

Borne the Battle

Episode #120 Liz Rotenberry – Caregiver, Elizabeth Dole Foundation Fellows Program

Coordinator

Hosted by Timothy Lawson

(Text Transcript Follows)

00:00:00 [music]

[00:00:10] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

Timothy Lawson (TL): Wednesday, November 21st, 2018. This is Borne the Battle brought to you by the Department of Veterans' Affairs. I am your host Marine Corp Veteran, Timothy Lawson. Back after a significant break about 4 or 5 weeks took off since episode 119. Was still able to get interviews done but as I went into production mode trying to edit and produce the shows things were just popping up. Our digital media engagement team has been very busy in the month of November for Veterans' Month. We had people all over the place producing content and covering events, covering Veterans' Day. It has been a busy past four or five weeks. I have a handful of interviews to catch up on, which I intend to do in the next two or three weeks here, so we will have an episode today and then we'll have an episode Friday in the next week probably a Monday, Wednesday, Friday. And we'll see where we sit there but looking forward to the future of the podcast, even though I wasn't able to produce any content, I was thinking a lot about the future of the podcast, people we can get on the show. Ways that we can provide a visual component. Ways we can add maybe different types of episodes to the podcast so a lot of cool things coming down the pipe from VA as far as the podcast Borne the Battle and other endeavors are concerned. So, November is also National Caregivers month, something that gets sort of paired with Veterans month which I think is very appropriate because caregivers are such a crucial part of the veteran community for those that need that sort of care. So today and Friday we will be featuring caregivers. So today Elizabeth Rotenberry. Liz is with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation. She's the fellows program coordinator and she's an adult caregiver fellow alumna. She's a military caregiver for her husband who is a Marine Corps Wounded Warrior of Operation Iraqi freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. She works to advocate not only for herself and her family, but also the veteran and military caregivers in our community. She's been with them for, she's been with the Elizabeth Dole foundation for a while now and we had a very just open and honest conversation about, I say we like I did much, I was just

asking questions. Liz was very open and honest about caring for her husband and transitioning out of the military and what that did for her. So, this is a really interesting perspective at from someone who is a former military spouse, a current caregiver for a veteran, and has a really interesting perspective and really important insight on both of those. So, I think that you're going to get a lot out of this. I do appreciate you listening. So, Liz Rotenberry with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation. Enjoy.

[00:03:16] Music

[00:03:20] PSA:

Man 1: I served in Vietnam.

Man 2: I served in World War 2.

Woman 1: I served in Afghanistan.

Man 3: And VA serves us all.

Man 1: No matter when you served.

Woman 1: No matter if you saw combat or not.

Man 4: There are benefits for veterans of every generation.

Woman 2: See what VA can do for you.

Man 5: To learn what benefits you may be eligible fo,r visit www.va.gov. That's www.va.gov

[00:03:47] Music

[00:03:52] INTERVIEW:

(TL): And record. Elizabeth Rotenberry.

Liz Rotenberry (LR): Yes.

(TL): Yes. With the Elizabeth Dole Foundation. You are your husband's caregiver.

(LR): Yes.

(TL): Which is the main draw having you on here. The Elizabeth Dole Foundation was interested in being on the podcast and typically I reserve guest spots for veterans but whenever there is an important topic to be discussed I will stray away from that and caregivers are a segment of the veteran community that we haven't addressed too much in a lot of our communications, especially here on the podcast. So, I'm excited to talk to you about that experience, as well as what you're doing with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation. Usually these interviews start with the veteran telling me about why they joined the military, their transition, stuff like that. For you I'm going to ask I want to know about what your military experience was as a mil spouse. So, let's start with meeting your- was your husband in the Marine Corps when you met him?

(LR): No actually we met in high school.

(TL): High School sweethearts.

(LR): High school sweethearts. [Laughter]

(TL): That's adorable [Laughter].

(LR): We did meet in high school and I actually had to beg him to go out with me, which I was fortunate he did because we managed to stay together throughout our college years in which his second year of college, he decided to join the Marine Corps and I decided to stay in school. We knew we were eventually going to get married and reconnect wherever he was going to be stationed once he was done with bootcamp. So, he did go to Parris Island and that was in December of 1999 and you know he loved it right off the bat and I knew he was going to be marine for life...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...and I was ready to join him with that effort. It was an exciting life and I was really proud of him for it.

(TL): So how long was he in the Marine Corps, then?

(LR): So, he was in for 12 years active duty and then he did do two years reserve after...

(TL): Okay.

(LR): ... after his injury...

(TL): Okay.

(LR): ... so about 14 years total.

(TL): So, when you when you two got married and you joined him at that first duty station what was in elements to military life that maybe surprised you, for good or for bad?

(LR): Honestly, I was just excited about it. Just the whole idea of being able to move. We loved moving. I mean we did a lot of it. But you know his role in it too, he was K9...

(TL): Right.

(LR): ...I loved watching him work with dogs and watching dogs work is just fascinating in itself. So, it was just the whole idea and in once you become friends, once you meet people on base, they're lifelong friends and family, and I loved that. I didn't always have the closest friends growing up and so to have that support...

(TL): Sure.

(LR): ...was unbelievable. It just made me feel like I was at home.

(TL): Yeah. You know whenever I talk to veterans and you ask a hundred veterans what they miss the most about the military and 99 of them will say camaraderie and the other one didn't understand the question, right? It's that consistent. What's it like on your side? You mentioned

you loved the community. Did you also... Have you felt a void of that community since your husband left the military?

(LR): Yes, absolutely. My husband after he was injured which was in 2011. It was early 2011 and after about 2012 was when we technically we're not active duty anymore, and we moved off base and I'll never forget because he had moved up ahead of me to start a new job and I had to, you know, clean the house and get it ready for inspection with the base housing. And I felt this real, you know, grief. It's almost like a loss in my life that what were we going to do now? I've only ever known myself as his support, as his military spouse. What am I now? And it was very difficult, especially because he didn't medically retire...

(TL): Hmm

(LR): ...We are working on trying to understand, you know, retroactively maybe how that taken care of because he really should have but at the time it was a height of the Marine Corps downsizing, he was injured. I think he saw himself with his injury starting to not do well and when he told me he wanted out six months after his injury I knew there was something wrong and so red flags were going off and it just... I just couldn't process. You know, in my mind we were set for 20 plus years. My kids loved it. We loved it. It's a great life...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...and so it was very difficult. I went through about a year for that transition, a year-and-a-half, of probably depression, a little bit of anger, resentment that he was doing this...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...I couldn't understand why and financially it took a toll.

(TL): Sure, yeah and it's... you know one thing they harp on so much when, especially when military service members are looking to get out at after their four-year, after their 8-year mark, they remind them, "Look, I know your annual salary doesn't look like it compares well but if you think of everything you're getting out of the United States government right now on housing and food, free healthcare, you are so far ahead of people that are making the same annual salary in the private sector." It

takes people awhile, one of the issues with transition that a lot of veterans have is that they're not... They don't know how to adjust for that because...

(LR): Right. It was very difficult. We even have four children and so just to manage everything that they were now gonna go through because it's not just him getting out of the military; it affects the whole family. And, you know, I remember the transition assistance program that he had to go through for two weeks...

(TL): Sure.

(LR): ...at the end of the Marine Corps life, as you may recall. I was... I said to my husband "If you go, I should be going with you as your spouse"...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...and I was probably the only wife in there with 350 marines that were getting out. I understand things have changed and they now have...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...a Stars program through just Marine Corps that I know of for the spouses getting out, but they needed that. I needed that. I needed to understand what was happening.

(TL): Yeah. I mean did you... What year would that have been? You said...

(LR): That was 2012.

(TL): 2012. Okay that's a year after I got out. What station were you at?

(LR): Camp Lejeune... "journ"

(TL): Camp Lejeune. That's right. All the die hards out there nodding their head like 'yes'.

(LR): I know Camp Lejeune [laughter].

(TL): What were your takeaways from...? Did you find it effective? Did you feel like as a transitioning family that you were better prepared after taking that class?

(LR): For some of the components that they talked about. They talked about the VA and how to enroll in the VA and going through all that and that was important because I could help my husband go through that and get the you know the claims process started. But some of the other stuff at the time wasn't really relevant to what he was gonna be doing. Fortunately, he did have a job opportunity that he was able to focus on but some of the other classes you know were kind of preparing you for how to get a job, how to write a resume, how to do things, so I tried to take away from the classes that we could. But it's still, I mean, we were young still and just trying to understand life and...

(TL): Right.

(LR): ...How are we going to be able to make this work?

(TL): Do you understand life, now?

(LR): No. Still don't.

(TL): I was... [Laughter]

(LR): Still learning [Laughter]

(TL): [Laughter] I was like when did you understand life, and could you tell us that secret?

(LR): Still learning [Laughter].

(TL): I just turned 33 this year.

(LR): You're so young.

(TL): I know.

(LR): [Laughter]

(TL): But it's funny... There's... I can't remember who sings it... There's that country song where she says, "I remember when 30 was old" or something like that. I can't remember the exact line. But in my thirties, I hear that line in my head all the time of like realizing, like I am still pretty young. But I do remember when I thought 30 was so old, right?

(LR): [Laughter]

(TL): You're practically dying, right?

(LR): Absolutely.

(TL): How many stations did you guys... 12 years, two in the reserves, like that's a lot of moving?

(LR): It was a lot of moving. It's a lot of moving on the family and the kids because, you know, as it is in active duty life like you can move to another, you can PCS but when you get there, sometimes you have to stay in other housing outside of town and wait until you can get on base. So that's essentially two moves for every state pretty much, for us, was always how it went. Gosh we were in Georgia, Texas, Arizona, North Carolina, Virginia and now in Maryland.

(TL): And now in Maryland.

(LR): And we moved two times pretty much every place we lived.

(TL): That's amazing.

(LR): Yes.

(TL): Yeah. Did you... How did the transition impact your... How old were your kids when that was happening?

(LR): So, our oldest probably faced the most impact.

(TL): Okay.

(LR): When we finally settled in Maryland, he was going into his fifth grade and had already been in six schools.

(TL): Oh wow.

(LR): And was getting ready to go into his... He only spent one year in that fifth grade and then moved into middle school, so he's been in seven schools up to 6th grade, which was a lot on him. We also have twin girls who... Well, I should say he's 14 now. He's a freshman in high school and we have twin girls who are both 11 and sixth grade. And then we have a first grader...

(TL): Okay.

(LR): ...so just when we think we're through it we're starting over again.
[Laughter]

(TL): [Laughter]

(LR): But, you know, the three oldest have really taken on the most responsibility in the home and they've been brought up in a life that's very different than civilian children. This is a topic that's very passionate to me because, you know, what the military children face on a daily basis, not only just surviving active duty life or reserve life, or just military life in general, it's what they're facing afterwards. If there's a wounded warrior, if there's somebody ill in their home that they're now having to take care of...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...and the caregiving roles that they take on. And as you probably know, military kids are the most resilient...

(TL): Mhmm.

(LR): ...They really don't complain about much, and they just take on responsibilities without even asking.

(TL): So what was... You know, you mention that for the first year-and-a-half after you were transitioning from being a military family to not being a military family that you were going through some resentments and some depression. I imagine he had his own difficulties...

(LR): Mhmm.

(TL): ...in that transition. How are your kids... Were they being outwardly... Were they expressing any similar emotions or were you even able to really notice? With... 'Cause both trying to deal with your emotions, support your husband, how connected do you think you were with your kids and what they were experiencing?

(LR): Yeah. I tried to keep them informed. You know, from the time we found out my husband who suffered traumatic brain injury. He suffers with severe post-traumatic stress among other injuries with shrapnel wounds, hearing loss and such. I've always tried to keep them informed. "Dad's not feeling good today. I really need your help", or just try to help guide them. I know that they have had reactions that I believe stem from my husband. Stem from everything that they're going through, from the... Even if it's a breakdown or temper tantrum or something like that. I mean, my oldest son has had a very tough time in life and most recently in the last 7th and 8th grade years he had to be admitted to a hospital for two weeks for patient Mental Health Services. And I think it's because they don't know how to understand what's happening in their life and they don't know how to express it like adults do. We may be able to find somebody to talk to or vent to, but they don't know what it is that they're hurting from.

(TL): Right. They wouldn't know how to...

(LR): The anxiety...

(TL): ... put it in words, maybe.

(LR): ... Right. And so they do struggle a lot.

(TL): Yeah. You said, you'll let them know that "hey, dad's not feeling great tonight, or I need your help." Are those things that you're picking on or is your husband communicating those things to you?

(LR): Both.

(TL): Okay.

(LR): I mean, I'm fortunate to have known my husband since high school so I can read him like a book...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...I know the second, you know, you can see it on any veteran when they're not feeling well. It doesn't always take a physical injury to not be completely hurting inside. I feel for my husband because a lot of times I think he suffers in silence just to hide it from us. He'll put on a mask just so that he doesn't want to burden us with his injuries. So, that's disheartening to me because I know him and so I'll sometimes jump in and say, "why don't you go take a break and I'll take over." And there are times where it's not that easy where I do get a little angry like this isn't the time, I really need your help and support...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...So, it kind of goes both ways but I can read him...

(TL): ...Yeah...

(LR): ...very well.

(TL): You know, my audience knows that I've experienced my own emotional health issues. There's been a couple times where I just really won't be feeling well, and a couple of days will go by and I'll wake up and turn to my wife and be like, "I need to tell you I'm depressed" ...

(LR): Mhmm.

(TL): ... And she'll be like, "I know" [Laughter].

(LR): [Laughter].

(TL): That's her first response...

(LR): Yes...

(TL): is like "I know..."

(LR): ... Yes, I know...

(TL): ...tell me what you need from me, but I know."

(LR): And it's hard because it's hard not to take that personally and that's how children feel too. And I have to try to remind them it's not personal. He doesn't... He's not sleeping all day today or can't go to your games because he doesn't want to be there. He's either got a severe migraine or he's not feeling good or depressed or whatever that symptom is for that day. It's hard for us not to take it personal.

(TL): Yeah, absolutely. So, after he got out, I imagine he started going to the VA and getting some health care there. Did you immediately take the role of caregiver in an unofficial or official way or did someone else have an official role in that? Tell us all about those first couple years and how he was getting his care outside of a medical center.

(LR): Sure. Well when he was injured, he was basically an undiagnosed TBI. I remember Marine Corps headquarters calling me in the day of his injury and said, "that your husband has suffered minor physical injuries but that he will be fine and remain in theater." I didn't think anything of it and I don't think he did either, but almost instantly I think he started seeing the symptoms and feelings...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...It wasn't until he came home from that deployment, I did notice a change in him. Things weren't right. He was very sensitive, angry, quick to anger which was not like him. I mean, he was the light-hearted one, patient in the family, loving,...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...funny and so it was just something was going on. He would stay in bed with migraines for days. It just debilitating. I still didn't know what a traumatic brain injury was. We didn't know so we went for about a year-and-a-half during that transition time not knowing what was going on with him. He was just being treated for those symptoms, but with no full understanding of why we were experiencing these symptoms. So it really wasn't until we got to Virginia, one of our last places to live and the VA caregivers program opened my eyes to the severity of his injury and also informed me that I am now his caregiver. It was really them who kind of changed things around for me and my outlook on our life and what was happening.

- (TL):** How did you receive that when you were told that you're now his caregiver? I imagine you're still coming off of the resentment and depression and the difficulty of the transition...
- (LR):** Mhmm.
- (TL):** ...and trying to help him understand what he's going through.
- (LR):** Mhmm.
- (TL):** Did it feel like a burden? Did it feel like an opportunity? Maybe a mix of it all?
- (LR):** Probably a mix of it all. I mean, it was overwhelming because I never had anybody explain that to me. Nobody explained to me really what his injuries were and how they're affecting him. It was almost like I needed somebody to just sit me down and tell me "This is what your husband's dealing with. This is why, you know, it's not you, it's not family, it's just the injuries. It's these things that are affecting him", and so hearing the words caregiver, I think in a sense empowered me more. It gave me that opportunity to say, "Okay you're not gonna stay in bed all day. You have to get up. You need to get a shower. You need to eat. You're going to feel worse the longer you stay in bed." It allowed me to separate my roles as a caregiver and as a wife.
- (TL):** Interesting.
- (LR):** Into kind of two areas. I could be loving when I needed to be, but I could also be that tough love. Like, "We need to schedule an appointment. You need to see a neurologist", and kind of take charge.
- (TL):** Has it been difficult for him, or at least was it initially, for him to separate who was talking to him in those moments between caregiver and wife?
- (LR):** Well I know that's something that he'd probably like to answer.
[Laughter]
- (TL):** [Laughter]

(LR): I'm sure he could answer better than I could.

(TL): Sure.

(LR): You know, there are still days even today where I have tried and I'm working, we're actually working with the VA in a FIT therapy program. Family Intervention Therapy. Working on how to communicate with each other.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): Because sometimes I would be a little bit too tough and not... And questioning him too much and saying, "did you take your medication today?" and assuming that he wasn't doing what he was supposed to be doing instead of... It's kind of a balance on how you talk through those situations.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): So...

(TL): With what you've experienced with your husband and being his caregiver have you been able to see that in other veterans, then, and either better understand what's going on? Or maybe even assist?

(LR): Yes.

(TL): Okay.

(LR): Yes, with the veteran and with the caregiver.

(TL): Okay.

(LR): Anytime I meet a veteran I always ask, "How is their... Who is their caregiver? How are they doing? How are you all doing?" It's not just a, "thank you for your service", it's "how are you doing?" You know, I kind of, I feel for my husband. I try not to get emotional. I feel bad for him because you know he's 39 years old almost living inside of a 70-year-old body.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): It's breaking down on him. You know, the dementia, the hearing loss, just the physical injuries, you know, all the things that come with a traumatic brain injury. There's no cure for it. And so... To see him aging at a faster rate I feel for him. And I have learned to know he doesn't want to feel this way.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): No veteran wants to feel this way. They want to be who they were prior to, but I also know that he wouldn't change it for anything. He loved his life in the Marine Corps and so I just try to be as supportive as I can.

(TL): Yeah. You know, a lot of veterans one of the problems veterans have when they are transitioning is, they view their military service as this peak in their life and post military is the decline.

(LR): Mhmm.

(TL): And you can almost separate it into two groups of veterans that continue an ascent after they get out and veterans that accept the decline. I don't know if your husband's been able to aspire for, like a new vocation or any new purpose in life, but how do you think he handled that part of the transition in trying to strive to continue to maintain a purpose while dealing with these injuries? Did you ever notice a time where he may be might be accepting the decline?

(LR): I think it's a little bit of both. I think he has come to understand his limits and knows that he'll never be that Gunnery Sergeant he was...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...prior to...

(TL): He was Gunny, huh?

(LR): [Laughs]

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...Prior to the PT test that he used to do.

(TL): Sure.

(LR): He can't quite live up to it and I think that hurts him inside. That he's this physical man but he can't run like he used to. He can't get his blood pressure up anymore.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): And so even with the work, you know, he is fortunate to be able to do the same thing he did in the Marine Corps right now. He is very fortunate. There's very few opportunities for veterans to be able to do what they did in the Corps. You know, I'm hoping that maybe companies and other private sectors will start to understand that these veterans are amazing employees and if they could just get to do something that fulfills them daily, I think we would have a lot less suicidal rates.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): I don't think any job can compare to what you did in military life but there's got to be something out there to help save them. My husband, as I said, he is very fortunate he works with all of his guys he served with...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...So, they know him. They know his injuries. They know that there's days where he maybe can't make it into work and they have that flexibility. And that flexibility is really key for our military members...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...in the future with any work they do.

(TL): That difficulty that veterans have in finding something that fulfills them in the same way or that somehow rewards them is that the military like pumps you full of purpose within like...

(LR): Mhmm.

(TL): ...your first 18 months that you're in. And it's almost issued to you, right?

(LR): Mhmm.

(TL): It's almost a part of your gear issue, "Here's your rifle, here's your uniform, and here's your purpose."

(LR): Right.

(TL): When we transition out and one, nothing's gonna have that surge of purpose anymore, right? Purpose takes a long time to develop in most places in life, right? It takes a long time to get yourself in a position where you are serving yourself and other people, and you're being fulfilled in a way. And so going from, you know, yellow footprints...

(LR): Mhmm.

(TL): ...to "here's your rifle and here's your purpose", to okay now "you need to find a vocation" and it'll take years for you to like really find...

(LR): Establish.

(TL): Yeah exactly, establish this purpose. Not only that you have to find it, right?

(LR): Mhmm.

(TL): It is no longer being issued to you like it was in the military.

(LR): Right.

(TL): You have to discover this. That's one of the biggest hurdles I see a lot of veterans having to deal with. I'm glad that your husband was able to find something inside of an industry or a craft that he enjoys.

(LR): Yeah. He was... He is fortunate to be able to do canine work he did outside in the Marine Corps now. But I still see, like you had mentioned, the decline or the struggles with his vocation. Just him trying to manage. I think it's a lot of it's the management side of just trying to

manage, you know, people. He's really good at working with dogs
[Laughter]

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): But when it comes to working with trying to manage schedules and conference calls and things like that, I see a struggle. I know it frustrates him cause he used to be so good at it...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...and that's where the injury kind of comes in.

(TL): Yeah. Does he have a service dog?

(LR): No. We actually had our retired military working dog, who did serve with him.

(TL): Okay.

(LR): She just passed away recently.

(TL): Aww...

(LR): She actually did three tours. She did two to Iraq and one to Afghanistan. She suffered severe PTS, as well. Canines go through the same injuries our...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...military members do. There's no reason why they can't get a concussion...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...with the things that they are around. So, she was with us for about six years after her service years. We loved her immensely.

(TL): Yeah. We do a daily post here at VA on our social media and our blog called Veteran of the Day.

(LR): Mhmm.

(TL): And I've been really tempted. I am this close to making a...

(LR): Absolutely.

(TL): ... a Canine Veteran of the Day.

(LR): You absolutely should.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): There's a...

(TL): I have been worried about how some of the audience will respond to it. I'm sure that there will be plenty of people who are gonna think that it's... I don't know... maybe not. Maybe I'm overthinking it.

(LR): The majority... The majority of the military appreciate what they did because when the day she passed away. I try not to get emotional because she was everything,...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...but, you know, my husband sat with her and said, "You saved a lot of lives you can rest now."

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): So, you know, I think that a lot of military recognize that and it's more appreciated now than it ever was in previous wars because they're the... they're the main source of detection for our military members.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): I think, you know, recognizing them, you know, we can take her to a military base and she'll get full honors...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...burial. And so they don't treat their Marines any differently...

(TL): Sure.

(LR): ...whether it's four legs or two legs.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): They are all Marines.

(TL): Let's segue, then, into your work with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation...

(LR): Mhmm.

(TL): ... and what's going on there. How long you been with the foundation now?

(LR): Actually, just almost a year.

(TL): Okay.

(LR): Well working with them.

(TL): Sure.

(LR): Employed with them. I started out as a fellow...

(TL): Right.

(LR): ...for Maryland as a caregiver to my husband. So, I started there in 2015, and 2016 was kind of my two-year fellowship with them.

(TL): Okay.

(LR): And then...

(TL): And what did that entail?

(LR): You know we got a lot of sense of self identifying. Who am I? What is my story? And the Senator really focuses on when people ask questions to a veteran, they ask "how you are doing?" They ask, "What have you been through?" And the story tends to... sorry I lost my train of thought.

(TL): It's ok.

(LR): The story kind of tends to revolve around the veteran. Not as much the caregiver or the person standing next to them. And Senator Doles started to recognize this. She recognized it after Senator Bob Dole was injured. Sorry, not injured. After he fell ill and found himself at Walter Reed hospital for 11 months. And during that time, she got the connect with all of these family members and loved ones who are sitting by the bedside. And she's thinking to herself, "Wait a minute people are surviving on the battlefield injuries that would not have sustained in wars past and who's going to take care of them?" This person by their side. So, she started to realize we've got, you know, 25-year old's who are now becoming full-time caregivers, quitting their jobs, quitting their schooling just to be able to take care of them. How are they going to survive? Where are they going to get income?

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): And so, you know, I started to realize this throughout my years coming up and trying to reach out to military resources for help and being told I was a caregiver. And I thought to myself, "my gosh this is very true." I wanted to help other caregivers know to self-identify. I'm very fortunate that my husband and I have a foundation from high school, but a lot of these spouse's and family members don't have that same strong foundation. And divorce rate, as you know, is very high. Suicide rates are very high...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...and a lot of that comes from a lack of support. And so the Foundation really empowered me to be able to advocate, bring awareness to, be able to talk with my senators and congressmen leaders to let them know what am I going through. What do we need as caregivers within our state?

(TL): So, in general then, what are the answers to those questions? What are ways... You know, the sign on our building says to "Care for those who are borne the battle and their widow and their orphan",...

(LR): Mhmm.

(TL): ...but the extension of that is the caregiver, right?

(LR): Mhmm.

(TL): Whether it's a family member, whether it's a professional caregiver who lives in or visits. Those are people that are deserving of being taken care 'cause you do take on a lot of that emotional burden.

(LR): Mhmm.

(TL): We hear a lot of stories of mil spouses transitioning almost in the way that you're talking about. You were a military spouse. That was as much of your identity and that's how you lived. You hear a lot of mil spouses that transition and they go into caregiving status. Or they have to go into a situation where they might be the new breadwinner,...

(LR): Right.

(TL): ...but they don't have a resume built that's strong enough because they've been moving around. They take jobs that they can find and stuff like that.

(LR): Mhmm

(TL): With all of that in mind and in that context, what are some of the ways that that the Foundation or any partners you are working with has identified: here are some of the key things we need to make sure we're delivering to caregivers that way not only are they taken care, but they can better take care of the people they're serving?

(LR): Well, I mean, you know the saying "happy wife happy life"...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...and it kind of goes the same with veterans. In our house it's kind of reverse it's: "the happy veteran, the happy life,...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...and the happy family."

(TL): Whatever rhymes with veterans that applies there. [Laughter]

(LR): Whatever rhymes. Whatever fits the veteran it goes with it. Because that's really key and that's why the fellow's program was established to help not only those caregivers who do know, like myself, that I was a fellow and I was a caregiver. Now I need to go out and help these caregivers self-identify. What are those resources and programs that you are lacking? Senators working very closely with faith leaders in DOD and the VA and whoever, you know, can help change what's happening to our caregivers. The fact that they're not getting the help that they need.

(TL): As you're working in this what are the things that you realize that are being identified or ways the Foundation is advocating on behalf of caregivers that you realize like "Ah man if I had that sort of support when I was starting out that would have been that would have been huge"?

(LR): This is always hard to answer because it's hard for me to speak on behalf of the 5.5 million caregivers...

(TL): Sure.

(LR): ...and what they need. I think, in general, when it comes down to it you know the financial help is a key piece to it. So many parents come out of retirement. Have to dip into their 401ks and their savings in order to take care of now their child who's moved back home with them and changed their whole life. The spouse who, you know, can't work. So financial is a big piece of that. Respite. I don't actually really rate respite as far as I've been told because my husband doesn't suffer with ADLs, activities of daily living.

(TL): Okay.

(LR): He doesn't need me to help actually physically dress him. He can get dressed but I have to kind of guide him as to maybe what to wear. [Laughter]

(TL): Yeah. Alright baby it's time to put on pants.

(LR): [Laughter]

(TL): Let's put on pants...

(LR): You know, I have to...

(TL): ...Let's make that the goal for the next half hour.

(LR): Right.

(TL): Let's get the pants on.

(LR): The instrumental activities of daily living are very impactful on a veteran and their family. You know appointment scheduling, medicine reminding, just remembering to eat. My husband there's days where he'll go without eating. And so, you know, respite is another big issue for caregivers. A lot of us don't rate it but we do need it because just trying to be the brain for another person and then throwing it at any children or anybody else in your life that's a lot going on.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): It's a lot to maintain. And we're seeing that with the Rand study that Senator Elizabeth Dole...

(TL): Sure.

(LR): ...helped establish is all of those struggles that our caregivers are facing.

(TL): How has... How is your work with the Foundation, your work with of the caregivers, how has it helped you be a caregiver?

(LR): Again, it's giving me that of sense of independence. That I am still who I am. I'm not just a wife and a caregiver or a mother. I am Elizabeth Rotenberry. I now am able to work and try to maintain my own sense of life and it's giving me that strength. I'm very fortunate once again, like my husband, to have the opportunity to work in a field that not only am I passion about, but they understand my role. The Foundation understands my life and they appreciate it. They give me that flexibility to be able to work from home when I need to. Come in when I need to.

It's really empowered me in such a great way that I feel like I'm accomplishing things once again.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): I did go through that void for a couple years not knowing who am I? What am I now?

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): And I really missed it, so this is a great opportunity and I'm very thankful.

(TL): So, as the audience learned before the interview the Elizabeth Dole Foundation is focused on caregivers and it's about advocating for them in and serving for them. What are some of the big initiatives? Some of the big efforts that are at the focus right now currently going on in 2018?

(LR): Yeah, well I can't even begin to explain to you since my joining the Foundation as a fellow back in 2015 how much this has grown.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): Just the word caregiver alone is now associated with so many people, not just hospice and senior care living. It's asked in more appointments to the veteran, "Do you have somebody at home? Who is your caregiver?" So just to see this Foundation grow from just establishing that important word to also all of the programs that we're doing and... You know, I'm very fortunate to be the fellows program coordinator and in that program, which is probably in one of the key pieces because it's our Hidden Heroes Program.

(TL): Hmm.

(LR): In this program we select different caregivers from around the nation. We have one to two that represent each state every year. Actually, our application process is open now for the 2019 class. Those caregivers we help give the training, the knowledge of who they are. How to tell your story, how do you tell your story. Don't talk about what your veteran's been through. Talk about what you've been through.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): As I was saying earlier and maybe didn't get all the way through is that Senator Dole's really made it about the hidden hero. Who is that person? And so we give them the knowledge and the training to be able to help other caregivers self-identify, advocate, go on the Hill, be able to share their story, and get the resources that they need established within their own local communities and cities. We have the Hidden Heroes Cities Program, which we're really proud to have 120 cities on board, where we work with the local mayors to establish those programs and establish those resources for caregivers. Most importantly with that Hidden Heroes Cities Program, we've just announced a partnership with Comcast NBC Universal and Psych Armor Institute to expand the services of Comcast Internet Essentials. Basically, we'll be offering... the Comcast is gonna be offering now through Internet Essentials, who has been established already for 7 years to lower-income families internet and TV and things like that, communication with the world. We're now gonna be offering it to close to 1 million veterans who we've recognized do not have access to even a computer,...

(TL): Wow.

(LR): ...internet, cable, anything. They don't have access to the world. As you know, you've got My HealthyeVet online. That's your access to your benefits,...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...your records, everything. That's how you communicate. The VA's even started to establish telehealth and so it's through Comcast that they're now gonna be able to reach out to all of these families who have been long without communication.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): This is very very exciting and one of the other just announced with Secretary Wilkie, which you may have recall hearing is the Center of Excellence.

(TL): Yes.

(LR): The Elizabeth Dole Center of Excellence. This is unbelievable. This is wonderful because Senator recognizes in the Rand study, when they did their study, they found that there needs to be a center of excellence for caregivers. There needs to be a research community continuing on with these studies to find out what is going on with our caregivers. What are their needs? This is going to be a long-lasting, this is a lifetime effort because caregivers aren't just the immediate caregiver it's now my four children who are going to be growing up dealing with the depression and anxiety, you know the things that they've dealt with. So now you have even more caregivers who are establishing themselves as that title. And so the Center of Excellence, which we're very honored, and I know the Senator was very surprised to hear that it was named after her, but I could not, personally, I could not think of a better person. She has ultimately led the way for caregivers. She has been just the leader, in not only DC in general for all of her life as an advocate but in this role she's just the first one to really recognize what we are dealing with.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): We're very very excited about Center of Excellence and it is a newer program at the VA but we're really looking forward to working with them more.

(TL): Yeah, absolutely.

(LR): So...

(TL): Liz, is there anything about the experience of being a caregiver or the work that you are doing at the Elisabeth Dole Foundation that we haven't touched on yet that you wanted to make sure got mentioned today?

(LR): I think the key piece that I want to make known is there still so many out there who don't know that they're caregiving. For the longest time I thought I was just doing my duty as a wife...

(TL): Sure.

(LR): ... you know, in sickness and health. And it's just what you do. Even as a parent it's just what you do or a friend or sibling, but you are a caregiver. They need to know that, and they need to know that there are specific resources and programs out there for them, benefits for them. The VA Caregivers' program is out there and they're really trying to work hard to bring those resources and benefits to caregivers but, you know, if you're not sure you are a caregiver you can absolutely find out more information about us with the elizabethdolefoundation.org [Link to Elizabeth Dole Foundation website], hiddenheroes.org [Link to Hidden Heroes Program website], our websites. You can email us and say "I've got this question, can you help me with this or we've got the struggle can you help me with this?". So if you don't know if you're caregiver, if you're doing any one of the above, like just being there for somebody, establishing appointments, helping with medications, driving them to their appointments or even if you're doing physical care for them. You are their caregiver.

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): You're not just their spouse or parent.

(TL): Yeah. Liz, I appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today. I appreciate you tolerating some of the technical difficulties I was having earlier but something I want to make sure that you understand and that anybody else that's in a similar situation, we thank veterans for their service, but you know, there's a lot of ways to contribute to your country's success and one of the ways is taking care of veterans or being a military spouse and being the foundation at home, so I want to thank you for your service to our nation in that capacity.

(LR): Thank you. Thank you. I really appreciate you having me on here. I know that you had mentioned that I'm probably the third only non-actual veteran...

(TL): Yeah.

(LR): ...to be on here. I do like to consider myself part of the military [Laughter].

(TL): [Laughter] Yes.

(LR): But I do appreciate it and thank you for the time and if anybody has any questions please feel free to email us at elizabethdolefoundation.org.

[00:45:34] Music

[00:45:38] PSA:

Man 1: My grandfather served in World War II. Spending time with him were the best memories of my life. I became a physician at VA because of my grandfather so I can help others like him. I can't imagine working with better doctors or a more dedicated staff. I'm fulfilling my life's mission with the help of my team and thanks to these veterans. I'm proud to be a doctor at VA. I'm proud to honor my grandfather every day. Search VA careers to find out more.

[00:46:06] Music

[00:46:10] CLOSING MONOLOGUE:

(TL): Big thanks to Liz for joining me. If you're curious about what they do over at the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, you want to learn more about their efforts: elizabethdolefoundation.org is where you can learn more about them. If you enjoyed today's episode, please let me know. I would like feedback on these episodes especially ones that I think that really stand out with truly valuable insight. I think Liz really brought that. NewMedia@va.gov [VA Communications email address]. NewMedia@VA.gov. Shoot me an e-mail. Let me know what you thought of that interview. If there are any follow up questions that you would have. If you're like, "Hey I want to know a little bit more about how they touched on this." Maybe we can do a follow-up interview and get those answered for you.

Today's Medal of Honor citation reading is for a Horatio Birdsall, Service US Army Rank of Sergeant division Company B, 3rd Iowa Calvary. That's right, we're going back to the Civil War conflict. Year of honor 1865. Back when the Medal of Honor was the medal that they awarded people for actions and combats. Citation reads five simple words: "Capturer of flag and bearer." We honor his service.

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[00:48:17] Music out