

Borne the Battle

Episode # 125

Jared Lyon – President of SVA’s interview from #NatCon2019

Hosted by Tim Lawson

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Opening Music

[00:00:10] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

Timothy Lawson (TL): Monday, January 7, 2019. This is *Borne the Battle* brought to you by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs. I am your host, Marine Corps Veteran Timothy Lawson. I actually had to record that a couple of times because I kept on saying 2018 on the date. That is incorrect. We are in 2019. The new year is upon us. I hope everybody had a fun and safe holiday season. We are back here at *Borne the Battle*. This week is gonna be all SVA-focused content. Student Veterans of America. They just wrapped up their National Conference in Orlando where they hosted more than 2,300 student Veterans and stakeholders at their National Conference that they hold each year and it was amazing. So much inspiration and motivation in the room. I say in the room, there were plenty of rooms. In the building, I should say. I met with a lot of student Veterans and man, Veterans are doing amazing things in higher education. I met with all 10 Student Veteran of the Year finalists. We’ll hear from them later on in the week. I got an opportunity to sit down with the Student Veteran of the Year winner, who you’ll hear from on Friday. So, this is how the week is gonna go. Today we’re gonna hear from Jared Lyon, who’s the President of SVA. He’s a Navy Veteran. You’ve prolly heard him here on the podcast before ‘cause this will be his fourth appearance. But I love sitting down with Jared at NatCon because Jared has what they call the “NatCon high” and I like to get that fresh feeling of inspiration and excitement that he has about student Veterans and the success they’re having. And then tomorrow, Wednesday, Thursday are going to be episodes with 2-3 student Veterans at a roundtables that we recorded. They were the finalists for Student Veteran of the Year. And then on Friday, we will hear from Alexandria Sawin who won the accolade of Student Veteran of the Year. And she is just as inspiring as the rest of them. So, that is how the week looks. We start with Jared Lyon, President of SVA, recorded at NatCon 2019. We talk about what it means to be, for SVA to be “left of bang.” He tells us about the amazing

group of Student Veteran of the Year finalists, and what SVA's priorities are going into 2019.

[00:02:43] Music

[00:02:48] PSA:

Man 1: I served in Vietnam.

Man 2: I served in World War II.

Woman 1: I served in Afghanistan.

Man 1: And VA serves us all.

Man 2: No matter when you served.

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

Man 1: There are benefits for Veterans of every generation.

Woman 1: See what VA can do for you.

Narrator: To learn what benefits you may be eligible for, visit www.va.gov. That's www.va.g-o-v.

[00:03:14] Music

[00:03:19] INTERVIEW:

TL: Jared, no, no introductions needed. This is your third, no, this is your fourth. So, you've been on the podcast three times before -

Jared Lyon (JL): Wow.

TL: - This is your fourth appearance. The first time you were on, we were at SVA headquarters. Second time you were on was in San Antonio last year at NatCon. Third time you were at the roundtable we did in George Mason -

JL: Oh, wow. George Mason, yep.

TL: - So, when they ask me who I want to do an interview with, I said, "Hey, if Jared is available," - 'cause I know your schedule is busy- "If Jared is available, I'd like to," 'cause I like 'NatCon high' Jared –

JL: Right on.

TL: 'Cause I know, I know even though as exhausted as you may be, you still have that energy from being here. The thing I want to talk about first is in your state of Student Veterans of America this morning, you talked about a concept of being "left of bang" –

JL: Yeah.

TL: And I think, I believe it's a new concept being brought forward from SVA –

JL: It is.

TL: As far as part of what your mission is. What does it mean for SVA and for the Veterans they represent to be "left of bang?"

JL: Yes, so if we think of "left of bang" as it pertains to the military, it's this idea, like, of close quarters combat. It's been used by the Marine Corps, law enforcement, others, but it's about situational awareness. It's about like being tuned to your surroundings and essentially what can you do in advance of a "bang." A "bang," for instance, being the point of violence. The firing of a gun, the bomb explosion. That's the "bang." And so being "left of bang" is, you know, what can you do before that? Anything to the "right of bang" is after the point of impact or violence and that would essentially cause you to be reactive. So, what can you do to be proactive as it pertains to survivability and preventing the bad thing from happening? And so, as we look at that concept, one that a lot of us that have served in uniform have a familiarity with, we kinda start looking at it as, you know, what is this differentiating idea of, you know, groups of student Veterans who are all recently transitioned out of the military, are now using their VA educational benefits on a college campus, kinda getting together and being there for each other. These are chapters where individuals are forming lifelong friendships. Sometimes, you know, they're result of marriages. I recently, for their own privacy cause it's not Facebook official yet, but I recently was just shared with an amazing story of, of two chapter leaders who met each other in their chapter, became a couple that then got married and they just found out that they are pregnant. –

TL: That's wonderful.

JL: So, I mean we are producing children out of SVA chapters but if you think about it –

TL: [Laughing] How to find love at your local campus through-

JL: Right? Right?

TL: -SVA chapters.

JL: But that's, isn't that the beauty of a network?

TL: That's great.

JL: Like it enriches our lives in so many different ways. And this concept of being "left of bang" or "left of the point of impact" is we hear a lot about in the Veteran community the challenges that Veterans face when they separate from active duty. I never stand before you, Tim, and proposit that our generation isn't without its challenges. But on the whole, on the balance, what we see at SVA through aggregated data, through the amalgamation of 1500 plus chapters, in all 50 states, 4 countries overseas, are Veterans not only, you know, succeeding, but thriving in their post-military lives. And you start thinking about the value of a group of student Veterans getting together on a college campus. They are, quite literally, being proactive; because of their efforts, they're never going to see the "bang" happen. And if the "bang" does happen, they're gonna be there to respond to it in very quick fashion. So, one of the strengths, I think, of our national chapter network is this notion that we are proactive and preventative organization from anything negative happening in one's post-military life. But even beyond that, we're creating the platform where Veterans can thrive and go on to live incredibly successful lives immediately after they've gotten out and certainly after they've graduated, degree in hand, gone on to successful careers and awesome civilian lives that might result in marriage, and children and all these other great things.

TL: Yeah, absolutely. So NatCon holds a special place in my heart because I've done... I've spoken here multiple times. I can trace the job I'm in right now all the way back to NatCon 2016 –

JL: Wow. That's cool, Tim.-

TL: Yeah, it is pretty cool.

JL: That's cool.

TL: Yeah, I bring it up every time I'm here. Every time I meet people I, like, take this endeavor seriously, because –

JL: No doubt.

TL: Like you, without even knowing it, you can start your career here. You know, it doesn't –

JL: You hear hundreds, thousands, of those stories at this point –

TL: Yeah and it's amazing. I didn't have to go to a recruiting booth or anything. You know, just, I talked to enough people and the right person heard what I needed.

JL: Yup. It could be a conversation over lunch, over a beer at the bar, or just sort of walking in between breakout sessions. –

TL: Yeah.

JL: You know what I mean? Like those conversations happen here at NatCon.

TL: So, tell me like, when you guys are planning and executing a NatCon, obviously chapter development's key, professional development's key, but as you continue to try to improve NatCon- At NatCon you said you had 30% increase of attendees this year? –

JL: We did.

TL: That's unreal –

JL: That's crazy.

TL: There's event planners out there that are green with envy –

JL: No doubt.

TL: On that sorta growth. What sort of, like going into this, going into this one specifically, what were you hoping to improve based off of last year to make the experience that much better for the student?

JL: It's a great question and the easiest way that I can answer is we were looking to improve our conference based on user feedback, based on customer feedback, based on the feedback of student Veterans, like yourself, that have been attending since 2016 or even all the way back to the first-ever NatCon in 2008. So, we aggressively survey the population that attends NatCon to try to learn from them. And we learned a couple of things. First, is that student Veterans, when they attend SVA's national conference, NatCon for short, they're looking for the opportunity to connect with each other more. So, we looked at our breakout sessions and we looked at our general sessions, time that we have organized programming. And we said how can we enrich that and maybe reduce the general sessions so that there's, you know, 3 or 4 versus 5 or 6, to create a little bit more breathing room in the schedule for those organic, networking connections that can happen –

TL: Yeah.

JL: But then also, how do we make sure that we reach equilibrium as it pertains to our breakout session offerings? That journey started almost three years ago when we made the understanding that to get to where we're responding to the unique needs and interests of our community of student Veterans, we were gonna need 96 breakout sessions over a three-and-a-half-day period. Three years ago, that sounded bonkers. —

TL: Yeah.

JL: Right. Like that was like, that is a big undertaking. But we relied on the community to do it through a competitive request for proposal process, or an RFP process, right? And so, over the past three years, we've really gotten good at reaching out to the community as it pertains to the breakout sessions. To over our six tracks of offerings, that we're bringing in cutting and leading-edge research, leading and best practices, to running a successful student organization. Having conversations about student success. And all of the unique areas of interests, to running a successful and sustainable student organization that is oriented towards the military and military-connected community of student Veterans throughout the country. And that process has really driven a big amount of the change for us. I'd say, in addition,

you're always looking for more food, so we're getting much better on the food quality. –

TL: [Laughing]

JL: We're really grateful to our, our hosts here at the Walt Disney World Coronado Springs. Amazing staff helping to make that happen. And then I'd say the last area is making sure that our pricing is competitive.–

TL: Yeah.

JL: A lot of the programs and services that SVA offers are at no cost to student Veterans. NatCon isn't one of them. Which means that our chapter leaders have to make some hard decisions back on campus. Now don't get me wrong, some of our highperforming chapters have over 30 student Veterans here –

TL: Yeah.

JL: From one school at NatCon. Some can only afford to send 2 or 3. And so how do we keep our pricing structure competitive? The way we do it is we subsidize the cost of a NatCon ticket through the amazing generosity of corporations, foundations, and other non-profits that come here. That wanna have the opportunity to, whether it's cultivate talent pipelines, engaging corporate social responsibility, or just share the good work that they're doing. Whether it's the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs, who's wicked well-represented down on the SVA campus –

TL: That's right.

JL: Which is what we call our exhibitor space. Or other amazing non-profit organizations like Team Rubicon and Team Red White and Blue and The Mission Continues and Travis Manion Foundation and service to School and Warrior-Scholar Project and a slew of others. They pay to come to NatCon, and it helps us keep our prices low enough that it's not too much of a burden for student Veterans to travel to have this experience. And year over year growth, 30% increase over last year to this year is overwhelming, right? –

TL: Yeah.

JL: And as we start looking forward for NatCon, this is our 11th annual NatCon –

TL: Crazy.

JL: Can you believe it? You know, we're starting to look to what the future looks like, which is probably an even bigger event.

TL: Yeah, that's, that's amazing. Over the course of the weekend, I'll have an opportunity to speak to the 10 finalists for Student Veterans of the Year –

JL: Amazing human beings.

TL: Yeah. I did it last year and the class of 2018, if that, we'll call it –

JL: Sure.

TL: Were super impressive. Kirsten Battacchio, Randy Dexter, just to name a few, really inspiring people. This year I haven't met any of them yet, but I'm curious if you can summarize sort of, a couple, a couple of things that make this class either unique or inspiring. I mean, what's a common thing you have seen across student Veterans that were competitive for such an accolade? What're you seeing out of this class of student Veterans?

JL: Yeah, when you look across a network of 1,528 active chapters right now, across all 50 states, 4 countries overseas, that makes Student Veterans of America the largest chapter-based student organization in the country. By a lot. And when you start thinking of the accolade or the honor of Student Veteran of the Year, it's the highest individual honor that our organization can bestow. And a few years ago, we started to, we've always had finalists, but we weren't as... It didn't make sense to us to publicize that but then we sorta were like 'Well hey, we always wind up with our 10 finalists –

TL: Yeah.

JL: That go through a gauntlet for a selection process. Why not tell everyone who they are?' Because, I think when you look at these women and men, who are represented, representative of the nationwide network of Veterans in college, they're remarkable. As far

as like pulling out a theme, it's, it's challenging, other than like, I, I can't. You always think last year was amazing –

TL: Yeah.

JL: How are we gonna up our game? And then, you just do the process again, and you up your game because student Veterans are just, day by day, getting stronger, more adept to higher education, and they're crushing it. And our ability to highlight the good work that each of them are doing is inspiring. I mean, we have 5 women, 5 men. It's amazing when the process works out that way. But that's representative of who SVA is. Nearly 50% of our chapter leadership are women Veterans –

TL: Amazing.

JL: Which over-represents –

TL: Yup.

JL: When you look at a lot of other Veteran organizations out there. You've gotta good mixing of community college, four-year programs, graduate students. There's a doctoral student in the mix, a few MBA's, and other graduate degrees, Bachelor's and Associates degree-level folks that are there. You see an ethnic and racial diversity that is on par with what we see in the enriched diversity that exists within our Veteran community. And you just see individuals that are not only leading in their SVA chapter, because the award acknowledges what you have done to this point in your academic career, but all 10 of our finalists are, are really, you know, a peek into the future –

TL: Yeah.

JL: Of how badass student Veterans are when they graduate –

TL: Absolutely.

JL: I mean, these are the high-potential individuals, that to your point, when you sorta make mention of the class of 2018, these are the folks to watch. –

TL: Yeah.

JL: They really are because they did great things while they were in school, with their SVA chapter. They enriched their campus communities and their communities beyond campus. And they're gonna continue to do it, whether in career or in volunteer opportunities, for life. So, you know, though we'll only award one of the 10 finalists with the coveted Student Veteran of the Year award, keep your eye on all 10 of them –

TL: Yeah.

JL: Because these are the individuals that we'll be talking about throughout the rest of 2019 and beyond.

TL: Yeah. I mean, last year Chris Rolph went on to a great career. He's at Raytheon, is that right? –

JL: No, he's at Accenture. –

TL: No, he's at Accenture, Accenture, that's right. –

JL: So, you know, Chris is a, is a good example to the point that you made about just finding these great opportunities, man. Like, it's starting to happen where student Veterans that get involved, that show up, that enrich their network, through each other, through other students on campus, through faculty, through staff, through companies, that they wind up being seen for who they are –

TL: Yeah.

JL: Which are straight-up badassess –

TL: Yeah.

JL: that are doing awesome. And the net result is not graduating and wondering what might my next step is, but graduating and being like, which of these handful of job offers do I accept? –

TL: Exactly.

JL: You know, which way do I see my career going? And Chris is no exception; had a handful of different job offers. And when he was

named Student Veteran of the Year, we wound up having a lot of great phone conversations –

TL: That's awesome.

JL: And in-person conversations. He is now engaged –

TL: Perfect.

JL: To, to a lovely young lady. So, I mean, you know, I feel like I'm rambling about like my favorite amazing people, like, but, you know–

TL: [Laughing] Yeah. But I think, you know, and the reason why I bring them up is, and why I seek to talk to them while I'm here is, you know, they are student Veterans, right? –

JL: Yeah.

TL: And I think that one of my, I mentioned this is in my, my breakout session yesterday, one of, the reason I enjoy doing these pod..., these interviews and why I like talking to Veterans and spotlighting and showing their sto..., your service. That's great. –

JL: Yup.

TL: It's really great to recognize and honor your service and call back on it. Your transition, that story's important because that is something we all go through and the more we can learn from each other, the better. But, Jared, I can't tell you how many times I tell people all the things that I have done in my life up until now. You, if anybody knows, that I have an impressive resume starting at the end of my military career –

JL: You do brother, yeah.

TL: Until now. And people will still, 'oh, you were in the military, Thank you for your service.' And I was like, did you not just hear all the other things I listed on? Like I appreciate the thanks but I think it's important for us to emphasize, we honor them and we recognize them for their military service, but we're trying to show how Veterans are, are having a post-military life that is, that is in a lot of ways rivaling their, like, it almost, not outshining, but competing with their military service as far as how much impact they can have in their community. And how much

impact they can have in their own personal lives. And so, I like talking to these finalists because they're such a great example of succeeding in higher education and going on to become just amazing people in society, who have the, who have the privilege to call them self a Veteran.

JL: Well and I think to, to this exact sentiment, words matter, right? –

TL: Yeah.

JL: Like we say student Veteran for a reason. I can recall 10 years ago in this work, far too often, you'd hear "Veteran student". And a Veteran student, to me, connotes the notion of, you know, a Tommy Boy or Van Wilder of sorts –

TL: [Laughter] Yeah.

JL: You know, rounding the corner on the 18th year of their undergraduate–

TL: Yeah.

JL: Hoping to maybe get a degree. You know, a "student Veteran" is exactly to your point. The thing that's most important in their identity is right now they are a student. They're also a Veteran. They might be a mom.–

TL: Yeah.

JL: They're also a cousin or a brother or a sister. They're all these other things. But a student Veteran conjures up the idea of who they are. They're scholars right now. Maybe they used to be warriors, but they're scholars right now. And because they're student Veterans, they're bringing both ideas to the table. There's this notion that's often misattributed to the cities. I'm sure you heard me say it a million times, but it's the nation that makes a great distinction between its scholars and its warriors, will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools. These "warrior scholars", these "student Veterans" are individuals that are bringing both things to the table and then will go on to lead as a result of graduating. And when you think about that, we're really no different than like, the NCAA, for instance, right? –

TL: Yeah.

JL: Where they put a strong emphasis on the notion of student-athlete. Because people had so many of these ideas that they were only athletes who happen to be students, so they focused on that. When in fact, you are a student first and then all these other things. An athlete, a Veteran, a mom, anything else, right? –

TL: Right.

JL: So, leading with student is so important because of the phase in life that you're in. But I think more importantly, where you're going post-graduation. –

TL: Yeah.

JL: It is about transitioning. And you'll be a Veteran for life. You're a student Veteran for life and it's just, it's, it's exciting to see that now people, I mean, the colloquialism, the accepted term is student Veteran. And that just warms my heart because, you know, we're leading with the thing that matters in higher education. That we're here to be students. We're not only high potential, but we're going to do really well in the classroom. We're gonna get better GPA's than our civilian counterparts, higher graduation rates than those that have never served in the military. When we graduate, we earn more and we're more, we're more likely to be employed. Like, these are all amazing things and, on the balance, our generation is thriving. And I think it's through the transformative power of higher education that that is extremely evident.

TL: Yeah. Absolutely. Briefly tell me about, if you had to look back at 2018, you're on an elevator from the first floor to the 33rd floor of a hotel. You're on the elevator with someone who, and you had, you had just that amount of time to tell them about a big win that SVA had in 2018.

JL: Wow. Big win that SVA had in 2018? I'd, I'd say that, that we're starting to shift the conversation in higher education away from the notion that Veterans are... You know, I hear it a lot, Tim. People look at me and go, "oh, well, gee golly thanks for your service, but let's be honest. If you were smart enough to get into college, how'd did you ever wind up in the military?" And I, I don't think that is, is a nefarious or, or bad thing that somebody is saying, it's, it's frankly just an ignorant assumption, right? –

TL: Yeah.

JL: And higher education is shifting away from the notion that we weren't smart enough to get into college, that's how we wound up in the military. But, instead, that we've taken this extended gap year, of sorts, served our country, earned the ability through a generous VA, taxpayer-funded benefit, to not graduate college with a bunch of debt. And then earn our education. And in so, higher education is starting to truly look at this population as high potential and not high risk. And I'd say, to me, that is one of the biggest wins because when the best schools in America are hungry for this high-potential student talent to come and enrich their classrooms and campus communities, that's when we really start moving the needle of making sure that Veterans transition successfully from the military into some of the best college and university campuses in the country, majoring in something that matters, and leads to great career and life outcomes.

TL: Yeah. I served with plenty of people who had, who had their Bachelor's degree, still decided to enlist –

JL: Yeah.

TL: And not commission, and then got out and pursued higher edu... pursued graduate's degree and stuff like that. So that, yeah, that the, the ignorance that, that you know, that military came first 'cause you couldn't do college, is, is unfortunate.

JL: But in the neglecting the notion, too, that our entire officer Corps went to college-

TL: Sure, sure.

JL: - and then join, and then join the military, right? But, yeah.

TL: [Laughing] Yeah. So, finally, tell me, tell me about, if you had any one priority, singular priority, for SVA in 2019, what are you guys looking to accomplish?

JL: It is tough because it's two-fold for me. But they, they are joined so –

TL: Okay.

JL: I'm gonna, I'm gonna give you both –

TL: Alright, I'll give it to you, I'll give it to you.

JL: So, so, so the first is, is just making sure that we can do everything humanly possible to well-represent the voice of this generation of student Veterans, as it pertains to the implementation of Forever G.I. Bill. And the VA is making great strides in ensuring that they're a partner in that work, to make sure that the bill is implemented in the way that best benefits students. And that reduces the amount of stress that Veterans have in college so that they can focus on the comradery and proactive abilities to run strong and successful SVA chapters. And that's why we're really focusing on our chapter programming and supportive elements to the organization.

TL: Okay. I like that. —

JL: Is that fair, is that a twofer? —

TL: That's a... Nope. That's fair. I'll give it to you. —

JL: Cool. —

TL: Cause, yeah. That's the priority with the, with the, what's the, what's the right word I'm looking for? I've been trying to, I've been, I've been select... I've been so word selective this week and I'm starting to burn myself out on it —

JL: [Laughing]

TL: Like I was drafting tweets last night. Like is this the better word or is that the better word? —

JL: "Can I borrow a thesaurus?"

TL: That's the that's the positive consequence of being able to, and consequence isn't the right word for there. Anyways —

JL: Outcome?

TL: Outcome. There we go. Yeah. –

JL: Let's get it. Yeah.

TL: [Laughing] Yeah. Perfect. Jared Lyon. I know you and I will talk at least one more time –

JL: Easily.

TL: Before the year's over. It's always a pleasure talking to you. Thank you so much for inviting me, once again, to SVA's national conference.

JL: Dude, thank you for coming because I, I mean, I, I travel a lot. And as I go around, I, I very frequently hear from folks that I've not yet had the chance to meet. "Oh hey, I caught your, your podcast. Tim did a great job and I listened to the whole thing. –

TL: Yeah.

JL: So, I'm here to have a conversation." It's, it's so interesting to me how often I have received that feedback. So, anyone listening, feel free to connect with me on LinkedIn, or any other social media platforms that you might be into. 'Cause I, I absolutely love having those conversations with folks about student Veterans' success.

[00:25:38] Music

[00:41:04] PSA

Man: 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 and proud to honor my grandfather every day. Search VA careers to find out more.

[00:26:11] Music

[00:26:15] CLOSING MONOLOGUE

TL:

Big thanks to Jared for joining me, for taking the time to sit down and talk. He is very sought out in those 3 to 4 days at NatCon so I'm always grateful when he takes a little time out of his busy schedule to sit down and talk with us 'cause I'd like to hear about what's going on. I wanna hear it straight from him, of course. You know what I mean? If you're interested in Student Veterans of America, you can go to studentveterans.org [Link to SVA website]. They are on social media @studentvets [Link to SVA's Twitter page: <https://twitter.com/studentvets?lang=en>] and they are a great chap... They're a great organization to be connected with, especially if you are in an area, maybe a more rural area, and there is a student veteran chapter at your local university. Reach out to them and see how you can, how you can support them because student Veteran chapters are always looking for support, and connections, collaborations, whatever may be. And I know they'd be, they'd be flattered to hear that a member of their community is looking to support them.

Today's Medal of Honor citation reading, we'll do one today and then we'll do one Friday. Today's Medal of Honor citation reading is Sergeant Ryan M. Pitts. I chose him 'cause he, he provided a keynote at, at NatCon. I thought it was appropriate to include his citation reading here. Service is U.S. Army. Division: 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, 173rd Airborne Brigade. Conflict: War on Terrorism in Afghanistan. Year of Honor is 2008. Citation reads: "Sergeant Ryan M. Pitts distinguished himself by extraordinary acts of heroism at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as a Forward Observer in 2nd Platoon, Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade during combat operations against an armed enemy at Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler in the vicinity of Wanat Village, Kunar Province, Afghanistan on July 13, 2008. Early that morning, while Sergeant Pitts was providing perimeter security at Observation Post Topside, a well-organized Anti-Afghan Force consisting of over 200 members initiated a close-proximity, sustained, and complex assault using accurate and intense rocket-propelled grenade, machine gun, and small arms fire on Wanat Vehicle Patrol Base. An immediate wave of rocket-propelled grenade rounds engulfed the Observation Post wounding Sergeant Pitts and inflicting heavy casualties. Sergeant Pitts had been knocked to the ground and was bleeding heavily from shrapnel wounds to his arm and legs, but with incredible toughness and resolve, he subsequently took control of the Observation Post and returned fire on the enemy. As the enemy drew nearer, Sergeant Pitts threw grenades, holding them after the pin was pulled and the safety lever was released to allow a nearly immediate detonation on the hostile forces. Unable to stand on his own and near

death because of the severity of his wounds and blood loss, Sergeant Pitts continued to lay suppressive fire until a two-man reinforcement team arrived. Sergeant Pitts quickly assisted them by giving up his main weapon and gathering ammunition while continually lobbing fragmentary grenades until these were expended. At this point, Sergeant Pitts crawled to the northern position radio and described the situation to the Command Post as the enemy continued to try and isolate the Observation Post from the main Patrol Base. With the enemy close enough for him to hear their voices and with total disregard for his own life, Sergeant Pitts whispered in the radio situation reports and conveyed information that the Command Post used to provide indirect fire support. Sergeant Pitts' courage, steadfast commitment to the defense of his unit, and ability to fight while seriously wounded prevented the enemy from overturning the Observation Post and capturing fallen American soldiers, and ultimately prevented the enemy from gaining fortified positions on higher ground from which to attack the Wanat Vehicle Patrol Base. Sergeant Ryan M. Pitts' extraordinary heroism and selflessness above and beyond the call of duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, Company C, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, and the United States Army. We honor his service.” That does it for this episode. Thank you so much for taking the time to listen. We will be back tomorrow speaking with a few Student Veterans of the Year Finalists. Be sure to follow us on social media @DeptVetAffairs on Twitter [Link to VA Twitter page: https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor] and Instagram [Link to VA Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/deptvetaffairs/?hl=en>] and Veterans... [facebook.com/VeteransAffairs](https://www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs) [Link to VA Facebook page] on Facebook. I'm Timothy Lawson, signing off.

[00:30:52] Music out