

*This Week at VA*

Episode # 45

Rory Cooper – Army Veteran, VA Research Engineer

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/40467/rory-cooper-army-veteran/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

### **[00:00:00] 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 be honor my grandfather every day. Search VA careers to find out more.

[00:00:29] Music

### **[00:00:39] OPENING MONOLOGUE:**

**Timothy Lawson (TL):** Hello, everyone and welcome to another episode of *This Week at VA*. I am your host, Marine Corps Veteran Timothy Lawson. If you missed the announcement from last week, *This Week at VA* has been nominated for a podcast award in the Government and Organizations category and that was only made possible because of the support and listenership this show receives. So, thank you to all that listen and for sharing with your friends. Truly appreciate it. On today's docket, we have an interview with Army Veteran Rory Cooper. He's a VA Research Engineer and – uh, has done a lot of great research and developments. We'll get into that. Uh, we have a look at explore VA's website and the value that that brings and, of course, our Veteran of the Day. First, and of course there's always the thing that comes before the list of things I just mentioned, but first, I have some audio from Secretary Shulkin's remarks at the 2017 American Legion Convention. Recently I believe I played notes from his AMVETS Convention as well as the Choice and Quality Employment Act signing and I'm going to continue with the trend – with that trend with this week's American Legion Convention. I'm spotlighting these audio bites because Secretary Shulkin's priorities

and the improvements being made to VA are important for Veterans, their families, their caregivers, and anybody – uh, with any vested interest in VA’s transformation. I believe last week – uh, Secretary Shulkin mentioned the marginal improvements that were being made by VA this year compared to the years before – uh, and that he has five priorities moving forward. I think that’s where the audio stopped. Um, so this week I’m going to play the first two of those priorities, those being – uh, greater choice and modernization. Uh, I’m gonna do – I’m gonna play those two this week and then I’ll play the other three – uh, that follow next week. Uh, that way you can digest them in smaller bites, and we can get to that featured interview that much sooner. So, here is Secretary Shulkin at the American Legion Convention in Reno, Nevada.

**Secretary Shulkin:**

What I’d like to do in a very brief period of time, is talk to you about the five priorities that I have to really transform the VA to get it to be the type of organization that we all know that it can be. And these are the five things that I believe we have to focus on to get us there. So, I’m going to take you through it. The very first is to give you, Veterans, greater choice in your decision making. I think that’s fundamentally important. It’s our primary strategy on how we’re going to make the VA a better place. By making it more competitive. When people want to get services from you, that makes you perform better and it makes you stay on top of your game. So, our major legislative requirement, going forward that we are going to work on this fall, is to get the choice program working in a way that works better for you. Takes out the red tape, takes out the complexity and changes it from a system based on administrative rules to a system that functions in a clinical way. The way that health systems should function. So that will give Veterans greater choice over their care. We’re going to eliminate the forty mile, thirty-day requirement - that just doesn’t make sense for people who want to get health care. [applause] And we’re going to add a new benefit for walk-in clinics, so that people who live a distance away from the VAs don’t have to drive fifty miles or a hundred miles to get a flu shot or a chest x-ray or a lab test. [applause] So this is all about giving Veterans more choice in their decision making and making the VA work better for them by working with a stronger VA and with community partners. The second of our priorities is to really modernize the VA. And for too long, I think we’ve neglected modernizing the VA. And so, this is – you’re going to see a number of decisions that I’m going to be announcing to modernize this system because I believe Veterans deserve the very best that this country can offer. The first of those decisions that you may have seen is I’ve announced that we are going to be replacing our

information technology system, our electronic medical record, with the same system that the Department of Defense uses. This is a commercial [applause] top notch, off the shelf system and it just makes sense. We know where all of our customers are going to come from - one place the Department of Defense. And why should we lose all the information that we have on Veterans when they come to work at the - when they come over to the VA. So, we're working hard to get that implemented and working with Congress to get the funds appropriated. Um, we also are going to be updating our facilities. And too many of our facilities are getting old and in disrepair. So, I've announced that we're going to be disposing of eleven hundred facilities that are vacant or underutilized and reinvesting those resources that we're spending back into facilities that Veterans are being cared for in, right now. And that will allow us to rebuild and to modernize our VA. If you take a look at some of our facilities, we actually have over four hundred facilities from the Civil War and the Revolutionary War. And these are old buildings. On the other hand, you can see at the bottom right, we have some of the best facilities in the country. This is our Palo Alto VA, all single rooms places where families can stay with their Veterans, really beautiful. I want all of our facilities to be able to look like that and so we're now heading in that direction.

TL:

Again, I'll play priorities three, four, and five at the top of next week's show. Today's featured interview is with C - with Rory Cooper. I first met Rory Cooper at the VA Medical Center in Pittsburg. He was showcasing a number of products that he helped research and develop like - uh, different types of wheelchairs and such. I called upon him to join me on the podcast here when I saw that he was a top twelve finalist for the Samuel J Heyman Service to American People's Choice award. He's also nominate - nominated in the Science Environment category. Some of you may know that award as the Sammies. Uh, Rory's going to talk to us about his service in the Army, his spinal cord injury, accommodations for people using wheelchairs and the evolution that we've seen in this country - uh, from when he was first injured in the until now, and his research that is benefitting those with similar injuries. Enjoy.

[00:07:15] Music

**[00:07:19] INTERVIEW:**

TL: Alright, Mr. Rory Cooper. It – uh, some – you and I met – uh, last year in Pittsburgh at the MVAC meeting that was there at the – at the facility. You were showing off – uh, a New Chair, I think it was called.

Rory Cooper (RC): That's correct, yeah. We had – uh, two products actually – uh, three products. We had the New Chair which – uh, we're pretty excited about. The – um, the power chair version is licensed to – uh, Morgan's Wonderland and Morgan's Inspiration Island is being used down in San Antonio, now – um, at their waterpark and – uh, it is just starting to go into production. And we had the Knee Bot which was our mobility enhanced robotic wheelchair. Uh, we just collected some data at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games with Veterans participating in the games and – uh, we had our virtual seating coach which – uh, right about the time we had that meeting in Pittsburgh – um, it came on the market from – uh, Permobil, and so hopefully it's out there helping veterans reduce their risk of pressure ulcers, lymphedema and other disabilities.

TL: Yeah, absolutely. Um, we're gonna get much more into – into your work and research. We're – we're gonna go back to the beginning – the – the beginning of the story that we all sort of have in common and that's the decision to join the United States Military. Uh, bring us back to that day for you.

RC: Uh, well that was quite a while ago for me, but – uh –

TL: [Laughter]

RC: [Laughter] Um, you know – my – uh, my father and some of my uncles had served in the – in the Army. And – uh, I was a Boy Scout, actually an Eagle Scout and – um, and a lot of our Scoutmasters and Scout Leaders were also Veterans. And it – uh, just seemed like a natural way for me to – uh, to serve my country and to – um, see a little bit of the world outside of the small town I grew up in, in California and – um, to – uh, it seemed like, for me the – the right way to start off my – uh, my adult career.

TL: Sure. And – and what year was that?

RC: Um, I actually joined the Army in – uh, 1976 and entered basic training in – uh, 1977.

TL: Okay, and then – and how long did you serve?

RC: Uh, well I got injured in – uh, in July 23rd of 1980 – uh, but was officially discharged in 1982.

TL: Gotcha. Um, during your time in – uh, and this – and you can choose anything here – um, give me a story, an experience – uh, something that maybe you recall on often or something you feel like epitomizes your service that you can share with us.

RC: Uh, well – um, you know, unfortunately I served in – in Germany during peacetime. I mean, probably what epitomized my service is that – um, in 1979 I met a young – uh, German girl – uh, named Rosemarie Haymons and – um, we got married in 1982 and now we've been married for over thirty-five years. So – uh, that's obviously is probably one of my – uh, longest lasting memories of military service. Um, I remember my Sergeant Major when I got over to – uh, to Germany telling me "Oh Cooper, you're eighteen years of age, you're going to be here for three years. Uh, in all likelihood, you'll go home with either a cuckoo clock, a car or a wife". So – uh –

TL: [Laughter]

RC: [Laughter]

TL: And – and of those three you got one. Did you get either of the other two?

RC: No, I didn't – I still don't have a cuckoo clock, I still don't have a German car. So –

TL: [Laughter]

RC: But – uh, very happy with – uh, the German wife.

TL: Yeah. Well congratulations.

RC: [Inaudible]Thank you.

TL: Thirty-five years is a – is a long time. I'm married just over thirty-five days so –

RC: [Laughter]

TL: uh, not as impressive of a stat but I'm – I'm hoping I can get there.

RC: So – uh, you know the – um, you know, for me – uh, of course, the other lasting memory is that – the support that I received from my – uh, superiors and from my – uh, unit once I was injured. Um, they – uh, I worked for – on the staff of General – Major General Clarence McKnight as a Civil Affairs NCO and – um, he was actually the reason that I went on to study engineering. He himself was an electrical engineer and he – um, when I would do my briefings with him, and actually, he would encourage me to – uh, to go onto college and study engineering. And of course, he was trying to motivate me to – to take ROTC and come back to the Army as an officer. But even after I was injured, he visited me several times in the hospital and encouraged me to – uh, to pursue – to continue to pursue – uh, college and become an engineer. And so, I think that was a huge influence on me. I was also a – a very success – a fairly successful advocate and – um, avid runner when I was in the army and was greatly influenced by – um, two young captains – uh, Joe Young and Randy Black, both of whom I'm still in – in – in communication with all these years later – um, who were my running partners and also were very supportive in mentoring me as a young – as a young soldier – um, and I think, you know, the other experiences, just – uh, the friendships that I've made and some of those are – are lasting even, you know, over thirty-five, forty years later, which is pretty amazing. Um, you know, some of the subliminal experiences of course,

you have experiences in exercises or – uh, other – other events too, just kind of felt – formed that – uh, that lasting bond.

TL: Yeah – the – um, you know, I – I don't know how much of this story you're – you're willing to share but I – I would at least the audience, if you're willing, if you can explain to them what your injury is.

RC: Um, so the, you know, the primary injury that I have is a – um, is a spinal cord injury – uh, just below the chest. So that – um, causes paralysis of my – uh, of my legs, basically the lower extremities for me. So, I use a – I mean, I need a wheelchair. Um, it's fortunate that that's what I do for research and that, also, that the VA provides Veterans with a high – with high-quality assistive devices. Um, and there's obviously variation from VA to VA but if you – um, can get to one of the spinal cord injury centers or spinal injury clinics, my experience is that they do an excellent job. And I've – uh, I not only work in the VA, but I receive my care from the VA – um, and I'm – I'm very happy with both.

TL: Yeah. Uh, and again, you can – you can answer this as little or as much you're comfortable with. But when you transitioned out – uh, after your injury and you transitioned out, how – uh, did you face any emotional challenge or emotional crisis like a lot of Veterans – uh, seem to face?

RC: Yeah, I mean, of course. Um, I – I think it's sort of two-fold. Um, you know, I guess really in my case, three. Um, you know, I got – um, sort of – uh, you know, torn away from the – um, woman that I was engaged to and wasn't sure we would, you know, we would remain in contact because we weren't married at the time. You know, she had no – um, privileges even to know where I was or how to contact me – um, until I reached out to her. Now that of course causes – there's a – um, there's the transition to having a disability, right? So, your whole life is basically changed directions. Um, and – um, I didn't – I didn't have, like, a lot of – uh, people and didn't have a lot of experience with disability – um, beforehand, so I didn't know exactly what my expectations – uh, were. And then the other part is that – um, you're also torn away from your – your unit and your friends and – um, and not knowing – um, you know, sort of losing that support system as well. That's why I think it's extremely important today where we have the Marine Wounded

Warrior Regiment and the – uh, Army Warrior Transition Command and similar units for the Navy and the Air Force. And on the – as well as the office in the VA to – for DoD-VA coordination and seamless transition to – uh, to try to make that process a little bit easier, and so you're not sort of – uh, you know, ripped away from the – the military – um, and that you – you still have that support system and you're still – um, and your service is recognized and valued.

TL: Yeah, absolutely. Something I'm – I'm curious about. Um, I've never – uh, really had to think about it much in my life but – um, one thing I've always wondered. Um, tell me about the evolution you've seen in the logistics of being in a – uh, in a wheelchair. From when you first had to start using one until now. Has it improved? Or like when you go somewhere, how much research do you have to do in the building or location you're going to, to make sure you can even access it, or it can accommodate?

RC: Well, it's – uh, it's certainly improved. Uh, just give me – let me just give you a few examples. So, when I was first injured, I couldn't rent a car because you couldn't – none of the car agencies – car rental agencies offered cars with hand controls. Um, you – uh, hotels didn't have – uh, accessible rooms, so. Uh, there were times that I would travel, especially like for example even going to the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in the early 1980s, or all the way through the 1980s for example, there were times where I might have to, basically, hop out of my chair and crawl on my – uh, on my hind end to – uh, to get into the bathroom and to the – to use the toilet or the shower.

TL: Hm.

RC: Um, there were no grab bars. Believe it or not, before the Air Carrier Transportation Act, it wasn't uncommon for me to get to the airport and have – uh, the gate agent say, "Oh, you're not allowed to get on this plane without an attendant".

TL: Oh wow.

RC: And I'd say, "I don't need an attendant, I can, you know, get it on and off the plane by myself". And they would say "Well sorry sir, without an attendant you can't fly". And I would have to go, and I would look around and find a sympathetic person and ask them if they would be willing to be my attendant for the flight. And – uh, and most people would – uh, they'd be a little hesitant, ask what that entails, and I basically would say "It just entails telling the flight – the – the gate agent that you'll be my attendant in case the plane crashes". Um, which of course, you know, nobody's going to hold you to that obligation if the plane crashes.

TL: [Laughter] Yeah, yeah, and if your – if the plane crashes and both you and that person survive, you're kind of a dick if you're like "Sorry, I was – I was lying!" and they'd run off.

RC: That's right! [Laughter]

TL: Uh, yeah. Um, so what, I mean, what about – um, what about now? Like how, you know, if –

RC: Things have gotten better. Um, you know, by, you know, by and large – uh, all hotels have accessible rooms. They're not necessarily great. We need to – uh, to work, really, on the accessibility standards so that they're – uh, more accommodating. So, even today I have to do some research, and – um, I got to know, especially the major chains, which – which ones do a better job in accommodating – um, guests with disabilities. Uh, you can actually rent cars with hand controls, now which is a tremendous benefit. And I can fly, and you get some airlines, you know, are very accommodating where they have – um, seats up front that you can – um, transfer into more easily than – um, and – and – and in some cases even get into with your wheelchair without having to transfer into the aisle chair. Uh, you know, of course, there is a little bit of changes in the airlines that have caused problems too, with the –

um, the more use of regional jets. They're very difficult to get in and out of so that's one of the things I have to look at it is, you know, is it a regional jet. You know, sometimes that'll make my decision whether I'm gonna drive or fly. Um, and buildings are still a challenge. We really need to use more technology, I think. Well, I think first, architects need to design buildings where – where people with disabilities, especially people in wheelchairs can come in the main entrance rather than – um, creating some grandiose main entrance and then – um, having the person in a wheelchair have to find – uh, some hidden accessible entrance.

TL: [Laughter]

RC: [Laughter]

TL: Sorry I'm just picturing, like, the bellhop be like "No, sir you go in – you have to in through the back". [Laughter]

RC: Yeah, and that does happen to me today.

TL: Yeah.

RC: Um, I mean I – uh, believe me, I've seen a lot of kitchens at restaurants in my life because – uh, that's usually where there's a ramp –

TL: [Laughter]

RC: to carry dollies up for bringing packages up or food in.

TL: [Laughter]

RC: That's – uh, "Oh yeah we have an accessible entrance. It's – uh, go around to the back and it's this, you know, 45-degree slope that was made for carrying a dolly up. And – um, so, you know, there – well actually – um, when I was first injured, my congressman was Leon Panetta and he was very helpful. But up – to tell you a funny story of how things used to be. He had an office in California, and he asked to meet with me when I got out of rehab and – uh, just – I think we formed sort of a relationship and believe it or not we're still in communication to this day as well. And – uh, he – his staff – his office was on the second

floor of like an old Victorian house and – uh, his staff realized that I was in a wheelchair. So, they literally nailed boards to the stairs to form a ramp.

TL: [Laughter]

TL: Oh my goodness.

RC: [Laughter] Fortunately, I showed up with a friend of mine and we looked at it, we thought “I guess that means they expect us to go up the ra – up the stairs”. So, you know, with me pulling on the rail and him pushing from behind, we got up there, but – uh –

TL: [Laughter]

RC: um, things have gotten a lot better since then. [Laughter] It’s – uh, pretty crazy.

TL: Yeah and I – I – I only laugh because I think it’s ridiculousness that peo – you know, that people with – that don’t need accommodations don’t see, you know. And – uh, I can only imagine that – uh, it’s probably disappointing and frustrating but part of you, like – like, with the story you just told, kind of has to like, sort of roll your eyes at the situations that – uh, that you end up getting put in – uh, with lack of accommodations. I’m glad to hear that things are improving. I always – I didn’t – the reason why that – uh, that kind of came to mind was I remember – uh, my wife’s place when she lived in Columbus, you know – uh, we didn’t really think about it and – and – and accommodations came up in conversation and we sort of looked around and were like “Holy smokes, if we have a friend that was in a wheelchair, we would – they would not be able to visit”. You know just being able to get up to the apartment wouldn’t be possible. Um –

RC: Well that’s a great point, I mean – uh, accessible and affordable housing is, you know, one of the huge barriers as well as – as well as transportation, right? Um, I’m hoping that self-driving cars. Uh, if we – uh, can convince the Ubers and the Lyfts and the Fords and GMs and all

the different other organizations getting involved with self-driving cars or autonomous vehicles to – uh, think about people with disabilities and making them accessible as well as autonomous, that can be a huge benefit to people with disabilities. Yeah, they're a part of housing. Now more and more cities, even like the city of Pittsburgh, we have a visitability law that – that says that new construction codes should at least – uh, include a -a – a wheelchair accessible entrance and a wheelchair accessible bathroom – uh, in – even in residential dwellings – uh, for – in – in new construction. But, you know, that – every time we've moved over the years, that's been a huge challenge is finding a place that we can live in and of course, we've always had to do extensive renovations on any house that we've – uh, either rented or purchased –

TL: Right.

RC: uh, yeah, rented or purchased.

TL: And – uh, tot – just curious, when you make those renovations, does that at all change – like does that make it harder to sell because it doesn't have that tra – like, I imagine the accommodations sort of change the orthodox look – uh, look of the houses – make it easier to sell because it provides accommodations that others don't have or is it more difficult to sell – uh, because – because the renovations are specific?

RC: Um, well, you know, I think that's changing – uh, because of – um, I think, you know, twenty years ago, it – uh, I remember a real estate agent saying "Oh this is going to make it more difficult to sell the home". And my experience is now, that's actually changing. Um, people look at that as a – a – a sort of a, friends visiting with disabilities, they're more aware. Um, also, the ability, age and place so it's like, "Oh", you know, "oh, this home already has a lot of features". Um, and if you do it right – um, or if it's done well – um, then it just, you know, it still looks like a nice, normal home.

TL: Yeah.

RC: Uh, and we – you know, our home here in Pittsburgh, we get a – it's been made fully accessible and – um, and we get a lot of compliments. It's actually very funny, when we get like a new – uh, dishwasher delivered or a new refrigerator or something like that the uh, the delivery people are always like "Oh wow! I can't believe that you have your house so easy for us to put stuff in!"

TL: [Laughter]

RC: "A lot of people don't think about that."

TL: [Laughter]

RC: [Laughter] You know, anything to make your life easier to get that refrigerator in the kitchen, you know.

TL: It's like, I made the house easier to put myself in it. [laughter]

RC: [Laughter]

TL: Uh, very well, well Dr. Cooper, I really appreciate – uh, you providing insight on – on – on accommodations stuff. Like you said, it's – it's a part of life that I, you know, I just don't experience and don't get to see. So, but let's talk about your research. You – you are nominated for a Samuel J. Hayman Service to America Medal. You made, I believe, there at – what, the Final 12 at this point. Um, yep, Final 12. Uh, September 1, top four is announced and then on the 15th, voting closes. Um, you've been recognized for a lot of your hard work within research. Uh, can you – can you speak on that? Sort of, what – uh, what specifically you are being recognized for – uh, and sort of how you came about that research?

RC: Uh, sure. Well, I'm actually – uh, just for your listeners, I'm actually running for – uh, in two categories. So, I'm a finalist – uh, in the People's Choice, so I hope that they will – uh, they will go online and vote for me. Um, I'm – I'm the only VA finalist, so, you know, so gotta cheer for the home team.

TL: That's right.

RC: And I'm also a finalist in the – um, Science and Environment category which a panel of judges will choose so – um, hopefully you keep our fingers crossed that the VA gets a win in one of those categories.

TL: Absolutely. And – uh, yeah – and the research that you've done to get this recognition.

RC: So – um, the research that I've done is – uh, basically to – to help our veterans with disabilities and – uh, American citizens. Well, all – all – all Americans with disabilities and for that matter all people around the world with disabilities. I – um, after I was injured with support from the VA I – I received degrees in – or earned degrees in Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD in engineering. Um, and I was fortunate enough to get a postdoc in the VA and discover that – uh, designing technology to help our – uh, our Veterans with disabilities was a – a – a career option and so – um, I work on building better wheelchairs, robotics, robot device – robotic devices, prosthetic limbs – um, we do some work in cognitive aids and home and worksite modifications as well. So basically, in the realm of applying – uh, technology to promote a – a – a full participation of Veterans with disabilities and people with disabilities. And – uh, I did a lot of work in – uh, early on I did a lot of work in wheelchairs and still do and it [inaudible] into adaptive sports as well. But in probably the – uh, last fifteen years, expanded quite considerably – um, into intelligent machines and robotic systems for – um, as technologies to help people with disabilities.

TL: Sure. Is this – is this a career path you think you would have taken, hadn't you been injured?

RC: Um, it's not likely, no, I'm not – I'm not sure I would've – what I would've done. Um –

TL: Do you think you were a lifer in the Army? Were – were you a lifer?

RC: You know, I – I don't know. I was pretty young when I was injured. Um, I think I – I certainly wanted to get a college degree and – uh, coming back through ROTC was certainly on my – uh, one of my options that I was considering. Um, but it's – you know in retrospect it's sort of – I'm, to be honest, I'm the type of person that – um, focuses less of my energy on what my life could have been –

TL: Yep.

RC: and focusing on what my life – uh, you know, taking advantage of the opportunities presented to me to – to enjoy the life that I have. Um, so, but now I'm – I'm – I'm sure that I hopefully I would have done something to make a contribution and it could have been in the military, could have – um, you know – uh, I've – I've always had an interest in – uh, in – in technology as well and so maybe I would have wound up at – at NASA or some other agency or who knows, in the private sector. It's pretty hard to say but one thing I can say is that – uh, despite the – the spinal cord injury and the disabilities – um, I've – I'm very happy with my life and – um, and – and grateful with the opportunities that I've – I mean I have had to serve other Veterans. I'm not sure if I hadn't been injured, I would have discovered anything that has been so fulfilling as – as my career has been.

TL: Yeah. Um, do you – do you have a story that you can share where some – maybe a discovery – um, or a discovery that you made got mani – got made into reality and then you got to watch a Veteran benefit from – from that research? Do you have a – do you have a story like that?

RC: I can tell you a couple of them, just – just from this year as a matter of fact.

TL: Sure.

RC: Um, so I'll try to tell you one without choking up. But, earlier this – so, I've been working with a company called Next Health, on – uh, developing a wheelchair and bed, sort of robotic wheelchair, robotic bed that work together to help Veterans get in and out of bed – uh, without having to be lifted – uh, because you have a lot of – um, you know, older Veterans with an older caregiver. Or even in my own case,

you know, it would be very difficult for my wife to – um, to assist me to get into bed and it can put her at risk, as well as me. And so – um, we – uh, we have some of these. Uh, so, the first units have come onto the market, and we've been working on new and improved prototypes, and we have the H.J. Heinz Center here in Pittsburgh which is – uh, lo – an intermediate and long-term care facilities for Veterans. And at the suggestion of our Chief of Rehab, he said "You know, you should – you need to get these inventions out so that the Veterans, their families, and the clinical staff can see them". So, we set up in the – in the lobby for a day, to just kind of get – uh, feedback from Veterans and their families. And – uh, and so, there was one of the spouses came by and she – she talked to us and she looked at the device and she – um, she had a lot of questions and she was very interested and then she – she left. And then – um, about an hour later – um, she came back with her husband's – uh, physician and said, asked us to demonstrate it and told the physician "I want one of these because I want to take my husband home with me" .....And, you know, that's – that's – and she – that's where you see the impact of your research.

TL: Yeah. That's – uh, that's powerful.

RC: And then – um, on a more – on a more fun note. I – I – I still – uh, do research and I participate in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games every year. I think one – they're one of the VA's more outstanding programs. And – um, so – uh, this year, I had a – um, they have an – and event called the Slalom which is an obstacle course for wheelchairs, and I had qualified for the Super Giant Slalom. And – um, and that's – that's kind of where all the winners get to go to – the top athletes get to do the extreme Slalom, like – uh, sort of an extreme obstacle course. And – um, I was – a subtle therapist from – uh, from various VA's across the United States were kind of sitting there kind of asking me stupid questions like this "What's your – what kind of research are you doing?" and "how was it, you know, what – what, you know, a little bit, what kind of things should we be looking for? What kind of impact?" And I said – um, I said, "Well, you know what? Um, if you look, everybody that's – all 12 of the competitors that have made it to the Super Giant Slalom here, they're all using technologies from our lab".

TL: That's awesome.

RC: They're all – they're all – all of them. So, you're already using – you're – you are prescribing, and their mobility is increased. All of them are using technology that we created. So, I – I was even kidding with the competitors, I told them, I said, "You know, you've got to give me a few extra seconds for – because I – I developed – you know, I created the technology to help you get here". [Laughter]

TL: [Laughter] I like that. That has to be – that has to be a lot of fun, though. To be able to – um, you know, I – I imagine that in the science world, that, you know, not every researcher, not every developer gets to – to have the – um, the pleasure of seeing their work function in reality. So that has to be really rewarding.

RC: It is and that's – that's actually the best, you know, the best part of what we do, right? Is – uh, is to go out and – and see your research impact people in a positive way and – um, you know, the – like when I go to the Veterans Wheelchair Games or – um, I go to the hospital, the – the Veterans that, you know, know what I do, they're – they're always very gracious, very generous. I – I always get, you know, basically two comments of, you know - "Oh I love this or that" and "Thank you for doing that research, we really need you to do what you're doing." And then the – then the usually the follow up right after that is – um, "You should be working or what are you working on?" and "You should be working on this or that." [Laughter]

TL: [Laughter]

RC: Which – uh, is good cause that's what I want, you know, I'd like our research to be driven by the needs of Veterans and our VA clinicians, and – and – you know, and in turn that will benefit everybody.

TL: Yeah, that's wonderful. Rory, I want to be – uh, mindful of your time. Just a couple more short questions. First – um, what's – what's a skillset, a discipline, some sort of talent or whatever you want to call it

that you learned in the military, that you think is contributing to your success today?

RC: Uh, I – I think there's really two lessons that I learned in the military. I – I will tell you, that – uh, in the NCO basic course – uh, you learn a lot. I use those lessons till today. Uh, one of them is – um, if you take care of your people, they will take care of you. Um, and the other important lesson is – uh, you know, [inaudible] living the Army values. Uh, you know, never leave a fallen comrade, selfless service, putting the mission first. All of those have a – um, are – are lessons to live by and – uh, I think something that – uh, makes all Veterans – uh, stand out just a little bit.

TL: Yeah. I know that you've had involvement with several Veteran organizations including being an advisor to SVA, being the director of Paralyzed Veterans of America Research Foundation. Uh, but give me – give me a Veteran or Veteran organization that has you excited, where you really admire the work they're doing right now.

RC: Oh boy, that's – you're really putting me on the spot. I mean I think there's – [Laughter]

TL: [Laughter] Sure, we can stay – we can be here all month talking about this, but the first one that comes to mind.

RC: Well – um, I – I can't give you the first one. I'm going to give you two of them that I think –

TL: Okay.

RC: Um, are – um, the Paralyzed Veterans of America has been with me – uh, since I was in the hospital. I mean, I – I owe much of my success to Paralyzed Veterans of America, because – um, they were the first to believe in me and there – and you know, I – I have every expectation that they will be with me – um, until the end. And then the other organization I would have to mention is – is Student Veterans of America. They – um, one, you know, having been a student Veteran, they have – they have – uh, I think that they are going to – um, transform America. They – this is the work that they are doing – um, to

help our – um, primarily, post 9/11 Veterans but actually Veterans of all eras to – uh, to – to get a higher education – um, and to – uh, have a – a more – a higher career trajectory. I think they are going to – um, we are going to see the impact that we saw in the – in the post-World War Two era. These – where the work of those Veterans – uh, is going to come and – and be a tremendous benefit to Veterans. But I will say that there are – um, a large number of Veteran service organizations that – that do a – uh, a great work on behalf of Veterans. Uh, every day Disabled American Veterans, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled Veterans National Foundation, - uh, Wounded Warrior Project just to name a few that – um, I think are highly dedicated and – um, making a tremendous difference in the lives of Veterans in America, as well as – um, on society in general.

**TL:** Yeah, absolutely. Dr. Rory Cooper, thank you so much for your time. Thank you for your service and thank you for your continued research and development to – uh, to help our – our Veterans – uh, you know, live a better life.

**RC:** Well thank you very much. Thanks for the opportunity to be on your show.

**TL:** Yeah. We'll make sure to – uh, I continue to vote every day for People's Choice Award. So – uh, you'll at least have one every day from me. I know my director does the same and we continue to – to ask our community to support you.

**RC:** Well thank you, I appreciate that.

[00:42:31] Music

### **[00:42:34] PSA:**

**Man 1:** The VA has made it extremely easy to access information, to get out there and find benefits that are there for you.

**Woman:** Veterans might be eligible for things they had no idea they are eligible for, no matter what age you are.

**Man 2:** That's your benefit. That's what you've earned. Take advantage of it.

**Man 3:** And the only reason I am sitting here today talking to anybody is because of the VA.

**Man 4:** Explore the many ways VA Benefits can help you purchase a home, earn a degree, advance your career, and so much more! Learn about VA Benefits you may be eligible for. Visit [explore.va.gov](https://explore.va.gov) [link to the Explore VA webpage] today.

[00:43:10] Music

### **[00:43:14] CLOSING MONOLOGUE:**

**TL:** Earlier this week, some of you may have seen, I led a panel on Facebook Live. It was featured on Department of Veterans' Affairs Facebook page, it's [facebook.com/veteransaffairs](https://facebook.com/veteransaffairs) [link to VA's Facebook page] and we were discussing Explore VA. Explore VA's a site that lets Veterans explore the benefits they may be entitled to. [Explore.va.gov](https://explore.va.gov) is the site and it has information on disability claims, edu – education benefits, home loans, and much more. If you click the menu tab in the upper left-hand corner, you'll see a "Benefits Navigator" option. That navigator is going to ask you a string of questions and then it'll show you which benefits, based on your answers, you may be qualified for. You can do this as a Veteran, you can do this as a spouse, you can do this as a caregiver. This is something – this is a site that's meant to be user friendly for any person looking into benefits, whether it's for themselves as a Veteran or for a loved one that they're representing. It takes less than twenty minutes and is very powerful tool. I highly suggest you use it. When you use it, please – uh, give us some feedback. Let us know how you felt about the – about the – the tool and what you learned from it. Again, you can find that at [explore.va.gov](https://explore.va.gov). Today's Veteran of the Day is Army Veteran James Jimmy Buckland. Jimmy served operations in Panama, Desert Storm, Khobar Towers, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom. We thank Jimmy for his service. To read Jimmy's full writeup and to nominate your own Veteran of Day, visit [blogs.va.gov](https://blogs.va.gov) [link to the VAs podcast page]. That wraps up Episode 45. We're so close to fifty, it's pretty exciting. Thank you so much for listening. Be sure to follow us on Twitter @deptvetaffairs [Link

to the VA's Twitter page:

[https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor). You can also follow Secretary Shulkin,

he's at secshulkin, that's secshulkin. Follow us both for more stories from our community. I'm Timothy Lawson, signing off.

[00:45:10] Music Out

(Text Transcript Ends)