

Borne the Battle

Episode # 228

Marine Corps Veteran Walter Gaskin, North Carolina Secretary of Veterans Affairs

<https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/84383/borne-battle-228-marine-corps-veteran-walter-gaskin-north-carolina-secretary/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Music

[00:00:05] Opening Monologue:

Tanner Iskra (TI):

Ah, yeah let's get it. Monday, February 8th, 2021. Borne the Battle brought to you by the Department of Veteran Affairs, the podcast that focuses on inspiring veteran stories and puts a highlight on important resources, offices, and benefits for our veterans. I am your host, Marine Corps veteran, Tanner Iskra. Hope you had a good week outside of podcast land. We had a hearing, but as of this recording, I haven't had a confirmation, but I can say with pretty good certainty that the eleventh secretary of Veteran Affairs will be Denis McDonough, and we look forward to getting a full court press to get him here on the show as soon as possible. No ratings or reviews on apple podcast this week. However, we did get a couple of comments on blogs. You can find those blogs on blogs.va.gov. Before we get into those, I also got a response from a buddy of mine who actually looked up the town in Montana that I couldn't pronounce in last week's Borne the Battle rewind. The town is pronounced Haver, so I apologize to the entire population of Harve, Montana for mis-pronouncing the town's name. Again, it's spelled like Farve with an H. So, I pronounced it Harve. It's Havre. So, I appreciate my friend who sent me a video message telling me that he went on Youtube after the podcast and actually looked up what the actual sound – what the actual pronunciation of the town is. Thought that was pretty funny. Alright. On to the blog comments. Episode 226 blog that featured Scott Stump had a lot of Gulf War Veterans posts and share their accounts and it was great to read all the stories. Episode 227's blog which was the episode that featured Vietnam Veteran and New York Bestselling Author John Del Vecchio, James Laviana said, "I've read all of John's books and everyone was factual and emotional. I learned last year that John was a Connecticut resident from one the girls when I was in therapy at West Haven VA. It's great to know that John continues his quest to educate the average American about Vietnam and how it affected us, the veterans. It haunts me to this day." James, I'm glad,

and I'm sure John is glad that you enjoy his books. And yes. I'm glad that John does the work he does as well. I personally learned a lot in just the short amount of time that was I able to work with him. Donald F. Smith writes, "I look forward to reading John Del Vecchio's book. I was the United States Air Force combat news representative and photographer with the 3rd tactical fighter squadron stationed at Benowa Air base, South Vietnam. 72171 Information Technician Staff Sergeant 1968. My unit flew the F-100 Super Sabre." Donald, I looked up that plane and it looks pretty wicked. I also saw that it flew in the military for sixteen years from 54 to 70. That must have been a sight to see. Appreciate you writing in. And finally, the Benefits Breakdowns where we broke down the Cares Act federal home loan protection extensions with a couple directors from the CFPB from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Will Loyd Owen commented, "*Good Day!*" I think he might be Australian. *It's a good day! What is the song at the end of the episode?* I don't know if that was Australian or not.

[00:03:34] Music

Like I said, at the end of every episode, the song is called Machine Gunner and is courtesy of the non-profit Operation Song and was written by Marine Veteran Mick McElhenny, Nashville songwriter Jason Sever—who also performs the song—and Mykal Duncan.

[00:03:55] Music

Finally, Robert Allison Smith stated, "They still charge you interest if you owe the government money. That is what they don't tell you." Robert, I appreciate your input, but what you said was a little vague. You can owe the government money for many different things, but not in the case of owning a home. You don't owe the government money. You owe the bank, credit union, or mortgage company money. The VA just backs your loan. Basically, if you default on your loan to the bank, the bank still gets its money through VA. It's a reason a VA home loan is attractive to some banking institutions. There's some pros and cons to it, of course. And we cover all the pros and cons in episode 150. So, if you want to look at what a VA home loan entails, that's a good episode to listen to here on Borne the Battle. Now, with the CARES Act, what we covered inside the episode, we covered accruing interest forbearance. Spoiler, you don't. And many other myths like having to pay it back all at once. Again, these are some of the things that I learned while listening to some of the subject matter experts at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. So, if you haven't taken a look at that bonus episode where it talks about forbearance protection for your home, go check it out. And as always, I appreciate all the feedback every week. And if you like what we're

doing here, please consider smashing that subscribe button and leaving a rating and or a review on Apple Podcast even if you listen to us on a different podcatcher. In doing so, you'll either be letting me know what you would like to see out of the podcast or you're helping push this podcast higher in the algorithms giving more veterans the chance to be provided not only in the interviews, but in the Benefits Breakdown episodes and in the news releases.

Kicking off news releases, we got a statement from the Acting Secretary of VA. It talks about a President Biden executive order that was issued on January 22nd. It says it is to address the economic hardships the veteran community faces during the ongoing pandemic. It goes on quoting Mr. Tran by saying and I quote, "Through no fault of their own, our Veterans and their loved ones continue to face economic hardship during the pandemic. I want to assure Veterans, their family members, survivors, and caregivers that we are doing everything we can to lessen the burden and worry. Effective today, VA will extend the existing moratorium on evictions and foreclosures until March 31st, 2021. VA borrowers experiencing financial hardships due to COVID 19 can review VA guidance for borrowers. Or call 1-877 827 3702 for additional information. VA is also looking for immediate ways to help over two million veterans maintain their financial footing. By exploring options to ease the burden of federal collections on compensation, pension overpayments, medical and education related debt. VA will provide updated information and guidance for veterans va.gov on this effort as soon as possible. VA is focused on lessening these financial hardships for America's veterans. We will continue to work with our partners in Congress and veterans service organizations to honor our veterans and their families by providing care and benefits they earned and deserved." Very well.

Alright. The next one – and I'm not going to go too much in depth with it. It's a news release where the VA is celebrating about itself and 75-year academic partnership. But one thing that I did read in there that is interesting that you might like is that through the VA's office of academic affiliations program, I learned that the VA provides training to nearly 70 percent of the United States' trained physicians. I just thought that was an incredible stat line, and you can learn more about the Office of Partnerships at va.gov/oaa.

Alright. Next one says, for immediate release, the US Department of Veteran Affairs posted a draft decision for criteria in the federal register to be used by VA secretary to develop recommendations for the future of Veterans Health Care Administrations. Their criteria are

based on specific factors outline in the VA MISSION Act of 2018 which gives veterans greater access to healthcare in VA facilities and the community and input received through collaboration with stakeholders including veterans and veterans service organizations. That criteria includes the following categories: veterans need of care and services, accessibility for care of veterans, impact on mission, providing the highest quality of whole health care, effective use of resources, and ensuring a safe environment of care. In accordance with the MISSION Act, VA is conducting market assessments for each VA's markets to design high performing networks of care. The networks will consist of a more flexible platform that can provide quality rarely accessible, cost effective care the VHA through the Veteran's Health Administration, and leverage the best of care provided for federal partners, academic affiliates, and other private sector providers. Recommendations from the assessments will be finalized utilizing the improved criteria by submitting to the VA Secretary to the presidential appointed asset and infrastructure review and commission also known as the AIR commission for their consideration in January of 2022. In addition to analyzing public comments, VA is hosting virtual listening sessions in the coming months. The feedback will be used to provide recommendations for networks of care to be reviewed by the AIR commission, President Biden, and Congress. View the draft decision criteria and make comments on the federal register webpage, the public comment period ends after 90 days after February 1st which is, you know, it's coming right up. Now, the URL is a little long, but I'll put a link to the register in this episode's blog on blog.va.gov. Going to federalregister.gov and making a comment about the MISSION Act of 2018 is good because unlike the comment on Facebook or Instagram or Twitter, the powers that be will be forced to read and consider your comments. I would say that if you've used community care or if you're a caregiver that falls under the act, I would say that your input is especially valuable. You can go to federalregister.gov and search for draft criteria for section 203 of the VA MISSION Act of 2018 and navigate your way to it. Or you, again, can go this episode's blog on blogs.va.gov. Just look up Borne the Battle 228, and I'll have a link towards the bottom of the blog. Again, you've got less than 90 days from the podcast episode drop to get you word in.

Alright. This week is a little treat for me. I first interviewed this guest over ten years ago for a Marine Corps production, and I remember that he had so many quotable quotables that he could have had a production – that we could have made a video that just featured him. He is a retired Lieutenant General. Actually, one of only six African

American Lieutenant Generals ever in the Marine Corps. He served as the 19th Deputy Chairman of the NATO Military Committee providing strategic military counsel on operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya to NATO's secretary general and North Atlantic Council. He's also the first African American Commanding General to ever command a Marine Division. He accomplished that as the commanding general 2nd Division from Camp Lejeune from 2006 to 2008. In addition to that role, he simultaneously served the commanding general of two marine expeditionary force units. During this tour, Lieutenant Gaskin also led 2nd MEF forward to its yearlong deployment to Al Anbar Province in Iraq as the commanding general of Multi-National Force West. Our guest most recently served as the CEO of LaPorte Tech Defense. He's a graduate of Savannah State University NORTC Scholarship Program with a Bachelor of Science. He earned a Summa Cum Laude and a master's degree in Public Administration from the University of Oklahoma and completed the senior executive seminar in the JFK School of Government and Harvard University. He is now the Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Military and Veteran Affairs. We know that state has a lot of veterans in it. He is a Marine Corps veteran, Walter Gaskin. Enjoy.

[00:12:27] Music

[00:12:34] Interview

(TI): Back – back then, I was hoping that you liked your placement in the 235th birthday message. It was—. That was one of my—. To be honest, that was one of my favorite parts of the message. When you said, “It’s our duty to go out and do the bidding for our nation when they call upon us to serve, as that Cobra was rising, as the Marines were taking the Hill”, I think we used that as a transition because it was a – it was a great link between what the Marines were saying and what the commandant ended on.

(WG): Right. It was well received by the Marines. And—. And the things that we were able to convey to the nation of, you know, I will do these. Not only that we were the first to fight, we would be there when the battle was won, you know. One thing as General Krulak used to say, you know, “Winning battles for our nation is our calling.”

(TI): Exactly. You know, your interview, I remember that you had a lot ofisms. You had a lot of good quotes. And I just remember it was a great conversation, and that, you know, we wanted to, but we couldn’t fit all

the isms in. And looking back, we probably could have just made a production based on that conversation alone, which is, again, which is why I'm glad we got this time today.

(WG): You know, it's good being, you know, being a Marine. It kind of inspires you in of itself.

(TI): Absolutely. Sir, I'm going to go back. We start every interview with Borne the Battle by going back a little bit. When and where did you decide to enter the Marine Corps in the first place?

(WG): You know, living and growing up in Savannah, Georgia, you know, that's 35 miles from Parris Island. And so, going over to Hilton Head, and—. And then, one of my cousins, which is a—we were like, you know, second cousins because he's the kid of my mother's first cousin—joined the Marine Corps. And we were in junior high school and he went to Vietnam as a Marine. And, you know, unlike anything else, you know, even from those that returned from World War II, a Marine coming to Savannah or the Marines returning to Vietnam, it was not like, you know, the rest of the nation was all against the war. This was a genuine hero. And I kept saying, you know, even though we had an Army base there, to be a Marine was top of the notch. And I always said, you know, even while I was in Army ROTC in high school, I wanted to be a Marine. So, when I got an ROTC scholarship, you know, I discovered then that even going to the Naval Academy or going to ROTC that they produce both sailors and Marines, so I was - I was in there. So, it's like, from a kid, I always wanted to a Marine.

(TI): It's interesting that you – you – that your – your second cousin that came back from Vietnam was hailed as a hero from Vietnam because, again, like you said, that wasn't the norm then at that point of time.

(WG): No. And what you will see too, even more in African American community, having been a part of both those guys from World War II and Korea, and now Vietnam, you know, they were fighting for the right to fight, and they were absolutely heroes. And so, it was—. And being the southern town that appreciates service, these guys stood out. And as matter of fact, we had a parade for our returning Vietnam veterans.

(TI): Really? What year was that?

(WG): This was in the 69.

(TI): Wow. Wow.

(WG): And you know, and all of us then were, you know, a member of the drafts. So, I remember my number, 103. And the only reason that I didn't get drafted to go to Vietnam was because I had a college deferment and I – so I said—and even more the fact that I was going to ROTC and with a mandatory service, you know, my deferment was deferred from – from college, so.

(TI): But they knew you were already going. It was like, “Oh. He's going to ROTC. He's – he's in the system.”

(WG): That was—. That was the system with the draft then is that, you know, if you were—. If you had a – you had a college deferment or if you were continuing education that you would have, you know, some medical capability prevented you, but other than that, everybody, everybody signed up and he was given a number.

(TI): Interesting. So, sir, looking at your bio, one thing that stuck out to me—. A couple of things that stuck out to me were operations Assured Response and quick-and-quick response in the 90's with the 22nd Marine expeditionary unit, reinforcing the embassies in Liberia and Central African Republic was a mission that we were taking a look at doing in Kiev in 2014. And it's actually what my battalion did when I was attached to them in Libya back in 2014. These – these operations they're – they're the type that if they come off without a hitch, they get a footnote in the news, but if they don't, they're headlines. Can you run me back through the circumstances of – of those two operations?

(WG): Okay. What the Marine Corps—. Because we had the marines and the embassies for protection of classified stuff, as well as the ambassadors—we get these calls all the time—building the Marine Expeditionary Unit, or the MEUs, took that as one of their missions. And that was to evacuate, which we call non-combatant evacuations, was to evacuate any citizens that was caught in between whatever political strife that was going on in – in the – in the city. So, the time of Liberia, which is Liberia has a direct correlation to the United States because, you know, when Monrovia, the capital of Liberia was named after our President Monroe and that we – a returning – a number of returning slaves from the United States went back in. So, there was a special relationship. And at the time, you know, when you get a nation

that's a model that of America in Africa and South – and Southwest Africa being overrun, and the ambassador was in trouble. So, we had responded once before to that, and this time, Charles Taylor, who was really fighting against the nation – the free elections of the nation. And we were frankly, when that mission came to us, we was in Bosnia doing that patrol because of the strife that they were having, and we got the call that we had the ambassador and all the normal protective—cause the United States had the thing to protect all the other countries: France, Great Britain that was the embassies there for the protection—were being overrun or potentially too, because of the strife in the streets, you know, rounds were coming into the embassy and the areas. So, we—. So, I and my team—because I was the BLT commander—took and flew to Dakar, Senegal and then down into there to reinforce. And meantime, the commute, the 22nd commute steamed around. It was going to take 10 days for them to get there.

(TI): Yeah.

(WG): At the same time though, the Central African Republic was having a problem too, so I deployed my LER Company to fly into there too to protect their embassy at the same time.

(TI): You know, those are two operations that, like I said, they're kind of footnotes in the news because it—. I mean, did they go off without a hitch? Is there anything about those missions?

(WG): Yeah. We had some really tough times and that—you know. We – we evacuated, you know, some – all of our – all of our hundreds of our personnel, the third country nationals, as well as some of the – some of the support for – for the embassy. We brought about aboard thee – the amphibs to transport them, but we were dropping them off in – out of the area.

(TI): Very good. Very good.

(WG): But you know, it was a—. It was really a combat. Matter of fact, that's where I got my first bronze star was in the fight there and the – in securing the embassy in Liberia.

(TI): Tracking. So, you mentioned it – another issue that was happening in the mid-90s. See, Croatian is my heritage. My family came from Croatia, so Ugoslavia was, you know, was – it was breaking up at the

time. What was the—? What was the expeditionary unit's mission up there?

(WG): Well, you know, you know, you had Serbia and you had the whole, this central area, you know, that were Bosnia-Herzegovina, Syria—I mean, Serbia, and Croatia. All of those countries that were—. After they were breaking up of the old Yugoslavia and the part of – of Russia's Soviet complex, they still had issues with each other and the Muslims as well as the Christians were still – were still fighting each other in the – in the northern part of that area. And after—

(TI): Not just Christians, but Christians and Orthodox Christians.

(WG): That's correct.

(TI): And they—. And this—. And this goes back thousands of years, you know. Now I don't think anybody – not many people know that what – what that conflict entails – the history of that entails.

(WG): But, you know, what was really difficult about that is that you could really tell the different communities and enclaves by the architecture. And they had been neighbors for hundreds of years and they would walk out and shoot each other. Now, at that breakup—. That's how suppressed their particular areas were when they was under Tito and Yugoslavia and all of that just busted apart. And it was, it was really, a lot of folks didn't—worldwide—didn't see. All they saw was that in central Europe you were having problems that, but they didn't realize the cultural problems that they were having.

(TI): And how many lives that – that conflict cost? I think it's more than what people realize.

(WG): Absolutely.

(TI): Now, sir, as a flag officer, you held – you held many billets, many joint as well: Vice Director of the Joint Chiefs, in 2008 you were the CG of not only the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force, but the Commander General of all the Multi-National Forces West, Chief of Staff and Naval Striking Forces Southern Europe, and one other position that I will save, that's usually reserved for a four- or five-star billet. And I'll get more detailed into that in a bit, but while you were in, what was the hardest for you? What was the hardest decision that you ever had to make?

(WG): And in which job?

(TI): [Laughter]

(WG): [Laughter] All of them – all of them had their – had their issues.

(TI): Yeah. I would say—? I would say, what would be your number one? And what was the—? What was the way you—? How did you mitigate it?

(GW): One of the—. The greatest difficult of a Marine officer in the joint world is teaching the other services how the Marine Corps fights a lot of those things. You become the first Marine to do that. Our MAGTF is a joint organization when you look at the outside of the Marine Corps. You know, we have our own air force. We have our own logistic hub. We have our combat aspect, and we put it in together and we call it, you know, a Marine joint task force basically about MAGTG. But when you go into those joint assignments—. Like, I remember when I was out in Anbar, and I had army units working for me, but I had our MAGTF. I remember talking to my – my immediate boss then was General Denaro, you know, he wanted me to take in, drop my Air Force that I had at al-Assad sends them up to be with Air Force, and he wanted me to take my logistics hub - my portion of the FSB forward and send them to be with the Army Sustainment Command. No. No. That's not how we fight, so.

(TI): [Laughter] He wanted –. He wanted all the Marine Corps assets for his guys.

(WG): Well, he wanted to—. He wanted to break it up into what he was calling his joint force, but see, the Marine Corps, as I explained it to them and what all marines do is that our Marine Corps air ground task force is a force within your force, you know? Give us an area. And that's how we end up with Anbar. Give us an area and we'll defend it, but you know. And we don't—. And we are self-sustained. We have our own logistics system. We have our aviation system and how to resupply, so—. But we – we are well capable of doing the mission because of you. You spray it out the – into the MEF. The MEF is a core level organization and that – began to for them to understand. And that's why when we had the MEUs that came out into Phil fleet, that they - they were chopped to me in Anbar. So, that we could actually do our fight. You know, I told them I have 22 jets out here. I have as

many helicopters as the Army has, so, yeah, I'm capable of doing those sorts of things. And so—. And I also had attached to me two divisions, the second and the seventh from the Iraqis, as well as I had two brigades from the Army.

(TI): What was your, I guess, most challenging decision both in a combat situation or and in a non-combat situation?

(WG): Right then we were dealing with how the Blackwater situation had occurred and our goal was to separate those combatants from the populations. So, we didn't have destructions in the into souk area and into the little villages.

(TI): You didn't want a contract retaliation on uniform troops.

(WG): That's exactly right. And you, you know. And we had, you know. We had some cultural things that we had to deal with. Matter of fact, how I became good friends with Stan McChrystal—later work for him—was that he, you know, he had a special forces and his guys did a hit inside our area just outside of the town of Hit. And one of the sheikhs who was a good guy was killed in that operation. And we did not know that they were coming.

(TI): Oh. Wow.

(WG): And so, you know, the folks because of the death of the sheikh, we're ready to turn on. And my Marines and sailors and soldiers were living out among these. And so, they were, the eyes and ears for – for the soldiers so that it would not be—now, you know, al-Qaeda would not attack them without us knowing.

(TI): They were the intel.

(WG): So, that's right. And – and that's how I first, you know, I really got to know Stan McChrystal. He flew up to talk to me about what do we have to do? And we had to talk to those – a group of sheikhs about what had happened. And then he later became the Director of the Joint Staff and I was his Vice Director.

(TI): So, a relationship was built through that.

(WG): Yeah. Well, I mean, like I say that's a part of that joint that joint thing, and the – what is – what is your territory and how the Army positions up.

(TI): How did you mitigate that with the sheikhs?

(WG): Well, the thing is that they knew that we have concerned about folks who lived among them and the agreement that we had with them was that they would – they would let us know so that we could preclude things like the intel community discovering that they had a high-ranking guy living – living among them and – came to get it. He just happened to be at the compound of that sheikh.

(TI): Oh, wow.

(WG): But what was not known is that was where he kept his wife and it's—

(TI): It was—. It was an unfortunate accident.

(WG): It was an unfortunate accident. It was not an intentional death threat. And that—. And the other thing that they did was that – what we had taken care of is that we had used women for patting down women, and the – when the special forces came in and they just – it was stripping women down and everything. So, it was—. I will say I could have been a feaux-pas, but—

(TI): You guys were able to work it out with the sheikhs.

(WG): We were able to work it out. And the sheikhs, they appreciated that more than anything else is that the big guys would come down to talk to them. Which led to the reason that when President Bush came out – he met in Anbar – those sheikhs invited him out to do that.

(TI): Very good. Now, sir, you were also the Deputy, but for a short time, the acting Chairman of the NATO Military Committee. It's a billet—. It's a billet that was first held – held by general Omar Bradley.

(WG): . And that was the first—. And I was the second one since Bradley.

(TI): The second American?

(WG): Second American. See there was—. This was an agreement and the Americans agreed that we would never hold the billet of Chairman.

We will always have an American three-star would always be the Deputy Chairman, but we will never be the Chairman after – after Omar. And—. But they will give us in charge of all of their military forces and – and the SACEUR. SACEUR would be in charge of all – all the military forces. It's NATO Supreme Allied Commander.

(TI): That – that deputy coin you gave me—. To me, it trumps any other coin that I ever got previous or after because everyone knows the billet of the NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Eisenhower's old billet, right? Now, looking—. But looking at that command structure—that's a billet that reports to that body.

(WG): That's exactly right. And that's why I—. When I tried to explain to them—. And that's why I wanted to make billet a four start billet because that billet is senior to the Allied Forces Commander. And I tried—. And I explained it to them in this way. It's like a combatant commander like CENTCOM or UCOM, but it's a four-star billet. But they report to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. That's the relationship of SACEUR is to the Chairman of the Military Committee. You know, he is basically our—I mean, the Global Chairman of Joint Chiefs and SACEUR is just one of the Combatant Commanders. His combatant command covers all 28 – all of the 28 commanders of their forces – of the “chauds” they call them, reports to the Chairman and as well as SACEUR.

(TI): And – and you were able to be in that billet for 45 days.

(WG): That's right.

(TI): Pretty amazing.

(WG): You know, you know how that happen though? My boss then was John Giampaolo Di Paola. He was Italian, and he had been the Chairman of the Military Committee, and his country called him to be their Secretary of Defense, Italy.

(TI): Oh. Wow.

(WG): And he—. He was in Afghanistan because the chairman makes sure, you know, go down through, review the troops and making the rounds. And he was Afghanistan when the – the Prime Minister of Italy fired their Minister of Defense and appointed DePaulo by phone to do that. So, he called me at night and says, “I – I'm calling you before I call

the Secretary General and tell him that I'm going to accept the Minister of Defense because about troops here in Italy. Cause they was out near to town of Iraq. And that's closest to the Iranians. And the Iranians are overrunning this area because our Minister of Defense is an idiot. I'm calling and—.

(TI): [Laughter]

(WG): I'm calling to tell you that I'm doing that – that would automatically kick you in. And I wanted to give you a heads up because the Secretary General will be calling you” and that's how.

(TI): Interesting. So, you became part of the command history of that billet.

(WG): That's right.

(TI): One thing I also noticed when looking at the command history. Many countries' general filled that role, but none of African descent. And when I look into your—. When I went to your interview Mr. Rick Robinson, all those years ago, also a former guest here on Borne the Battle, first interview I ever did, actually. So, if you're listening to this, go check it out. He's an Emmy award-winning cinematographer, also a Marine, also one of my greatest mentors, also African American. And he explained. He explained to me, you know. We know we were always taught, and I was always taught to see green. We all bleed red, but up to that point, I didn't know that we had never had an African American four-star general.

(WG): And still haven't.

(TI): And we had very, very, very few. You and Lieutenant General Williams who our office reported to when I was in headquarters, Marine Corps combat camera. And you guys were both in at the same time. We had very, very few three-star generals.

(WG): We've only had six.

(TI): Very, very small group, but Rick explained to me the importance of the optics of your position and appointments and what it meant to the African American community and to Lieutenant Williams and to all six of you gentlemen, to have someone from the community be appointed based on merit regardless of the melanin in one's skin.

(WG): Right.

(TI): Did you ever feel pressure to perform because of what your appointments meant to many within the African American community?

(WG): Well, you know, yes, frankly—

(TI): [Laughter]

(WG): because it was not only, you know, just a Marine – being the first Marine to hold this billet, it was the first African American Marine. And I remember, some instances that really brought it home—two in particular when I was – when I was a chairman. One was we have summits, you know, every two years that NATO has a summit. And this particular summit, it was the first-president Obama summit with NATO, and we were in Lisbon Portugal and it was the heads of state. And of course, you know, you being—. I was the Deputy Chairman. When you look around the table of all the CHAUDs from our – the Chairmen’s of their – of NATO are sitting at the table. And when I came back to talk to President Obama and I looked around the room, we were the only two African Americans in the room of all NATO’s senior leadership. And it was, it was amazing to me. And I looked at him, and he looked at me and said, “I guess it’s just me and you.”

(TI): [Laughter]

(WG): But you know, it was – it was a personal, you know, acclimation that we represented. The second time that I became aware of that is that I went to a—. When you check in as part of the Military Committee, you go, and you meet the King of Brussel and the Queen and the—. You wait in an appropriate room and then you have an audience and with the King and Queen of Belgium. And so, I was waiting my turn to go in and they put you in a separate meeting with one of the—either the King who is now – who was then Prince. He was heir to the throne and his wife. And so, in my particular area, I was with the princess. She was going to become the queen when the King moved up. And she was telling me about the beautiful ceiling that they had in there where he took all the bugs from – beetles from the Congo which was a beautiful green. And they kind of changed color, you know, like the glowing bug that we have. Anyway, she was showing me the ceiling that they had taken all those chandeliers. They would cover with all of these bugs. And she said to me, “I’m really sorry about your bugs”. And so, I’m

looking at her that, you know, I don't know anything about the bugs. And so, her—. The four-star Air Force General behind her who was her aid was, you know, kind of standing behind her waving his hand like, "Hey. He's not from the Congo. He's from the United States."

(TI): [Laughter] Wow!

(WG): And so, she was very apologetic which got me invited to a lot of good stuff at the palace.

(TI): [Laughter]

(WG): [Laughter] But that was the first time that I, you know, it dawned upon me that the members of NATO were not used to seeing a black person, whether it was for the black President or whether it was for me as Chairman—in this case—Deputy Chairman of the Military Committee. So, it was a thing. And I—. So how, you know, Colin Powell felt when he was a Secretary of State felt the same way is that it was just not new, and it was no ill will. It was just surprise and a reckoning. And it caused you to realize, hey, it just says, "Oh, yeah. You don't know that." You know? And so, it was—. So, those are the times that I actually felt that being the first, you know, just like being the first Vice Director of African American descent of the Joint Staff was there and being the first African American to command the Marine division, you know, all those things, you realize. But a real thing comes to mind when you have that thought is you're not the first one qualified of African American descent. You're the first one given the opportunity. And that's what everybody looks at you and say is that you have actually opened the door, took down the ceiling, and frankly, that still remains the position that you would like to see one day, an African American four-star.

(TI): Yeah. How did you mitigate pressure that you felt? How did you go, "Okay, not the first one qualified, but I am first one."

(WG): Well. You know, you know, I remember some—. You know, you have some frank discussions about that especially when you're talking to your peers. And I remember frankly incident of that nature when the General Krulak, you know, created the MEUs. He had—. You know, he called them the goals and the crown of the Marine Corps. And I became the first African American to command the MEU.

(TI): Yeah.

(WG): Even though I had done all the things that were prerequisite. I'd had a BLT. I had deployed with NAVY. I had commanded and at the level, you know, of equivalence to Regional Commanders and the MEU was a, you know, magnificent seven, they used to call them at the time. You still had your peers say to you, "Well. Did you get that because you were black, or did you get it because you were qualified?" So that particular thing is that you—. You know. I remember always laughing when I say that. You really think that the commandant is going to assign one of his seven jewels to someone just for affirmative action. You think he's going to put his Marines at risk for what we do for affirmative action. Give me a break. And then you find out that people say, "Well. They'll make themselves anyway." Matter of fact, nobody wants the dentist that made these, that made their teeth. You know? Come on. So, those things. And then, on the other side of the coin you have this thing too is that I am here not to guarantee you some instate. I'm here to show you that you have the opportunity to prove how good you are. And if you aren't good and you won't. It's opportunity. And it's the performance that counts. You know, the last thing that someone will ever—should ever—say to you. And I tell this to young – young African Americans, young white Americans, the last thing that someone can ever say to you is—well you'd want them to say to you is you didn't know what the hell you were doing.

(TI): [Laughter]

(WG): You know? If they say to you, "Oh. I didn't give it you because, you know, you didn't drive the red car." I mean, I could see you could be upset. But if they says that, you know, your performance was shot, you know? You didn't—. Then you've got problems. So, if I'm going to give you an opportunity, you're going to have to demonstrate that you knew what you had going for you.

(TI): Exactly. And that'—. And that's like you said. That goes across the entire color spectrum.

(WG): That's right. That's exactly right.

(TI): So—. And I liked that you talked about, you know, some people just weren't used to an African American in that position and, you know, some people might be, I guess, bitter, angry, whenever they saw maybe a Prince or Princes not knowing the right—you know, not saying it right way or not doing. I liked the humil—. You were very—. You understood the situation.

(WG): Of course, I did. I mean, she was never seen literally, you know, after we talk about it. She has never seen a black leader in that position. They had never been an African American who was SACEUR or who was a Chairman at—I mean, you know, Deputy Chairman. So, you know, it was like, it has to be somebody who is visiting from the Congo. They can't be coming here from some other reason because all of them, all of their senior military came to them to, you know, to be accepted in the country and that kind of stuff. That was a tradition. And what part I think that she missed is that this group that was coming in was the NATO folks. And once she got in—. And I remember she was so gracious that she, you know, first of all, she just didn't understand what she had done wrong until finally they told her in French that I was not from the Congo.

(TI): Wow.

(WG): And then, of course, I'm telling you, I got some invited to some great balls and as a special guest of the queen.

(TI): Very good. Very good. How important was it for you to understand the situation as well?

(WG): What is very important because we were demonstrating. And I think that if you look at the countries in NATO that handled their integration good was the British and their Commonwealth. So, the Commonwealth of officers came and go whether there was from India, whether they came from Jamaica, you know? It was different. So, the idea of them getting used to, you know, a black President, a black Chairman of Joint Chiefs, a black Secretary of State, you know, those kinds of things stay where they were getting used to, but they were occasionally. And it wasn't, you know, it wasn't regular. So, it was—. They didn't have—. Frankly, I found Europe to be very much so or accommodating than, frankly, in the United States.

(TI): Interesting. Very interesting. Now, sir, this interview will probably be release during African American history month as we're coming right up on it. You know, the Marine Corps, we knew—we know of Montfort Point Marines. Now camp Johnson Army is highly aware of Buffalo soldiers, Army and Air Force, Tuskegee Airman. The video game Battlefield 1 taught me about Harlem Hell fighters and World War I. Is there another African American group in military history that

don't get talked about maybe as much as these units that veterans maybe should be aware of?

(WG): Well, you know, the idea that we are – have equated our buildup, our Montford Point Marines to hold their rightful place in the services, we took a while to get the...you know, into their rightful of specialties that they brought—

(TI): to be recognized.

(WG): Yeah. To be recognized. I was just talking to the guys of Montford Point veterans here that the first African American to be commissioned was Fred Branch in the United States Marine Corps on November the 10th, 1945. He was—

(TI): On the birthday?

(WG): That's right. He was from Hamlet, North Carolina. And Howard Perry who was the first Marine to go through the gates of now Camp Johnson which should be Montford Point was from North Carolina up near Charlotte. So, the Marine Corps has recognized the Montford Point has finally had the Congressional Gold Medal. They have a ship named after them. They are beginning to add veterans to the pot, but the Marine Corps has always appreciated the staff NCO in – of color in the Marine Corps and that's – and that's how they got recognized, and our Medal of Honor, one of the most recently won, you know. It's important that doing this as they realize is that those folks that wanted to be a Marine always believe that, you know, that they would have to fight for the right to be a part of America, but the Corps did not hold them back from performance. You know, if you flip on the officer's side, it was limited, but if you always talk about being a Marine, and I think that helped. It definitely helped me and those that returned to society to realize how it should be. It don't matter what type of tension that already exist socially, being in Marine meant something. Folks, whatever biases they have or whatever thing they learned that a man to man, woman to woman core of being a Marine was special. It raised above all of the other things that precludes someone that you either looked at someone because you depended on who was on your right and left. You depended on who was coming behind you and you depended on those shoulders you stood on. And I think that for this, the Marine Corps has been the model for the nation.

(TI): Very strong history in the staff and state ranks. While you were in, give me either a best friend or a greatest mentor.

(WG): I have—. You know, my best friend has always been Ron Bailey in the Marine Corps. I had three mentors in the Marine Corps who took care and shaped me. The first one was Fred Jones. Fred Jones was my MOI and he's still my friend today. And the one that took me by the hand as a Marine was—I mean, from day one has been General Krulak. General Krulak gave me opportunities and a realization of where I was and strung out from him, you know, understanding the Marine Corps from a mentor perspective. And then I've picked up, you know, things like I—you know. Today, if you asked me who was - I would say Jim Mattis because we bonded, but we bonded as more closer to peers than the mentor. And then, of the African American Generals, it would be Coach Stanley who kind of walked through the road before everyone else. I learned – I learned a lot from him, but the one who probably was my friend in the battle buddy, well, it was Ron Baily as we went through things together, you know, and he—.

(TI): Yeah.

(WG): I always tease him that he keeps copying after me, you know? When I was first African American company commander at Parris Island, he had to get a company at Parris Island. When I commanded a second Marine division, he had to go into command the first because he still claimed the first.

(TI): [Laughter]

(WG): Those guys that form the fire team that you were able to talk candidly about where you are, what you stood, and the lessons in life that you learned. And it, you know, some folks you can't tell the true stories of how things happened, but you could sit down with these folks and talk to them about your experience. And I remember that I told General Krulak my experience as a Lieutenant of the only two African American lieutenants in the battalion, third battalion, second Marines. And we were getting our first fitness report. And I went into see the battalion commander. It was like the Spanish Insurrection, you know? You set front of the front desk and these fitness reports were handwritten. You didn't get a copy and you know that they had to read it, and they talk to you about it. And I remember going in to see Richard Reigns. He was my battalion commander, and he says, "You know. Well. I was one of the ones, you know. I didn't believe that. Blacks could make good

officers. I know they made damn good staff NCO. Had a few, but I didn't think they could make good officers. That's all, but we'll talk more about that later." And he gave me my report. My hand was shaking because I don't know whether or not the be pissed or insulted,

(TI): Yeah.

(WG): You know, as he's handing this – as he's handing this to me, but then I, you know, I read it. I remember my hands shaking, so I was trying to hold the paper, so I wouldn't let him see how he emotionally charged I was.

(TI): Sure.

(WG): And the first in the first line read, "My number one Lieutenant of 19, the best one of the best Lieutenants I've seen in my 27 years in the Marine Corps." And I looked up at him because, you know, I'm shocked after hearing what he said and reading the paperwork, and he says, "But you changed that. You showed me what you can do, and color doesn't matter. And I want you to get out there and take care of my Marines." And I was still so stunned. I couldn't say anything, but "Yes, sir," get up, and walk the the hell out, but I remember explaining that to General Krulak about that experience about how shocked I was. And he said, "Well, what did you expect? And I told you from the very time I first saw you is that performance counts.

(TI): Yeah.

(WG): Performance can transcend anything. Lance Corporal was going to give a second Lieutenant a hard time, but what he does not want is a second Lieutenant who doesn't know what the hell he's doing.

(TI): Yeah.

(WG): And so that's important." And that's what—. And basically, what he was saying was that's what you're doing. He said, "Lance Corporal we're going to give you a hard time because you're a Lieutenant, but he respects that you know what you're doing and that when it hits the fan that you're going to lead him out if and he's going to come back home alive. That's what they want from you."

(TI): Yeah. And I think to your credit, to your point, also important is the bearing to read the whole story.

(WG): Exactly. And, you know, of course, you know, he and I had a number of talks later after that. But he – he wanted it to be a shock effect because he wanted to realize not only what he was appreciative of not only what I was doing, but his own growth, and understanding that, you know, people should be measured by who they are, not some reputation or some preconceived stereotypical attitudes, but by who they are and that's what's, you know, he says, "And that's what's going to keep the Corps strong and when it's in its time of adversity."

(TI): Yeah.

(WG): I definitely—. It was a learning to me. I—. You know, I went there wanting to work harder, climb the hill, and motivate and, you know, regardless of what color they were or what they were capable of doing.

(TI): Yeah. It – it was understanding both sides. So, now – now you retired in 2013. What did you do the first day on terminal leave?

(WG): [Laughter] It was – it was – it was a bittersweet ending because both of my, you know. When I came home, I was scheduled to go home, and relax and get ready for my ceremony which was going to be on the 21st of September. I came back on the fourth. My mother died on the third.

(TI): Oh my gosh.

(WG): My mother was sick. She was really going down. Some dementia had set in, and I was coming home trying to figure out how I was going to tell her that she was not able to travel because my mother had been to every one of my promotion and changing in commands, you know. And I was going to tell her that she wasn't going to be at my retirement. Yeah. And—. But she died. So, I came home then to – to – because I had to check out in Quantico, and then I was going to—I mean, the family was at camp Lejeune, and I was going back there. And I had to go straight to – to Savannah for the arrangements. And we buried her on the 11th and my stepfather of 40 years. They've been married 40 years. Died on the 19th—

(TI): Oh wow.

(WG): in route to my retirement.

(TI): Oh my gosh.

(WG): Yeah. So, those first days where this kind of like—. I lost, you know. When I gave my speech at “8th and I” retirement, I told that my mom and my dad, stepdad were in the sky box looking down because they both had passed. He died of a heart attack in Lumberton, North Carolina. They stopped to get gas. My cousins were driving them up, and he had a heart attack there in that station and—

(TI): That’s—. That’s tough.

(WG): Yeah. It was tough. So, that first part was the kind of down. I—. You know, I did nothing for about a month after that. And then I took a job out in California.

(TI): Well. That’s supposed to be a lighthearted question.

(WG): [Laughter]

(TI): [Laughter]

(WG): You know, I told her, I told General Pace. General Pace’s advised to me when I retired was that I was supposed to take six months off and not do anything and not agree to be on any board, you know, that was a non-paying board. But I didn’t.

(TI): Why do you think that is? Is it—? Is that one of the—? Is that one of your coping mechanisms is to bury yourself in work?

(WG): Well. No. It was to go back to doing the stuff that I left off of. I had been involved in natural disasters all over the world. And the guy, when he was going to hire me to be his managing director for the banks of supplying things. One thing was on the table then was getting wells for Indian girls in India because they had to – before they could go to school, they had to take the water and he was working on that project. He knew that I had been involved in the Pakistani floods. And he was saying, “You know, this was a project that you know you could do.” And I said, “Yeah. I can do that.” It takes my mind off of the rest of this stuff and not being involved in what the NATO and United Nations was doing, so.

(TI): Yeah. It took you to a different part of the world. [Laughter] Do you think that was good or bad?

(WG): I think that was – that was good. I think that was good for me because it gave me a chance to stay connected to the international community and it wasn't a completed shutdown.

(TI): Yeah. You know, there are two schools of thought that, you know, decompress, take time, relax. And, you know, at that point you had retired, so you're not in a financial way of having to work, right? You know, you get a chance to have a little bit of a decompression, but at the same time, there's also the school of thought of, "Hey. Just get right back into it because as soon as you—. If you grind to a halt, it's pretty hard starting back up."

(WG): Well. You know, the thing that really got me was that I was talking to my doctor who thought that, you know, as you decompress and you know, you can discuss how life was for you in a pressured environment. But he also says that everybody that he knows who just did a quick halt is dead. So, "You don't want to slow down too much," he says. Because he said, "You know, you only get to enjoy some of your retirement."

(TI): Yeah. And you don't want to lose all the discipline, all the drive.

(WG): And, you know, basically—. So, you know, keep up the PT program. Get the work going. And I said, okay. And I took him up on that. And then I had a friend who had been teaching and was retiring from a principal, and he was anxious to get both his retirement and his social security. He got two checks and died. I said, "Nope. That's world enough for me."

(TI): Very good.

(WG): I said, "I got it."

(TI): Sir, what was the overall transition like for you? And how did you end up as the CEO of LaPorte Technology Defense? Is that a company you founded or were you brought in to be the CEO?

(WG): I was brought in to be the CEO by some friends of—. Remember I told you about Colonel Jones?

(TI): Yes. Yes.

(WG): Colonel Jones had a classmate who when he played football at Oregon had a classmate that did four years in the Air Force but developed his own company. And he had become a millionaire in the IT community, you know, in the movies and making and all that stuff, so. And he had a friend, Chanat, who was Indian descent and they had – they had businesses. And they were invited by then Governor Pence into Indiana because they had lost all – you know, the – lot of businesses and manufacturing business had left Indiana and they had a really thing. The only thing that was still a thing is it's potential to get government contracts.

(TI): With a defense company, you usually see them headquartered here in Northern Virginia and Southern Maryland. Not – not Indiana.

(WG): Yeah. Well, see, that puts them closer to TACOM which is the Army's AMC which is in the Alabama. And that put them closer to—. They were there to ensure that all the track vehicles. For the Army, whether there was a striker vehicle, a Humvee, and now later, the JTL V vehicles were out and out in that area. And so, what we—. What he realized is that, at the time, the Army was looking. Oshkosh as well as AM General was looking to bid for the new replacement of the Humvee and that whoever won that contract still would have, you know, between our allies and because my connection with all the CHAUDs in Europe and the NATO vehicles of the Humvee, they were some 360,000 vehicles that were going to be replaced.

(TI): Wow.

(WG): When the Army did this study, it takes 15 years for them to overlap the new JLT vehicle which Oshkosh won. But that—. And therefore, the Humvee had to be either upgrade or replace. And it was a—. That was a lucrative contract. And trying to, you know. When that Humvee, you know, that particular contract and that's when he formulated – formed the company and asked me to stand that up and work with the AM General about what's the – because they were a specialist of the Humvees.

(TI): So, AM General, did—. Are they the ones that won the primary contract?

(WG): No. Oshkosh won the primary contract. AM general was the current maker of the Humvee. What we were bidding for and, frankly, the COVID just screwed it up. What we were bidding for is a package of upgrades that will extend the life cycle of the Humvees as the JLTV's took over in the replacement.

(TI): Okay. Yup. Yup.

(WG): And the areas that needed replacing was the alternator for—because with the Humvee, we had put so many things on it electronically based that it took, you know, it took extra batteries in the battery system and alternating that they had to have slayed at night, plugged-up because they couldn't be there to crank them up. So, there was a lot of things that needed to be done in that regard—the tires, the drive train system. So, we would try and put in a bid to do that. But what happened was is that the—. And especially saw it in the Marine Corps, because the operations slowed down, the requirements to have these vehicles – the number of vehicles would have replacement and the change in the budget. You know, everyone blames it, you know, administrations for the lack of money in the military, but it was sequestration by the Congress that really chilled the militaries for planning the R and D portion because they had to sacrifice R and D for current readiness. So, that's the way all the money was going. And so, when the last two budgets gave the services money, they were saying, "Well, I can—. I can stagger in the lack of military operations. I can stagger having to upgrade the Humvee. I can just wait and replace the Humvee." And that's what the Marine Corps says, "I'll just fix anything that goes on. And I won't buy. I won't buy a package of upgrade."

(TI): Very good. Well, while you were there at LaPorte what is one job or maybe one contract in support of the DOD that you would say you're most proud of your company in achieving?

(WG): Well. I think probably helping them to understand our allies' point of view of what it meant for companies like AM General, who supplied them and had a maintenance contract that goes to the life cycle of the vehicle. But because of the wear and tear on vehicles between Iraq and Afghanistan and other operations, we fast forward that. So, if you had a lifecycle of 20 years, you might be at 10 now. And the vehicles had become so heavy that the Navy is saying and the Air Force boats in their C5, C17s, C 141 list was that it takes more [sorties] now to transport a service to any place of fighting. And so—. Because of the weight. So, we had told them that, you know, for example the

Humvees, each one of the doors got to weighing 500 pounds. So, what we did was that we told them that if you rather than trying to upgrade that, then you can start replacing parts and work that out with AM General before they sold out the maintenance package. So that—. I think that's the greatest thing that we did and that helped them in and with an alternator system that would allow them to get more amps through to the battery and run the blue force tracker or any of the type things of navigational system that they had on.

(TI): Basically, support the digital age.

(WG): Yeah. That's exactly right.

(TI): For veterans that want to get into federal contracting, like I said, not just with DOD, but I mean, VA has got a bunch of contracts, Department of Energy, I mean—. There's just all the different departments. There's all these contracts that are out there right now. What advice would you give to someone that say, "I want to start a company, and I want to serve that purpose?"

(WG): You know, the one thing that you mentioned that's important is that the first thing you need to do is decide what you want to do. Don't keep it so broad then decide what the requirements is. I tell everybody, don't just go say, "I'm going to get me a contract." Actually, read what a contract looks like, what they're asking you for. And in those contracts, they're asking for you to have a person that can do what you say you're going to do, that you have the personnel, and you have the governance of that particular person. When you get my money, what are you going to do with it toward giving me the service that you are promising in the contract. So, we have a—. The government has become very astute in our contract officers on how we train them to look at providing the service at the cost. So, if you know what you're talking about, you need to know how much would it cost for you to do that. So, when you're bidding for it, you know that someone cannot do that any cheaper than you do because you know what the requirements are. And that's what they're going to test you out if you're trying to start a business. The other thing is I tell them is that if you're going to start a business, you really need to get the financing based on your business plan because a dream without any money is a nightmare.

(TI): True. [Laughter]

(WG): So, you need to know if you're going to – if you're going to go into that, you know, get the business plan all the way. Think it all the way through. And I say to them, plan for if your business doesn't start maturing for the first two years. Plug that in because some—. That first year, all you're doing is paying salaries. So, plan accordingly. So, if you're going to hire somebody and they're going to make \$80,000 a year, you need to plug that in—

(TI): Yeah.

(WG): as if you're going to spend it and it's not—. But they will be doing the things you need to establish the contract. But you know, this is not a pro bono type thing that you're doing with people and that's usually to the biggest mistakes that I've seen in startups is that they have the people, but they run out of money, so they get into a dire mood. So, the government is playing with them and governments say, "I'm going to teach them. I'm going to take you because you can name that tune in three notes when you really need seven notes to do it." And then you lose the contract because of past performance because you didn't deliver of what you do, and you got behind, you know. A lot of those guys know that they have a talent. They've been trained to. They can do it, but they have to think it through on how I deliver on what I say that I can do.

(TI): Very good. Okay. Sir, I recently saw this month and since we actually see this meeting up, that you've been named as the next Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Veterans Affairs. Congratulations on that.

(WG): Thank you.

(TI): What opportunities do you see to help veterans at the state VA level?

(WG): People, veterans, and folks who transitioned through whether they are civilian in the government—don't really know as much about the needs of veterans as they do. And so, a lot of that is an educational process, so be prepared to educate, not get angry.

Yeah.

You know, like I tell a veterans, "It's taken a long time for civilians to understand that if you served 20 years in the military, you should retire." They don't get that. You know what kind of retirement you get

after 20 years? No, no, no, you have got to work until you're 62 or 65 or whatever. So, that doesn't—. So, the thing that you're saying is that no, I might retire, but I'm not ready to quit.

Yeah.

You know? I—. You know, I want to – I want to give you the basis of my experience that I've had and why I stayed here, where I kept my family here, why I raised my kids around this. So—. So, what I—. So, what I tell them is that they have to also come – understanding that civilians are not necessarily as disciplined as you have been. The biggest misnomer that military people have as well is that the Veterans Administration understands what you did active duty. They were two different organizations mainly to benefit those of past wars rather than those who are coming out of current war. We've come a long ways. So, what we have to do is that I told him, one thing was as simple as me. I said, "You know, when I transferred from civilian world to the veterans, I had a Footlocker full of things that I had of my medical records that I had to—

scan.

duplicate for him, scan for, you know, 39 years of the military." That should have been just a push of a button that transferred my medical record from active-duty military over to the hospital system.

(TI): Looking at my helmet bag right now that's full of medical records. I had to do this and in a future interview, and it's already in the can. A future Benefits Breakdown is going to be talking about just that, the electronic health record that the VA is working with the DOD and doing that. That's going to be a huge thing.

(WG): Well, it is. And, you know, it's because we had some records on fish when we changed over and some who had to have xeroxed. It was a mess. I mean, they are—you know. And I—. When I talked to veterans who just left and who were reporting for the first time are going through that system. They understand that, you know, you got a disc now and this a little better, you know. What we had was we came with disc that we didn't have the right operating systems to put them in. And so, we worked through that, so we are light years away from where we were. The one thing that we have done better is that we have open VA so that you can actually get an outside doctor to do something for you and you, and you don't have to be a hundred percent disabled to do that. So, that's—. So, we are getting better, but

that's why I tell everybody, when I talk to those kids are in transition, pay attention to what they are saying about the transition as it relates to all aspects of your life, not just, you know, do I get the—do I get to go to VA for buying me a house or whatever? I said, "Education." I say, "It's all of those things that you rate because of your service."

(TI):

That's one of the things that I like doing about the Benefits Breakdowns episodes that we do here on Borne the Battle. I get to explore that for other people, you know? I get to go to an office or go to a benefit or go to a program. And I—. And I shake them. I say, "Well. What do you do? How do you—? How do you help veterans and how are they eligible for your services?" So, if you get—. So, if you're listening to this and you get a chance, every five episodes, fifth and on the zeros, it might be one, it might be – might be a six sometimes depending on there's an anniversary or a battle anniversary or something but check those out in the archives here on Borne the Battle. So, at the State VA level, how do you see the state VA supporting that overarching mission?

(WG):

I had this discussion with the Governor Cooper as he was interviewing me for this job is one of the things that – the reason why a lot of the people at the eight major military basis that we have in North Carolina from Brag to Seymore to camp Lejeune, reason why these families stay is because you help them. You know, we have about 60 veteran centers throughout the state that as a veteran you can come in with your DD 14 hot off the print, walk into there, and they can tell you what all you do, what you rate, how you petition for any of the disabilities that you got on your last exit physical and what is it that this state does specifically for veterans? Like if you're purchasing a house and you are a veteran, you can – you can petition for tax breaks.

Your state VA centers?

These are state VA centers. That's how they connect you to all of the federal stuff that you rate and it's to the state's benefit because if you are a veteran in the state and you're receiving disability funds, we count that. And the VA lists you by state, you know, like \$3.9 billion worth of federal stuff goes into North Carolina. And this is what the state does in addition to taxes on your car. You know, some—. You know, I am currently—. One of my first things to do is I'm going to talk to my counterparts of both, Florida and Virginia because they got some things that are for veterans that North Carolina needs to incorporate. For example, if you had—. If you are a veteran, a retired

veteran for example, in Florida, any airport you park in is free, you know?

(TI): Wow.

(WG): Yeah. That, you know, people don't add up how much they save on that in just the parking and especially if they have a veteran that you're doing business and got to travel a lot. Anyway, those things, those are kind of things that the state can do. But also, we are setting out for job training. For example, if you are coming out of the military and let's say that you were working as a medic or corpsman, we can send you to school to be employed in one of the hospitals or in one of the – we got four veterans' homes in the state. So, those are things that we will do if you agree to stay in the state after you get out.

(TI): I know another Marine that is going to be – that is going to be working for you. My—. One of my former Sergeant Majors, Sergeant Major Paul Berry. So, if you ever have a chance, look him up.

(WG): Okay. I'm going to write his name down. Paul Berry.

(TI): Paul Berry. I'll never forget. Sorry. Major Berry. When I was going through a very difficult tie in my young life, I was a Lance Corporal, you know? I was working in his S-1, and he just took me fishing with his son.

Good

You know? Just – just—. I mean, I'll never forget that. I'll never forget that. I also never forget Sergeant Major Berry because he was our squadron Sergeant Major. And we had a group Sergeant Major Dingell. So, we had Sergeant Majors Dingell and Berry.

[Laughter] Dingel and Berry.

[Laughter] I was like, "That was not a mistake." That was some monitor just having fun that day. Sir, what is one thing that you learned in service that you carry with you today?

(WG): Your reputation is not what you think of yourself, it's what other people think of you.

(TI): Yeah.

(WG): And that's—. That has been something that's been an important to me is do – when I say that I'm here to help. Do you understand that I'm here to help? And I've often believed that if people need help, I tell often – tell them often that I don't do autopsies. I don't want to know what killed you. I'm not trying to clean you or kill you. I rather be able to help you if you are having problems. You know, like the Sergeant that took you fishing? He would like help through the problem, not wait till, you know, you want to jump off a bridge or something?

(TI): Yeah.

(WG): So that's—. I think the one thing is, this for me is not what you think of yourself, but what people think of you. If they believe that you are there to help and to lead, it's been one thing that I've learned that you can spot the fix a mile away.

(TI): Absolutely. Sir, Is there a veteran non-profit or an individual whom you've worked with or whom you've had an experience with whom you'd like to mention?

(WG): John Kafka and his work, the Hope for the Warriors. That's it.

(TI): What does Hope for the Warriors do?

(WG): Every year here, they have a major golf tournament fundraising that brings in celebrities and the senior Marine Generals of the four-stars – the four-stars comes in, and they raise money to help those wounded warriors, you know. It's sort of like a habitat for humanity, house for humanity, so they help.

(TI): So, they like outfit—

(WG): They outfit them, their houses, their special vehicles that that they have to, you know, to do that. And these are the warrior Marines that have come through camp Lejeune and every year they even bring – they always bring to the senior gulf celebrities out.

(TI): Tracking. Walter, you know, I just got to say, even 10 years since the last time we talked and six years out of the Marine courts, it's still weird not calling you "sir". [Laughter]

(WG): [Laughter] I appreciate that, but you know I understand. And I appreciate you giving me the opportunity to talk to you.

(TI): We've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything else that I may have missed, or I didn't bring up, or maybe at some point I didn't mention that you think is important to share?

(WG): I really appreciate the opportunity in telling, And I am—. I think you can tell by my talk that I think that being a Marine is a calling. I think that we—. You know, this song that says, "Such as regiments hand down forever, if any time or place they come and they return to society as better citizens and better people." And being a Marine has been the greatest blessing in my life.

[00:86:43] Music

[00:86:52] PSA

(Male Veteran 1): I served in Vietnam.

(Male Veteran 2): I served in World War II.

(Female Veteran): I served in Afghanistan.

(Male Veteran 1): And VA serves us all.

(Male Veteran 2): No matter when you served.

(Female Veteran): No matter if you saw combat or not. rly in the morning, for me. That's exactly why I choose VA.

(Male Veteran 1): There are benefits for veterans of every generation.

(Female Veteran): See what VA can do for you.

(Narrator): To learn what benefits you may be eligible for visit www.va.gov .That's www.va.gov .

[00:87:18] Music

[00:87:25] Closing Monologue

(TI):

Want to thank the good Lieutenant General for coming on Borne the Battle. To learn more about Lieutenant General Gaskin, well, in addition to going to his Wikipedia page, he is still has a bio on <https://www.laportech.com/#leadership>

This weeks' Borne the Battle Veteran of The Week was provided by VA's Veteran of The Day program. Every day, our digital media team honors a veteran with a short write up on all of our social media platforms and on blogs.va.gov. You can submit your own veteran of the day by emailing a photo or two or five and a short write up to newmedia@va.gov .

Jessie L. Brown was born in October of 1926 in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. When he was six years old, his father took him to an air show which was the impetus for his interest in becoming a pilot. While at college, Brown learned of the Naval Aviation college program, a flight training initiative. A recruiter told him that he would not pass the qualifying exams and even if he did, the Navy did not have African American pilots. Despite all odds, Brown passed that exam and joined the program. As an aviation midshipman, he attended a series of flight training courses. The last one was at flight school in Pensacola Florida. While there he secretly married his high school sweetheart. See, marriage for men in the training program was prohibited until after graduation and if found out, Brown could have been discharged from the program. However, in October of 1948 he graduated from flight school and became the first African American to earn his Navy wings. As Brown broke the color barrier, his achievement grabbed to media's attention and his picture was in Life magazine. Brown was assigned to fighter squadron 32 and was aboard the USS Wright before his unit transferred to USS Layette. At the start of the Korean War in 1950, the USS Layette was called for duty. On December 4th, 1950, Brown, as squadron leader, was on a strike mission to the Chosin Reservoir in North Korea. About an hour into the mission, one of the pilots saw what looked like fuel leaking from Brown's plane, apparently hit by gunfire. According to historynet.com, Brown radioed, "This is Iroquois One-Three. I'm losing power. I have to put it down. Mayday. Mayday." Brown crash-landed on the side of a mountain. His wingman, Lieutenant Thomas Hudner Jr., saw that Brown did not emerge from his plane. Hudner Jr. then crash-landed himself next to Brown's wreckage. In doing so, he risked his own life, a court-martial and capture by the enemy. Hudner Jr. was unable to free Brown, who was injured and was trapped and crushed by instrument panel. Even when help arrived, the men were unable to free him. Before he died, Brown

asked Hudner Jr. to tell his wife that he loved her. Jesse Brown was 24 years old.

Brown earned various medals and honors, including a Distinguished Flying Cross, a Purple Heart and an Air Medal. In addition, the Navy commissioned a frigate in his honor, naming it USS Jesse L. Brown. Navy Veteran, Jesse L. Brown. We honor his service.

(Commander):

Ready. Aim. Fire. [gunshots]
Ready. Aim. Fire. [gunshots]
Ready. Aim. Fire. [gunshots]
Present Arms.

(TI):

That's it for this week's episode. If you yourself would like to nominate a Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week, you can. You can just send an email to me at podcast@va.gov, include a short write up, and let us know why you would like to see him or her as the Borne the Battle Veteran of The Week. And if you liked this podcast episode hit the subscribe button. We are on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcast, iHeart Radio—pretty much any podcatching app known to phone, computer, tablet or man. For more stories on veterans and veteran benefits, check out our website, blogs.va.gov [Link: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/>] and follow the VA on social media. Facebook [Link to VA's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs>], Instagram [Link to VA's Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/deptvetaffairs/?hl=en>], Twitter [Link to VA's twitter page: https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwca], YouTube [Link to VA's YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBvOzPLmbzjtpX-Htstp2vw>], RallyPoint [Link to the VA's RallyPoint: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/56052/questionrallypoint-great-place-start/>], LinkedIn [Link the the VA's LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/company/department-of-veterans-affairs>], Deptvetaffairs, US Department of Veterans Affairs. No matter the social media, you can always find us with that blue checkmark. And as always, I'm reminded by people smarter than me to remind you that the Department of Veterans Affairs does not endorse or officially sanction any entities that may be discussed in this podcast, nor any media products or services they may provide. I say that because the song that you're listening to now is called "Machine Gunner" and it was courtesy of the non-profit Operation Song. And it was written by the Marine Veteran Mick McElhenny, Nashville songwriter Jason

Sever, and Mykal Duncan. Thank you for listening, and we'll see you right here next week. Take care.

[00:92:34] Music

(Text Transcript Ends)