

Episode Two

Francisco Urena

Public Service Announcement:

Man: VA's round the clock hotline can put veterans who are homeless in touch with the resources and support they earned through their military service. Call 877-424-3838.

Intro Monologue:

Good morning, everyone! I'm Timothy Lawson, your host for This Week at VA. This is episode two of our new podcast. If you haven't heard episode one, head over to SoundCloud.com/DeptVetAffairs to listen to my great interview with Marine Veteran Haley Carter. This week's episode brings us another Devil Dog to the show with our featured guest Francisco Urena. Fransisco is Massachusetts Secretary of Veterans' Affairs that served as a Marine Security Guard and also saw combat with his tank unit. Following my interview with Francisco, I'll briefly describe a benefit that Francisco found value in and also announce our Veteran of the Day.

Before we get to the interview, I want to tell you about VA's digital and online efforts. The digital media engagement team at VA works hard to bring valuable content through several different mediums. You can follow us on Instagram at DeptVetAffairs for a visual following of endeavors around VA. Our Twitter account, also @DeptVetAffairs offers engagement, live tweeting, and story releases. Our largest following is currently at Facebook.com/VeteransAffairs where we post our popular Veteran of the Day posts along with other valuable content from the Veteran community. Finally, you can find many inspiring articles and videos at blogs.va.gov where we continue telling the Veteran story. Be sure to connect with us on your favorite social media platform.

Interview Intro:

The feature interview for this episode is with Marine Corps Veteran Francisco Urena. Francisco served in the Marine Corps straight out of high school. He was posted in Syria and Kyrgyzstan as a Marine Security Guard and went on to do a tour in Iraq following those assignments. While in Iraq, he suffered an injury to his face, leaving a piece of shrapnel in his cheek which is still there today. Fransisco will tell us about serving in the military, getting out, and continuing his commitment to Veterans through civil service. Enjoy.

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will tell us about serving in the military, getting out, and continuing his commitment to veterans through civil service. Enjoy. Okay, on the phone with me today, Francisco Urena, a Marine Corps veteran and currently the Massachusetts Secretary of Veteran Services.

Francisco, thank you for taking the time to join me.

Francisco U.: Oh, thank you so very much, Tim.

Timothy L.: I know you and I have—we've met in the past and we got to know each other and I thought that you would make a really good example on just success coming out of the military. There's a lot of great examples out of there, but I thought yours is unique in entering public service. But let's start where every veteran's story begins, right? It's that decision to sign the dotted line and join the military. Tell me, what made you decide to join the military in general, and then why'd you decide on the Marine Corps?

Francisco U.: Tim, from an early age I always had the affinity to join the service, especially the Marines. I think it was the aspect of seeing my local recruiter in my high school when I'm there about tenth grade, so I approached a recruiter. He said, "Son, you're a little too young," but he definitely kept me under his wing and got me involved with the (inaudible @ 00:03:36) activities, and when I turned 17, I was able to sign up the day after high school. I went to boot camp—we graduated on a Sunday, and Monday morning I was on my way to Parris Island to face the yellow footprints. And it was a decision that was fairly easy for me—I grew up in scouting, I grew up with community activities, I emigrated to the United States when I was four, so it was an aspect of giving back to a country that gave so much to myself and my family and it was just an easy decision for me to make.

Timothy L.: You joined the service in 1998. You were in the service when the September 11 attacks occurred. We just recently recognized the 15th anniversary for that. Just briefly tell me the change in atmosphere that you noticed between September 10, 2001 to September 12, 2001.

Francisco U.: Absolutely. So I was in a tank unit, I was with First Tank Battalion in Twentynine Palms, California from '98 to thereabouts August of 2001. I had received orders after requesting to transition out of my tank unit and volunteer for the diplomatic security unit, which you are very familiar with that as an alum of diplomatic security. And so I was with orders in hand when September 11th happened—I was in Massachusetts on leave waiting to report to Quantico, Virginia on October 1st. And so I called—obviously, dealing with a national tragedy such as what we did on September 11th, I reached out to my tank unit, to First Tank Battalion, Twentynine Palms, California, and I said, "Hey, I just noticed, what is the next phase?" They said, "Well, you have orders in hand, so just continue with your orders as dictated, and if anything changes, we'll let you know." And so our

class was the first to report to diplomatic security, so not only did the world change, the military was strategizing for the next phase, but our embassies and our consulates around the world were now the tip of the spear when it came to that public interface and that aspect of a soft target that it could become in any given country. And so we were the first class to train, retool our mission—obviously put a lot more emphasis when it came to the aspect of security and protection of the embassy and personnel and classified information within those compounds—and we were the first class to arrive. I was the first group, myself and two other Marines were the first ones to arrive in Damascus, Syria, which was our first duty station, on December 22nd of 2001. And essentially, it was some trying times, but the training that was issued was put to great use.

Timothy L.: And the diplomatic security service that you're talking about is the Marine Security Guard program inside of the Marine Corps. What's really unique about that program is you live in that country for 12 to 18 months, which is a little bit more unique than maybe a deployment as you sort of become a resident almost of the area. Tell me about how that experience living in both Syria and then Kyrgyzstan right after the September 11 attacks sort of influenced the way you perceived this national and global crisis.

Francisco U.: It was interesting times, to say the least. We were in a country where at any given time, a state-sponsored demonstration could be held with little to no warning to us, and sometimes these demonstrations could escalate or be allowed to escalate, shall I say. Across from the street from the American embassy at that time was the Iraqi intersection under the Tunisian flag, and there many a times would be a rally point for a lot of the activities that would happen. One of my toughest memories till this day was seeing military-age males boarding charter buses and getting ready to meet our troops and our coalition troops in Iraq, and all we could do was just send notes, take reports, and send them off to Washington. And myself being a Hispanic-descent male, I was able to walk through that crowd and see the smiles on the guys' faces going to go fight my fellow service members who just 15, ten, 12 months prior I had just seen my tank unit, which I knew now they were in country in Iraq those months later. And so that was a tough memory to see that and only to watch the reports and to then later watch our satellite feeds of international news to see the demise of what that would cause, and really, the start of the aspect of infiltrated outsiders coming into Iraq to fight the war.

Timothy L.: After your tour with the Marine Security Guard program, you did go in support of Operation: Iraqi Freedom and was awarded a Purple Heart. Do you mind telling us the story behind that?

Francisco U.: So after and before that, I also served at the American embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, so we were getting ready to engage the enemy. It was Operation: Matador in 2005. I was in a tank unit, I was the junior tank commander of a tank platoon, and we were engaging the enemy, the aspect of exposed as I may have to be, being the junior tank commander, ensuring that every target that we engaged was the proper target and several other vehicles, friendly vehicles, were engaging suspected enemy positions. And there was a vehicle parked right in front of us that we started to engage—the vehicle blew up and debris came towards my position where I was exposed on the tank. It was 114 degrees outside—at first I thought it was just sweat, and when I realized that it was blood, one of my crew members said, “Oh, you’re definitely bleeding from the face.” And I just thought it was debris that had just hit me and bounced off, but my crew, I had no intentions of leaving my crew members with a deficit on my tank, so we continued the mission and it wasn’t until later that evening that I was able to then report it to the corpsman of the unit, let him know what was happening. So I had some swelling for a couple of weeks thinking that it was just swelling, and after an X-ray, it turned out that I had—and till this day, I still have embedded—a piece of shrapnel on my face from that day. Definitely is a memory. I mean, it’s an aspect of that day, that tragic day that we went. Out of our specific platoon, we didn’t lose anybody, we brought everybody back from those seven months, but we weren’t as fortunate with our sister units and our sister pool too of tanks, more specifically. So it’s a memory of some of the guys that didn’t have the opportunity to come back.

Timothy L.: What was your favorite thing about the military? What did you enjoy the most?

Francisco U.: Tim, I would definitely have to say the camaraderie, that the common mission of fellow Americans all bounded together by this discipline instilled upon us and the sense of mission completion, the sense of camaraderie, the sense of gung-ho that the Marines bring each and every day. That’s first and foremost what I miss, whether I was in the tank unit or whether I was at a couple of embassies overseas, is that same sense of camaraderie that even Marines after coming home, you have that sense of rapport with one another, no matter if they served in World War II or just came home last week.

Timothy L.: What prompted your separation from the Marine Corps?

Francisco U.: I wanted to go to school. That was really the intent. I wanted to volunteer for diplomatic security—I thought I was going to head a plant in California. And that was really the intent—I wanted to come to school and partake of the civilian experience, and it didn’t turn out to be that way. I arrived to Lawrence, Massachusetts in

May of 2006. Lawrence at that time was underwater, literally, with a flood of May of '06. And I picked up my bike and I was riding around the neighborhood to begin to know the new AO, if you will, and there I saw many of the local parks flooded. There were many service tents providing aid to the locals of the community. And I remember somebody from local access television approaching me and asking me if I wanted to help interview people that day or to talk and then be able to spread the word. And so it seemed that I was a natural, because the person that told me to help them just stepped aside and gave me the mike, and so that week I was able to assist the locals of the city of Lawrence, being able to translate the message of where to receive aid, where to receive services for their damages of their property, the aspect of community services such as YMCA and many other nonprofits that were engaged that day, and then the aspect of how to replace and continue the normalcy of life, however you will. And from there I got to learn of the very unique programs that we have here in Massachusetts, which is our Veteran Service Officer in every city and town. And in the city of Lawrence, I learned that there was a deficit in that office—the active Veteran Service Officer had some personal challenges of his own and wasn't able to be in the office, and I knew that from what I was told that some people were going without services. And so I was asked to volunteer, and for six months simultaneously, I enrolled in school in Massachusetts, which became my new plan, to go to night school through the Northern Essex Community College and later University of Massachusetts, and I started helping. Six months later, I was offered the job, and two months after being on the job, I now was told that a young sergeant in the Army, Sergeant Alex Jimenez, was captured in Iraq and the family being from Lawrence, being from my hometown where I was living, now were the subject of building awareness to the aspect of that family. English wasn't their first language, and so I became the spokesperson as well for that family, so for 14 months, I'm told, of the very end when we heard news from the Department of Defense that the remains of Alex Jimenez and Byron Fouty from Michigan were found in a mass grave, we kept hope and we kept the story and the families and the community as connected as possible. Four years later, I completed my degree from the University of Massachusetts in Lowell and I was asked by Mayor Tom Menino of Boston to come interview for the city's commissioner position, which is the largest office of Veteran Services in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and I was the most prepared candidate per se and I was offered the job, where I served Mayor Menino and Marty Walsh for about four years before I came to the state to represent the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as the state secretary with Governor Baker.

- Timothy L.:** You said you came the most prepared. Other than being a veteran and being able to empathize with those in need, what do you think gave you the leg up, especially when reflecting on maybe what you've gotten out of your time in the service?
- Francisco U.:** Definitely had a greater aspect of outreach. I knew the job by then—it was four years later, so the aspect of starting from an office that was in disarray and then really turned it around where we were serving 14 people, then to 110 people at any given month were receiving financial assistance from the city, which is part of the compensation program that we have for veterans and families in Massachusetts. So an aspect of turning around, building and projecting budgets, accounting for the financial assistance, but most and foremost, building the trust in the community, because that sometimes was the challenge. I tell you, it's not the challenge for young veterans trying to get into this type of public service now, but then it was an interesting aspect. There was some opposition of seeing a 25-year-old veteran helping 90-, 80-year-olds, 70-year-olds in the community, and it wasn't from veterans themselves, it was just from our civilian counterparts who would say, "This person won't get along with veterans." But any veteran knows that we have that sense of camaraderie and building trust, and so all the goodwill that was set also in that year, in 2008, I was awarded—the state has an award for the top service officer of the year—and I was fortunate enough to be the recipient of that, presented then by our former state secretary, Thomas Kelley.
- Timothy L.:** You graduated from the University of Massachusetts in Lowell. Did you use your GI Bill for that one?
- Francisco U.:** Yes, I definitely did. And it was part of the old GI Bill, as you remember.
- Timothy L.:** You had a Montgomery?
- Francisco U.:** Correct, absolutely. And it wasn't until my senior year that the transition was made into the new GI Bill where it then actually has the cost of living, so I don't know how life would've been any much different, but the aspect of having to work, I think, there was no options then under the Montgomery GI Bill, which gives a lot more flexibility to our veterans today to use the post-9/11 benefits and have that sense of peace of mind of solely focusing on our education and the aspect of academia in general.
- Timothy L.:** The Montgomery GI Bill, to so many of the recent veterans of, like, the past decade or so, to us it's the GI Bill that we all switched from, right? That's all we really know about it is that it's the one that we opted not to have so we could have the post-9/11. The post 9/11 is possibly one of the best products the United States government has ever given any of its citizens.
- Francisco U.:** I would agree with you. And also, part of the benefits that I was able to use. But one of my first benefits of walking in was the dental

benefits—when I transitioned, I was in a unit called Mojave Viper. We were training troops to go into Iraq at a small makeshift village that was created in the desert. And so I never had the opportunity to get my final dental, and so my first experience of the VA in Boston was the whole treatment that they gave me of coming in and participating in the dental clinic in Boston, and I tell you, that was a very eye-opening experience because it was an opportunity to engage with a new system that, outside of that Navy clinic that we had in Twentynine Palms, it was totally different, and I was so impressed in the attention to detail that they offered and the quality of service that they provided then and they continue to provide me as a member of an active part of the VA healthcare system.

Timothy L.: As you told Secretary McDonald at the MVAC meeting in Boston, you're a client of VA.

Francisco U.: Right.

Timothy L.: What else? You're getting your healthcare through there—any other benefits? Have you used the home loan?

Francisco U.: I sure did. I participated with the home buyers program and the Home Loan Guaranty, and that too was a smooth process. I was fortunate enough to have a realtor who understood the value of the GI Bill and the caveat of different requirements, and so it was another benefit that we as veterans have, and sometimes go unutilized. And so I was very fortunate to be able to participate with that as well. But again, it was one of these benefits that all of us earn and it's just a matter of putting it to good use.

Timothy L.: So the home loan obviously, you know, you have help with a real estate agent and a mortgage company and anybody else that's connected in real estate are pretty familiar with VA loans, but with the healthcare system, with the disability claims, the education benefits, some veterans find those processes difficult to navigate. In your experience, which one of those products was the most difficult for you to get through?

Francisco U.: I had good advocates, Tim, and I think that's what made the difference in able to engage all those systems. I had somebody there to guide me, and once again I think that's where the community that we have here in Massachusetts varies from any other given state, because we have these dedicated individuals who, when I came home, while I didn't have a Veteran Service Officer in my town, I was able to go to the neighboring town, and to this day, people that remain as a mentor were the ones that guided me because they had—and I'm talking about Vietnam-era veterans who had, obviously, another layer of challenges of returning and integrating, but also the aspect of participating in some of these programs pointing me where to go and the right people to see to be able to be successful.

Timothy L.: Francisco, this is a nationwide, possibly globalwide-listened podcast—it's new, so we're unsure yet—but I'm sure plenty of my audience members are in Massachusetts. If they're listening to this and they're like, "Oh, man, I need to be a part of this system, I need to inquire with someone nearby," for the veterans of Massachusetts, what's the best way for them to take advantage of the services that your office and their local office provides?

Francisco U.: Yeah, absolutely. So one—let me think—all of those who have served and those that continue to serve who may be listening, and I welcome all of our veterans who are coming to Massachusetts and their families to take a look at our website, MassVetsAdvisor.org. MassVetsAdvisor.org. And it is a system that we have developed which has every unit of service available to our veterans, including benefits and services available from our federal partners such as the VA are listed there. Currently, we have about 443 units of services listed, but a more important point, it is the very first engagement on that website, it is where you type your zip code or your city's or town's name and you're able to know where your local Veteran Service Officer is and be able to connect with him or her to be able to start the transition at any given phase of your life, whether you're leaving the service today or you've been in our community or you're moving into the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, to be able to be part of this great community of veterans and veteran families.

Timothy L.: Francisco, this has been wonderful. Thank you so much for your time, for talking to us about your military experience, your continued service in Massachusetts, your insight to your experience with the Department of Veteran Affairs, and of course, thank you ultimately for your service to our country.

Francisco U.: Oh, Tim, thank you very much, and you as a veteran who has served and continue to serve our veterans, thank you. It is an honor to be part of your podcast today, and once again, to all those who have served, thank you especially to our military families who have sacrificed.

Public Service Announcement:

Male One: I was a gunner's mate, Tonkin Gulf

Female One: Logistics, Ramstein

Female Two: Medic, Kandahar

Narrator: As a veteran, it doesn't matter when or where you served

Male Two: Infantry, Camp Pendleton

Narrator: Or what you did. The VA has benefits that may be useful to you right now.

See what VA can do for you. To learn what benefits you may be eligible for visit

www.va.gov. That's www.va.gov.

Post-interview monologue:

Francisco mentioned the value in getting dental work provided by VA. Dental is a benefit that is often asked about. VA offers comprehensive dental care [benefits](#) to certain qualifying Veterans. In addition, Veterans enrolled in VA health care may purchase dental insurance at a reduced cost through the [VA Dental Insurance Program](#). Eligibility and benefits for Veteran Dental Care are limited by law and categorized into VA dental classifications.

Go to [va.gov/dental](#) for information regarding dental benefits or [explore.va.gov](#) to begin an online application for VA healthcare. If you just got out of the service, you may be entitled to a free dental exam.

Veteran of the Day

Let's finish by honoring Army Veteran Jack Shannon as Veteran of the Day.

Jack was one of twelve children when he enlisted in 1951. He was selected for the Army Airborne Corps and deployed to Japan and Korea.

Jack recalled a training exercise where a group of men worked to dislodge a Jeep from the back of a cargo plane to airdrop it onto a target. The pallet was suddenly freed, and both Jack and the Jeep were carried out the back of the plane. Still holding on to the vehicle, he managed to pull himself into the driver's seat and held on tight for a safe, hard landing.

Jack passed away in 2014. We honor his service.

For Jack's full write up and photos, go to [blogs.va.gov](#).

That does it for episode two. I want to thank you all for listening. I know there are a lot of options out there for entertainment so I appreciate you for spending your time with me. If you have any feedback or questions you'd like to have answered on the show, please Tweet them to us using #VApodcast or emailing us newmedia@va.gov.

Be sure to visit [Facebook.com/VeteransAffairs](#) for more stories from our community. I'm Timothy Lawson, signing off.