

Borne the Battle

Episode #115

JJ Pinter – Army Veteran, Executive Director of Team RWB

Hosted by Timothy Lawson

(Text Transcript Follows)

00:00:00 [music]

00:12

Timothy Lawson: Wednesday, August 1st, 2018. This is Borne the Battle brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs. I am your host, Marine Core Veteran Timothy Lawson. Exciting week here at the Department of Veteran Affairs as we welcome our new secretary, Robert Wilkie. He was sworn in on Monday, and has already started his endeavor as our official secretary yesterday. He is the tenth Secretary of Veterans Affairs that does not include all of the acting secretaries we have had. Those are confirmed secretaries. He is the tenth confirmed sworn in secretary for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Very excited to have him, looking forward to his leadership. On Tuesday, he released a video as a message to his workforce to introduce himself as the new secretary, and to pledge his allegiance to them as VA continues striving to provide the best care for Veterans.

00:01:08 [music]

00:01:11

Man 1: Hello, I'm Robert Wilkie and it is an overwhelming honor to serve alongside you as Secretary. There are two emotions for me today. The first is feeling very humbled. I was humbled by the honor of being a candidate for this job; I was even more humbled by the call to be your next Secretary. The second emotion is that of being very, very excited and thrilled. Thrilled to be part of this wonderful department. I'm deeply grateful to President Trump for the opportunity to serve for him and for America's Veterans. I am also grateful to the United States Senate and the Veterans Service organizations for their vote of confidence. First off, I want to thank you, the staff of the VA. Whether you are at a health care facility, on the Benefits team, serving at our cemeteries, or here as part of our staff at the headquarters. You may not hear enough, but I want you to hear it from me. Thank you for your tireless work and devotion to our Veterans, and thank you for all you do to help them and their families everyday. When President Herbert Hoover signed the executive order in 1930 creating the Veterans Administration, he consolidated Veterans programs and created a new independent administration for the relief of

veterans. Eighty years later, that is still our charge. Serving our Veterans is a noble calling. We have a solemn responsibility to our Veterans – not just today, but in the months and years to come, to set the standard for the millions coming into our VA, and for the millions who will join the ranks down the years. During my confirmation hearing, and in previous messages to you while serving as the Acting Secretary, I shared with you my basic philosophy – customer service. Customer service must start with each other-not talking at each other but with each other across all office barriers and across all compartments. If we don't listen to each other, we won't be able to listen to our Veterans and their families, and we won't be able to provide the world class customer service they deserve. Next, we must have a bottom-up organization. The energy must flow from you who are closest to those we are sworn to serve. It is from you that the ideas we carry to the Congress, the VSOs and to America's Veterans will come. Anyone who sits in this chair and tells you he or she has the answers is in the wrong business. I want to share with you a story I often use from President Eisenhower. Five months after his inauguration, about forty Korean War Veterans climbed aboard the presidential yacht Williamsburg—many were missing limbs, and some were horribly disfigured. When Ike arrived at the pier, the Secret Service began running up the plank to separate the President from his troops. Before they reached the deck, Eisenhower yelled "Halt! I know these men." The agents retreated, and the soldiers gathered around the President. He said there was nothing the country could do for them that could compensate for what they had already given to America. He then addressed them at attention, and those who could stand did, and he said, "You will never put your uniform away, you are always on duty, but you must get well, to remind your countrymen everyday that freedom is never free." This is our VA. We are here to care for all of our nation's heroes whose service and sacrifice inspires all Americans. That is our important and non-negotiable mission. The President and the Congress support us, and I'm honored and excited to help you lead this organization. I look forward to meeting you, listening to you and serving alongside you. I value your thoughts and insights as we improve our department for the challenges in the years ahead. Thank you and God bless.

00:05:05 [music]

05:10

Tim: Again, we look forward to working alongside Secretary Wilkie as we continue moving forward with providing care to our nations Veterans. This week's episode is with JJ Pinter, the executive director of Team RWB, he was the second official employee of Team RWB that is how far he goes back with the organization. Him and I have a really great conversation,

we learned about his service and those aspects like we do week to week from our Veterans. As we get into the nuance of who he is, and what he does with Team RWB we learn a lot about his perspective in the Veterans space: how team RWB measures it's success in delivering its benefits to Veterans, and how they help Veterans grow, how they manage themselves inside the Veterans space, the focus of their staff all a bunch of great stuff. I know you are going to enjoy it. Here is my interview with Team RWB executive JJ Pinter. Enjoy.

00:06:09 [music]

00:06:15

Woman 1: There are nearly 2 million women Veterans who served and deserve the best care anywhere.

Woman 2: VA is dedicated to meeting the unique needs of all women Veterans. VA offers comprehensive primary care, and women's health specialty care.

Woman 1: Women Veterans who are interested in receiving care at VA should call the women Veterans call center at 1- 855- VAWOMEN

Woman 2: Or contact the nearest VA Medical Center and ask for the women Veterans' program manager visit www.va.gov/womenvet.

00:06:45 [music]

00:06:49

Tim: JJ Pinter, You were the second employee for team RWB is that right?

JJ Pinter: Second official employee.

Tim: And you are now currently the executive director. We're going to talk about team RWB extensively later on, but we're going to start this how we start all of our interviews; the decision to join the United States military bring us back to that day for you.

JJ: Yeah. So that's a really interesting question. So I graduated high school in 1997 and my dad was a was an Army Veteran and had really thought about enlisting in the Army honestly, and my mom felt really strongly about me going to school and getting an education. She kind of said, "If you don't do it right now life will get in the way and you probably won't do it." I grew up on a very rural town in Southern Michigan. A local Army recruiter, I talked to him and he said well there's this thing called West Point that I don't really know much about, but it's a college and it's the

Army and you know maybe you should look into that. I didn't even know, I'd heard the name but I didn't really know what it was so I said, "Yeah okay, cool just let me know." He showed up to my house a few days later with a brochure on West Point. So I'm a junior in high school and I would like to say that it was it came from this place of like Sublime altruism, and there was certainly some aspect of that and wanting to serve my country but there was a very kind of economic incentive to this to where I didn't have money for college. I was looking for a way to get some money for college, and it was a pretty safe time in if you think back at the late 90s there hadn't been any armed conflict in awhile, and so I ended up squeezing through the cracks. I still to this day I'm not sure how it happened, but I squeezed through the cracks and was able to get accepted to West Point and that really started my army career.

Tim: And you went in as a field artillery officers is that right?

JJ: I did I graduated as commission as a field artillery officer, but I always feel a little guilty saying that to people because if you think about the time frame. I graduated in June of 2001, and then September 11th happened immediately thereafter, and that kind of framed my whole Army experience.

Tim: Yeah

JJ: But we weren't' shooting a lot of big artillery in Iraq at the time. So, I didn't really shoot much artillery in my artillery career kind of like everybody else did, kind of task organized as like this kind of Quasi you know infantry battalion, and did Convoy security.

Tim: Yeah.

JJ: So, it was it was a very different experience. I did wear the cross cannons on my collar for sure, but I don't really have the depth of experience. I find that artillery men, I feel weird saying that actually men and women love to talk about shooting artillery, and I can't really engage in those conversations because I don't really have too much experience. [laughter]

Tim: Sure. So, you graduated in June where were you then come September?

JJ: So, I'd just gotten off some leave in the summer there was a fantastic program called ATRAP, which is the hometown recruiting program which I was able to effectively extend my summer leave even longer. I had reported to Fort Sill, Oklahoma to began what at the time was called the field artillery officer basic course. They've now changed it to BOLC I believe. And so yes I was at Fort Sill, Oklahoma and I had just reported, the course had just started mid August.

Tim: So tell me about from where you were at in the Army tell me about that the shift that you saw between September 10th 2001 and September 12th 2001.

JJ: Well it was a really interesting time to be in the Army. I will never forget this, I know everyone has their September 11th experience, but I was actually out on a range at Fort Sill and back then there wasn't cell phone service everywhere and you kind of left the main base, and there is no cell phone service. We're out on the Range and we ride the Blue Bird buses and come back late in the day. Our Battalion Commander is sitting there waiting for us with this kind of solemn look on his face, and we get off the bus and they have little formation. They tell us about what happened and they looked like everyone else looked down Fort Sill, nobody on nobody off. I knew that I was going to Fort Hood. There was two divisions at Fort Hood there was the 1st Cavalry division and the 4th Infantry Division. We didn't know which division we were I was going to be in and I found out later I was going to be in the 1st Cav, but it immediately changed the training and put some urgency in the training because I think everybody knew that the war was going to kick off. Fast forward little bit farther we knew that the fourth infantry division was going to be as part of the expeditionary force from Fort Hood and that the first cav was going to follow them up. So, I found out I was going to go to the first cav, and knew I knew I wasn't going to deploy and immediately, but I was going to get there and have 8 or 10 months or a year to kind of train before we left. In one sense it was this incredibly intense time because we knew that we were going to go back up the 4th ID and rip with them and take over so we were really training hard but in another sense. You know I was a young man in my early twenties it was one of the funnest times of my life because we also were really trying to spend a lot of time in Austin, Texas, and I won't go into any incriminating details here.

Tim: [laughter]

JJ: It was a lot of fun.

Tim: Yeah.

JJ: And I really enjoyed that part of my life and so it's kind of an odd position.

Tim: Yeah. Tell me about a close friend or a great leader that you had an in the military, you can choose either one but tell me about that person.

JJ: Well I'll tell you about a couple a close friend and a great leader, we just talked about this earlier, would be Blaine Smith. For those of you who don't know Blaine Smith, is the former executive director of team red white and blue he's been on the VA podcast. He's a fantastic guy, and he

was my roommate at West Point for 2 years. We both served in the 1st Cavalry division together. We were in different brigades, but I still saw him a lot then. We deployed together at the same time, and then you know we took different routes I ended up leaving the army. He ended up going the Special Operations route after that, and then we came back together later in life. This rear balance of someone who is your peer and you can relate with, but you could also respect and learn from someone is a really interesting place to be. They also are in that spot where they can very directly communicate with you and say, "Hey man you're being stupid here." or whatever it is. [laughter] As a young person you can receive that. So he's a person that that stands out to me as a great leader and a good friend for that time, but I mean I can list a bunch of others I spent a ton of time with you know Mike Erwin, the founder of Team RWB. I met him during that period of my life just like this guy named Jimmy Campbell and Mark McNamara, and then I had a fantastic battalion of people that I came in with and served with you know. I'm going to drop a couple names here just because these people mean a lot to me Roshan Jessani, Corey Clyburn, Danny Colontrelle, Tim Murphy, Micah Nordquist, Coley Tyler and just a bunch of this crop of good fellow officers and spent a ton of time with them.

Tim: What prompted your transition out then?

JJ: Yes, so if you think back to that point in time, I mean this is 2006 at this point in time the war is not going well, and by any realistic expectation if you look to the future you were looking at a year on a year off deployments for the foreseeable future. I just wasn't super jazzed about that. I had just met the person who is now my wife, but at the time we were dating. I was thinking about what my future would look like with her, and then there was some more practical without getting into nerdy Army Doctrine. The army was doing this thing called the force 21 transformation at the time. They were restructuring and essentially the opportunities for advanced command for field artillery officers went away. I was looking to the future and saying, "Well I don't really see if a long-term career here for me because my path to promotion is effectively gone." So it was it was a whole host of things, but it was a whole host of things. The biggest thing was, I mean I think if you talk to most officers they'll tell you the best time in their career is like Lieutenant and young Captain because that is when you're actually doing things still. So I looked at these field gate officers that I served with and their sitting in the battalion headquarters grinding out op orders, and I was like, "That looks like it's stinks I want nothing to do with that." [laughter] It just was the right time for me.

Tim: Sure. You mentioned Blaine Smith, he was episode 11 of this podcast which as of the time of this recording was 100 episodes ago. I can't believe this podcast has been around that long.

JJ: I don't want to disappoint you, but I am just going to be straightforward he is more intelligent [laughter] and articulate than me. I will do my best but it's not going to be as good.

Tim: Very well. Well we are prepared now. Give us whatever context you'd like before we start talking the Team RWB, and what the work that you are doing there. Fill any gaps you would like between your transition out of the military and becoming Team RWB's second employee.

JJ: Yeah. It's a really interesting thing to think about because I did kind of the thing that company grade officers do when they get out. They kinda go do the corporate America thing because that's like the path that people tell you you're supposed to take. I think I realized pretty early on that that wasn't the path for me. I wound up working private sector. I worked in the private sector for a couple different big companies. There's this interesting dynamic were on one hand I want to do a good job because I am a pretty competitive person, but on the other hand when you strip it all away there is no purpose there. What you trying to affect the stock price when you strip it all the way your trying to make a bunch of rich people even richer. I just was really having a hard time getting my heart behind that so that was one thing. Disenfranchised is not the right word, but I just was looking around and saying I don't think this is where I want to be full-time. I can't see myself doing the corporate thing for the rest of my career that was one thing. The second thing was, I started to see real-time some of my friends and people I served with such as coworkers struggle with the transition in a big way getting out of the military. A couple people in particular, I'm looking around and I'm saying, "Like man these folks have everything going for them." They come from supportive families, they have financial resources, they're mentally strong some of them were former college athletes, and they have everything going for them and they're still struggling. I remember thinking what the heck is happening to the people that don't have all those things, right? When you don't have a supportive family or you've got economic stress, and you have other things in your life. I just remember thinking "What the heck is going on." I never thought I would end up in the nonprofit world not in a thousand years, but I just kind of found my way there. At work I was not super motivated about the lack of purpose and then having these experiences with some of my friends, and then I get an email from Mike Erwin right at the right time saying, "Hey man, I'm starting this this nonprofit called team red white and blue. Yeah, serendipity.

Tim: [Laughter] serendipity. Team red white and blue, one of the fastest growing nonprofits in the veterans' space. Something that no one has anything bad to say about it. Not that people should be speaking poorly of nonprofits or VSO's, but you know you look around the space there is plenty of criticism of most organizations. You know I am sure there is someone out there with their own opinion that goes against what I'm saying but I've yet to hear anybody when speaking of team RWB to have anything bad to say about it. They're either neutral or completely positive. I am curious as to what you credit that to?

JJ: Well I A, first of all appreciate you saying that. When you work in the organization like I do, and we spend all of our time focused on the things that we could be doing better you know. I know all of the warts of the organization, and so sometimes you tend to focus on those things. We try to run the organization in a way that we are very proud of, and we have some very simple rules here. One of them is, they're very simple very basic, but you know the old front page of the newspaper roll. If you wouldn't be proud of what you're doing to be on the front page of the newspaper, then you shouldn't be doing it. The second one is, "Hey every penny that we spend was given to us by somebody, every penny" and I always want to be proud. If someone were to ask me how we spent their dollars, I want to be proud. I am proud, and I always want to be proud to be able to tell them how we spend those dollars. So those two things at a very high level are some of the ways more overtly, the way that we position the brand is really important. We try to be very inspirational. We try to be very inclusive. We try to be very positive, and we are not divisive at all. So those are things I think that lend themselves to being a place that anyone can be part of. Tim it's very deliberate right, we want lots of Veterans to take part in team RWB, and if we are saying things and doing things that could potentially be divisive issues or taking sides on issues by definition. You know any issue in supporting Veterans people believe both ways then we could potentially be disenfranchising someone who might want to take part in our programs. So we just choose not to do that.

Tim: Yeah. You definitely have a good reputation of working well with others. I know you collaborate with other nonprofits and VSO's in a space. I often see the eagle flying alongside other logos and trademarks. How much obviously people that are familiar with a lot of the organizations in this space and this community know that there's some natural re-pore that goes back always. You're always curating new relationships and such. What sort of effort goes into that? Is that something you're spear heading or your teams involved in. How do you guys work on collaborating with other organizations?

JJ: There's two ways that this happens really at a very high level. One, our organization is run by volunteers. We have a very small staff of full-time

employees that that run the organization, but really our 2,000 volunteer leaders are the people who actually you know who run team RWB. We just try to set the conditions so that they feel really comfortable in collaborating at the local level because what we care about is serving Veterans and how that's done. Then there's the more formal, "Hey who are we going to have partnerships with or who are we going to work with on a formal way kind of headquarters to headquarters?" and that's a very different thing and it's kind of a thing I learned the hard way. In the last six years, when you first get started and you're a new organization and you want to work with everybody. You kind of say, "Let's partner let's partner let's partner." and it sounds good, but partnerships are not ever going to last. If there's not a compelling need for both parties. If both parties are not getting something out of it, it's not going to last. It's perfectly okay to have mutual admiration and respect of other organizations, but to not have like kind of formal signed partnerships with them because those partnerships require resources to maintain. We all run really lean on the nonprofit side and sometimes we don't have the resources to put towards those things. That's kind of a long-winded answer, but I would say yeah there's some organizations that we work with, and then there's a lot more that we just have respect and admiration for. We try to do things together, but there's been a crop of about five or six that we were all formed kind of late in 2008-2010ish time frame and we've all kind of grown up together and we spend a lot of time with those. You know some of them right like Team Rubicon and The Mission Continues they are a couple that we are all about the same age.

Tim: Yeah. I think you know same age. You work together, but I think there is still commonality in you just named organizations that I most often see people proudly wearing the brand of. People love wearing their gray shirts from Team RWB and the blue Mission Continues shirts out and about. IAVA is also another well represent organization in that manor. You mentioned your focus is serving veterans.

JJ: Well so Tim let me actually dive in, do you mind if I dive into that a little bit?

Tim: Sure, nope go ahead.

JJ: So I think there's a reason for that right because of the positivity that we spoke about before, but I think some people call this different things. I've heard people call it like the Veterans empowerment movement or whatever you want to call it, but I think they're from our organization and then I know from those other organizations and many more there has been a victimization that has occurred over the last 15 years. We just fundamentally disagree with that and are much more in the camp of that Veterans are assets, and that we need to challenge Veterans to take

charge of the transition process and to go back to lead in their communities. We want the conversation to be much more about thriving than restoring deficits. I think that's a message that resonates with Veterans, and I think that's why you're seeing that.

Tim: Right. You talk about focusing on serving Veterans, but one of the things that team RWB is known for is how inclusive it is of everybody, right. Some of them more involved Team RWB members I know are non-Veterans.

JJ: Yeah

Tim: Tell me about the evolution of that, and how that's become so critical in Team RWB's success.

JJ: Yeah, it's really interesting because when we first opened up the organization to non-Veterans, we did this very early on. It was like heresy at the time [laughter] people really got upset about it, "How could you have non-Veterans be part of a Veterans service organization" but our thought process was part of what we're trying to accomplish is connecting Veterans to their community that's a really important part of our mission. It's kind of like, well you've got to have supportive if you want to connect Veterans to the community, then you've got to have supportive members in the community in the equation. We allowed early on community members to be part of the organization now. A good chunk of the civilian members are tied to the military in some way you know a spouse, a family member, or friends something like that, but some are not. Some are great kind of red-blooded Americans who just want to help, and some of our best chapter captains are and some of our best leaders are. It is a fantastic thing when you have a volunteer that comes in because all they want to do is serve. Those people are fantastic. It's been an important part of our model, an important part of our mission, and it's going to continue to be.

Tim: So, there's lots of volunteers you said at Team RWB, one of the things that makes it sustainable and growing and that small staff. What exactly then is your staff doing? Talk to us sort of about their priorities there at that higher level, and what your staff is doing to make sure that what's happening on the ground continues to grow and develop.

JJ: Well there is kind of two sides to the staff. There's the side of the staff that is all the kind of natural business functions that any business would have. We have to have financial people, some marketing people, business development people, and technology. You know those kinds of things and we run about as lean as we can there. Then we have the program side of the staff that is really focused on supporting volunteers of all of our

chapters, all of our Eagle leaders, and what we're trying to do is to give him the resources they need to remove road blocks and obstacles and to allow them to empower them to be successful. What that looks like in reality is we're broken down geographically, and you have employees whose sole purpose in life is to interface with our volunteer leaders, and to help those chapters be successful. That help in the development of our Eagle leaders or our volunteer leaders.

Tim: Something I'm interested in that I'd like to get your thoughts on, and you can answer this however you want. Either you can answer as JJ Pinter the Veteran or as the leader of a non-profit whatever it may be. Since I got out of the military in 2011 and even going little bit before then when I was sort of familiar with what was going on in the Veterans space. We've seen sort of the rise and sort of the roller coaster and you know certain issues become more prominent than others. You know military sexual trauma and sexual harassment peaked, and then we saw homelessness then suicide was sort of like the leading issue. It seems like homelessness is being spoken about again, mental health, PTSD, and everything sort of gets its moments and exposure if you will. What would you say if you could give it a name or narrow it down, what do you think the priority is in the Veterans space as it comes to serving Veterans and caring for them post military?

JJ: Yeah that's a really good question Tim, and I'm going to try to answer it. I think there's some pretty good nexus between me and team RWB, so I'm going to try to do my best to answer it that way.

Tim: Okay.

JJ: Let me start with a qualifier by saying that people who come into kind of the Veteran serving space do it because they care almost all of the time. They're doing what they generally are involved in some facet of that that is close to their heart or in which they had a personal experience and something that they care about now that can manifest itself to your point in not only lots of different kind of themes within that. How do we support Veterans, but then also a myriad of different ways that those things can happen or mechanisms by which you can provide that support. To your point there's been things that have risen to the top in terms of visibility things that the community has gotten engaged about like employment would be kind of a perfect example.

Tim: Yeah, yeah.

JJ: Something that has been a big issue for awhile, and people got really engaged about it, and have been able to move the needle on that. So in terms of what the thing are here's what I would say, there's a shift going

on right now in the space where we are trying to move everybody towards high quality care. What that means is evidence-based practice based off science and then you know good program evaluation where we're measuring the outcomes of our programs using universally-accepted scales. What that does when we talk about measuring outcomes- I don't want to just use fancy kind of words here- in its most basic sense what this means is a Veteran better in an objective way. You know, has their life improved since they've taken part in your programs. What we're finding is that some things work better than others, and that addressing certain kind of components of a Veterans support are more effective than others. The system is somewhat self-regulating down to the things that really move the needle on outcomes. It's a long way of answering the question, but to me it's less about the issue of the day or the issue du jour it's more about hey the resources are maybe constricting a little bit and so we got to make sure that they're focused on the things that really move the needle the most in the Veteran community.

Tim: Yeah. I think I went into the question to sort of talking about the issues that are in the Veteran space.

JJ: Oh man, as a fellow pod-caster I am pretty adept at shifting questions around on the fly.

Tim: You nailed it. You nailed it. What I was gonna say is I am glad you went that way. I am glad you took the answer that way because I think if you look at it as just topics in the Veteran space, and what's being talked about. I think that one of the things that I'm really excited to see a lot of people talk about and not just Veterans but people that are caring for Veterans and people that are investing in care for Veterans is alternative methods of healing like meditation, yoga, other methods that unfortunately VA can't allow because their not legal yet. I'm really excited to see that we are taking a more realistic approach to healing Veterans in whichever way their looking to be cared for, and finding ways that work specifically for the Veteran.

JJ: Well you bring up a really good point, and traditionally when people thought about Veteran support it was almost kind of like Maslow's hierarchy of need right. It's the basic needs like we gotta get a roof over people's heads, jobs, and we got to get education; we meet these basic needs. The thought process has really expanded such that yeah those things are important, but this whole kind of broad umbrella of health and well-being is it used to be thought of as kind of a tier two need, but it's really being thought of in a way in a much more holistic sense. In the sense that you got to stay healthy, you've got to have kind of good physical health, mental health, emotional health, you have to have a

purpose in your life, and you have to have positive relationships in your life. These things are not just like fluffy kind of you know...I was going to make some terrible kind of millennial joke there that I won't make....

Tim: [laughter]

JJ: ...they're not just like fluffy things they are really important to overall wellness. You're going to be a better employee, you're going to be a better student, and going to be a better parent you're going to heal faster all of these things. When you consider health and well-being and that's been a really important shift, and to your point the ways that we could do this are much more broad than they were. I mean when I got out of the.. I am an avid yogi.. full disclosure. I love yoga. When I got out of the army, you couldn't have drug me to a yoga studio. [laughter] I mean there's nothing that someone could have done to get me to a yoga studio because it just had such a connotation of.... I don't need to go into details...it just was not something that I would have done. I can give you all sorts of examples of things like that that are changing and it's a really good thing.

Tim: Yoga and meditation have both evolved from this thing that Veterans were sort of embarrassed is the closer word I can think of maybe to saying they were involved in then to now. If I mention to other Veterans that I enjoy yoga and I try to meditate. It either inspires or gets a conversation because they do it too or interested in what it's like. The reception of that approach is just so different even just five years later thinking back to 2013 and 2012. It still was some did it and some didn't. There was still that stigma attached to it. Now I feel like it's encouraged and more and more Veterans are not only willing but are really advocating for it.

JJ: I remember the first time I told my.... we host yoga camps at team on RWB. The first time I went to one of these and did my first yoga session, A it was a Bikram Yoga which is hot yoga if you've never done it I got crushed in that. [laughter] I got absolutely destroyed so if you're listening to this and you think that yoga is not physically challenging go to a Bikram yoga session then tweet at me and tell me how you feel. I just got destroyed I was just trying not to pass out in the room.

Tim: [laughter] How do you stay on the mat like even in normal yoga, I get all sweaty my palms get all sweaty and I have a hard time keeping myself up simply because I'm slick from sweat.

JJ: You don't use a traditional yoga mat you use a towel.

Tim: Oh.

JJ: Yeah.

Tim: Okay. That makes sense.

JJ: I'm not a huge hot yoga fan. I do it occasionally, but yeah use a towel to kind of keep your body sticky. I remember I told my dad that I had gone and done this yoga, and his response was, "Isn't that just like chanting and stretching?" [laughter] like no dad there's a little bit more to it than that. He's an army vet, and that was his thought process.

Tim: Yeah. You mentioned talking about evaluating what you do that helps Veterans. Evaluating is a Veteran better because they've gone through your program. How does Team RWB evaluate what they're doing to help Veterans through that lens you just talked about?

JJ: Yeah you bring up. It's like you do this all the time Tim.... [laughter] ..You ask these really good questions.

Tim: Thank you.

JJ: It was possible. So there's a couple ways to answer this. It was possible five or ten years ago as a non-profit when you think about fundraising because you need dollars to run your organization. It was possible to kind of wrap yourself in the flag and you know find some compelling stories, and then you could fund raise that way pretty affectedly, not anymore. It's not the American probably doesn't care, there's other things that that they are concerned about right now. We're just getting farther and farther removed from these wars, and it's just less and less kind of proximal to people. What that's caused is you have to be as an organization be able to better demonstrate results and that what you're doing works because investors especially larger investors that's what they care about. They care about generating outcomes the positive outcomes so there is a push to do this partially because this is what the funding community wants to do, but this is what we want to do. We want to make sure that what we are doing works so we've been trying to be good at program evaluation from the beginning. Now that being said, it's hard things like measuring well-being. It is like applying quantitative measures to qualitative things is hard. It's like saying how much do you love someone and putting a number to that, but you know what makes it a 79 out of 100 vs 38 out of 100. In a way that's academically valid and mathematically repeatable and all these things it's hard. There are scales that exist out there that people can use, and in the beginning people say to us, "Oh you should use this scale for grit or you should use this scale for resilience or the VA's got one called the M2CQ like you should use that that's.. I don't remember the acronym something Veteran to Civilian Quotient or something like that. We just kind of looked at these and said these scales are great, but this

isn't what we do like our programs this is not our mission this isn't our programs. So we have a fantastic research director her name is Dr. Caroline Angel, and over the last half a decade we have worked with Syracuse University to develop our own survey instrument. So, we have a tool called the enriched life scale, which is a validated survey instrument which measures or quantifies to psychometric scale so quantifies enrichment. For us enrichment is health plus people plus purpose. So how much physical mental emotional health you have, relationships, shared individual purpose, service like all of those things and it provides a number. For us we're looking at, do they have a more rich life after they've engaged with Team RWB than when they started? Can we use the data that we have to identify some traits or characteristics or demographics of people who might be more under enriched or less enriched and try to go find Veterans like that? I didn't mean to nerd out on you.

Tim: No that's great. I'm trying to think about what the right follow up question is.

JJ: Let me kind of run it back at you.

Tim: Sure.

JJ: So, you'll get a little bit of time to think. So maybe the Myers-Briggs assessment to personality tests that's something that a lot of people might be familiar with. You can go on to their website and fill out the survey, and it will provide some data back to you that's what we're talking about here. It's fundamentally trying to quantify something that is qualitative in nature, but to do it in a way that makes sense. That's what we're trying to get out. We're trying to be able to move those numbers and to increase the amount of enrichment in someone's life.

Tim: One thing that we've seen that non-profits in the Veteran space do is try to do too much, try to offer too much to the Veteran, try to be involved in too many aspects of caring for the Veteran. What have you had to do at Team RWB to keep that in check?

JJ: One of the most important things that we have done I think is to learn how to say no from a very early kind of stage in the organization. Nobody likes saying no to people but it just becomes a question of focus and it becomes a question of resources. We have a mission that we feel really strongly about and unless something happens and we change our mission which I don't see happening we're going to stay locked in on accomplishing that mission. You just have to have the discipline to say is this thing going to help us accomplish the mission yes or no. If the answer is no then we don't do it now there is the term that people use is Grant

Chasers right. There are there are some people who will go out and try to get grants for things that are tangentially related or maybe even unrelated to what their organization is set up to do. They'll get a grant and they'll spin it up and go try to do that thing. For us, I just have no interest in doing that because there is so much work we can do to get better just at our mission. I wouldn't even want to think about trying to do something new at this point, but saying no is really important just being focused and then saying no and asking the really hard questions of, "Is this going to help us accomplish our mission?" even if I really like this person or this organization. If not then we should just say no thanks.

Tim: I wanted to ask you that one thing I don't really see much really that has sort of cleaned itself up in the past few years. I would say in the first few years I was out of the military everyone was trying to start their on 503 to help Veterans, and the ones that didn't do it I saw go away as quickly as they came. The ones that didn't have a defined mission, and those were often the ones that were claiming they were going to try to do too much. I think I lost count of how many Veteran non-profits contacted me as being the "one stop shop" [laughter] for Veterans issues. I was like I don't think that's gonna work out for you, and eventually most of those organizations are no longer around. What's next? So Team RWB you have this mission and you're trying to serve Veterans and you're looking for ways to do that more effectively and efficiently. Team RWB as a concept is pretty simple, but I know that managing all that is still complex you know looking at end of 2018 looking at 2019 what are some improvements or developments that that Team RWB is looking at that you can share with the audience?

JJ: Yeah. So there's a couple things in there when I try to take them in pieces here. You said something really important that the what we do is simple it is what we do is incredibly simple and that's the beauty of it, but that can also be the detriment when talking to supporters of the organization because when you're talking to businesses sometimes or corporations it's not this really compelling tragic thing that...

Tim: Yeah. They get together and they run. [laughter]

JJ: Yeah, yeah. That's it. I mean....

Tim: [laughter] Please support us.

JJ: That is the challenge right because we've tried to take this positive approach to fundraising which is an important part of what every nonprofit has to do. What we do is so simple and so positive but it works so well, but just building relationships with supporters such that they understand that is really important so that's a big consideration for us. We're very conscientious of how we present the brand to people and how

we present Veterans to people, and how we present the organization to people it's a really important part of our DNA and what we do. In terms of what's next for us it's really we're talking of questions of scale. We've got the business model pretty well locked down. We can always and we're going to try to continue to get better at how we support our chapters and our leadership development program, but the bones of it are there. It really becomes questions of how do we serve our current members better? How do we provide more enrichment to them? How do we get more and new Veterans that can take part in our program? So just becomes issues of scale, and there is the scale in terms of like building out the programs, and then there's the scale in terms of funding the programs in a long-term sense. That's really what it's about it's how do we put the systems in place so we can continue to grow, and then how do we continue to get better so we are serving more Veterans in more places but no fundamental shifts. We're not going to start doing anything different or new that's really it for us.

Tim: Okay. Before we get to the to the closing out questions, if there's anybody listening who is this is the first time they've heard of Team RWB are intrigued with what we're talking about how does one find a local chapter? When I tell people to check out Team RWB in their local area I think sometimes I forget to tell them how they should do that. [laughter] How does one become engaged with Team RWB?

JJ: Yeah so fortunately now this is this is pretty simple because we have spent a lot of the last 2 years putting together digital infrastructure that works really well. The simple answer is go to our website teamrwb.org and there you can join the team very simple you get a free Team RWB Nike shirt if you're a Veteran for joining the team. More importantly you can find where the closest chapter is, and we have over 200 locations right now. So chances are if you live where most Americans live there's a chapter relatively close to you, and even beyond that there's a list of all the events that are going on around you. You can join the team you can register to be a member, and there's a very simple it's geo encoded list of items you can find out what's going on around you at any time. You can come get involved doesn't cost anything it's very simple we just want people to show up and take part in it.

Tim: Yeah. So JJ the last two questions I like to put at the end of every interview is first give me a skill set and experience you had in the military that's contributing to your success today.

JJ: So that's a really interesting question and it's always hard for me to tease out the things that I learned just in the military versus the things that kind of came from my childhood and then were amplified by the military if that makes sense?

Tim: Sure, yeah absolutely.

JJ: I would say one of the things that really helps me out now and it's going to sound so simple and so silly, but I think the some of these simple things are really important sometimes is just the ability to stay calm and even and to try to not make rash decisions. No matter what you do there are things in our life that that we get stressed about or feel urgent or whatever it is, and just the ability. I have been in stressful kind of real-world dangerous situations it allows me to have some perspective, and to try to stay calm and make unemotional decisions in this job. I think that's probably one of the things that has served me better than anything because I find that anytime you're making decisions that are charged with emotion they're not as good as they could be.

Tim: Tell about a Veteran or an organization that you're familiar with other than Team RWB that has you excited about what they're doing right now.

JJ: That's has me excited about what they're doing right now? One of the easy answers is Team Rubicon.

Tim: Yeah.

JJ: I mean I think the work that they do over there is fantastic, and I know Jake Wood personally. He's an outstanding guy that they do awesome work over there. I think it's great a friend of mine his name is Jason McCarthy, he is the founder of GORUCK it's a for-profit company that makes awesome gear. They run awesome events that's something that he's working on. I'm going to list a couple here that I think are awesome GORUCK is another one, a friend of mine his name is Matt Griffin he was my classmate at West Point he runs a company called Combat Flip Flops.

Tim: [laughter]

JJ: You might have seen him on Shark Tank.

Tim: Yeah!

JJ: Really great I love the social good that his company does. He's an awesome guy I think they do good stuff. I just.. it's hard to pick because there's so many that are cool, but those are just some that roll off the tip of my tongue here.

Tim: Yes, Jake Wood unfortunately has not made an appearance on this podcast, but one of his staff has de la Cruz I can't remember his first name.

JJ: Oh Art?

Tim: Yeah. Yeah Art. Art de la Cruz has been on the show. Jason McCarthy and his wife Emily were just actually recently on the podcast before the Star Course event they did here in D.C.

JJ: I did the Star Course event.

Tim: Okay yeah.

JJ: The most miserable 18 hours of my life.

Tim: [laughter] You know he was at VA and we were talking and I was getting a little inspired as we were talking about it right everybody likes a good challenge. I was like, "So is there still time to sign up?" and when we were done I was like, "never-mind [laughter] that sounds awful. I don't want to do that."

JJ: So, I was on Jason's team actually.

Tim: Okay.

JJ: It was me, Jason, and Blaine and let me set the stage it was May 18th so it was the end of May so you wouldn't think it would be cold. It rained, it had been raining all weekend it rained 5 and a half inches, and it got down into the upper 40s at night and it was just wet and cold. It was just a big suck fest is basically what it was.

Tim: [laughter] and then Griffin has not been on the show yet, but his media rep and I are in talks with each other and we just haven't found the right time to get him on. Griffin when not running Combat Flip Flops is doing a great job being a stunt double for Matthew McConaughey. [laughter] yeah.

JJ: But I mean there's just so many people that are doing really amazing stuff right now. I don't know it's tough.

Tim: Yeah no I getcha, I getcha.

JJ: Who would be your favorite? Has anyone asked you this question yet?

Tim: You know what's funny no ones asked me these questions. I think episode 50 I had my colleague interview me, and I think I answered some of the staples but I'm not sure if I answered this one or not. Who has me

excited? If I'm talking about just Veterans I'm having fun watching, Nate Boyer I like seeing everything he's doing.

JJ: He was on, so quick plug, we have a Team RWB podcast and Nate was one of our early guests on it. He is pretty inspiring to watch as well.

Tim: Yes. Fred Wellman founder of ScoutComms he was on episode 2 I think or episode 3 of this podcast.

JJ: Is he known for being the founder of ScoutComms or is he known for starting the Team RWB chapter in Fredericksburg, Virginia?

Tim: Um I will...

JJ: Maybe ScoutComms okay. [laughter]

Tim: Yeah, I was gonna say if you wanna get the plug in [laughter] for that chapter we can but I'm pretty sure people know him from ScoutComms.

JJ: No, no, Fred is a volunteer leader for us and he started a fantastic chapter. I mean what he does at ScoutComms is amazing.

Tim: Right, right.

JJ: He's just generally one of the most fun and high energy people that you'll ever spend any time around.

Tim: Sure, and then Will Hubbard.

JJ: From SVA?

Tim: Yeah, he has to be one of the most influential people in the Veteran space that most Veterans don't know. If you were to start listing the Veterans that the average Veteran or the average person are aware of like the Jake Woods, the Paul Rieckoff of the world. People are familiar with those names.

JJ: The Matt Bests of the world.

Tim: The Matt Bests of the world is right, but if you look at someone who has made a huge impact on the Veteran community specifically from an education and policy standpoint. Will Hubbard deserves to be among those names. It's been cool being in the same town as him, and literally watching him talk about work.

JJ: Yeah actually, he's deployed right now. He's still continuing to serve.

Tim: Yep.

JJ: In addition to the work he's doing on the hill in supporting Veterans.

Tim: Yeah how about that? Continues to serve, lives in D.C., helps the forever G.I bill get drafted and passed, and then goes off and gets deployed.
[laughter]

JJ: Yeah. Then comes back home and gets deployed. Yeah. [laughter]

Tim: It just drives my point home. JJ it's been a pleasure talking to you sir. I'm always open to talking to people that are apart of Team RWB because it is such an easy concept for people to understand and want to be a part of, yet so powerful in the way it impacts people's lives. It was a real pleasure talking to you sir.

JJ: Well I appreciate it Tim. It's odd because I'm usually on the other side of the microphone and being the person asking the questions. I find it quite odd to be on the receiving end, so [laughter] it's been an interesting but a really good experience and you've made it really easy I appreciate it.

00:59:07 [music]

00:59:12

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 for visit www.va.gov that's www.va.gov

00:59:44

Tim:

Again, Team RWB is all around the nation if you go to teamrwb.org you can find a chapter or event near you. This week's Medal of Honor citation reading is for Donald Truesdell service is United States Marine Corps rank of Corporal. Second Nicaraguan campaign is the conflict year of Honor 1932 citation reads, "Corporal Truesdell was second in command of a Guardia Nacional Patrol in active operations against armed bandit forces in the vicinity of Constancia, near Coco River, northern Nicaragua, on 24 April 1932. While the patrol was in formation on the trail searching for a bandit group with which contact had just previously been made, a rifle grenade fell from its carrier and struck a rock, igniting the detonator. Several men close to the grenade at the time were in danger. Corporal Truesdell, who was several yards away, could easily have sought cover and safety for himself. Knowing full well the grenade would explode within two or three seconds, he rushed for the grenade, grasped it in his right hand, and attempted to throw it away from the patrol. The grenade exploded in his hand, blowing it off and inflicting serious multiple wounds about his body. Corporal Truesdell, in taking the full shock of the explosion himself, saved the members of the patrol from loss of life or serious injury. We honor his service. That wraps up episode 115 of Borne the Battle. I thank you so much for taking the time to listen. You can read more stories from our community at our Blog at blogs.va.gov you can check out the video from secretary Wilkie's message to his workforce there as well. We'll be back next week thanks so much for taking the time to listen. I'm Timothy Lawson. Signing off.

01:01:48 [music]