

Borne the Battle

Episode #119 Elliott McKenzie- Marine Veteran, R&B Artist

Hosted by Timothy Lawson

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Music

[00:00:10] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

Timothy Lawson: Wednesday, October 10th, 2018. This is *Borne the Battle* brought to you by the Department of Veterans' Affairs. I am your host, Marine Corps Veteran, Timothy Lawson. Back from a short hiatus, a little break. I think I've put out one episode, maybe, in the past month? Maybe five weeks, even? I haven't even checked the dates. But I took a little break to sort of gather myself, to catch up on some other projects, to assist others and some other projects, to really take a look at the podcast of what we can do moving forward as we're coming up on Episode 120. That'll be next week. And the podcast has been in existence for about 2 years now. That's pretty remarkable. And so, I decided to take a break to re-evaluate things and look at what I wanted to do moving forward. Looking forward to bringing you more valuable interviews. Hoping to possibly introduce a video component to some of these interviews. Hoping to do some more round tables. Hoping to get some more contributions from other- uh- other staff offices and other efforts inside of VA. That's something that I am pushing hard to do. So, the podcast is still here, don't worry. If you wondered, "Hey, where's *Borne the Battle*?", don't worry. Still here. We're moving forward. I just wanted to take a little time to decompress and- uh- and, and really look at what we can do to make this program better. I hope everybody down south is safe, everybody that's in the path of hurricane Michael. Hopefully you have gotten to safety or have taken the precautions necessary to ensure your safety. If you have any concerns about VA medical centers' operating status in your area, if you go to va.gov [Link to VA's website], you'll see an alert banner there on the front page. There is a link that's highlighted with at our website. So, follow updates regarding VA medical centers' operational status at our websites. That will take you to a web page that is dedicated to everything you need to know about how to inquire on your benefits, your health care, et cetera, during a disaster and also has updated information on medical facilities in other VA- VA properties and facilities as far as whether or not they're open and their operating status. So, va.gov [Link to VA's website]. Click the link that's in that alert banner. That'll take you to the page with the hurricane Michael updates. This week's interview is with Elliott McKenzie. This is an interview that I actually conducted prior to my little break. So, I'm excited to finally get this out. 'Cause this was really interesting interview that I had with him. He- uh- he reached out interested in being on the podcast. He's a R&B artist. And so, I listened to a couple of his songs and, and really enjoyed them. I decided to bring him on

to talk about it. And one of the- one of the topics we get into is dealing with PTSD and TBI while in public and sort of the response you get from people around you. And he really addresses that in the song “Gunshots” that he did with-uh- with, with an artist by the name ‘The Marine Rapper’. And so, Elliott and I are going to talk about his, his time in the Marine Corps, his transition out, his struggles with depression and PTSD, his stint with homelessness, and sort of where he is now as an artist, how music is helping him cope. And at the very end of the episode, we’ll actually hear- I’ll actually play the track that we reference so you can- uh- so you can hear the song and know what Elliott's talking about. Enjoy.

[00:04:03] Music

[00:04:09] PSA:

Man 1: I served in Vietnam.

Man 2: I served in World War 2.

Woman 1: I served in Afghanistan.

Man 3: And VA serves us all.

Man 1: No matter when you served.

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

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

Woman 2: See what VA can do for you.

Man 5: To learn what benefits you may be eligible for, visit www.va.gov [Link to VA’s website]. That’s www.va.gov.

[00:04:36] Music

[00:04:40] INTERVIEW:

Tim: Alright. On the phone with me I have Elliott McKenzie. [Laughter] See there we go. I got it right. Elliott was- is a Marine Corps Veteran. Sir, thank you so much for joining me.

Elliott McKenzie: Of course, of course. Thank you for having me.

Tim: So, you- you're a musician. You're an R&B artist. I see the tag 'R&B Vet' on your website. And I'm really excited to talk to you about your music. You've actually collaborated with a friend of mine recently. But before we get into your current vocation, let's go back to that one day that all of us Veterans have in common and that's the decision to join the United States military. What madness drove you into enlisting in the, in the Marine Corps? [Laughter]

Elliott: Well, in high school, I was very athletic. I played football. I was on swim team. Um- I was in- um- ROTC when I was in high school. I actually went to a high school that was a Marine Corps ROTC high school- um- for high school students that aspired to go into either law enforcement or the military. And so, that steered me in the direction of the Marine Corps. Um- And I knew that the Marine Corps was very demanding physically and I wanted to go into a branch that fit my personality the best. And so, I felt like the Marine Corps was the best choice for me because of the physical fitness, the high demand for discipline, the extremely high standards. And I wanted to go into something where I had a lot of sense of pride and earning the title "Marine" through graduation, through bootcamp, was- um- a goal of mine in high school. Like, I just wanted to earn the title of "Marine" and become a Marine- um- and go- and be able to say that I accomplished that challenge. And so, I think that's what steered me towards the Marine Corps.

Tim: Yeah, I getcha. And, you know, I joked at the beginning there. My listeners know that- and I'm not sure if you're familiar- but I'm a Marine Corps Veteran, myself, and—

Elliott: Ok.

Tim: Yeah I remember when- you know, those first years- that first year you're in. Like, when you hit the first bit of 'suck' in the Marine Corps, you all look at each other like, "What? Why'd we do this? Why?" [Laughter]

Elliott: Yeah, exactly.

Tim: Yeah. Um—

Elliott: "What did I get myself into?"

Tim: [Laughter] Right, exactly. My brother-in-law is in the Air Force and- uh- he, you know, we give each other a hard time, little bit. But, you know, he would always tell me about, like, when Marines would try to, like, make fun of him, right? For being in the Air Force. For the Air Force being so, like, cushy and a little more laid-back and stuff and—

Elliott: Yeah.

Tim: He'd be like, "Yeah. I'm staying in the Hilton and you're sleeping in a firing hole and I don't know why." - [Laughter] - "And I'm the moron here?" So—

Elliott: Right?

Tim: So, Marine's definitely, you know, go into it knowing that they're going to take a little bit of that hardship. I'm with you. When I- when I enlisted, a lot of it was just that, that desire for the title.

Elliott: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. What-uh- so you- uh- 0-3-11, right?

Elliott: Yeah. So, I was an 81-52. And an 0-3-11. So, I enlisted into- um- security forces. I got selected for presidential support duty in Washington DC- um- in bootcamp. And so, I initially enlisted as an 0-3-11 and then, while I was in recruit training, I got selected for that. And so, then they made my B-billet, or my BMOS 81-52, which is security forces. So, I went to security forces for two years, did that, and then I spent the other two years in- um- at 1st, Battalion 5th Marines at Camp Pendleton as an 0-3-11.

Tim: Interesting. So, how- so this is something, as an air winger, I have no, I've no idea how this works.

Elliott: Ok.

Tim: Did they just randomly select you, like, in bootcamp? Like, "Here. Come here, McKenzie." [Laughter] Like, "Guess what you're going to do." [Laughter] Did you, like, did you have to volunteer at all or did they seriously just look at you, like, "Yeah, you're doing this."?

Elliott: Well, the way that it worked was I was in recruit training and one of my drill instructors came up to me and he said, "Hey, you've been selected for this duty. You're going to report to this building at this time." So, that part wasn't an option. So, I reported to that building at that time, that day, and when I got there, they basically said, "You have been selected." There was a group of us. There wasn't just me. There was about, I'd say, 15 to 20 recruits in that classroom. And they said, "You guys have been selected for presidential support duty." They explained to us, to us what it was which is basically there's a very small group of Marines that are selected to work at the presidential retreat and other places in DC to help protect the president of the United States. And so- I guess- I don't know how I got selected or what the criteria for selection is but, somehow, I got selected with the other recruits in the room. And then, at that point, after they explained it to us, they said you can either choose to do this or you can choose to just do what you enlisted to do when you talked to your recruiter. So, I was, like, excited and I was like,

“Wow! An opportunity to go work in DC and do the special duty.” So, I took the opportunity and I volunteered.

Tim: Yeah. How did you enjoy living and working in DC?

Elliott: Oh! It was amazing. I want to go back there. I either want to retire there or I just want to live there. Go back and just live there for, like, 6 months just because I miss it.

Tim: Wow!

Elliott: It was amazing.

Tim: Ok. Very well. I don't hear too many people that lived here that want to come back. I know a lot of people that live here that are cool with staying—

Elliott: Yeah.

Tim: ...but I haven't heard a lot of people that have lived here, left, and want to come back here. Especially as specific as, like, retirement or just they'd love to be back here. Well, that's good to hear.

Elliott: Yeah.

Tim: So, when you- What difficulties did you have, then, going back into a ground unit, having a couple years in now but on this B-billet?

Elliott: The biggest thing was earning respect from my fellow Marines who hadn't been in security forces. I learned very quickly that the grunt units look at Marines who come from security units differently because we're not, you know... In the, in the 0-3 field, you kind of have to earn your place, you know? It's kind of like being on a football team—

Tim: Yeah.

Elliott: when you're the rookie. You have to earn your place because it's a very demanding job; it's very physically demanding. It's just intense, you know? That's the front lines of combat. And so, even though I was already a Lance Corporal and I had been in the Marine Corps for 2 years when I got there, they didn't respect me as much as they respected the other Lance Corporals and Corporals, and even some of the PFCs that had been in the 0-3 unit since their entrance into the Marine Corps because of the fact that I hadn't been to combat yet, I hadn't even really trained as an 03-11 outside of SOI. And so, because of that, I had to earn my respect as an 0-3 all over again, pretty much.

Tim: Yeah. But you- I am sure you earned their respect soon enough as you did end up deploying to Ramadi, right?

Elliott: Yeah. So I got there in late 2004, early 2005 from DC and then we deployed to Ramadi literally two months later, in February. So, it took me- it only- I only had about two months to earn my place and get my respect and, you know, figure out what- I'll figure out the grounds and everything. And, luckily, I- um- I got there right when they were training for rotation so I jumped right into a training, you know, cycle and everything went really smooth.

Tim: Yeah. Tell me- So, either- From any part of your time in, whether it was while you were in that infantry unit, when you were in security forces, at anytime. Tell me about a close friend or a great leader that you had while you were in.

Elliott: So, while I was in 1/5, while we were in Ramadi, I was in Charlie Company and the company commander was Captain Maloney, John Maloney. He was probably the best company commander that I've ever had. He was very informative with his Marines. His leadership style was different than your average officer or your average, like, senior NCO in the Marine Corps where, typically, they just tell you what to do; they don't tell you why, you know? They just say, "I need you to do this. This is what we're going to do. blah blah blah. Don't listen- or- don't ask any questions. Just do it, get it done." That, you know, the instant willingness of obedience to orders. And so, his style was different because he would actually take the time to explain to us why we were doing what we were doing so we would understand it and we would have a clear picture of the big picture. And he would explain things from an officer's perspective and said, "Okay. I've been told we need to do this because of this, so I need you guys to do it." And he would explain it so that we would see the big picture, not just, "Okay. He told us to do this so we're going to do this."

Tim: Right.

Elliott: And so, I really appreciated that. And his style of leadership was very personable. He was very easy to talk to. If you needed to speak to him directly, it wasn't that 'typical' situation where you get yelled at for not going through your chain of command. If you were to go straight to- straight to him and talk to him, he wouldn't have an issue with it. So, unfortunately, he was killed in Ramadi. He was KIA when an IED went off underneath his HUM-V. And him and the Lance Corporal who were in his passenger seat were both killed in an ambush. It was an IED and then small arms fire after that. So, unfortunately, he was killed in Ramadi. He was given-um- posthumously- I think it's called the Leftwich? I'm not sure which- what exactly what the name of it is. But there's an award that's given to officers for exemplary leadership skills that- I think it's called the Leftwich award? I'm not sure what, what it

was but he was the only- as far as I know- he's the only Marine that's been giving it after death.

Tim: Interesting.

Elliott: He was given the award. But, yeah, his leadership was definitely an influence on me. He was very easy for me to approach. Whenever I approached him, whether it was in Ramadi or before we left, it was very easy for me to communicate with him. And I, now- When I became an NCO, and I became Corporal, I adapted his leadership style and I took pieces of what I learned from his leadership style and I used them in my leadership and I actually got kind of the same results. So, when I had Lance Corporals and PFCs and brand-new Corporals who were under me, I used his leadership styles and it really worked. And I got known within the battalion later on, after we got home from Ramadi, as being an approachable NCO. And I even had other Marines who were, like, Lance Corporals skipping their [Laugh] Corporals and coming to me for advice or coming to me for situations because they, they felt like my leadership style was, I guess- I don't want to say better- but better for them, better suited for them. And so, I became known in my unit for my leadership. But it all, but it all came from me using what I had to learn from Captain Maloney.

Tim: Yeah. Ok. So, when you returned from Ramadi, how long between coming back from deployment and you exiting the Marine Corps?

Elliott: So we got back in September 2005 and then I got out of the Marine Corps in- What was it? March, I think? March 2007. So about 2 years.

Tim: Ok.

Elliott: Yeah. Just under two years.

Tim: So what prompted- What prompted your transition out, then? Was it a decision on your own? What was it?

Elliott: So the next deployment that we went on in 2006 was to the 31st MEU and Okinawa, Japan. And while all this other stuff was happening, a couple of my close buddies that were in the Marine Corps in my unit knew that I was a musician because I had been doing music since I was in high school. I'd been in gospel choir in high school. I played drums in high school. So, I'd been singing since I was a kid. And while I was in Okinawa, one of my friends in our battalion introduced me to a Marine who was stationed in Okin- Okinawa for 2 years and he actually was a music producer. And so, he had a recording studio in his barracks room. He could- He actually, somehow, constructed a small recording studio in his wall locker. And, um—

Tim: [Laughter]

Elliott: Yeah. Crazy, right?

Tim: That's awesome, yeah. [Laughter]

Elliott: [Laughter] So, yeah. So he was actually well-known around, you know, the area 'cuz he was- He had been there for just under two years when I met him. And so, um, a lot of Marines who were, like, rapping- rap artists and, you know, doing that kind of music hustle on the side went to him for stuff. And I was introduced to him because one of my friends introduced us and said, "Hey. This guy, he's a producer. You know, McKenzie sings. You guys should work together while we're here in Oki." So, I ended up working with him and a few other Marines who were active duty, who were stationed there and we ended up actually recording an album together. And that kind of kicked off my, you know, my drive to become a musician after leaving the Marine Corps. And so, what got me out was, um, I found out about- I can't remember the name of it. But there's a program in the Marine Corps where if you're towards the end of your contract and you get accepted into a college, you can actually get out of the Marine Corps early.

Tim: Okay.

Elliott: And so, I got myself into that program. I sent in an application to a college in California and Hollywood called Musician's Institute, which is basically a college for people who want to break into the music industry. I got accepted into that school and then through the program, I got out of the Marine Corps early and went to that school. And so, basically, I got out of the Marine Corps to pursue my dreams in the music industry.

Tim: Very well. What was that Marine's name with the- um- with the studio?

Elliott: Arg! Hold on. I have to remember. Oh my god. I have TBI, as well. 'Cuz I got blown—

Tim: Ok. If you can't remember, that's fine.

Elliott: No, no.

Tim: I am just curious if I'm—

Elliott: No, I—

Tim: Familiar with him.

Elliott: Chastise! Oh! That was his name, Joel Chasteen. That was his name.

Tim: Ok.

Elliott: Because his producer name was Chastise. His real name is Joel Chasteen. Yeah.

Tim: Ok, very well. In- When reading your bio on your website, you talk about when you left the military, you were immediately starting to see signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and that the symptoms were sort of increasing at a sort of a rapid pace. Tell us about that experience. And were you aware of what you were experiencing at the time and when you were actually diagnosed?

Elliott: So, yeah. After getting out of the Marine Corps in 2007, I pretty much immediately started to notice, um- Anger issues was the first thing that I noticed. I noticed that I had a high level of irritability. Really simple things would piss me off immediately. Like, for example, if I was walking around somewhere in public, like, in a store and somebody accidentally bumped into me, that would irritate the crap out of me. I would get extremely mad to the point where I would almost want to fight the person even though it was not their fault and it was just a complete accident. Loud noises would bother me. Anything that sounded like gunshots like balloons popping, glasses hitting the ground on accident, you know. Things that were flat hitting a flat surface and causing that really loud popping sound. As well as my anxiety was going up. Like, I would get nervous in certain situations or I would get really tense in certain situations. I noticed that I had to, whenever I was in public- Like, if for instance, I went out to a restaurant, I had to sit in a chair or a, you know, a booth where I could see the front entrance of the of the venue. So that if anybody were to walk in the venue with a weapon or any kind of ill intentions, I can do what I needed to do. Um, what else? I had depression. So, there were days when I would sit and cry all day in bed. There were days when I wouldn't leave the house. There were days when I didn't enjoy doing everyday things. So, I noticed these things probably in- Yeah, in 2007. Just after leaving the Marine Corps in early 2007. Yeah.

Tim: When- So, did you...? Like, at what point, then, do you decide to acknowledge it and either get it diagnosed or get treatment for it?

Elliott: So, late 2007 was when I ended up getting help. And it happened because, up to that point, I hadn't really acknowledged it. I knew that something was wrong with me. I knew that I was acting differently but I didn't know why. And there was an incident that happened at home because at the time I was living- I moved back in with my family and I was living with my mom and my brother. And a violent incident happened at home with my brother, between me and my brother. And my mom walked out of the living room and found us in the middle of this incident. And she didn't know what to do so she freaked out

and called the police. And the police officer, luckily, was a Veteran who arrived on the call. And so, he recognized that I had PTSD and he asked me, like, "Have you had any help for it prior to this?" and I said no. And so, I got lucky. And basically, he said, "You have two options," he said, "I can treat you like a civilian and I can charge you with assault with a deadly weapon and take you to jail. Or I can treat you like a Veteran and I will personally drive you to the VA and get you whatever help you need to get so that you can get over this anger issues and this PTSD that you have." And, obviously, I took the second option and I had him drive me to the VA. And that's when I started realizing that I had PTSD and then that's when I started getting help for it.

Tim: Wow. So, through all of this, are you still creating music?

Elliott: No. At that point, I had stopped creating music because I was so, you know, worried about, and I was so involved with, my issues.

Tim: Yeah.

Elliott: And so, at that point, I was just in survival mode. I was in- That's when- I call it my 'gray area'. My 'gray area' is my way of describing the time when I was really bad with my PTSD and it was really affecting my life, and I didn't really- I wasn't making any progress of that. For me, that period was from 2007 to 2015. And so, I was- That was the beginning of my 'gray area' at that time.

Tim: If you don't mind, I'm cur- When? Like, how did you end up becoming homeless?

Elliott: That's actually how I ended up becoming homeless, the story I just told you. So—

Tim: Oh, ok.

Elliott: When I got- 'Cause what had happened was I went to the VA—

Tim: Yeah.

Elliott: And the police officer drove me to the VA, and what they did was they put me on a 51-50 hold for 3 days, for 72 hours, and after that, I was released. And, you know, because they realized that it wasn't super, super dangerous or severe. So, they put me on some medication while I was there. They released me. When I went home, my mom was basically like, "No, you can't come back here. We're scared of you." You know, "After what happened, we don't, you know, we don't know what's going on with you. We can't trust you. We feel like you're dangerous and so you can't live here." So, I ended up going back to the VA and speaking to them and I was- At the time, they were working on- Between that day and the time I got admitted to VOC- or, not VOC- The time

that I got admitted to the place where I ended up living. I was living in my car—

Tim: A homeless facility?

Elliott: Yeah. So, I was living in my car for, about- I wanna say, about a week? And then I ended up getting accepted into a place with US Vets in Long Beach- I can't remember. Oh! Villages of Cabrillo.

Tim: Ok.

Elliott: So, um, there's a facility in Long Beach, California called Villages of Cabrillo, which is basically a homeless facility or a transitional housing facility for Veterans. And I got accepted into that facility. And so, I started living there.

Tim: You know, in your story on your website, you- After you talk about your time with homelessness, it says, "There for about a year. Started- And I started my long road to recovery...." What experiences were you having in that year, in that facility, that was helping- helping nurture a recovery and sort of be the catalyst to- to new growth?

Elliott: It was- The biggest thing was, definitely, the, uh- I found out that there was actually a support system for Veterans. 'Cause prior to all this stuff happening, I didn't know that there was a large support system and multiple organizations out there that are designed to support Veterans and help Veterans. And so, for me, it was the big noticing of support, the backbone that I was given by different organizations: the VA itself, U.S. Vets. You know, the different organizations that are out there. The staff members at those organizations. It was being treated- even though I knew I had an issue- it was being treated like I didn't have an issue. Like, they didn't treat me, like, you know, this- this combat veteran with horrible PTSD who's going through this crazy time. They just treated me like a Veteran. They treated me with respect. They treated me with dignity. They were there for me when I needed them. They helped me find work. They helped me get back on my feet as much as they could. And so, it was- it was just the support system that really stood out to me.

Tim: So, when did you start making music again?

Elliott: I started making music again in 2015, I want to say. Because between about 2007 and 2015, there were other incidents that happened with school. 'Cause 2007 to 2015, I recovered slightly. Like, I got to the point where I was able to function, but I wasn't completely quote-unquote "better" yet. My PTSD was still affecting me and there's more to the story, my story, that, um- Like, I went to school, like, from basically 2007-2010. I was kind of in a, in a, just a holding pattern, I guess you can say. I was working random jobs. I ended up moving out of the facility in Long Beach and moving in with a couple of old high

school friends. I ended up sleeping on a couch. I was couch surfing on my best friend's couch for, like, a couple of years. And then, I ended up meeting a woman and we started dating and then she let me move in with her and her mom. And then, I started going to college. And then, me and her broke up. And so, I started going to college using the Post-9/11 GI Bill. And I went from the college from 2010 to 2013. But I was still in that gray phase so I wasn't completely better. And so, my PTSD was still affecting me and I ended up having to drop out of college in 2013 because I hadn't really mastered my PTSD yet and gotten to learn how to adapt to it completely. And so, it was causing me a lot of issues with school. Like, I couldn't focus in classes. I was having- still having- some anger issues. I was having really bad depression issues. There were days when I wouldn't even wake up and go to class. I would just cry all day at home. And so, 2013 was when I kind of went back to the VA and I started getting more help.

Tim: So, what- How did your...? You know, as you're slowly getting back into music, like, were you just- were you doing any performing? Were you just writing? Were you- Like, what was sort of- You know, bring us through that creative process of, like, getting familiar with music again and what parts of it were therapeutic?

Elliott: So, yeah. So, in 2013, I met a counselor at the Vet center in Corona. And she gave me the advice of music as therapy because I told her about the fact that I had been doing music since I was a kid. And the therapeutic part of music, for me, has always been songwriting and performing and being able to get things off my chest. So- I didn't know this- but she explained the whole scientific aspect of it to me about adrenaline because part of my issue is that I'm also an adrenaline addict. And so, she explained to me that, like, when I perform on stage, I get into an adrenaline- like, that nervous energy, that rush that you get right before you go up on stage or while you're up on stage performing. That's actually an adrenaline release, an endorphin release. And she also told me about how I could use music as a way to get things off my chest. And so, that's how music is therapeutic for me. It's the mix of live performances and that adrenaline rush I get also mixed with the ability to write about experiences that I've gone through like the song 'Gunshots' I released, for example. Like my upcoming single 'Fight Back' is a song about fighting back against depression and PTSD and anxiety or whatever mental illness people are fighting. So, being able to express myself and tell my story through my music has been extremely therapeutic for me. Because a lot of Veterans isolate themselves and a lot of Veterans don't want to talk about what they went through. And I was one of those Veterans. When I was back in 2007 to 2015, when I was in my gray- my, you know, my cloud, my gray phase, I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't want to talk about my experiences in Ramadi. I didn't want to talk about my depression. I wanted to just cover it up and act like I was fine. You know, when people would ask me, "Oh! How are you?" You

know, my typical response would be like, "Oh! I'm great! How are you?" You know—

Tim: Right.

Elliott: When the reality was, I was horrible, you know? I was going through a really bad time. And so, this, finally- music finally gave me an outlet to be able to tell people about my experiences and actually tell the truth about what I was going through and about my everyday battle with PTSD. So, it was therapeutic in those types of ways.

Tim: So, you recently, um- You recently collaborated with a friend of mine who goes by the moniker 'The Marine Rapper'.

Elliott: Right, yeah. Mhmm.

Tim: A song called 'Gunshots'. And—

Elliott: Yeah.

Tim: You know, one thing that I appreciated about the video that you did was the- You know, the video shows a couple instances where, you know, a Veteran may be acting awkward- acting weird in, in public, right? Sort of, you know, experiencing some sort of flashbacks or PTSD. Ducking behind a counter or stuff like that.

Elliott: Mhmm.

Tim: And I think- What I appreciated about it was I think it displays the awkwardness that it is for everybody, right? I think that's something that—

Elliott: Yeah.

Tim: That people sort of don't understand is while it's uncomfortable and weird for the people who don't understand what's going on, it's just as awkward and uncomfortable for the Veteran to experience that and realize that they just did that in public.

Elliott: Yeah. It is. It's- 'Cause that story and that scene actually came from something that I experienced personally. I just kind of twisted it in the video to make it a little bit different. So, while I was going through my 'gray phase', there was a day when I was in a grocery store and there was a family that had just walked into the store and I was in the fruit section looking for some bananas and I happened to be next to the tomatoes. And this kid, this young boy- I think he was probably about five or six- was carrying a balloon. And it looked like they had just come back from either some kind of graduation or birthday party or something. They had celebratory balloons with them. Somehow the

balloon that the kid had got popped. In my mind, that was a gunshot and I immediately ducked behind the counter that was in front of me which was the tomato. Kind of like that little mountain that they have at grocery stores.

Tim: Yeah.

Elliott: With the fruits and vegetables on them. So, I ducked behind there and the family immediately looked over at me and, like- like- Kind of like, 'What the hell is wrong with that guy?' Like, "Why is he hiding behind the counter? It was just a kid popping a balloon. It's no big deal.' And so, I got so embarrassed that I literally just walked out of the store and I didn't even finish my grocery shopping. And I went home. And so, that's where that scene came from. I just twisted it a little bit and I made it a different location, different environment. But pretty much the same thing happened in that scene where the guy drops the coffee mug and the coffee mug bouncing on the ground sounds like gunfire from, like, a machine gun to him. And so, he ducks behind the counter in the store.

Tim: Yeah. What- How often do you get to- how often do you get to collaborate with other Veterans? Because I am sure there's- They're- You know, it makes the content more powerful because you have two similar experiences from different perspectives but ones that, you know, sort of empathize with each other.

Elliott: I try to- Honestly, I try to collaborate with other Veterans as much as I can when it comes to music because of the fact that a lot of, like- You know, a lot of what I write about is Veteran-related, even though I'm trying now to not limit myself to just Veteran-related content because I want other people who are non-Veterans to be able to relate to my music. When I do write about Veteran topics, I definitely try to collaborate with other Veterans on the topic because, obviously, they're first-perspective individuals on that topic. And a lot of people don't know this, but, actually, the guy who produced the beat for 'Gunshots' is an Air Force Veteran. And so, 'Gunshots', as far as the music goes, was completely done through Veterans. The Air Force Veteran produced it, I was the singer, and then TMR was the rapper. And we're all Veterans. And so, that was actually a thrill for me to be able to put out a song that was completely constructed by all Veterans.

Tim: So, I've done- I've done a lot of work in Veteran suicide, not only in sharing my own experiences, but helping share the experiences of others. And after doing that for a few years on the backside of it, I had a hard time getting back into doing that work simply because I wasn't in that space anymore.

Elliott: Ok.

Tim:

You know, I was- You know, my, my- Mentally, I was- You know, I had, fortunately, had been able to, like, develop and progress and stuff like that. Where do you feel like you are, right now, when it- as a creative- addressing the things that you have been through and you're currently going through as far as, like, how that's influencing what you're creating?

Elliott:

I feel like I am as advanced as I've ever been as far as I'm- I'm out of my gray cloud. I've been out of my gray cloud for 3 years now. So, I'm back to a mental state where I can put logical music together, think straight, not really have the symptoms that I used to have. I'm at a point now where I can express what I've been through without feeling worried about being judged. Because I've seen the positivity that has come out of, like, 'Gunshots', for example. The feedback that I've gotten from both the Veteran community and the civilian community has been nothing but love. And so, that has encouraged me to continue that and has encouraged me to continue being an outlet for mental illness, an outlet for PTSD, an outlet for the Veteran community. And so, at the- at this point right now, I'm at a point where I'm proud to do what I do. And I'm proud to tell my story. And I'm proud to be able to tell that dirty side of what Veterans go through and that ugly side of what Veterans go through. Because now that I've seen the positivity that can come out of it, I know that me telling my story and doing a song about what we've been through, or doing songs about what we've been through, doing music videos, you know, etcetera, etcetera. It might be an outlet for other Veterans, you know? Like, a Veteran might, you know, for instance, listen to this podcast and be like, "Wow. He had, you know, the gonads to be, like, 'Look this is exactly what I went through. Even though it sucks and even though it was horrible, I'm going to tell my story and tell about what I went through.'" So then, that Veteran might turn around and be, like, "Look, you know what? It's possible. If Elliott could do it, I can do it, too." You know? And, for example, one of the- one of the feedbacks that I got from 'Gunshots' was there was a kid. Like, a fifteen-year-old kid who DM'ed me on Instagram after watching the video and he said, "This is what happened." He said, "My grandpa's a Vietnam Veteran. When he got back from Vietnam, he shut down. He wouldn't talk to us about what he went through. He shut down when it came to talking to the family about anything military-related. He said, 'Don't talk to me about it. I don't want to do anything. I don't want to hear about it. Don't ask me questions. Just shut up about it.'" And then, I saw your music video and I played it for him. And about three-quarters of the way through the music video, he started crying. And he broke down and he finally opened up to us about what he went through in Vietnam." And he said he'd spent about two days talking to the family about everything that went on in Vietnam. And it's stuff like that that keeps me doing what I do. And it's stuff like that, and that kind of feedback, and stories I hear about stuff like that happening with other Veterans. Seeing that I was able to open up and then that triggering them being able to open up? That's where I'm at right now. And I'm proud- I'm proud of the fact that I could do stuff like that for people.

Tim: So, I think that- What I really- What I think is really interesting about the current-conflict Veterans, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans, is there is so many ways that that we connect or that we resonate with other eras. And—

Elliott: Right.

Tim: I think, when it comes to the Vietnam Veterans, they- it was like this circle of- sort of- They ensured that our service was not going to be taken for granted, right?

Elliott: Right.

Tim: When that first plane back from- from Fallujah, from Iraq, from Afghanistan. When those first planes were coming back—

Elliott: Right.

Tim: It was- It was the Vietnam Veterans that were going to the airport to welcome home the troops.

Elliott: Right.

Tim: And that's when- And then we got the 'Support the Troops' movement. And, you know, people start- Like, the yellow ribbons and stuff like that. And then, a decade later after- after our generation has reached almost the pinnacle of being appreciated and being recognized, and all of that as a direct line from the efforts from the Vietnam Veterans. I think that, as we come back and we make music, we do talks, we do TED Talks, we do- we create, we share. And current-conflict Veterans have made it- We've normalized expressing what we've been through, how it's made us feel, accepting that PTSD/TBI's are real- are realities of war, that depression and transition and stuff like that are all difficult. And we have helped Vietnam War era Veterans open up about what they're going through, getting diagnosed with their PTSD, opening up about their depression, their anxiety. And I think that it's- it's been- As a- As someone who's both in the Veteran space and someone who's observed it from afar- because I'm not a combat Veteran- it has been remarkable to see those two things happen within the same decade and how powerful it's been for both generations.

Elliott: Yeah. It has been. Whenever I go to the VA for appointments and I'm in the waiting room, I always see older Veterans from the Vietnam era and I talk to them. And it's amazing to see how much they've grown. Because I remember the days back when- you're right- Vietnam Vets wouldn't open up and they wouldn't talk about it. And now, whenever I go to the VA, Vietnam era Veterans are the majority of the Veterans that I run into, you know? And now,

I hardly ever seen young Veterans my age from Iraq or Afghanistan. Most of the Veterans that I see are from the older generations.

Tim: Yeah.

Elliott: And so, it's good to see that they're there opening up and getting the help that they deserve.

Tim: Absolutely. Elliott tell me- tell me- Give me a skillset or an experience that you had in the military that you think is contributing to your success today.

Elliott: Um... Okay. So, while we were in Okinawa, I was meritoriously promoted to Corporal by my Master Guns in my unit and I was given a whole lot of new responsibilities that I didn't have before. Like, for instance, about- I want to say... Maybe a month or two after I was promoted, I was made the- I was in the S3 shop at the time- and I was made the training NCO for our battalion. And then, I was also sent to this course called C2PC course, which is basically a course for officers only and they only allow a small amount of enlisted Marines into this course. It was a 3-day course for a computer program that officers use- field grade officers use- to basically... I'm trying to figure out how to put this together so that people understand it. It's basically, like, almost- Imagine a video game, like, a war video game on a computer where you can map out the battlefield, map out your unit, map out where you think the enemy units are, and then map out how you're going to attack or defend in this situation on the ground. And so, it's a program that does that and I got trained on that program. And I got sent back to my battalion. And I was working directly with, like, with the battalion Commander, with the higher-ups in the battalion to teach them how to use the program and then actually use the program. And they actually gave me responsibilities to the point where they were asking me, "Okay. If we end up here, in this area, and we're on land and this situation occurs, show us on C2PC how you would design the battlefield." And it was that transition from being a Lance Corporal to being, not only a Corporal, but a Corporal that was treated, like, almost like a Staff Sergeant, to be honest with you. That gave me a lot of responsibility and it really made me mature very, very quickly. And it taught me how to lead. Even if you're not even, like, if you're not super high on this- on the- on the chain of command, how to be a leader like you are super high on the chain of command. Because, like I said, I was working directly with the battalion Commander. I was working with Majors and Colonels and even a General, a One-Star General, that was on the ship at the time. And so, that maturity that I gained from those experiences and the responsibility that was given- I think that maturity has contributed to what has enabled me to do what I'm doing now with my music and the fact that I'm able to express myself and get things off my chest and, you know, do what I'm doing, pretty much.

Tim: Yeah. Tell me about a Veteran or a Veteran organization that you're familiar with that has you excited about what they're doing right now.

Elliott: Okay. So there's this great organization that I'm a part of called *Merging Vets and Players*, MVP. Mike—

Tim: Oh! we know *Merging Vets and Players*!

Elliott: Yeah. 'Cause, so I live—

Tim: Yeah.

Elliott: I live in L.A. where their, um, their headquarters is located. And so, I've- I've been going to workouts with them for a small amount of time- probably, like, 6 months now. And they're a great organization because what they do is they take either current or former professional athletes and then combat- not just combat but all Veterans- and we do workouts once a week. So, every day- I think it's Wednesdays now. They changed it. Wednesdays at 7 p.m. at a special gym in Hollywood where these- Some celebrities work out there, athletes work out there. And the organization was founded and ran- is now ran by Jay Glazer, which- who is one of the Fox 11 NFL, you know, announcers and then also a former Army Green Beret and Seattle Seahawks. So, he got out of the Army and then became a long snapper for the Seattle Seahawks. And so, those two got together and started MVP. And so, I like MVP because of the fact that it's- it's a family environment and it's- it's, even though it's only once a week, all the Veterans that are involved stay in contact with each other. We're all friends on Facebook. We all have each other's numbers. We text each other. We check up on each other. MVP holds events like barbecues and hikes and, you know, things like that, you know, every now and then. So, it's not just the workout. You do other events with them, as well. It is now a nationally, if not globally, known organization. It's well-known amongst the NFL because Jay Glazer's, you know, an NFL announcer and a lot of the Vet- Or a lot of the athletes who come work out with us are either active duty or former NFL players. Like, a lot of the Rams players come work out with us since it's in LA and the Rams are in LA right now. We've had Chargers come work out with us. Mike McCarthy, the Green Bay Packers head coach, is one of the biggest donators to the organization. So, we've had Aaron Rodgers in the gym. We've had Demi Lovato in the gym. You know, there's a lot of different celebrities who come to the gym and work out with the Veterans. Like, for instance, Wiz Khalifa- who's a famous rapper- he comes and works out.

Tim: [Laughter]

Elliott: And he wears MVP shirts and he supports the organization. So, it's kind of cool to be able to hang out with those types of individuals as well as get the support from the organization and the other Veterans that are in the

organization. Not as- not only that, but you also get a good workout. The workouts that we do are pretty intense. So, if you're looking to get in shape, it's a good way to get in shape at least once a week. Get a good workout in and then release them endorphins through the workout which also helps with depression and anxiety and things like that, too.

Tim: Yeah. Absolutely. And the- uh- the Army Veteran that you're speaking of that helps build that organization is Nate Boyer. Yeah—

Elliott: Yeah. Nate Boyer. That's his name. [Laughter]

Tim: Yeah. Nate Boyer who was on- on Episode 63 and he talks a little bit more about the organization. So, anybody who's curious about it, go check out Episode 63 to hear Nate expand on that. But that's cool. I didn't realize [Laughter] Wiz Khalifa was getting in the *Merging Vets and Players* gym.

Elliott: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Tim: I don't know why but that amuses me. [Laughter]

Elliott: Yeah. It's actually the other way around. MVP is getting in their gym because the gym where all the workouts are housed is a gym that's owned by- um- I hate this TBI, man. It kills me. [Laughter] The guy who was the Fox announcer. I just said his name ten seconds ago—

Tim: Oh, Glazer. Yeah.

Elliott: Glazer. Yeah. So, it's owned by Glazer and it's one of those private, secret gyms that celebrities go to work out so they won't be bothered—

Tim: Gotcha.

Elliott: by their fans—

Tim: Ok.

Elliott: and bothered by paparazzi. That's why I said Demi Lovato works out there. You know, Wiz Khalifa works out there. Usher works out there. There's a whole bunch of—

Tim: Yeah.

Elliott: you know, A-list celebrities who work out there because it's protected and it's secret so they can't be bothered.

Tim: Right.

Elliott: And so, MVP just happens to work out there, as well, since it's owned by Jay Glazer, and he happened to start MVP. So, a lot of the times that we do the workouts, there's these celebrities there, as well, and either they would join us, or they'll talk to us, or they'll engage with us. And so, that's also a nice experience, too, to be able to, you know, mingle with those types of people who are that way and see them as regular people. You know, like Wiz Khalifa, for instance. You would think somebody that famous and somebody that huge is, you know, egotistical, whatever. You know, a lot of people assume about celebrities. But when he's with us, he's completely chill. He's a jokester. He'll run around and play with us. He'll work out with us. Like, he's completely down-to-earth. So, it's- it's kind of nice to be able to see, you know, people like him and other people who go there just kind of in a relaxed setting. You know, where they're not having to be in front of the camera. And, you know, they'll hang out with us and chill with us and, you know. So, yeah. It's- it's cool.

Tim: I really appreciate your time, Elliott. It was a pleasure talking to you. I listened to it. I didn't pick up on any, like, profanity. I imagine 'Gunshots' is probably okay for radio. Clean enough for radio?

Elliott: Yeah. 'Gunshots' is- Actually, all of my- As of right now, there- Yeah, all my music is actually good for radio. So, yeah. 'Gunshots' will be good. Yeah.

Tim: Alright, alright. Well, we'll throw it in at the end of the podcast so people can listen to what we were referencing, and maybe get a better idea of what you were talking about as far as what the song was about and the imagery. Where can people find you if they're interested in more of your music?

Elliott: So, I have a website and that's the best way- uh, excuse me- to get ahold of me. My website is elliottmckenzie.com [Link to Elliott McKenzie's website.] So, it's www.ElliottMcKenzie.com; so two L's and two T's in 'Elliott'. So, ElliottMcKenzie.com. I also have Instagram which is the second best way to get ahold of me which is @Elliott_McKenzie [Link to Elliott McKenzie's Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/elliott_mckenzie/?hl=en]. Again, two L's and two T's in that. You can send me a DM on Instagram. And then, on the website, there's a contact section and when you type an email into there, I'll immediately get an email from the website saying someone contacted me. Or just send me a DM on Instagram.

Tim: Very well. Elliott, thank you so much for your time. Thank you so much for telling us about your service, your time after, your experiences in and after transition, and about your music, and Semper Fi, sir.

Elliott: Of course. Semper Fi to you, too, bro.

[00:50:13] Music

[00:50:15] PSA:

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

[00:50:44] Music

[00:50:49] CLOSING MONOLOGUE:

Tim: Again. Big thanks to Elliott McKenzie for joining me. It was a pleasure talking to him. ElliottMcKenzie.com [Link to Elliott McKenzie's website] is the website you can go if you want to learn more about him as an artist and if you want to reach out to him for any of the endeavors that he mentioned. Again, I want to reiterate VA.gov [Link to VA's website] has the alert banner with the link to our updates on hurricane Michael. Visit that page, click that link to get updates on the operation status of the facilities that are down south in the area, in the path of hurricane Michael. Of course, the biggest concerns, of course, with medical centers in our Outpatient Clinic. So, and our event centers, as well, of course. So, click that. Stay up-to-date that way. We'll also be tweeting and posting on Facebook as there's updates, as well.

This week's Medal of Honor citation reading is for Ronald Shurer II. Ronald Shurer II is the most recent Medal of Honor recipient. Service is U.S. Army. He was the rank of Staff Sergeant. Conflict was the War on Terror in Afghanistan. Year of honor is 2008. Citation reads: *"Staff Sergeant Ronald J. Shurer II distinguished himself by acts of gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty on April 6, 2008, while serving as a Senior Medical Sergeant, Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha 3336, Special Operations Task Force-33, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Staff Sergeant Shurer was a part of an assault element inserted by helicopter into a location in Afghanistan. As the assault element moved up a near vertical mountain toward its objective, it was engaged by fierce enemy machine gun, sniper, and rocket-propelled grenade fire. The lead portion of the assault element, which included the ground commander, sustained several casualties and became pinned down on the mountainside. Staff Sergeant Shurer and the rest of the trailing portion of the assault element were likewise engaged by enemy machine gun, sniper, and rocket-propelled grenade fire. As the attack intensified, Staff Sergeant Shurer braved enemy fire to move to an injured*

Soldier and treat his wounds. Having stabilized the injured Soldier, Staff Sergeant Shurer then learned of the casualties among the lead element. Staff Sergeant Shurer fought his way up the mountainside, under intense enemy fire, to the lead element's location. Upon reaching the lead element, he treated and stabilized two more Soldiers. Finishing those lifesaving efforts, Staff Sergeant Shurer noticed two additional severely wounded Soldiers under intense enemy fire. The bullet that had wounded one of these Soldiers had also impacted Staff Sergeant Shurer's helmet. With complete disregard for his own life, Staff Sergeant Shurer again moved through enemy fire to treat and stabilize one Soldier's severely wounded arm. Shortly thereafter, Staff Sergeant Shurer continued to brave withering enemy fire to get to the other Soldier's location in order to treat his lower leg, which had been almost completely severed by a high-caliber sniper round. After treating the Soldier, Staff Sergeant Shurer began to evacuate the wounded; carrying and lowering them down the sheer mountainside. While moving down the mountain, Staff Sergeant Shurer used his own body to shield the wounded from enemy fire and debris caused by danger-close air strikes. Reaching the base of the mountain, Staff Sergeant Shurer set up a casualty collection point and continued to treat the wounded. With the arrival of the medical evacuation helicopter, Staff Sergeant Shurer, again under enemy fire, helped load the wounded into the helicopter. Having ensured the safety of the wounded, Staff Sergeant Shurer then regained control of his commando squad and rejoined the fight. He continued to lead his troops and emplace security elements until it was time to move to the evacuation landing zone for the helicopter. Staff Sergeant Shurer's actions are in keeping with the finest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan, Special Operations Command Central, and the United States Army." We honor his service. That wraps up Episode 119. Thank you so much for taking the time to listen. I know there is a lot of options out there for entertainment so it does mean a lot that you decided to some spend time listening to these powerful Veterans stories. You can follow us on Twitter [Link to VA's Twitter: https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor] and Instagram [Link to VA's Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/deptvetaffairs/?hl=en>] @DeptVetAffairs for more stories and images from our community. Until next week, I am Timothy Lawson, signing off.

[00:55:55] Music from Elliott McKenzie's new song, 'Gunshots'

(Lyrics to 'Gunshots' by Elliott McKenzie and The Marine Rapper)

Shots fired, my station.
All around my position.
Training kicks in.
Cover concealment.

Adrenaline's pumpin'.
Heartbeat's thumpin'.
I'm in fight or flight mode.
Heartbeat's racing, then I get angry.
Must kill the enemy.
But then I realize I'm back home.
It sounds like gunshots everywhere I go.
Makes me want to hit the floor.
Heartbeat's racing out of time.
'Cause I think I'm out of time.
I probably won't but I gotta get control tonight.

Stranger looking at me like,
"What the hell is wrong with him?"
They don't know what I hear when I hear that sound.
I hear combat.

Adrenaline's pumpin'.
Heartbeat's thumpin'.
I'm in fight or flight mode.
Heartbeat's racing, then I get angry.
Must kill the enemy.
But then I realize I'm back home.
It sounds like gunshots everywhere I go.
Makes me want to hit the floor.
Everywhere I go.
Heartbeat's racing out of time.
'Cause I think I'm out of time.
I probably won't, but I gotta get control tonight.

TMR like,
Gotta get a grip on me.
How I did amazing feats.
Life's been slippery
As a Veteran Marine.

When you come back.

No one knows the scene.
When you've been through all them things
That keeps you from your sleep
Or makes it hard to breathe.

When you come back.

Like sitting here in class
When I first heard something crash,
Reminding me of that blast
From an enemy out in Iraq.

But then you come back.

Hearing them gunshots
Landing on my paws.
Thinking all is lost.
In central Al-Anvar.

And this is this is

Killing me slowly.
Skippin' my, skippin' my heartbeat.
Flippin' out, flippin' out constant
On all of the people who love me
So many walls that I punched in
Splinters and splinters in knuckles.
'Cause everyone seeming above me
Don't none of you, none of you touch me.
Now, give me my distance
All of you foes.
Girls say I'm different
Really, the fiction
How can I tell?
What is the difference?
Now, I'm just tripping
I always revisit that time in '06 I was with the Infantry
Rockets were zippin' and bullets were snappin'
And when I came back to you, do you hear what I'm hearin'?

Sounds like gunshots everywhere.
Gunshots
Makes me want to hit the floor.
Everywhere I go.
Heartbeat's racing out of time
'Cause I think I'm out of time.
I probably won't, but I gotta get control tonight.