and it even talked about - it's because of - we go into more alternative medicine. So, I - I totally understand with what you're saying. As I had a bad experience, I walked away. And I totally get - and I totally understand what you're trying to say. I don't - I think it's fair to say that before a couple of years ago, the VA was in a very bad place with veterans. So yeah, I agree. I've seen a huge change in it. And I work with a lot of veterans who are still getting a lot of treatment at the VA. And so, I see it - it's changed tremendously. Not to say it's - not to say it's perfect either, you know, like every big - but there has been a lot of improvement. Giving the veteran more control over their treatment is - is very helpful. You empower them, right? And so, that you make them part of the healing process instead of just telling them

like, “Hey, take these pills and call me in the morning.” Right. That doesn't, that doesn't work. So, making - you know, engaging them I think is – is - is huge when it comes to long-term – long-term care. ‘Cause if - here's the thing. If they're just telling them, “Hey, do this,” then they have - there's no value to them, right? It's like, “Oh, well they just told me to do it.” But if you make the veteran part of the process, then - then it has value because they've helped create the solution. So, they're gonna - it's gonna be more valuable to them, and they'll stick with the treatment longer. If you can help them, it would be part of the process.

**(AQ):** Sure. One of the things that the VA has - has learned is that - that medication is good in the short-term to get somebody through a rough patch where they can process through some trauma, but in the long-term, it's more detrimental. I remember they had me on this prazosin which was - I think it was a blood pressure medication - for years to stop the nightmares, which was great. It stopped the nightmares, but I didn't dream. And so, I - not being able to have any dreams – like, that's where your brain processes through your day. And so, there were days that it felt like I was walking around in a dream state - even though I wasn't dreaming - but it felt like a dream state because my body - I just hadn't dreamt in two years.

**(TI):** And that's no way to live.

That's no way to, that's no way, you know.

**(AQ):** And so, they've learned a lot, and they've - they've – unfortunately, I was one of the experiments that they use to learn from, but they learned at least. And so, it makes it better for the next generation. So, yeah, I think they've learned a lot.

**(TI):** So, if there's any - if there's any - if there's any soldiers that you can take, take that.

**(AQ):** Yeah, no, absolutely.

**(TI):** Absolutely. Is it your experience that other veterans' benefit?

**(AQ):** Absolutely.

**(TI):** And so, your faith has brought you, and you're now doing very well. I'm now living up in Washington. I remember KIRO 7, and - which I think it's a CBS affiliate in Seattle. If I remember right, their hometown hero awards - I remember those, and they recognize people making a difference in the Pacific Northwest community. You were a recipient of that, I think in 2017, 2018. If I remember

right, a couple of years - a couple of years ago, we basically - you received that hometown hero award for QMissions and Operation Restore Hope. What are these and why were they recognized, and how did you start it?

**(AQ):** I started it very begrudgingly. So, I – I - I just developed a plan for myself, you know, in the military, in the Marines, and especially in ANGLICO, they - you work out there with very limited support. Five or six million team out there doing call for fire and controlling the - the battlespace. So, you've gotta be able to analyze things, pick them apart and decide what to do next. 'Cause there's not a lot of extra support that you're going to get. So, I just did that with my own mental health, and when I would go my - my doctor, I would have usually a lot more questions for him than he had for me. Because he would tell me, you know, something I was dealing with, and I'd go home, and I would read medical journals. I would research about it. I look at these alternative therapies and then during my next session, I would ask him questions like, "Okay, hey, this is - this is what this research study says which goes against what the VA is doing. Why is that? Why aren't they doing this?" It's like, "Well, 'cause we have parameters and it hasn't been proven yet, and you know, that's still in its testing phase." So, I would just - I would have these discussions with him and say, "Okay, well I want to try this treatment. Can we do that?" He's like, "Well, we can't officially do that because, you know, these parameters." I said, "Okay, well this is what I'm going to do. And I'll just - recording - I'll just tell you my results, and you were going to record them. How's that?" And so, that's basically - I had to take control of my mental health, and I started reading a lot about how the brain operates.

**(TI):** And - and he was cool with that.

**(AQ):** Well, he didn't have much of a choice, really. I mean, honestly, it's all - I mean, at the end of the day he works for me.

**(TI):** Sure, absolutely. Absolutely.

**(AQ):** Right? Like he's - he's my physician. So, I said, "This is what we're going to do." And I realized that the VA can't sanction this, but this is, this is what I'm doing. And I mean, I tried everything, man, hypnotherapy like all kinds of stuff, you know - with very limited results. And so, I started doing that, and I started really studying the Bible and reading. And once I started reading it, I could see there's a lot of portions of the Bible that are written specifically to warriors by warriors like King David. If you read the Psalms, that's him

pleading out to God for help, because he feels, you know, PTSD, you know. It says, you know, the arrows that come at - at noon day, you know, he's talking about anxiety. That's coming because of a battle that he had to go through, and he talks about that in Psalms 91. That whole psalm is about having to deal with PTSD and the fear that envelops him, and he's afraid of his enemies coming to get him. And so, I started - you started seeing all these things in the Bible that talked about mental health. And one of the - one of the things that really struck me was in the book of James. It's James 1-2. It says, "Counted all joy when you fall into various trials because the testing of your faith produces perseverance, and perseverance becomes perfection." And I was like, what the heck "Counted all joy...when you fall into trials..." like, how do you do that? That doesn't make any sense. But as I kept reading into it and kept reading and studying, I realized that you have to change your mindset about things that we have in our brain - this thing that's called a negative bias. And so, the negative bias - what it does is it hyper-focuses your attention on the negative of experiences. It's a survival instinct. So, if you - back when we were hunters and gatherers, and I ate a pink berry, and it made me sick, the next time I saw that pink berry, my body would have a reaction because the brain was like, "No, we don't want to eat that again." So, it weighs negative experiences heavier. So that's why when you have a negative experience, you have to really search for the positive things and use that positive reinforcement to change it. Your neuro-network - you're literally rewiring your brain. And so, that's what I started doing. And I created this program for myself to deal with panic attacks, to deal with anxiety, to deal with depression. And I created that for myself, and it was working very well. I mean - I started a janitorial company. it was just me and one other guy. I started janitorial company. Now - today we have over a hundred employees. We've been in business for 12 years.

**(TI):** And how - how did you - how did you - I mean, you hit rock bottom. You started with nothing.

**(AQ):** Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

**(TI):** You were even homeless. I mean, people - people nowadays, when they want to do something - I mean, you start your - became an entrepreneur from, you know, I don't know what you were doing at that time, but at one point you were homeless. I mean, a lot of times people be more in credit. They be - they bemoaned that they don't have any capital, and you beat those odds.

**(AQ):** How? Yeah, that's a great - being obedient to the Lord, doing - reading the Bible and doing what it says. You know, I try to be honorable in all things and do - do what the Lord tells me to do. And that's - that's the - the key to my success. And I know people are going to look at that and think, "Oh, that's weird. I don't understand. That doesn't make any sense."

**(TI):** Well, how do you ensure - basically what does it make? And just 'cause they want to know, how does that - how do you turn that into starting with no credit, no capital and becoming an - and starting a company? You know, what - what - what from that, you know, certain passage of the Bible led you down the certain path of starting a company? You know, how did - how did - how does it correlate?

**(AQ):** Yes. So, I did it just out of desperation. I had just been fired from that sales manager job at the car dealership, and I was looking at being homeless a third time. I was living in this tiny little one-bedroom basement apartment in Auburn where one wall was concrete. So, in the summer it'd be super-hot, and in the winter, it would like, freeze, so I'd have to hang blankets on this thing. There'd be like this - concrete walls in a basement. So, I mean, just tons of moisture. Terrible - terrible rats the size of my arm. No joke, man. It was crazy. And I didn't really have a business, really, to start. I just - I knew people in a janitorial world 'cause I had worked as an account manager for like, American Building Maintenance and Seattle Building Maintenance - some of the big guys. But they weren't - they weren't going to hire me because - because my mental health state, you know. They would - I would have been a detriment to their company. And so - started - just getting tag work - just extra work from those guys that they didn't - didn't want to do. They would sub it out. And so, I went and got a business license. It didn't cost a whole lot to get some used equipment off of the internet, just a few hundred bucks. And I started just scrubbing floors. Me and one other guy, we would go out, and we would just do these floor jobs that these bigger companies didn't want to do. And I just walked in there and said, "Here's my business license, my bond." You know what? I just call on those relationships, those friends that I had in the industry. And so, they'd send me a little bit of work here and there. And as I started doing that work, we did it really well. And so, they would send us more work and more work and more work. And that turned into full-service janitorial. Before, I just wanted to do floors. I just wanted to make enough money and not get thrown out of town apartment.

(TI): Right.

(AQ): Because we did such a good job, we made sure that - you know, attention to detail in the military - you know how to clean, right? Like it's - it's - it's - can't be halfway clean. It's gotta be 100%. And so, we would just take our time - very detailed. We learn how to work in a very high stress environment. I mean, I was scrubbing floors in emergency rooms where they have gunshot victims coming in and bleeding out, and I've got to work around them. And I've got to coordinate with the nursing staff like, "Hey, I've - you've got 10 rooms. I need to shut off two of them. Which two do you want me to shut off?" You know, and "How do I make a pathway to do that so you guys can still operate?" And so, it was a lot of coordination with them and they loved - they loved the work that we did. And so, we ended up getting full-service contracts from a lot of those customers where they were like, "Hey, do you ever think about doing full service janitorial?" I was like, "Well, I could." I said, Well, we're going to put this out to bid, so you should bid on it." And I went and bid on it, and I started winning these accounts. And next thing I know, I have to like, actually start a real company, right? Higher importance, you know, like, stuff. I've just gotta trial by fire. I've got to learn how to do it. Thankfully, my wife - she was my girlfriend at the time. She had worked as a business banker for Wells Fargo, and so, she quit that job to help me start the company. And so, she ran all the office stuff, and I would run the crews at night, and it was crazy those first couple of years just - just killing ourselves. I mean, yeah. I would get home at 3:00, 4:00 in the morning. I'd fall asleep. She'd start answering calls at like 6:00, 7:00 in the morning, you know, from customers or complaints or issues or, you know, we need this extra work done. And then I would start work typically around noon or 1:00 going out and delivering supplies and working with, you know, employees 'cause we had employees that worked 24/7. So yeah, you know, and that's what we did. I remember my son would be in the back of the truck, and my wife would be delivering supplies to me, and he'd be doing his homework and eating dinner at seven o'clock at night, and she's driving around, you know, supporting me out there in the field. So that's what it was like for the first three, four years, you know, of just, yeah. 24/7 working.

(TI): Wow. Well, that's - that's a - that's a good, you know, it seems like a very successful story. I find a good spouse.

(AQ): Oh yeah. Yeah.

**(TI):** That - that's - that's good that it's like, I wouldn't - I wouldn't be - it would be - where I'd be without my spouse, you know. It's just - it's just - that seems to be a running theme in a lot of things, but not, I mean, It's just seems like you just worked hard, started doing a good job, and you just started getting those word of mouth, and then the contracts came. That's -it's a pretty incredible story, man.

**(AQ):** Yeah. I've never hired a sales - salesperson. It's always been word of mouth, you know. And I - one thing - I do a lot of business mentoring now. So, I mentor other people coming up, and they want to know like, how did you do this? How are you successful? And I just tell them, you have to be honorable in all things. That's number one. Number two, surround yourself with people who have high integrity. And third, if anybody asks you to violate rule one, refer to rule two. So that's - that's paramount, you know, and that comes - that set of ethics really came from - from my time studying the Bible, you know. The world will teach you to just get what you can get--doesn't matter who you screw over, but, you know, scripture tells you something different.

**(TI):** There's the correlation.

**(AQ):** Yeah. When I tell people that, "Hey, you know, I just read the Bible and I do what it says. That's - that's how I run my business. "

**(TI):** Stick to those two core - core ethics. Yeah, absolutely.

**(AQ):** Absolutely. So, with - with the - with the ministry, with QMissions and - so I created that program—

**(TI):** The original question.

**(AQ):** So – so -so QMissions was originally just a way I started. So, I went - I went to the church, and I got invited to go to Mexico to build a home for a homeless family on Memorial Day weekend. And I was like, "I don't want to do that. That's not for me." But eventually, God pushed my hand, and I ended up going. And when I went, I, you know, I plan on spending Memorial Day weekend, you know, at the bar drinking beer. You know, remember my good friend, Brian Bertrand that died now, Stan.

**(TI):** Yeah.

**(AQ):** And - so those are my Memorial Day plans. So, when I found out that this trip was on Memorial Day, it made me even more resistant to want to go, but I did it. And when I went to Mexico, God showed me a different way - a better way to honor the loss of the people

that didn't come back. And that was to continue to serve others in life as they served us in death. And so, I look back on Brian and who he was, and he wouldn't want me bellied up to a bar, drinking beer, feeling sorry for myself. He would want me out there helping people 'cause that's what he was doing when he died. And so, it was my way to honor Brian and his memory. And I did that for seven years. Seven years as I was building my company, I was going on mission trips all over the world. I'd go to, you know, Haiti - multiple times to Haiti. I'd go to South America. I would go to South Africa - Kenya, Swaziland, you know, Honduras - all these places. And I've built churches and schools and orphanages. And what God was showing me was that there was healing through serving other people. And that became just my lifestyle. I didn't just serve overseas, but I would serve in my church. I would serve in my community with the Salvation Army. They wanted to start a feeding program in Renton and providing meals. And so, I'd go and volunteer with them, you know, UGM - Union Gospel Mission. I would go out with just, other guys from the church and just do community service stuff. So, there was healing from - from serving other people. And in the book that I wrote, *Healing Through Service*, it talks about that. It talks about the physiology of the brain and how it operates.

**(TI):** Great.

**(AQ):** How people who do good works, they get an actual dopamine hit, and they actually get benefit from helping others more than the person who actually received the assistance. Yeah. So, I talk about all that stuff. That's stuff that I learned as I was going through this process that God—

**(TI):** There's studies on that, right?

**(AQ):** Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. They're all cited in – in - in my book. And I talk about - that's - that's what I created for myself. And so, four years ago, God called me to lead other veterans to find the same healing that I did. And honestly, I was like, I don't want to do that. That sounds like a lot of work, but you can see that's kind of a common theme for me, right? Like - it's like, I don't want to do that. That's a lot of work. I don't want to do that. I did it. I did it. And I took that first team to Mexico on Veterans Day, and we built a home for a homeless family, and I watched these guys just come alive, you know? And I was like, "Okay, there's something here." So I was like, "Alright, now I got to actually turn this into a real thing." And so, my wife and I went back to the drawing board and figured out how

to do that. And I started raising money and – ‘cause it costs me about 20 grand a customer - about about - \$1,500 per veteran to take them away. And so, I only make them pay for their airline ticket, and we cover the rest. And so, that way it makes it very affordable for guys to go and do this trip.

**(TI):** Does that count the actual building of the house? 20 grand?

**(AQ):** Yeah. She - between 20 and 30, depending on the size of the team. Sure. So, it's about, like I said, about \$1,500 per veteran with the cost is depending on what I can get for sure. Airline tickets, but the veteran pays for their airline ticket and then we cover everything else. The transportation down, the building supplies, the food tacos, like, room and board, all of that stuff is covered by the organization. And when we go, we teach these principles from the book. So, this is actually my second book. The first one I just self-published, and it was just a little - kind of like a field manual, you know, that I would give to guys for the trip. But now I actually wrote like, an actual chapter book that - each chapter goes through a different - different element of how the brain operates. And - I wrote it like a five-paragraph order. So, it's been very similar in - military guys will totally get it. There's five pieces to it. There's the personal recon, which is just a story for my life. Then the second part is going to be the scientific data, you know. Then the next part is going to be the scriptural application. The next part is a practical application. Like, how do you take what we just learned and apply it right now today? And then the last part is just a conclusion - typically a success story from - from using that element. And so, it just walks people down this path to teach them everything I did. And it's the stuff that I teach when I take guys on mission with me, and I've had great success. I've had guys go on - guys like me who were on suicide watch, you know, go through this program. And now one of my guys - he's in Oregon now - he started his own nonprofit down there helping house homeless veterans. Those are the things that I love. I love watching guys go through this program and then go on and do greater things in life than I'm doing.

**(TI):** Gotcha. So that's QMissions. What's Operation Restore Hope? How are they different?

**(AQ):** So, QMissions is the overall organization, and then everything we do is an operation. So, Operation Restore Hope is basically the bootcamp. It's that Mexico mission strip that I was telling you about.

**(TI):** Gotcha. Where are we going?

**(AQ):** We build a house for a homeless family in two days, and then we have other operations that we do throughout the world. Operation Hope Cambodia, Operation Kenyon Hope, you know, every - everywhere we go Operation Fire for effect. There are different operations, Operation Pop Smoke which I think you're familiar with. Everything that we do is an operation.

**(TI):** Tracking, tracking. So, okay - well that brings us up to your Operation Pop Smoke which is - which was the reason for your trip to DC back in December. You know, it's an - from what I understand - it's an app to help in the fight against suicide and with the president launching the prevention task force and Secretary Wilkie at the helm, I thought it was important. All the more reason to bring you on here now. Briefly - briefly explain what is the app and how'd you get the idea for it?

**(AQ):** It came out of necessity. So, I was struggling - communicating with the guys that have gone through my organization when they came back, and they were struggling, they were having a hard day. They weren't reaching out, and I couldn't figure out why. And so, I talked to some other nonprofits that are working with veterans and they were all having the same problem: how do they stay connected with these guys? And so, when a guy comes into your organization - to the time he receives actual benefit and starts turning the corner can take weeks or even months or years, depending on how much time they put into it. So, everybody was having a problem staying connected with - with - with guys. And when - when I talked to the guys that were in my organization, I'd ask them like, "Hey, why aren't - why aren't you guys reaching out?" It was - it was all, "I don't want to be a burden or, you know, I just didn't think about it at the time." And so, I started - I went back to the books, and I started studying like, what happens when somebody is going through a mental health crisis? Like, what is physically happening in their brain? And I watched a lot of videos of suicide survivors talking about - they all regretted it. The instant that they committed suicide, they regretted it. And these are all people who have survived, like, jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge or, you know, shot themselves just like that. Right. And so, at that moment, they instantly regretted it, and I thought, "Okay, so what is happening here? What's going on with the brain?" And so, I found a research study. It said that when somebody is going through a mental health crisis, parts of their brain shut down. So, their frontal cortex stops operating normally. So, in that - in their frontal cortex, they have rational thought processes. I have good decision-making skills, long-term

planning, but the most important thing they have is the ability to overcome impulses. Okay. And so, when someone's going through a mental health crisis, all of those faculties are completely reduced. And we know by talking to suicide survivors that suicide is an impulse that they had - an impulse and they acted on it. And that's - the reason they acted on it is because they didn't have the mental capacity to process through it. So, it's not that these guys wanted to commit suicide, they just couldn't overcome the impulse to do it. And so, I thought to myself, "Okay, so how I understand the problem in its entirety? How do we overcome that?" And in my time working with veterans, I always gave an ambush analogy. I said, "During an ambush, you know, you feel like you've been, you know, the enemy wants to attack you, overwhelm you with fire, separate you from your support network, so they can overwhelm you and kill you."

**(TI):**

Sure.

**(AQ):**

"Isn't that what a panic attack feels like? That you're being overwhelmed with the thoughts, feelings, and emotions which makes you isolate away from your friends and family? And then the depression kicks in, and it overwhelms you. And then you want to commit suicide." I go, "It's just like an ambush. So, what are two things that we do? Well, number one, the first thing we do is we start returning fire. And so, what are some of the positive things we can start talking to each other to ourselves about, you know, remind us that, 'Hey, we're in - in the U. S. We're safe. We're okay.'" I said, "What's the second thing you're going to do? Well, we're going to call for support. Okay. You call for support on the battlefield. So how do you do that here? How do you call phone a friend call a buddy when you're struggling with mental health?" And guys were like, "Well, I'm embarrassed. I don't want to be a bother to somebody." I said, "Well, would you feel embarrassed if you were taking fire and - and radioed in to get some air support? You wouldn't feel embarrassed about that?" Like, "No, no, not at all." "So, okay. So, this is the same thing." So, I broke it down to them like that. So, with the app - the app - it solves this problem in two ways. Number one, when people are struggling with their mental health and they're not able to process "Who do I call? What do I say? What do I do?" they don't have to worry about that. All they have to do is press one button on their phone and it sends an alert out on the app. The second thing that it does is it helps - helps them regain those cognitive functions after they've pressed the

button. So how it works is - back to the squad mentality which is - we all know from the military.

**(TI):** Yeah. 'Cause we - we work in fighting squads, so - or fire teams, right.

**(AQ):** A group of three or four guys will get together and say, "Hey, we're going to be a squad. We're going to support one another." And they joined the same team on the app. Okay. Now when somebody - it works like a messaging app. So, when somebody is struggling, they just push one button on their phone, either red or white. White means "I'm mildly struggling." Red means "It's an emergency." So, they push the red button - it sends an alert out to the rest of their team. So, if I was depressed it - my guys would see it, that there's - that I'm in distress, and if they accept it, then they instantly start chatting with me via a chat feature. They ignore it because like, I'm in this interview right now, maybe I can't and can't answer it. So, they will dismiss it and hopefully somebody else will pick it up, but if nobody else picks it up, then it automatically kicks over to the veteran's crisis line at Rutgers University. It's called Vets4Warriors. So, it automatically kicks over to those guys.

**(TI):** Oh, there's - there's a - there's a - it's not the VA crisis line, but there is a crisis line it goes to?

**(AQ):** Yes, it's not the VA crisis line. It's the - Vets4Warriors at Rutgers University that it goes to. Okay. And so, that's - that's the fail safe for them. But hopefully it never gets to that point. Hopefully it - their squad answers up. That's what it's designed for. So, if I press a button, my squad gets it. They can open it up and start instantly chatting with me. But even if I don't answer up, even if I go completely dark, it doesn't even matter 'cause it's automatically turned on my GPS feature. And so, now my squad can navigate to my location and find me. Because I see on Facebook all the time - I'm part of a lot of support groups on Facebook - and somebody will make a, you know, a goodbye post, and then you watch all these people frantically try to find them and try to help them. And "Where's this person?" And "Where do they live? Who are they with?" You know, all these things. It wastes valuable time.

**(TI):** A lot of anxiety, a lot of stress you see on there. Was that type of stuff.

**(AQ):** Absolutely. Absolutely. So, with this, it mitigates that completely because - press the button, now their squad can navigate directly to their position and help them. So, the other thing that it does is when

somebody hits that button, I'm like, if I hit that button, after it sends the alert, it pops up on my screen - a cognitive reconditioning protocol. So, basically grounding techniques that are widely used in the mental health arena, you know. Name five things that you can see, four things you can touch, three things that you can smell, two things that you can hear, stuff like that. Right. So, it's - puts them through these - these cognitive skills to be able to bring their conscious mind back online so they can start having those decision-making processes.

**(TI):** The frontal cortex.

**(AQ):** That's right. Gets that back online so they can start making rational decisions. So, those are two very important things that it does straight off the bat to help guys overcome their mental health crisis that they're in. And so, when I first originally designed it, I just designed it for my guys in my organization. And a news story picked it up - I think it was KING 5 - picked it up and did a story on it. And about a week later, I got a phone call from a guy named Tony Dayton.

**(TI):** Yeah. And I went to high school with—

**(AQ):** Yeah. It's funny that you guys ended up being friends, but Tony Dayton and I - so he's like, I gotta meet you. So, he meets with me and says, "Hey, you have this app. You know, I want it for my guys in the VFW. Please help me, you know, I need this app."

**(TI):** So, was it just - was it just an app? It wasn't on the Play Store? It wasn't on - it wasn't on Apple like it is now? it was just on your phone.

**(AQ):** Well, no, it wasn't even developed yet. It was just a concept. I was trying to raise money. I mean, it costs me over \$100,000 to build this thing.

**(TI):** Wow.

**(AQ):** So, I was trying to - and it wasn't even what the whole news story was about. Right. It was about my organization and we just bought a building - a headquarters in Auburn. And that was just a little blip in the - in the - in the newscast tracking. But Tony picked up on it and I said, "Look, man, I'm trying to raise money. I don't have the money for it. So, you know, if I get money, then - then I'll do it." And a few months go by, and he contacts me again, and he's like, "Hey, one of my guys is really - really struggling, you know, I need to have this app." And I said, "Look, man, I haven't been able to get

the money. I don't know what to tell ya. I guess it's - this thing's gonna cost me 80-grand, you know, I don't know what to tell ya." And I said, "Yeah, check back with me in a few months." And I'll never forget it, man. He called me and said, "Hey, man, is that app ready?" Said, "Nope, no money came in, man. I did a Kickstarter campaign, nothing, you know, I know - I did a GoFundMe campaign, nothing came in. Yeah." He's like, "All right, cool. Oh, I gotta go check on one of my guys, Adam, and I don't know if he's going to be alive when I get there." And I was like, "Oh crap." So, for the next two days, I walked through that program, that - that process with - with Tony, trying to find Adam. And they found him, and they brought him to the - to the hospital, and his wife was there. And then he had another mental health crisis while he was in the hospital, and he escaped, and he climbed a radio tower. And he was at the top of it, and they were trying to talk him down, and he was really struggling for days. He was up there and - they finally - he finally agreed to come down. And so, the fire department put the ladder up there with a basket, and you reached for the basket, and he grabbed it with one hand, and he slipped and wasn't able to hold on, and he died.

**(TI):** Geez.

**(AQ):** And I remember walking through that with Tony and just thinking, "Man, I got to do something that this - this happens every day, all over America, and I have the solution, and I'm just not using it. And so, I call a real estate agent, and I put my house on the market to raise the money, to build the app. And it was the easiest decision I ever made, man, just to put my house up for sale, to - to build this app.

**(TI):** Wow.

**(AQ):** But my house never sold.

**(TI):** So, how'd you build the app?

**(AQ):** Some of the other business owners that I know - this guy named Matt from Matt Foundation Repair, he - he'd been a supporter of what I've - what I had done. And he - he knew me from the business arena. He heard about what I did, and he wrote me an \$80,000 check, man. He called me and said, "Hey, I want to help. What do you need?" I said, "I need 80-grand." He says, "All right, come to my office, and I'll have a check waiting for you." And so, that's how I started, man. I said, let's do it.

(TI): One single donor.

(AQ): Yeah. I mean, I put in an extra like, 20-grand into the pot to, you know, to - to finish it off. But the 80-grand got me started, and it got the app on the App Store. Yeah. And yeah, man, I'll never forget that guy, Matt. When he - when he says, "All right, well, let me - let me call my secretary. I'll have a check waiting for you." He goes, "I believe in what you're doing. You're going to save lives."

(TI): That's incredible. That's incredible.

(AQ): God works, man. I was - I remember I was out fishing. I was - I was salmon fishing on Brown's Point off the shore, and I was just praying to God like, "God, I don't know how to do this. You know, my house isn't selling I've - I've already committed to build this app. I don't have the money. Like, I need help." And then I got that phone call when I was out there fishing.

(TI): Wow.

(AQ): So that's - that's how it got started. And from that it's - it's been amazing. It's on the App Store now. There's still a lot of features that I want to put into it that - that haven't been put in yet, but they're - they're literally in development right now.

(TI): With this incredible. I mean, you get - you got - you got the app design, you got it on the app store. You know, there are a lot of other apps out there. You know, our sister podcast on the VA podcast network, the MIRECC Short Takes on Suicide Prevention. They did an episode with the founders of Objective Zero ([https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/education/media/podcasts/2\\_11\\_2020.asp](https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/education/media/podcasts/2_11_2020.asp)). How is this app different from some other ones?

(AQ): That's a great question. So, Objective Zero - I wanted to use that in the beginning. I didn't want to have to build an app, right? I want the path of least resistance. And so, I looked at them, but what I saw with Objective Zero was just a bunch of veterans on there that basically put a pin dot, saying that, "Hey, I'm a resource if you need help." which is great. But odds are people aren't going to reach out to somebody they don't know.

(TI): Yeah.

(AQ): You, you want to have a shared experience with somebody. The only time that people reach out to somebody they don't know is if they don't want to have accountability to get their life together. Because that's part of what the squad does is - if you're having a

problem, they don't let you live in that - in that environment, they help you get out of it. And so, with the squad, the people who know you and care about you, they're going to make sure that you're actually - I'm going to go through with it - mental health treatment or alcohol treatment or medication or whatever it is that you're - you're working on. They're going to make sure that you do it.

**(TI):** So - so the squad - the squad is the - is the - is the main difference in that.

**(AQ):** It's - there's two differences. The main difference is number one, the squad. The Department of the Army, they did a 40 year-long study to determine why the U.S. military was so vulnerable on a battlefield. And they narrowed it down to one single element, which is the squad because every member values the squad over themselves. So, we just try to put that mentality into the app. So, you have this squad of guys now that you do life with. They know you, they care about you, and they want to make sure that you're okay. So, they're going to help hold you accountable and lift you up when you're struggling because they know you inside and out. You've had shared experiences with these guys, so yeah - build trust, track. And so, that's why suicide hotlines have such a hard time because they're trying to build that rapport with somebody in the middle of a crisis - it's tough. It's much easier for somebody who already has a shared experience with that person. Yeah. So, you know, the listeners, you know, think about people in your own life. It's much easier to talk to somebody who you already know and have a relationship with than somebody brand new, you know, trying to open up to them.

**(TI):** It can happen, but it's difficult. Okay.

**(AQ):** We develop that squad of people that they already know and trust. And the second thing is that we have that GPS feature that pops. So, if somebody hits that button, that GPS comes on, and you can navigate directly to their position. And so, those are the two things that separate us from - from like Objective Zero and some of those other things that are out there.

**(TI):** And, you know - you know, from a social aspect, that totally makes sense. Have you heard anything from the medical community on what you're doing?

**(AQ):** Yeah. So, it was a really cool - I'm on these different veteran groups. And so, I had a - a guy reach out to me - Shell - or - Darren Shell. He - he reached out to me on one of these groups and said,

“Hey, I heard about what you're doing. I'd like to talk to you about it.” So, I gave him - the guy – a phone call. He's part of a hospital group out of North Carolina, and he's part of a task force that's the Zero Suicide Initiative. So, they had a - a nurse commit suicide a few years ago, and so, they developed this - this kind of task force to figure out how to - to end suicide. And so, he's part of – that's part of his story. He's got a – what's called 317 that's coming out. And he - his father had committed suicide, and his best friend had committed suicide, so this guy has definitely been touched by this. And so, he wanted to be part of the solution. So, he reached out to me - long story short. They flew me out to North Carolina. I spent a weekend there. I presented the app and what it does to their mental health team, to the director of the hospital, to their director of employee wellness - and they also have a venture capital group that was there. And so, they all love the idea, and they wanted - the venture cap group presented me with a partnership agreement. They want to take Operation Pop Smoke and build it out for civilians - so create a civilian model of what we already have, and their goal with it is they want to put this thing through clinical trials and get it certified as a medical device. That's their overarching goal.

**(TI):** Very good. ‘Cause - was this before or after you came to DC and just started cold calling like, the secretary of the VA? I gotta say, man, that was - Tony man come in and I - it was just surprising. I got – it - it's a message from Tony - or a Facebook message. And he was like, “Hey, I'm in DC. Hey, you know this guy?” I'm like, “Dude, that's like, my boss.” He's like, “Yeah, man, I'm across the street with him right now.” I'm like, “What are you doing?” You know?

**(AQ):** Yeah.

**(TI):** And I think – yeah, I finally - and I - and I finally got to see you guys, and you guys made a good presentation to my - one of my deputy undersecretaries. I think one of my questions to you is, is there anybody in the medical community that was - that's - that's interested in this? And I think is it - and I think at that point, were you - were you already talking to the medical community or was that after that?

**(AQ):** No, it was after. So, we, we hadn't - we hadn't - yeah, we hadn't. So, again, I'm going to DC. I - I was just - I was praying about it asking God, like, “What do I do? Where do I go from here?” And he told me to go to DC, and I was like, “I don't understand, like, just go

- like, I'm not meeting with anybody." He said, "Just go." And so, I said, "Okay." So, I - I called Tony 'cause I told Tony that if you want me to build out this app, that you - you got to come with me, you know, you gotta be part of this. And so, he has been. So Tony and then another one of my guys, my squad leaders from two missions, he came with me. And we just went to DC, and we started just showing up - talking to the different - different senators and different representatives - whoever we could talk to. But before I left, I did some research like who's in charge of the VA and how do I get ahold of them? So, I - I did - I called - my wife and I are - are pretty good at, you know, internet sleuthing. So, we - we did a lot of searching on the internet and about Mr. Wilkie, and we found his home phone number.

(TI): Wow.

(AQ): So, my wife's like, "Are you really going to call him at his house?" I said, "Yeah, I'm going to call him in his house." So, what do I got to lose at this point?

(TI): Right.

(AQ): So, I did, I dialed him, and I got his answering machine. I think it was his wife on the answering machine. And so, I said, "Hey, Mr. Wilkie, this is who I am, this is what I do, and I'd like to - I'm going to be in DC. I'd like to spend a few minutes showing you how I can help in veteran suicide." And then I hung up the phone, and I was like, "Oh man, that was a - that was ballsy for sure." And so, the next - that was a Monday - the next morning, Tuesday, is when I do all of my mentorship. So, I was mentoring this young entrepreneur, and I was telling him like, "Hey, man, you just gotta take chances sometimes. You know, you just gotta do things that other people would be too afraid to do." And I told them the story of what I did - I done. I had called Mr. Wilkie at his home. So, I had just told him that story and then my phone rings. And normally I wouldn't take a call, but it said that it was from Washington, D. C., and I was like, "Oh my gosh." And so, I answered it and it was, I guess, Mr. Wilkie's secretary. And she said, "Is this (AQ)?" I said, "Yes, it is." "Is - this is Mr. Wilkie's office. We're all very impressed that you got his phone number and called him at his house." And I was like, "Oh yes, ma'am, I'm a - well, I'm a Marine, and you know, you've gotta - you know - you know, you've just gotta take chances and do all this stuff." She goes, "Yeah, yeah, Mr. Quinonez, we know who you are. Trust me. We all know who you are." And I was like, "Oh yeah." I'm thinking, "Of course you do." The secret service probably ran me

real quick. I was - Secretary Wilkie at his house, you know? And so, I tried - I tried and tried and tried to try and get a meeting with him, and I just, you know, I kept kind of getting pushed off, which is fine - which is what they do.

**(TI):** Right. He's very busy. He's got a lot of stuff he's doing, you know, you gotta meet with one of my bosses who's one of his staff.

**(AQ):** How we got to that is even crazier because we went to this event - it's like a - a veteran entrepreneur group - and I got invited to go to that and be part of it. And when we - when we were there, we got invited to a couple other events. And so, we couldn't go to all of them together, so Tony went to one and then myself and my other guy, we went to the other one.

**(TI):** And you got involved in all of this by just coming to DC.

**(AQ):** Just coming to DC.

**(TI):** Knocking on senators' and congressmen's doors.

**(AQ):** God just kept opening these doors for us, right. We get an invite to this first meeting and this first event, and then from there we got two other invitations. Tony went to one, I went to the other. And the event that Tony went to, he calls me, he's like, "Dude, you're not going to believe who's speaking here at this event. It's Mr. Wilkie." And I'm like, "You've got to be kidding." Right. So Tony, you know, I said, "You got to go talk to him." So, Tony goes up, shakes his hand, gets a photo and says, "Hey yeah, with Operation Pop Smoke." And he said that he looked at Tony like you saw a ghost - like, "What?" 'Cause we had just called his house, you know? And he's like, "Look, I don't have time to meet with you guys, but, you know, call Wolf and he'll, you know, he'll - he'll set aside 15 minutes for you guys to be able to chat with him - which - who's - who's one of your bosses.

**(TI):** Yup. Talking with Wolf, he was like, "You know, these guys came from Washington state. The least we could do is - is hear them out." And I was like, "Absolutely."

**(AQ):** Yeah. Yeah. You know, it - we - we were guaranteed 15 minutes, and I think we ended up spending like, 45. I'm with you guys there, you know, talking with you, but those are just the doors that God opened for us, you know? And you just have to be obedient. You know, a lot of times in my life, these things - I don't want to do them. I just am obedient, and God keeps opening doors for me. So, that's - that's where I'm at. And the same thing with this app, you know,

the – the - this hospital group, they want to - they want to take this app and build a civilian version. I just built a medical version for medical staff specifically. So, the veteran version is veteran specific. The medical staff one called We Care, Empowered - it's on the App Store right now. It's being beta tested in their hospital, and they're looking to roll out 200 of these apps to their frontline staff in the next two weeks.

**(TI):** They front the cost and they just say, “Hey, download this.”

**(AQ):** Right, exactly. Yep. They're - they're gonna - they're gonna pay for it. The other thing that I put in there is a mental health wellness check, which is not in the veteran version, but it will be here - within the next month. So, it's a, it's a daily mental health wellness check, which is another reason we stand out.

So, there's a series of questions that you answer every day. It takes about. 30 seconds. And it just, it, it, it helps you gauge where your anxiety, depression, you know, it's that same one that we go to the VA and they ask us those questions. It's very similar to that. And then every week you get a report that shows you where your levels were, where your anxiety was during the week.

You also get your month to the day and year two the day for, for your - for those questions or answers for those questions, it's on a sliding scale one through five. And so, the great thing about that is you get to see yourself where you're at, where your mental health has been over the last week or month or year.

And you can also take that information and share it with your mental health specialist. If you're being seen or treated by a therapist, you can share that information with them because it gets sent to you via email automatically from the app. Very good. The hospital group really wants this. So, when somebody comes in, who has suicidal ideations, they want to be able to write them a prescription for this app.

So that way they can try and mitigate the - The suicide, the cost of suicide.

**(TI):** If you can read it as a prescription, that'd be,

**(AQ):** Yeah. They want to be able to get it qualified as a medical device. And so, with these components that we've put in it, and the fact that it's going to go through medical trials, I think we have a pretty good shot at doing it.

**(TI):** It's incredible, man. So, you've kind of laid out what's next. Aaron, what's one thing that you learned in service that you carry with you today.

**(AQ):** That - you never stopped fighting ever. So, in the Marine Corps, it's, it's pretty easy. You know, you you're, you're in battle and you just keep pushing forward and you fight your pin down, but you keep fighting.

Well, life is just like that. There's going to be times where you do take some hits. There's gonna be times where you feel pinned down, but you can't stay there. If you stay there, you die. Everybody knows. If they get pinned down, you've got to move. You've got to shift fire. You've got to expose yourself. It takes some hits to get out of that kill zone.

It's the same thing in life. And in business, there's going to be times where you're struggling. You're having a rough time, but you've got to move forward. You've got to keep fighting. So, in the Marine Corps, we call it the esprit de Corps, which is the spirit of the Marine Corps. And when you become a Marine, you get this spirit, this pride that you're standing on the foundation.

That the thousands of generations or thousands of guys generations before you have set and built, and your part of that legacy. And so, you have to continue to fight. And so, that's the one thing I think from my time in the military that has served me well, is that esprit de Corps that, that spirit that says I'm not going to quit.

I'm not going to give up. I'm going to keep fighting.

**(TI):** Very good. Very good. Aaron, other than commissions and - other than, than nonprofits that you've started, is there a veteran, nonprofit, or an individual who you've worked with or you've had experience with who you'd like to mention?

**(AQ):** Yeah, I'd say Pat right out of - he's a Marine.

And he started operation rebuild hope - out of COOs Bay, Oregon. And that guy is remarkable. He went through my program when it was very brand new that guy's out there doing amazing stuff. Those are the guys that I love to see, you know, the guys that come through the program and then they go out and they - go make the world a better place.

You know, he's out there. He started just helping veterans do repairs on their house that they couldn't. Physically do themselves

either because they were disabled or because they were elderly. And so, he did a ton of roofs on the Oregon coast and - you know, he just started doing that and then turn that into a nonprofit.

And now he's - transitioned it to him, housing, homeless veterans. And so, on the Oregon coast, anybody's on the Oregon coast. You look up Brian's home. you'll see, it's a. It's a veteran transitional housing that he's built - in honor of our friend, Brian Bertrand, who passed away in Afghanistan. Wow. he does that and he does two other facilities called Timberwolves den where he's housing veterans as well.

and he's working on right, right. No, a tiny home village, I think, somewhere on the Oregon coast. So that guy is making a lot of moves. He's doing big things in the world. and that's what I love. I love to light these guys on fire and setting them loose in the world and seeing what they do.

**(TI):** Very good. Now is he getting SSVF funding? For his,

**(AQ):** I don't know.

**(TI):** Okay. The only reason I bring that up, because one of our benefits break down, we talked about the SSVF program. They just recently got, I mean, during that episode, we were talking about \$300 million injection. they actually got another 400 million, so they're up to 700 million extra because a COVID-19 and SSVF program is a program that the VA just.

If you're part of an SSP, if you are an SSVF, nonprofit, you get a piece of that, that money. So, you put in a package and if you're helping homeless veterans, you get some of that money. So maybe that's something he should look into if he's not part of that.

**(AQ):** So, SF BF,

**(TI):** S S V F

**(AQ):** S S B F. Okay.

**(TI):** Yeah. I haven't looked into that when you, when you get a chance - Aaron, we've covered a lot of ground. We've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything else that I might have missed or that we didn't talk about that you think is important to share?

**(AQ):** If you're out there and you're struggling mental health, whether it's severe or minor, it doesn't matter. You've got to have somebody who's in your corner.

Somebody who you can rely on who you can talk to, who you can just be real and raw with. and, and that you can do the same for them be that ear for them. So, you know, none of us fought the war alone, so we shouldn't be fighting - mental health and PTSD alone.

**[01:37:16] Music**

**[1:37:21] PSA:**

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

**Man:** It's frustrating when you try to talk to people who don't understand.

**Man:** I still had the anger, I still had the addiction, but we didn't talk about that.

**Woman:** Came to a point when it was like, "Okay, I really need to talk to somebody about this."

**Man:** Family more or less encouraged me to go to the VA.

**Man:** It's okay to get help. It's okay to talk to people. It takes true strength to ask for help.

**Narrator:** Hear veterans' real stories of strength and recovery, at maketheconnection.net [Link: <https://www.maketheconnection.net/> ]

**[1:37:53] Music**

**[0:00:00] Closing Monologue:**

**(TI):** I want to thank Aaron for sharing his incredible journey. For more information on Aaron, go to [operationpopsmoke.com/meet-the-team](http://operationpopsmoke.com/meet-the-team). [Link: <http://operationpopsmoke.com/meet-the-team>] Our veteran of the week nomination comes by the way of the Colorado Springs Gazette and is a name I'm pretty familiar with 'cause he's in the podcast community, Duane France is 47 and is a retired Army veteran and clinical mental health counselor in Colorado Springs. As a child of the seventies and eighties *GI Joe* were in his words, "were just a part we're just a huge part of growing up." So when comic book writer, Paul Allor came calling earlier this year, seeking France's input on a standalone *GI Joe* issue, focusing on a character struggle with combat related trauma, France said that he was thrilled for the chance to revisit his childhood universe. The project resonated with more than just nostalgia though. "Sure. When somebody asks, do you want to work on a *GI Joe* comic? You don't say no," he said. "But what, for me, was exciting is that

he wanted to address this particular issue in this way and in this medium. It was amazing for me to be involved in approaching mental health with such an iconic brand." In *A Soldier's Heart*, which was released last month in August, one of *GI Joe's* main characters, Shana O'Hara, AKA Scarlett, is forced to deal with the psychological impact of her experiences in combat and is persuaded to start attending a support group for veterans. As an advisor, most of France's job turned out to be just confirming that Allor script rang true, accurately portraying combat situations and capturing the thoughts, fears, and warring emotions of those who returned home. "When I first read it. There was a part of where I had to just put the script down because I was overcome with emotions," said France, who has also served in both Iraq and Afghanistan. "Veterans will be able to look at this comic and say, that's me right there, and that is absolutely the way it is." The *GI Joe* issue was supposed to drop in June, which is PTSD Awareness Month, but it was delayed due to the pandemic. With September and Suicide Awareness Month. France said he hopes the timing and subject matter can help inspire/inform that conversation. And like I said, France is also a podcast host as well. He hosted the *Headspace and Timing Podcast* and is currently hosting *The Seeking the Military Suicide Solution Podcast*. Army veteran Duane France, thank you for your 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 send an email to [podcast@va.gov](mailto:podcast@va.gov) include a short writeup and let us know what you'd like to see him or her as the *Borne the Battle* veteran of the week. And if you like this podcast episode hit the subscribe button. We're on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcast, iHeartRadio, pretty much any podcasting app known to phone, computer, tablet, or man. For more stories on veterans and veteran benefits, check out our website, [blogs.va.gov](http://blogs.va.gov) and follow the VA on social media: Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, RallyPoint. DeptVetAffairs, US Department of Veterans Affairs, no matter the social media, you can always find us with that blue checkmark. And as always, I'm reminded by people smarter than myself to remind you of that the Department of Veterans Affairs does not endorse or officially sanctioned any entities that may be discussed in this podcast, nor any media products or services they may provide. Thank you again for listening and we'll see you right here next week. Take care.

**[1:41:44] Music**

(Text Transcript Ends)

