# *Borne the Battle*

*Episode # 132*

Brent Thompson—Navy Veteran, Head Brewer at Texas Ale Project

*https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/56123/brent-thompson-navy-veteran-brewer/*

# (Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Music

# **[00:00:10] OPENING MONOLOGUE:**

**Timothy Lawson (TL):** Thursday, January 31, 2019. This is *Borne the Battle* brought to you by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs. I am your host, Marine Corps Veteran, Timothy Lawson. It is super cold out there, just about everywhere in the United States. So, I hope everybody is staying safe and staying warm in this interesting time of winter. Big news around VA includes the announcement about access standards for healthcare under the [Mission Act](https://militarybenefits.info/va-mission-act/) [Link to more information about the Mission Act], signed by the president in June 2018. There’s six different eligibility criteria for community care: services that are unavailable, residents in a state without a full-service VA medical center, 40-mile legacy grandfathered for the Choice Program, access standards, best medical interest, and then needing care from a VA medical center line that VA determines is not providing care that complies with VA’s standards for quality. What does it all mean? What was all that? Uh- Those are the six different eligibility criteria for Veterans to be able to get care within their community underneath the Mission Act, i.e. opportunities that Veterans may have to get healthcare from a facility outside of the VA network. To understand that more, there has been a lot of stories that have gone out- New York Times, USA Today. A lot of stories have gone out on this care, but you can go to [blogs.va.gov](https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/) [Link to VA’s blog page]. One of our most recent news releases talks about the access standards and what Veterans need to know about this development. This week’s interview is with Navy Veteran Brent Thompson. Brent Thompson is head brewer and cofounder of the Texas Ale Project down in the city of Dallas. I’ve had the opportunity to visit the establishment a couple times. The alcohol industry is one that we have avoided from a ‘content creation’ perspective since I joined VA. But, with so many Veterans getting involved in distilling and craft beer and wineries and a whole bunch of different aspects of that industry, it would be foolish to not still get their perspective on their service and their transition and, most of all, their experiences in those industries and how their military service is contributing to their success in the industry and how they view that industry through the lens of prior service or just simply from being contributors to that industry. That’s what these episodes have been about. That’s what this podcast has been about. It’s not only learning about Veterans’ service and transition, but the industries that they’re in and how they’re contributing to them and any insight we can glean from their experiences in those industries and get their perspective. So, Brent Thompson will be the first of that industry to join us here on *Borne the* *Battle*. We talk about his time in the Navy, talk about the influence that his father was on his life, and we learn a lot about being a head brewer, most importantly, being the leader of a brewery in that industry specifically down in Texas. Enjoy.

[00:03:28] Music

# **[00:03:34] PSA:**

**Man 1:** I served in Vietnam.

**Man 2:** I served in World War II.

**Woman:** I served in Afghanistan.

**Man 1:** And, VA serves us all.

**Man 2:** No matter when you served.

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

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

**Woman:** See what VA can do for you.

**Narrator:** To learn what benefits you may be eligible for, visit [www.va.gov](https://www.va.gov/) [Link to VA’s website]. That’s [www.va.gov](https://www.va.gov/) [Link to VA’s website].

[00:04:00] Music

# **[00:04:05] INTERVIEW:**

**(TL):** Alright. Brent Thompson.

**Brent Thompson (BT):** Yes.

**(TL):** Navy Veteran.

**(BT):** Yes.

**(TL):** We’re here at the Texas Ale Project. I just realized- I’ve been here before- but I just realized yesterday that it’s- that it’s an acronym for ‘TAP’.

**(BT):** Correct.

**(TL):** [Laughter]

**(BT):** Sometimes it takes a little while for people to get that, but that was actually intended.

**(TL):** Yeah, well-

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** Ok, good. Well, I hope so because I would have hated to come to that realization and then find out that it was just a coincidence. [Laughter]

**(BT):** Right, right. That’s funny.

**(TL):** Yeah. So, let’s- let’s start this where we start all- all of these interviews. And the one thing that all of us Veterans have in common- no matter what you did in the military, no matter—

**(BT):** Mmmm.

**(TL):** what path you took- there was still some sort of prompt, some sort of decision to join. Um, I mean some people were [Laughter]- were drafted, of course—

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** but most of us current conflict Veterans have had the luxury of choosing to join.

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** Bring us back to that decision for you.

**(BT):** Well, you know, it was- It’s kind of one of those things for me that I- I wanted to serve. My father was in the Army during Vietnam. My brother also served, as well; he was actually a nuclear engineer for the Navy- or in the Navy. And, um- And to be brutally honest, I didn’t know if I was quite ready to go to college yet. [Laughter]

**(TL):** Yeah. Yeah. I know- I know a lot of Veterans that had that same sentiment that like, “I wasn’t sure- I wasn’t ready for whatever I thought the next part of life was. —

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** So, I postponed life, essentially,”- [Laughter]- “by going.”

**(BT):** Right, right.

**(TL):** And I know a lot of Veterans through those - through that one or two tours that they did ended up finding their path and then finding—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** what they were interested in. Did you find that through service or did you come out on the other side still sort of up-in-arms of like, “I don’t know what to do now?”

**(BT):** You know, it was really eye-opening for me. It was- It was a pretty incredible experience. Joining the Navy- You know, it’s interesting. I wanted to see the world and I actually- I got to do that. [Laughter]

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** I can’t remember off the top of my head how many different countries I’ve been to. But on my first deployment, it seemed like every two weeks we were pulling into a new port. And so, I really got to experience culture. I grew up in a really small town just outside of Houston, Texas. —

**(TL):** Ok.

**(BT):** And, not a whole lot going on there. And for me to pack my bags and be able to see the world was pretty incredible. And I fell in love with food and people and just, you know, what- Like, what defines culture. It’s, like, what you eat, what you drink, —

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** you know? And a lot of that had to do with where I am today. Or, I guess, it really influenced me and kind of guided me subconsciously—

**(TL):** Sure.

**(BT):** to where I am today, if you will.

**(TL):** Yeah. I was just thinking today about how- How amazing is the military in that you can just walk in and, so long as you meet a couple qualifications of, like, physical and mental standards, —

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** they’ll give you a job, they’ll feed you, they’ll send you around the world. Like, how amazing of an opportunity is that, really? When you think about, like, what comes with the opportunity to serve?

**(BT):** Yeah. It was really, you know- again- for me, it was a really incredible experience. I was an aviation ordinance man. And I was actually attached to a helicopter squadron. At that time, it was called HS-5. And so, after boot camp, I went to Pensacola and went to school to learn how to deal with the weapon systems on the H-60s. And from there, we deployed on aircraft carriers. And I’ll never forget the first time that I was on an aircraft carrier in the middle of the ocean. It was- You wanna talk about just feeling of awe. It was just incredible. It was intense but awesome. [Laughter]

**(TL):** My father did 20 years in the Navy—

**(BT):** Mmm.

**(TL):** and, just before he retired, I remember the USS Nimitz had pulled into port, —

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** near where we were. And so, they had a family day on the Nimitz. We could board it. They were gonna go, like, into the water, like, for, like, an hour and come back or something like that, right? And I remember- We went down into the berthing area and I just remember thinking—

**(BT):** [Laughter]

**(TL):** And, I was a child still, right? So, I had to have been maybe twelve—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** maybe a little younger? And so, things are still reasonably big to me, like- And I was still like, “Holy smokes. You slept in that small of a space?” [Laughter] —

**(BT):** Yep.

**(TL):** Like, “You lived down here?” So, I commend anybody that decides to willingly join the Navy [Laughter] and live in those circumstances.

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** I may choose a firing hole before [Laughter] sleeping in an aircraft carrier.

**(BT):** Yeah. Yeah. And being that we were part of the air wing, our berthing area was, literally, just underneath the flight deck. So, you would hear the arresting gear, and the catapults, and everything all hours of the night when we were having flight ops. But it was- it was definitely an experience that- It’s hard to describe to people that haven’t been there. I mean, everyone’s seen an aircraft carrier on television or in a movie.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** But, just, the power and just, um- Again, it’s just- It was a really, really neat experience. And I’ll never forget walking underneath the, you know, the rotor wash from our H-60s for the first time, too. And it was just- It was hard to believe that I was, you know, grew up in this small town outside of Houston and here I am, now, standing on the flight deck of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. [Laughter]

**(TL):** Yeah. The contrast is inspiring almost, isn’t it?

**(BT):** Mhmm. It is.

**(TL):** So, tell me about a close friend or a great leader that you had while you were in the military.

**(BT):** You know, honestly, I really think the- the- kind of the best leader, if you will, or the person that influenced me the most in my life is probably my dad. No, not probably. He really was. He showed me drive. He showed me what it was to work hard, and to love your family, and to provide for your family and, just, to really work with my hands. I mean, when I was growing up, we would restore boats and cars. And I have some favorites that are in the back of my head and I still wish we, you know, would have held onto those. But, at the same time, just, really getting to spend quality time with my dad and growing up with a good, solid foundation of what family is and, um- You know, I really think that that’s probably what’s influenced me and a lot of my decisions in life and how hard I work, to this day. It’s- I surprise myself sometimes. But, um, yeah. I would definitely say that the biggest influence or leader in my life was my father.

**(TL):** Interesting.

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** I like that.

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** So, what prompted your transition out, then?

**(BT):** So, I did two deployments- two long cruises. The first was on the- Oh, god- What was it? I’m getting it confused now. I can’t remember if it was- I did one on the JFK and then I was also on the Eisenhower. And, actually, I think the first one was on the Eisenhower. And it was pretty incredible, again, to be able to travel and, just meet people and, just, eat this amazing food. I’ll, just, never forget getting off the boat, and I’m thankful that I would, you know- One, I guess, one story in particular that sticks out in my mind, is that we were actually on the island of Corfu in Greece, and I found this little restaurant, kind of, just, off the worn- off the beaten path. And this guy was cooking on a wood-burning stove and he was making moussaka in ceramic bowls and, like, rosemary chicken, just very simple food. And it, just, really kind of hit home for me. And I can still taste it, to this day, just thinking about it, you know? And I actually want to go back there some day and see if that place is still there. [Laughter] And again, you know, as far as, like, the decision to leave the military- I knew that I wanted to go to school and see what other adventures were gonna be there for me. And for the longest time, I actually thought that I was gonna become a chef and maybe go to culinary school after I got out of the military. But instead, I started working on my bachelor’s degree in public relations and working in the service industry tending bar, waiting tables. It was a very flexible schedule, so it made it easy to go to school. But the overall, I guess, the overall decision for me to get out- I was just ready- I was ready to experience a new journey, if you will.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** What, as someone who is in public affairs, uh, why public affairs?

**(BT):** You know, that’s a great question. I knew at some point in time that I wanted to- that I wanted to open my own business.

**(TL):** Ok.

**(BT):** At this point in time, I had no idea what that business was going to be, and I honestly thought that this would be a good way for me to get a good, solid foundation on how to reach out to people, market, promote. You know, all those things that come into play whenever you actually own your own business.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** Yeah, I mean, Communications is definitely a part of marketing, right?

**(BT):** Mhmm. Mhmm.

**(TL):** And I think it was Bill Gates that said, “If I was down to my last dollar, I’d spend it on marketing,”

**(BT):** [Laughter] Exactly.

**(TL):** In reference to Microsoft, right?

**(BT):** Mhmm. Mhmm.

**(TL):** And so, I think he’s one of the few people that know that concept the best on growing business.

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** So, I think that was a wise decision. Um. So, I mean, that’s a good segue into where we are right now. We’re in the Texas Ale Project, in the tap room here.

**(BT):** Yeah. Yeah.

**(TL):** Your- Tell us about your role in this business and, um- Yeah, let’s start there. What is your role here?

**(BT):** Um, I make beer.

**Everyone:** [Laughter]

**(TL):** Well, that’s good. I feel like that’s a key—

**(BT):** Yeah, yeah.

**(TL):** component of a beer company, is to produce the product.

**(BT):** I know; it’s funny. People ask me all the time what it is that I do here, and it’s like, “Well. It just depends on the day, honestly.” Um. And there’s not anything that I won’t do here.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** And, it’s funny. With some of the guys that, you know, work with us- the guys and gals- You know, it’s funny, I always tell everyone that, “I won’t ask you something that I haven’t done or won’t do.” But, yeah. My main- my main focus here at Texas Ale Project is, actually, I run production. So, I produce wart. For those of you that don’t know, it’s basically, like, the sugar water that ends up fermenting into beer.

**(TL):** Hmm.

**(BT):** And then I also, you know, build the production schedules, do all the ordering, invoicing, you name it. I sweep the floors a lot, clean up; lots of cleaning. Brewing is actually probably, like, 98% cleaning, and—

**(TL):** [Laughter]

**(BT):** 2% actual brewing. It’s all we do; we’re cleaners.

**(TL):** Well, then the military definitely prepared you for this job. [Laughter]

**(BT):** Yes. For sure, for sure, yes. Yeah, definitely. And it doesn’t bother me. I mean, you know, I enjoy- I enjoy what we do here. There’s nothing more rewarding than being able to create something and have someone else try it and enjoy it. And it just, it means- It’s pretty incredible to be able to make something from scratch and have others really enjoy it, you know?

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** And that’s one of the reasons why I loved, you know, I love food and making beer, as well, is that you can change people’s minds on what their perceptions are and things that they think that they like but then, realistically- Or they don’t like. You know, for instance, India Pale Ales. It’s one of my favorite styles and it’s probably the biggest style in American craft beer.

**(TL):** Has to be.

**(BT):** For sure.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** Right? And I have people tell me all the time, “I don’t like IPAs,” and then I smile really big and I poor them a sample of ours. I say, “Well you haven’t tried ours yet.” [Laughter]

**(TL):** Yeah. Yeah.

**(BT):** You know? And I would say nine out of ten times people enjoy it, you know?

**(TL):** You know, it’s- it’s- What I really appreciate about that is, you know, we don’t- When we think about creativity and we think about the arts—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** we don’t- Like, I guess, culinary stuff does get brought into that—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** but I think that we don’t yet look at the beverage industry, especially even craft beer—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** as so much being a creative process, right? We know that there is a skill to it and there’s a craft, but I think that- I think there’s something to be said about the creativity that gets to go into it, not only the style and the taste of the beer, but how it’s labeled, how it’s named —

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** Right? Think about how important a name is—

**(BT):** Of course!

**(TL):** to a beer, right? And how, you know, someone walking into your tap room here is probably likely to try many of the beers there. But if I’m walking into a local bar here in Dallas and I see a number of taps from local breweries, the name really matters. Right?

**(BT):** It does, it does. And, you know, we try to have fun with our names- on- on our beer names. And, I mean, you know, I get asked a lot, “What is Texas Ale Project?” You know? And when we first sat down and we were going over names for the brewery itself, I mean, we probably went through probably 400 different names, and just- It was just this whole creative experience, and it was really incredible.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** Just listing words out and- You know, it took a long time to go through this process, but at the same time, we ended up with Texas Ale Project. And, you know, there’s a lot of- I guess- I just- We didn’t want the brewery to only mean, like, this city or this neighborhood or something like that. And we wanted all- One thing that we have, as Texans, in common is that we’re Texans. [Laughter]

**(TL):** Yeah. Yeah.

**(BT):** And so, Texas Ale Project is a brewery for all Texans- and not just Texans, obviously- but, I mean, we wanted people to look at that TAP handle no matter where they were in the state and say, “Oh! It’s Texas.”

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** You know, “Let me ask. I’ma have one of those.”

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** But, some of the more creative, fun names, um- For instance, our double IPA is called ‘100 Million Angels Singing’.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** And that’s actually a line from a Johnny Cash song called “When the Man Comes Around”.

**(TL):** Interesting.

**(BT):** And, um, on- it was on- I think the album was American IV. I think it was the last album that he put out. And, you know, he’s talking about, you know, “When the Man Comes Around” it’s literally like 100 million angels singing. And the double IPA, to me, is kind of that all-inspiring beer. It’s, you know, just incredible. And so, whenever you open up a can and have a sip, it’s like- It just kind of floods all of your senses, if you will.

**(TL):** Sure.

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** Sure. Johnny Cash, also a Veteran, by the way. I don’t know if you knew that.

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** I think he was an Air Force Veteran. So…

**(BT):** Yeah, that’s right.

**(TL):** I did notice- I did realize that there is one- there’s one beer here you have that has a very obvious military branding, and that’s your ‘Good to Go’—

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** pale ale.

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** Which I appreciate the name of—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** because I remem- I mean, I probably said ‘good to go’ a million times when I was in the military. [Laughter] Oh, man, I mean—

**(BT):** [Laughter] Yep.

**(TL):** You know, it’s both- it’s both a-a acknowledgment and a question, right? “Hey, good to go?” “Good to go.” “Hey, we need to do this. Good to go?” Right?

**(BT):** Right, right.

**(TL):** It was like- It was so- Ah, you could use it in so many- so many places. Um, were you- were you hoping to, like, were you guys making that beer, planning on making it military-themed or how did that come about?

**(BT):** You know, we met a group called ‘Honor, Courage, Commitment’ and they were a not-for-profit here in north Texas that helped Veterans become business owners.

**(TL):** Yeah, they have a little incubator here—

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** in Dallas. Yeah.

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** It’s amazing.

**(BT):** Yeah, for sure. And the- Just a really- It’s funny because, you know, be- You know, looking at the names and the marketing and everything, it was, like, the best worst decision ever to put a camouflage- a beer in a camouflage can because when it’s on the shelf, you can’t see it.

**Everyone:** [Laughter]

**(BT):** I know. I wish you could- I wish you folks out there could see it. I mean, it’s a digital camo can. It’s really awesome, and the beer is incredible. It’s probably one of my favorite beers that we brew. It’s just a really nice pale ale, lightly hopped, but nice- nice flavor and aroma.

**(TL):** We- in the two and a half years that I’ve been at VA- we have avoided alcohol-themed—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** subjects, right?

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** Because, obviously, it’s a sensitive subject in the Veteran community, especially for those that are recovering.

**(BT):** Of course.

**(TL):** But with so many Veterans getting into the beer business, it’s impossible to ignore now. And so, I’m curious. And, I guess, there’s a few questions involved in here—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** and we’ll start with maybe the tougher one. How do you feel fitting into all of that? In having a beer that’s marketed for, branded for Veterans? Have you thought at all about, um- Obviously, when it comes to any sensitive subject or anything that anybody- not just Veterans, obviously—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** could have issue with, sort of where do you stand on that, I guess, as a Veteran? I don’t know if you know anybody that’s- that’s struggled with stuff like this but—

**(BT):** I have.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** You know, I have. And- and it’s- and it’s- You know, it’s one of those things that, yes, we’re-we’re in the alcohol industry, right?

**(TL):** Right.

**(BT):** And so, we always promote being cautious and being safe. I mean, this- We’re not in this, you know, industry as, “Let’s overconsume constantly.” You know? We’re actually—

**(TL):** Right.

**(BT):** We’re actually creating something for people to be able to enjoy with their friends and family. Um. And, you know, the- the craft beer industry, I would say, it’s very similar to the military in the fact that there’s a lot of comradery—

**(TL):** Mhmm.

**(BT):** amongst team- amongst the team, you know? And just—

**(TL):** So, do you have twelve people here, right?

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** So, there’s twelve of us here right now, and actually five of us, including myself, are Veterans.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** And, you know, it’s easier for me, sometimes, to work with Veterans because a lot of times we’re on the same page.

**(TL):** Right.

**(BT):** And, you know, we’re given a task, we’re given something to accomplish, and we figure out how to do it.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** You know? And a lot of times, it’s- for me- it’s been easier to work with Veterans than someone who hasn’t served. Nothing against those that didn’t- haven’t served, obviously.

**(TL):** Sure.

**(BT):** But a lot of times, again, I think it’s just, like, that goal-driven mindset.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** You know?

**(TL):** And I’m wondering if you fall into this with your team. You know, in the public affairs staff at VA- a lot of Veterans there, as well—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** and, um, you know, I don’t look at anybody differently, whether they are a Veteran or not. But there is something- When you’re interacting with a fellow Veteran, especially if they were of the same branch as you—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** it almost- it almost seems like you know how to interact with them much more quickly than you would if someone wasn’t a Veteran.

**(BT):** Yeah. And I, for me, I think- and this could also have something to do with the way that, you know, I was raised, but at the same time I think- it’s just, you know, there’s not a whole lot of dancing around the topic, if you will.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** It’s kind of like, “This is what needs to be done. Let’s see how we can execute it—

**(TL):** Sure.

**(BT):** to the fullest, the fastest.”

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** You know?

**(TL):** I think that last part’s the- I have realized that, in most cases, Veterans are the ones who don’t want to be sitting around in meetings for too long. [Laughter] They want the mission, the objective—

**(BT):** Yep.

**(TL):** and, like, their lateral limits of execution—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** and then they want to get it done.

**(BT):** Yep.

**(TL):** So, that’s always appreciative.

**(BT):** For sure.

**(TL):** So, by the way, I appreciate you helping me get through that question that I had the hardest time getting out in front of you.

**(BT):** Oh no worries.

**(TL):** But—

**(BT):** Just real quickly.

**(TL):** Sure.

**(BT):** Sorry. But it is a delicate situational a lot of times. And if someone finds themselves, like, you know, that they feel like they’re struggling with something, they should definitely reach out to someone.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** You know, and there’s- You know, even with the VA and other sources, as well, I mean. There’s so many people out there that can help you, if you really need it, and you just have to ask for it, you know? The last thing that I’d want to see is someone struggling with an addiction- or whatever it might be- or challenges. But, at the same time, you know, just, there’s so many programs out there today. So, just—

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** If you need it, ask.

**(TL):** Yeah, absolutely. I appreciate that.

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** The- So, the lighter part of that- those set of questions I was getting to.

**(BT):** Mmm.

**(TL):** Have you- have you had a chance to- Have you paid attention to other craft beers that are coming or that other Veterans are getting involved with? I know out in Virginia we have Honor Brewing.

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** We have Young Veteran’s Brewing Company. I’ve run into a number of Veterans in other states that are, you know, a part of a brewery or starting their own brewery—

**(BT):** Right.

**(TL):** something like that. So, Veterans are really getting into this industry. Have you- do you have a beat at all on other Veterans in this state or in this area, that are getting involved in craft beer?

**(BT):** Yes. I mean, yeah. It’s really interesting because, you know- I think you mentioned earlier- it’s pretty incredible the amount of Vetermans- Veterans, excuse me- Veterans that are actually getting into- whether it be distilling or making beer. It’s a lot. And I think a lot of it has to do with just the fact that, you know, we’re able to create and work hard. And, again, it’s very mission-based I feel like, you know?

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** Because you- we’ll set out the production. Usually on Fridays we’ll have our production meeting and we’ll set out the plan for the next week or two weeks, whatever it might be. And then we just know, “Hey. It’s time to- it’s time to- These are the tasks at hand and let’s take care of them.” And at the end of the day, we get to have a beer. [Laughter]

**(TL):** [Laughter] That’s a great perk, isn’t it?

**(BT):** It is. It is nice.

**(TL):** Yeah, at the end of my workday, no one hands me a beer. [Laughter] I think it’s because we’re in a federal building; I’m not quite sure.

**(BT):** Right, right, right.

**(TL):** But no one hands me a beer at the end of my day. But, yeah, you mentioned distilling. Maker’s Mark- I don’t think many people know this- up until several years ago—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** Maker’s Mark’s head distiller was Dave Pickerell, who was a former Army scout.

**(BT):** Wow.

**(TL):** He now distills over at Whistle Pig Rye, which is a—

**(BT):** Yep.

**(TL):** Yeah, a smaller batch that people may know.

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** But, you know, here’s this- here’s this whisky that so many of us have had or, you know, that can recognize the label, and one of the main influencers of the product that is going into that is an Army Veteran.

**(BT):** Yep.

**(TL):** You know? So, it’s just another testament to how many facets of life Veterans are involved in.

**(BT):** Mhmm. For sure.

**(TL):** Tell me about- tell me about the challenges that you- that you see in this industry with the- I mean, I feel like every day there’s a different beer, new tap handle—

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** that I haven’t seen. Tell us about the challenges of being in an industry that somehow seems to continuously be just as popular as it was the month, the year, you know, the time before it, but also is becoming super-saturated with new competition?

**(BT):** Yeah, when we, um- Texas is a little bit different of a story than the national picture, I feel like. But, it is, it’s very competitive. Making good beer just isn’t enough these days. You have to make an exceptional beer.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** And, uh- Quality, quality, quality, quality, and about quality control. I mean, it’s extremely difficult out there. We have a very good team. We’re a small family business. So, my wife and I dreamt this place up about seven and a half, eight years ago. And she actually runs the business side while I run production. And she’s very smart; she actually got her M.B.A. at Cornell. And, um—

**(TL):** I’ve heard of that place. [Laughter]

**(BT):** [Laughter] Yeah.

**(TL):** And she’s helping you here? [Laughter]

**(BT):** [Laughter] Yes.

**(TL):** Huge sacrifice! [Laughter]

**(BT):** You know, and it’s really interesting. We make a really good team. And then my father-in-law runs business development for us. And, I mean, he’s a pretty incredible guy. And, um, so, ultimately, it takes all of us to make this place work.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** And we push hard every day and we strive for success. But, you’re right. I mean, there’s a ton of competition out there. And, growth, as far as production levels are concerned, you know, you have to be realistic these days, you know? Even just a few years ago, people were experiencing 80%, 90%, you know, 100% growth over the previous year.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** I mean—

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** And it’s not- it’s not really that way anymore. I mean, maybe for a select few. But at the same time, you know, there’s only so much shelf space out there. You know? And it’s hard to stay in front of people and be top of mind. I mean, you know, if you think about 20 years ago, people typically drank one beer—

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** and that’s what they always drank—

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** you know? Which, really, is interesting when you look at it today because they say that the average craft beer consumer may pick you up one out of eight times—

**(TL):** Wow…

**(BT):** One out of ten times, you know?

**(TL):** That makes sense.

**(BT):** So, yeah. It’s- And it’s interesting because people’s- people’s palettes have changed. I mean, like, the- If you look at, you know, how, I guess, quote unquote millennials, if you will, are always looking for something new and exciting, and, um- But it’s really kind of nice, though, because that- we have the ability to be able to create new things here. You know, it doesn’t take us ten years and product research to put out a new beer. [Laughter]

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** You know, in fact, today the guys and I are actually piloting a new beer that we’re hoping that can be on the schedule for this next year and it’s called ‘A Fistful of Dollars’. Yeah, it’s a big stout that we’re making with Mexican chocolate, and cinnamon and—

**(TL):** I like it! [Laughter]

**(BT):** milk, sugar, and, uh, cocoa nibs, and all kinds of fun stuff. So, it’s kind of a play on a Mexican chocolate. So, we’re really excited about that.

**(TL):** But there’s- there’s so much that goes into all this. But, the main- the main point that you said, that as a consumer I know is true—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** is it’s tough to get in front of people.

**(BT):** It is.

**(TL):** Because there is- I’ll go to my local store, I’ll pick up something I haven’t seen before, I’ll love it—

**(BT):** Mmm.

**(TL):** I’ll try something else from that brewery, I’ll love it. And then, through distribution changes or through availability changes, it’ll be a brewery that’s up in, like, Connecticut—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** and I’m in D.C. I can’t just, like- I just can’t, like, drop by their tap room. So, unless their distribution continues to come in my area, you know, that’s- I’m limited to that availability.

**(BT):** Yeah. And distribution is tough.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** We’re in about- Currently, we’re only distributed in the state of Texas, and we’re only in about 75 counties currently. Most of the east Texas, north, and then out west. And we’re starting to move into the Houston area a little bit. And the laws are a little bit tricky here in the state of Texas. We can self-distribute. So, we make the beer, we sell the beer, we deliver the beer and we can do that anywhere in the state of Texas. But we have to leave from the brewery, drive there, drop the beer off [Laughter], and then come back.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** So, we try to only send full truck loads down to Houston. But no, distribution is very tricky and you’re right. If, for some reason, something falls through with the distributor or, you know- They’re becoming very overwhelmed, as well. If you look at how many different brands that they have to actually carry and distribute. I mean, there’s still beers in Texas- uhm. You know, what I guess what I’m saying is that there’s still lots of breweries that are in the nation that aren’t distributed in Texas.

**(TL):** Right.

**(BT):** Texas is one of the bigger beer markets in the country but, at the same time, it’s very difficult to get into Texas. Some of our laws are a little bit different with labeling, and licensing, and all that fun stuff. And, so I think that actually helps us as a local craft brewery here because it keeps some people from wanting to come into Texas. But, at the same time, it’s still tough, yeah.

**(TL):** Yeah. Just a- We’ll close out with a couple questions.

**(BT):** Sure.

**(TL):** Tell me- tell me about an experience or a skillset that you gained in the Navy that you feel is contributing to your success today.

**(BT):** Being patient.

**(TL):** Yeah. [Laughter] I thought you were going to say cleaning. Sweeping.

**Everyone:** [Laughter]

**(BT):** Well, no—

**(TL):** Sweeping.

**(BT):** That’s funny. So, I mentioned this earlier. I was an aviation ordinance man, so I dealt with all the weapon systems on H60s. And, um, some of it is very tedious work.

**(TL):** Sure.

**(BT):** Working in very confined, small places. I, you know, I run production here, but I also fix everything here. [Laughter]

**(TL):** Oh, yeah.

**(BT):** If something breaks, I’m typically the guy that fixes it. So, again, being able to have those experiences and just learning the patience to work with something and figure it out and get the job done. You know, we can our own beer here on-site. And our canning line can be a bit of a train wreck sometimes, if you will. [Laughter]

**(TL):** I don’t know, for some reason I pictured an ‘I Love Lucy’ scene of her- I can just picture her out there, like, having the hard- darndest time trying to keep things in line.

**(BT):** It’s funny you say that because on one of our pieces of equipment over there we have a photograph of Lucy and- on the production lines.

**(TL):** [Laughter] Yeah.

**(BT):** So, yeah. It’s uhm- No, but honestly, it’s just, um, determination and patience, and, again, just being mechanically inclined and physically working to repair things was a huge plus for me in this industry.

**(TL):** Yeah. Tell me about a Veteran or a Veteran organization, other than ‘Honor, Courage, and Commitment’, that you’re familiar with that has you excited about what they’re doing right now.

**(BT):** This may not be- Well, you know, honestly, right now it’s called ‘Helicopters for Heroes’.

**(TL):** Okay. I’ve never heard of them.

**(BT):** They’re a local not-for-profit and they- What they do is they take a lot of Veterans out once a year for hunting expeditions in helicopters, and… Really neat. I mean, I got to go out last year with the guys and, again, just being around a bunch of Veterans and getting to- getting to- just to chat and tell stories. And, I mean, I’m talking about Veterans from, you know, Vietnam and more recent. But uhm, it was just really, really neat what they’re doing out there. It’s a good cause. It gets the guys out and allows them to fly and go hunting. It’s pretty cool.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** Yeah.

**(TL):** Brent- is there- is there anything about your service, about your efforts here at Texas Ale Project that we haven’t touched on yet that you want to mention before we close out?

**(BT):** You know, today’s day and age I feel like a lot of times the military is kind of frowned upon or, for some people, it just doesn’t seem like it would be an option for them. But, I have to tell you, that there’s nothing more American than getting to serve and meet so many people out there. And it’s just- It was, for me, it was a really incredible experience, and I would say if you’re even somewhat considering it, go down to your recruiting offices and talk to people. Talk to Veterans. I mean, just what you can learn and just the life experiences that you gain. It’s something that you can’t get anywhere else, you know? Hopefully I’m making sense.

**(TL):** Yeah, you are.

**(BT):** I would just- I would just urge people to serve. I mean, it was an incredible experience for me. And, again, I’m just very thankful that I was able to do what I did.

**(TL):** Yeah.

**(BT):** So…

**(TL):** There are so many, you know- Because of how simply we- and I hope I’m putting that right- But because of how simply we try to show our gratitude towards Veterans- and what I mean by ‘simple’ is, like, we focus on, like, the service of, like, the service of the nation. We forget to emphasize how many other amazing life lessons and life experiences—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** are had aside from simply serving one’s country.

**(BT):** Right.

**(TL):** Right? The work ethic, like, the patience you mentioned—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** the comradery. You learned on how to depend on people—

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** You learned on how to deliver when people depend on you. The amount of travel you get to do. You become a creative problem solver.

**(BT):** Mhmm.

**(TL):** Right? There’s so many different things that just inherently comes with four years of military service that is so much- that’s so valuable, along with that reward of having served the country.

**(BT):** Right.

**(TL):** Yeah. Well, Brent, I really appreciate your time, man. Thank you so much for sitting down and joining us. Thank you for creating such an amazing tap room here and some really amazing beer that your patrons—

**(BT):** [Laughter]

**(TL):** and your fellow Veterans get to enjoy.

**(BT):** Yes!

**(TL):** and thank you for your service to our country.

**(BT):** Oh, my pleasure. My pleasure. Cheers. Thank you so much.

**(TL):** Thank you.

**(BT):** Yeah.

[00:37:57] Music

# **[00:38:01] 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.

[00:38:30] Music

# **[00:38:35] CLOSING MONOLOGUE:**

**(TL):** So, at one point in the interview there you probably heard me mention Dave Pickerell in the present tense. This interview that I did with Brent was actually recorded back in November before I learned about the passing of Dave Pickerell. We made him Veteran of the Day not too long ago- I think toward the end of December- honoring him and his service and his contribution to his part of that industry through Maker’s Mark and Whistle Pig Whiskey. So, our respects to Dave. Big thanks to Brent for letting me join him and talk to him about his experiences there. And he mentioned where you could discover him in the. . . He mentioned where you can discover him and his products, should you so be inclined.

This week’s Medal of Honor citation reading is for Francis Brownell. Service U.S. Army, Division Company A, 11th New York Infantry. Conflict with the Civil War. Year of honor 1861. Citation reads, “*Killed the murderer of Colonel Ellsworth at the Marshal house, Alexandria, Virginia. First Civil War deed to merit Medal of Honor.*” We honor his service. That wraps up Episode 132. Thank you so much for taking the time to listen. I know there is so many options out there for entertainment, so I do appreciate you spending your time listening to these powerful Veteran stories. You can find us on Twitter [Link to VA’s Twitter page: <https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor>) and Instagram [Link to VA’s Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/deptvetaffairs/?hl=en>] @DeptVetAffairs, as well as [Facebook.com/VetAffairs](https://www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs/) [Link to VA’s Facebook page]. You can follow the Secretary of V.A., Secretary Wilkie, @SecWilkie on both Twitter [Link to Secretary Wilkie’s Twitter page: <https://twitter.com/secwilkie?lang=en>] and Instagram [Link to Secretary Wilkie’s Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/secwilkie/?hl=en>]. We’ll be back next week with another compelling episode. I am Timothy Lawson, signing off.

[00:40:32] Music

# (Text Transcript Ends)