

Borne the Battle

Episode # 242

Navy SEAL Veteran Al Kovach, Paralympian and Former President of PVA

<https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/88824/borne-battle-242-navy-seal-Veteran-al-kovach-paralympian-former-president-pva/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Music

[00:00:04] Opening Monologue:

Tanner Iskra (TI): Oh, let's get it. Monday, May 17th, 2021. Borne the Battle, brought to you by the US Department of Veterans Affairs, the podcast that focuses on inspiring Veterans' stories and puts a highlight on important resources, offices, and benefits for our Veterans. I am your host, Marine Corps Veteran Tanner Iskra. Apple Podcasts, iTunes, Spotify, iHeartRadio, or on any one of the hundreds of podcasts apps out there. I appreciate you taking the time to tune in from wherever you are out in Podcast Land. And, you know, taking some time out of your day and hearing what we got for you this week. It is Tax Day. No more extensions. I hope you got it in on time. If so, there's an accomplishment for you this week. Tell you what, an accomplishment I had this week was just getting a tank of gas. If you're on the lower side of the East Coast, you know what I'm talking about. Couple ratings, but no new reviews this week on Apple Podcasts or iTunes. If you're so inclined, please submit a review to Apple Podcasts as it not only lets me know how I'm running your show, and it is your show, but the reviews help bump this show up in the algorithm and it puts a little wind in the sails, if you will, and pushes the information provided in the episodes to more Veterans out in Podcast Land. News releases. We're starting to get hit with them now. We've got six, but a couple are relatively short. The first one is not only a news release, but it is a featured blog on blogs.va.gov [Link: blogs.va.gov/VAntage/88597/va-accepting-walk-covid-19-vaccinations-nationwide]. You can go see it right now. It says, "For immediate release: VA offering walk-ins at COVID-19 vaccinations nationwide. All VA facilities and clinics that

administer COVID-19 vaccines are accepting walk-ins for eligible Veterans' spouses, and caregivers. This walk-in service ensures all Veterans enrolled in VA Healthcare and those authorized under the SAVE LIVES Act have an opportunity to receive COVID-19 vaccinations from VA at the time that is convenient for them. To date, VA has vaccinated more than 2.7 million individuals, including over 60,000 individuals under the SAVE LIVES Act." Those are Veterans' spouses and caregivers. "For more information about COVID-19 vaccinations at VA, go to www.va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine [Link: va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine]." Situational awareness, VA vaccination clinics are not open 24 hours. Face masks are mandatory for all, and physical distancing measures will be in place per the guidance of the CDC. Now, I know I brought this up a couple weeks ago that it would take VA to get up to speed on offering the vaccine to spouses and caregivers due to supply issues, and, you know, the fact that the SAVE LIVES was just brought onto the VA and whatnot. Well, there it is. It's open now. Walk ins, everything, we're good to go. On that front, according to a, another press release, "VA published a second installment report identifying the department's strategic response from July 1st of 2020 to January 1st of 2021 to address the COVID-19 pandemic. This report is an effort to share best practices and lessons learned with other government agencies and the private health care system. While the country continues to fight COVID-19, the report cites conclusions, findings, and recommendations on planning, national and interagency coordination, emergency management and readiness, data and analytics, capacity, supply chain and testing, clinical operations, research and the outlook moving forward. You can find this report va.gov/health/docs/VHA-covid-19-response-2021 [Link: va.gov/health/docs/VHA-COVID-19-Response-2021]." Okay. Next one says, "For immediate release: The Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough and Small Business Administration Administrator Isabella Guzman visited Compass Coffee, a local Veteran-owned business in the nation's capitol on May 5th to show their joint support for the Small Business Administration's Restaurant Revitalization Fund. During the first 21 days, the Restaurant Revitalization Fund will prioritize and fund applications received from eligible small

businesses that are owned by Veterans, women, and socially and economically disadvantaged individuals. Registration for the Restaurant Revitalization Fund began on April 30th, and the portal to apply opened on May 3rd, which began the 21-day priority registration period for eligible businesses.” And if my Math for Marines is correct, that will end next week on May 24th, so get it in. “For assistance in preparing a Restaurant Revitalization Fund application, interested business owners may call 844-279-8898, or you can visit SBA’s website at www.sba.gov/restaurants [Link: sba.gov/restaurants] or contact your local SBA district office or resource partner by visiting www.sba.gov/local [Link: www.sba.gov/local]. You can also visit restaurants.sba.gov [Link: restaurants.sba.gov].” All right. Next one says, “For immediate release: the US Department of Veterans Affairs published a notice on May 6th in the Federal Register requesting nominations for a one-year appointment to the VA Secretary Sexual Assault/Sexual Harassment Prevention and Response Working Group. This is required by the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D., Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020.” To view the notice and submit comments, you can visit the Federal Register federalregister.gov [Link: federalregister.gov] and search for these words: ‘Nominations to the Sexual Assault/Sexual Harassment Working Group, and you’ll find it. That public comment period ends on June 16th. You can sign up, put your own comments in there, and it gets recorded as official archives. Okay. Next one, “For immediate release: The US Department of Veterans Affairs invites everyone to support our 55 and older Veteran athletes as they compete during the National Veteran Golden Age Games at home May 10th through the 28th by cheering them on virtually. Fans in the Stands allows anyone to register online and create video messages or cards in support of participating Veterans throughout the duration of the event. Nearly 500 Veterans from across the country are participating in their communities and at-home. That number has more than doubled from the 200 senior athletes who competed in 2020’s virtual event.” Unfortunately, registration for Veterans to participate in the competition is closed. However, from the Winter Sports Clinic all the way to the Summer Sports Clinic it seems like VA’s Adaptive Sports and Special Events have something

every couple of months. To learn more about VA's Adaptive Sports and Special Events, go to va.gov/adaptivesports [Link: va.gov/adaptivesports]. They've got schedules for all the events and contact information on how to register for each event or how to get involved Fans in the Stands for the Golden Age Games. We'll also have a link for that Fans in the Stands at the bottom of this episode's blog on blogs.va.gov as that URL was way too long for me to say to you on air and have you figure that out and write it down and play it back. And now we're just going to put in the blog [Link: va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5667]. There's the link. There you go. All right. Next one says, "For immediate release: The Department of Veterans Affairs established a commission to identify candidates to lead and manage the Veterans Benefits Administration." This is very interesting. "The position oversees leadership and direction of non-medical Veterans benefit matters—which has an approximate operating budget of \$6.2 billion, an average employment level of 24,700 employees—and a benefits budget of \$135 billion that you have to deliver for services and benefits to Veterans and their beneficiaries." This is a position that oversees all benefits within VA that are not related to health benefits. Think home loans, GI Bills, VR&E, the pensions, etc. So, it's a big position with VBA. See, there are three administrations under VA: Health, Benefits, and Cemetery, and each is headed by a political appointee, and this is one of them. However, the release says that by law the appointment is made without regard to political affiliation. Matter of fact, it's the first time I've seen one of these positions on USAjobs.gov, and you can look it up right now. We actually had the last one, Dr. Paul Lawrence in a previous bonus episode of Born the Battle. You can look for it in the archives [Link: blogs.va.gov/VAntage/75110/borne-battle-covid-update-six-secretary-paul-r-lawrence-veteran-benefits-administration]. He talks about his position a little bit. for more information about the buses. You can look up Under Secretary for Benefits on USAjobs.gov. It's right there. Interesting. It says it's for an annual salary of \$168,000. So yeah, check it out, apply. Put your name in that, especially if you're a Veteran. All right. So, we're approaching the summer and the Summer Games are finally going to happen this year in Tokyo. They're still calling it the

2020 games. But okay, we're doing it. We're doing it! But that also means that this year's Paralympic Games are finally happening. And we always seem to hear about some Veterans in the mix for those games. Our guest is a former Navy SEAL who knows what the Paralympic Games is all about, as he competed in the 1996 Atlanta Paralympic Games. He's also a former SEAL, a two time LA Marathon winner, and a former President of the Paralyzed Veterans of America. So, without further ado, here is Navy Veteran Al Kovach. Enjoy.

[00:10:18] Music:

[00:10:25] Interview:

Tanner Iskra (TI): Part of your intro, part of your bio, was that you were part of the legendary Indiana Swim Team before joining. Now, I'm from Washington state. I never did any professional swimming, and I never did any amateur swimming or anything like that. So, I didn't know that Indiana had a legendary program. I mean, what was it? Is it multiple NCAA titles? Any names that pop out from a program that I would know?

Al Kovach (AK): Mark Spitz.

(TI): There it is. Yes, sir.

(AK): Indiana really—they became such a powerhouse under the direction of their swim coach, Doc Counsilman. He just went by Doc. Dr. James Counsilman was really a real innovator in the sport. And then he ended up with a diving coach who was just as overqualified, and his name was Hobie Billingsley. And between Hobie and Doc, they put through some of the best swimmers and divers in the history of the sport. Their legacy really goes back to the early sixties. And I want to say 1956 is when they got their start. But I think in the early sixties is when they really became a powerhouse. And so, the likes of Charlie Keating, Jim Montgomery, Mark Spitz, of course, and just to swim in the same swimming pool as those guys was really remarkable. And when he gave me a phone call my senior year in high school and said he wanted me to swim for Indiana, I just—I couldn't get down there fast enough.

(TI): It was like, what wrestling is to Iowa and Minnesota is what Indiana is to swimming?

(AK): Io-who?

Both: [Laughing]

(AK): I'm just kidding. Iowa was actually one of our competitors, but that's like, it's a dirty word in Indiana. That's actually—you probably saw that I was a SEAL for a very short time. That's actually how I became a SEAL was that I was in a nuclear power school for the Navy and I was wearing an Indiana University Swimming t-shirt, and a guy came over to me and said, "Did you swim for Doc Counsilman?" I said, "I did." And he started telling me what he knew about the Indiana program. And then he says, "Well, if you're smart enough to be a nuclear guy and you can swim for Indiana university, what about the SEALs?" And I said, "I don't know anything about the SEALs. Tell me more." And a couple of weeks later I was passing the screening test and on my way to Coronado, California to start BUD/S.

(TI): And you haven't left? You're still in Cornell, right?

(AK): I am. You know, not only when I graduated from BUD/S, I was assigned to SEAL Team Five, which was also in Coronado. And when I became paralyzed, you know, Coronado is a very flat, it's almost like a sandbar and old people have been living here for a long time. It's almost a retirement community. And so, wheelchair accessibility is years ahead of most places. So, I decided to settle here.

(TI): Interesting. Stepping back a little bit, what made you join the military in the first place after your college university and go like the nuclear route, cause you said you went nuclear before for SEALs?

(AK): Yes. So, after swimming at Indiana University, you know, I could not take a full load of classes in order to dedicate my time to the sport 'cause I really went to college to swim and see how far I could take it. And once it became obvious that I was not going to make it to the Olympic team and after four years of college, I still didn't have a degree yet. And I started to panic and thought I needed to change course, and I thought I'd go into the Navy.

And the nuclear program was something that intrigued me and there was a route where you could go through nuclear power and then end up getting a college degree and continue your, my career as an officer in the Navy. And again, while I was—it was just something that I felt like, you know, I had gone through decades of very structured life with swimming. I was up very early in the morning, double workouts. And I felt like I took as far as I could and felt like I needed to change and the Navy came calling, you know. But, you know, I know you're a Veteran and you understand how that the military is structured and that was something that appealed to me. And it was my father was in the Navy and my grandfather was in the Marine Corps and I felt like I'd continue that tradition in our family.

(TI): Gotcha. So, you entered the Navy in '88, um, and you went to—what year did you go to BUD/S?

(AK): I entered BUD/S in 1988.

(TI): So right when you came in?

(AK): Yeah. Well nuclear—I started bootcamp and went in the early spring of '88, maybe. And nuclear field, a school after bootcamp—Nuclear Field A School—was, I think, 12 weeks. And then Nuclear Power School, which was six months. So just, it was the December of 1988 that I moved out to Coronado, and it may have been after my Christmas vacation that I began, so let's call it January of '89. You know, I was 26 years old. No, excuse me. I was 23 years old when I was going through BUD/S, and I was a little older than most. And because I had college in my background, I was a little bit more mature, I think. Most of the guys were coming right out of high school. And I was doing well in training except for I developed an injury—my femoral neck, which is the top of my femur. The femoral head started to come off the femur.

(TI): And this is before your accident?

(AK): Yes. We'll call it involuntarily removed from training. And I was just devastated because this was something I really wanted to do. I saw it more as a challenge to myself, and I wasn't thinking long-term. I was only thinking this was something that was really challenging and to be removed from training, I'm just not a

quitter. And it really was devastating. But one of my instructors went to the commanding officer and said, "Look, this is a guy that's at the top of his class. Let's see if we can't keep him around somehow." So, they basically hit me at BUD/S. They changed my naval enlistment code to that of a staff person at BUD/S rather than a student. And once I was healed, I went right back to training, and I eventually graduated from BUD/S.

(TI): Oh, wow. Did you start back on day one? Had to go through it again?

(AK): No, when you are what they call rolled back for, let's say medical reasons, what they—there's three different phases of training, and they take you back to the last, you know, the phase where you rolled out of. So, you would—so it's not exactly the day that you actually got injured. It would be—they would take you back to the first day of that phase that you're in. So, I had already made it through the hell week that you people often hear about. I'd already went through all that. So, I restarted my training on after hell week.

(TI): So, the deployments were a little more scarce back then in the eighties than what they are now. You said you were on SEAL Team Five. It was more like be ready, wheels go up for a one-off mission type of stuff, correct?

(AK): The way when you graduate from BUD/S, you would go to the Army's Jump School in Fort Benning, and you would get your, what we call the lead wings and then you would report to your SEAL team. And then there was advanced training that you would go through. Then you would go to your platoon and you would do a year workup with your platoon, and then you would deploy to a theater for all the West coast teams. You had SEAL Teams One, Three and Five back then. And those teams went to the Philippines. So, we were getting—we're doing a workup getting ready to go to the Philippines when Desert Storm broke out and that's when they kind of accelerated our workup. And just as our bags were packed and we were ready to jump on a plane, the war was over. You know, we blinked, and it was over. So, we went back to our platoons and continued our workup. And it was at the end of my workup that I was in a parachuting accident.

(TI): Yeah. You were, you were paralyzed in '91 during the parachute accident that you referenced. Do you mind running me through it?

(AK): No, not at all. So, this was, May 21st of 1991 and we had a C-130 that we were going to be using all day. It wasn't just my platoon, but it was a handful of other platoons that needed to get some jumps in before we deployed. And I wasn't the first stick. A stick is made up of eight jumpers, and I was the second guy out the door. You know, we jumped off the ramp off the back of the C-130, and the number three guy collided with me shortly after our shoots opened. And I discovered it was really my combat gear, my rucksack, that was really wrapped up in his suspension line. So, I cut away the ruck, but it was too late. My main shoot would not open. I went for my reserve, and I was already about—witnesses tell me in my line of duty investigation, it says I was about 150 to 200 feet, and that's just not enough time for the reserve to open. So, I landed feet first, but I do recall that in those last, you know, 150 feet goes pretty quickly when you don't have a parachute. And I do recall thinking this is it. I'm 26 years old, and I don't get to say goodbye to my family and those that I love. And it's a very lonely feeling when you think you're about to die. No matter how loud you yell, no one's going to be there to help you. And I do remember waking up in the drop zone with a circle of my platoon mates. And I remember hearing the helicopter coming to the come medevac me over to Balboa Naval Hospital. And I remember being loaded onto the helicopter and the corpsman kneeling above me and just having a very solemn look on his face and just shaking his head. Like this is not good. And I was landed on felt like the rooftop of Balboa Naval Hospital, and I was in the emergency room. And they were—up until that time, you know, I was either an Indiana swimmer or I was labeled as a Navy SEAL. And that was really my identity. And to lay there under all these bright lights on this table with people wearing masks and white lab coats just basically cutting my equipment off of me. I remember telling them “Don't cut off the shoelaces of my jump boots.” And, but they're basically very quickly I was being stripped of my identity. And in a matter of seconds, I was just laying there naked, unable to move anything. And they had bolted this thing called a halo onto my head, and I just, I was completely paralyzed, and the

room went silent and I felt like I was there alone. And I just thought about, you know, what next? It was basically the chalkboard had been wiped clean, and I found myself in a state of limbo for the next couple of weeks. It was a—so we have a drop zone just north of the Mexican border. It's out of Brown Field. So, we jumped a static line, which was about 1,200 feet somewhere in 11-1,200 feet.

(TI): You were talking about those couple of weeks afterwards and that it was pretty dark being stripped. How did you get out of that mindset?

(AK): I was in a state of limbo, and, you know, not knowing what your future is and you're completely paralyzed surrounded by strangers all saying that they're there to try to save your life. And it really—my commanding officer called my mom right away. And she was on a plane the next day to fly out to San Diego. And she was at my bedside the whole time. So that was really the only familiar face. And, you know, she was always there to hold my hand. But apparently, I was asking people, "Where am I? What's going on?" You know, obviously I had a spinal cord injury. My neck was broken. My back was broken, and I was in traction. And there's no lights in the room. So, you don't know if it's night or day. You just have this fluorescent light bulb above you. And it's—that, if anything, is difficult. It's almost, you know, it's sleep deprivation on top of all the drugs you're on. Plus, I probably had a—I know I had a closed head injury. So, it really wasn't until the 9th or 10th day that I realized when the doctor came in and said, "You will not walk again. You know, we're going to go in there, and we're going to operate on you and stabilize your spine, but you can forget about your career as a SEAL team guy. We're gonna have to move on." And he was a little—my mom was a little upset. He was a little too straightforward, but he didn't sugar coat it. And I do recall this, my entire platoon came to my bedside the day before my surgery. And, I remember thinking again, I'm in the state of limbo, that maybe I'm dead and they were all coming here. See, cause they're all wearing their dress whites, you know, I thought, "What's the occasion. We never wear a uniform."

(TI): Yeah.

(AK): And yeah, I remember the doctor telling me that he was going to try to put me back together again, like Humpty Dumpty. But I do recall coming out of the operating room, and he pulled the intubation tube out, and I asked the nurses, "Am I alive?" And she said, "Yes, you're alive."

(TI): Wow.

(AK): So, really from that point forward was when I started planning for the future as a paralyzed Veteran. And I was very ill besides that. I had a real serious infection in my surgery where I had my surgery in the back of my neck, and Balboa Naval Hospital just wasn't able to fix that problem. And against normal protocols, the VA had me transported over to the La Jolla Spinal Injury Center. And that is where, really, my next life began. They quickly operated on me to get rid of the infection, and a representative of Paralyzed Veterans of America came to my bedside and said, "Well, you've heard the news. You're gonna be paralyzed the rest your life. But we're here to help you." And I signed my power of attorney over to them, and they did all those mountains, all that. You know, I'm sure you've seen the paperwork trying to get your benefits at the VA. It's overwhelming, and they know all the buzzwords they used.

(TI): And I'm sure in '90 and '91, you know, it wasn't as quite the digital laser that it is now. So yeah, I can only imagine all the paperwork. Yep. What would you say was the biggest support in ensuring that you didn't get the feeling or that the feeling didn't linger that, "Okay, it's over. My life's over. I can't do anything." Like how did you overcome that?

(AK): That's probably the easiest question I can answer today.

(TI): Good. Because a lot of people stay there. And so, I think it's important to hear that.

(AK): When I was transported to the spinal cord injury unit, that spinal cord injury building was built thanks to the efforts of Paralyzed Veterans of America. They lobbied Congress to have that unit built in La Jolla because there was a lot of Veterans with spinal cord injuries who had to go as far as Long Beach to get their care. That's a couple of hours up the road. So, when I was admitted into that hospital, immediately representatives of

Paralyzed Veterans of America were coming to my bedside, not just staff who were there to do all my paperwork, but other paralyzed Veterans. They come rolling up, and there was actually that the local president for the Paralyzed Veterans Chapter was also a Navy SEAL. He was shot and paralyzed in Vietnam. And so, he and I became close friends. And then another Navy SEAL came in a wheelchair. Then another one, then another one. I realized that we could put together an entire platoon of paralyzed SEALs. Not great for the recruiter, you know, but you realize that you weren't alone. No. You know, there's something that we refer to as the brotherhood. I'm sure every military unit refers to the brotherhood, but there's something to be said about paralyzed Veterans. We have so much in common.

(TI): When and how did you get into your mind that, “Okay. LA marathon. Yeah, I’m doing that.”

(AK): So, when I was laying in bed and I was trying to figure out what I'm going to do with the rest of my life, a paralyzed Veteran asked me if I would want to volunteer at the local chapter. There was something called the Americans with Disabilities Act had just passed, and they needed someone to become a—well, we start off as a volunteer to help use the Americans with Disabilities Act to help make San Diego more accessible for people disabilities. And as I was volunteering there, I was also approached by an old swimming buddy of mine who wanted me to help him coach the swim team at UCSD, University of California San Diego. But, you know, when I was coaching there. I really felt so different sitting on the pool deck in my wheelchair. I just felt like I was just, I was removed from the action and despite the best efforts of my physical therapist trying to get me involved in sports, I just don't want to bring attention to my disability. But there was also that disconnect looking at my swimmers in the pool. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I knew that sports was a useful tool in my toolkit, but I didn't know how to use it until I met a paralyzed Veteran named Carlos Moleda. He was a Navy SEAL. He was paralyzed in Panama during the Noriega thing. And we got to know each other sitting out in front of the VA Hospital. He says, “You know, while you're considering the level of injury and your background, you make a great athlete

and maybe even make it to the US Paralympic Team.” So that's, that was the ah-ha moment that it was Carlos Moleda, a fellow Navy SEAL who was paralyzed, that motivated me to get involved in wheelchair sports. And so, I went to my recreational therapist and she was excited that I would finally pursue sports.

(TI): She had been waiting for you to do sports.

(AK): She tried everything to get me to do sports, but I just wouldn't go there. And I have to admit, I'm stubborn. That has worked in my favor and against me sometimes. But yeah, and I mean, as soon as she found out I wanted to—oh my God, it was—she was providing me with equipment, coaching. She would take me out to the track, the local high school track, and we'd work out there. She—her husband was a quadriplegic, so he would teach me techniques. And my first real big competition was the National Veteran Wheelchair Games, which is produced by Paralyzed Veterans of America and the VA. And that's where I saw 600 fellow paralyzed Veterans racing wheels.

(TI): I think it's amazing that, you know, you left Indiana because you're like, “Okay, the Olympics is out of my reach,” and how it's kind of come full circle that it was now attainable after your service.

(AK): I think one of the things that motivated me to get involved in racing was seeing people who were truly athletic. It wasn't a pity party. It was more, these are real, true athletes who've trained their asses off to become elite athletes. And, you know, I started off in track events, which were, you know, the 100-yard dash. Then it was the 800. Then it was the mile. Then it was 10Ks, you know, getting onto the road. And then, someone dangled that little carrot of saying, “Let's see if you can do a marathon.” And a, I think it's safe to say that you don't do have to do a marathon every day to train for a marathon. You know, you train maybe 10 to 12 miles a day. And then you had mentioned the LA Marathon. I went up the road to LA, and there were athletes coming from all over the world thinking they could win that race. And I guess you consider me almost local and I was a newbie. And I always say I was about 13-14 miles into the race, and I realized I was in second or third place. And I thought, “Wow, I actually might be able to pull this off.” And in the last mile I

passed a guy from Switzerland called Christoph Eitzlstorfer, and I beat him by about a second or two. And I had actually, I completed, I actually won the LA Marathon.

(TI): Wow!

(AK): And I set the record for the course. So, I thought maybe this is something I can really hang my hat on. And that's when, shortly after that, I went to the US Paralympic trials, and I made the US Paralympic Team. And it was such an honor to represent the United States in Atlanta as a member of the US Paralympic Team.

(TI): Yeah. And you won the LA Marathon twice, right?

(AK): I won the LA Marathon in, I think, '96, '97.

(TI): Gotcha.

(AK): Or '95, '96.

(TI): Gotcha. Now you went to the, again, then you went to the '96 Paralympic Games. What events did you did you compete in?

(AK): I competed in the, I think it was the 800, 1500, 5,000 and marathon. I think I got that right. You had to, in order to make the team, you had to be able to compete in multiple events to show up for one of them.

(TI): Oh, I didn't know that. Did not know that. Now we always hear about the Olympians Olympic village. Is there the same concept for the Paralympic games?

(AK): Yeah. So, the US, the reason they call it Paralympics is because it's really, it's like paralleling the real Olympics. And so that the Paralympics are always held about two weeks after the regular Olympics. And they're actually held at the exact same venue. And I have kind of a funny story that that year the Olympics were in Atlanta and the Olympics—

Tanner Iskra Didn't have to go far.

(AK): No, that was great. It certainly made travel cheap. And, unfortunately, the venue where the Olympic Village was located was, I think University of Georgia or Georgia Tech or something

like that, whatever school is in Atlanta. And lo and behold, the dorms were built on the world's steepest hill.

(TI): Oh my God.

(AK): And so, you've got thousands of guys in wheelchairs living on the ridiculously steep hill. So, they created this electric golf cart bus that would transport us up there, and it was not accessible. Guys were like, "I can't transfer onto this little electric train." So, we would just hold onto the side of it and they would pull us up. And then unfortunately, somebody fell, and it was like a Peloton. Just like one guy went down then about 30 guys all went down, and then they had to get high school students to volunteer to push guys up the hill. And the guys egos are like, "I don't want a kid pushing me up the hill." It just was the rooms were not accessible. You had twelve guys in wheelchairs trying to use two bathrooms.

(TI): Wow.

(AK): It was just a mess, and the transportation was horrible. If you indulge me just a little bit, the opening ceremonies was hours long. It was, you know, they got us in the queue to march into the stadium hours ahead of time. And it was really cool to see Christopher Reeve talking, you know. He was in his wheelchair then, and that was all the cool stuff. When we got into the stadium, it was relatively empty. And then when they'd transport us back to the Olympic Village, the bus would pull up, the door would open up, and a little elevator would come out to pick us up. But by the time the first guy in a wheelchair got in the bus, all the other ambulatory athletes were filling in through the back door. So, you'd only get one guy on a bus at a time to get back to Olympic Village. So, three or four in the morning, there's thousands of guys in wheelchairs.

(TI): Wow.

(AK): That haven't been home yet. And so, the US Paralympic committee contacted Paralyzed Veterans of America because we put on the National Veterans Wheelchair Games every single year. It's the largest annual wheelchair sporting event in the world. And so, we knew how to take all the seats out of the buses, build ramps and platforms. So, you could really get the

maximum amount of athletes in wheelchairs on to a bus as quickly as possible.

(TI): Efficiency, logistics, all of that. You guys had all that down. Interesting.

(AK): It was. I was pretty proud of PVA at that moment.

(TI): Well, sure, sure. Now the trials are coming up for 2021 for July. You know, we got the Olympics this year. Do you have any advice for any of the athletes who are looking to compete this year?

(AK): If you're looking to talk to me right now about that you are woefully behind. Trying to get to the Paralympics is something that takes years to do. And you missed the bus, I'm afraid, if you're just now thinking about it..

(TI): Okay Let's look forward to the next one. What if someone is just thinking I can do this if I start training today? Maybe they can't make 2021, but maybe they can make a, I mean, I don't even know now that the years are off now because of the COVID, but they want to go to the next one. What would your advice be to them?

(AK): The challenge with Paralympics is just like the Olympics. And it only happens every four years. I have to say that the Paralympics for me was my first really big international competition. And so, I guess you could call me a rookie and I wish I had more experience under my belt before doing that event. So, I would advise any wheelchair athlete who is trying to pursue the Paralympic team that they get some international competition under their belts. And that includes traveling to Europe or Australia, wherever you need to go. It's not so much how many races you have under your belt. It's really learning how to race. There's a lot of strategy involved, and people have different styles of racing. And it does help to know people that you're competing against, you know, when you're doing a marathon.

(TI): Yeah.

(AK): Believe it or not, it's very rare that somebody sprints out front at mile one and stays out there all by themselves the entire time. This is probably a story about life in general, but if you're going to win that race, you're gonna need to work with other people. And often you'll find a pack in the front where you're drafting behind somebody else. And then you take the lead and somebody who drafts off of you. And you just got to know who you want to draft behind and who you want to work with because not everybody has the same ethical standards as you might have.

Both: [Laughing]

(AK): Yeah.

(TI): So, it's like NASCAR?

(AK): Yeah. There's a lot of ego involved, and you know, you can work together as friends but in the last mile or two, you're going to be on your own. But it's, you know, you need to experience it. You can't just come out of nowhere and win a race. It's almost impossible. It's unheard of.

(TI): Gotcha. Other than the LA Marathon, I guess, real quick, if they were looking for a competition, if they were looking for different competitions to look into, what would you recommend as far as a couple?

(AK): Certainly, in the United States you have your national track championships. Let's say you have your big races, like LA Marathon, Boston Marathon. You know, Boston Marathon is a real, good example. You can't just show up the Boston. You have to qualify for it. So, you have to figure out what marathons in the United States are qualifiers for Boston.

(TI): Gotcha.

(AK): The same thing goes for international competition. Sometimes you have to do preliminary competitions in order to qualify.

(TI): Very good. Very good. What gave you the idea to do a transcontinental triathlon? Where was your start and end? And what events did you do when, like at what? Because you did a triathlon, so obviously you did different things at different places.

(AK): So, I was mostly a marathon person. 10 Ks, but longer distance races was definitely my forte. And I was at a fundraiser where they used a triathlon with celebrities and disabled athletes to help raise money for athletes with disabilities. And a gentleman came up to me and said, "I kind of know a little bit about your history and was wondering if you had some time, some free time next spring? I'm going to go from LA to New York. I was wondering if you'd want to do so in your wheelchair." And I said, "You gotta be kidding me." Yeah, I didn't know how to prepare for it. I said, "How do you prepare for something like this?" And he says, "You can. It's just, you're going to be in your chair, you know, 8, 9, 10, 11 hours a day."

(TI): What was the reason behind it?

(AK): It was called the Chance Trans-Continental Triathlon for Life, and Jim Howley, who was the organizer of the event, had overcome some of the complications of HIV and AIDS through the sport. And he wanted to convey to people with disabilities and illnesses that sports is a way to overcome those challenges. And so, he asked me if I could find others that might want to endure the same torture. And I found a friend of mine who lost his leg, who was a Paralympic athlete, and a woman who had lost her eyesight and hearing to some illness, and she was a velodrome cyclist. So, the four of us started at Santa Monica pier and we completed about 3,600 miles. We ended up in New York City about 65 days later. The bigger markets like Denver, Las Vegas, Philadelphia, we would meet with the mayor, and they declare us, you know, Transcontinental Triathlon Day or whatever, and we'd give out sports equipment or, you know, running shoes that were donated by Adidas and we give them out to kids at risk. But basically, the message was overcoming your challenges in life through sport.

(TI): That's very cool. Very cool.

(AK): And that's basically my mantra.

(TI): That's awesome. That's awesome. Now did you do different, you said triathlon—did you do different things like swimming and?

(AK): Yeah. As much as I try to avoid swimming, the guy says, "You're going to have to swim if you're going to go to this triathlon." So, I

bought a wetsuit and jumped in the pool and did about a total of twenty-five yards. And I said, "Okay, I got it." And, boy, did I not plan for this. But, we started off—most of it, yeah, it's a triathlon, right? So, running, biking, swimming, but obviously I can't use my legs. So, it's all in the arms. Most of it was cycling, and I have a hand cycle where I lay on my back and have the chain rings in my face and my gears are down by my ankles. But it's called a crank cycle or a hand cycle, excuse me. And that is the one way of getting the furthest the quickest for running. I sit more in like a cannonball position and lean over my knees and push on the back wheels, when I have a long, it's about six feet long. And there's a smaller wheel out front. I use that for running. And then swimming, I just tie my ankles together and put my head down and swim. It's—for me, it was very uncomfortable. The first one we did was across the Colorado River in Moab, Utah, and that water temperature was 47 degrees. And it was really just a bunch of melt off from the mountains. It was a lot of debris. The water looked like a chocolate milkshake, and we had to notify the local authorities so they would have a boat with lifeguards in there to catch us if we didn't make it to the other side. And there was some waterfalls and a bridge downstream that they were worried that we would go over. And as much of a challenge as it was for me, we, the woman who was blind and deaf, we had to tie her with a rope to Jim Howley. And, yes, she was—she knew that the rope came untied, and she knew she couldn't hear us. She couldn't see us, but she knew that we were panicking to come get her, and we would be embarrassed if the lifeguard had to come rescue us. But somehow, some way, we landed perfectly in front of the media for exactly where we were supposed to land. Of course, we were covered head to toe in 47-degree mud, and, boy, was it a miserable experience, but I was just so happy with myself that I was actually able to do that. And then we swam across parts of the Mississippi and Lake Erie and Lake Michigan. But really the majority of the race of—excuse me, all the of the triathlon was really mostly cycling. We could have done it faster, but we had to keep on a schedule because we had, you know, certain ceremonies with mayors that we had to attend. And the most stressful days were really not the days that we are out there peddling on the road with the tumble weeds, really the most stressful time was our days off 'cause we

were scrambling to find bike shops to fix our equipment. You know, we ran out of money very quickly. Our sponsors backed out. And yeah, you know, sponsors donate because they think they're getting something in return. And when you are only covering anywhere from 60 to 100 miles a day and you're in the middle of Nevada, no telephone crews, television crews are going out there. No newspaper people are going to go out there. It's—we're out there on our own. We must have been out on the, you know, on the moon. And of course, the internet didn't really exist back then. So, we didn't, you didn't have all, you know, Facebook. You didn't have Twitter. So, yeah, it was a, you know, we had to really scramble to get media attention. And, you know, you know, who was about a day ahead of us was a guy that wrote a diet book for Oprah Winfrey. He was stealing all of our media.

(TI): Oh, really? Huh.

(AK): Yeah. It was just him.

(TI): Yeah. But I think as far as you went through the continental, you know, I'm sure you picked up media at some point, you know, hey, Chicago. And as soon as you get to some of the bigger markets, I'm sure it picked up and the sponsors just missed out.

(AK): It was the local newspapers. They would, you know, we'd have to call them and tell them what we're doing and beg them to come out and cover the story. You know, if the mayor is going to be somewhere, he or she's got their own media people, but it was—I wish it had, we had done it today. It would be a different story. I think we would've been able to get our message out better. But I know I benefited from this personally, tremendously, but I know that we did change lives as we were going across country. And we did coordinate some of it with the many Paralyzed Veterans of America chapters that we have going across country. They helped us get media, and, you know, we could always use a couple of guys on the side of the road cheering us on.

(TI): Any want or desire to do it today? You talked about now we have Facebook and Instagram.

(AK): No.

Both: [Laughing]

(AK): I have no desire to do anything like that. Never again.

(TI): Very good. Very good.

(AK): I'm married. So, she wouldn't let me anyways. When Jim first asked me to do this, I said, "Jim, let me think about this." And I went home and called my mom, and my mom says, "You're not serious. You're not really gonna do this are you? And that's when I realized I'm going to do it 'cause I always did whatever my mom told me not to do.

(TI): There you go. Yeah. I always did whatever anybody told me I couldn't do, you know. That was why I joined the Marine Corps instead of the Air Force. "Oh, you look more like an Airman." Yeah, no, you know what? I'm going to join the Marine Corps. You know? How about that?

(AK): That's what my mom said when I told my mom I was gonna join the Navy. She says, "You are not going down there. You're not gonna join the Navy, are you?" I joined the Navy. So, you're right.

(TI): Outstanding. So, you're, you're the former President of Paralyzed Veterans of America. You've mentioned it many times. It's a non-profit that we spoke about personally on this podcast, either in, I think, I think we either in episode 157 or 160. It's where we broke down the VA's Assistive Technology Program. On the episode their representative Ursula Draper, I think she kind of started the program, she talked about how PVA works very closely with VA's Assistive Technology Program. And I remember her saying that you have an office in their spinal cord unit and that you help paralyzed Veterans file all the paperwork for those better, you know, for them to receive their entitlements, help provide equipment. PVA is a, you know, it's a nonprofit that my grandfather donated to personally. He never served, but he had the calendars and everything. And I just remember, I just remember PVA, and he had a real feeling towards wanting to help to take care of wounded Veterans and paralyzed Veterans. And I remember from the time that I was 18, he would always ask me from the minute I joined the Marine Corps, "Hey, do you know about this organization?" Like he knew he had no idea

what it was about. He had no idea what it was. He just knew that he was trying to and figure out how a way to help paralyzed Veterans. And he would always ask me, you know, “What do you know about that?” I was like, “Grandpa, I'm in the Marine Corps. I don't really interact with the non-profits. I'm not in the Veteran community. I'm still active duty.” But I always remembered PVA because of my grandpa. How is PVA able to work that closely with the VA program because we know there's all kinds of rules when it comes to nonprofits working in tandem with the government? So how are you able to make that partnership happen?

(AK):

Back in World War II, World War II, if you got paralyzed, you didn't live but a couple of days. In World War II, there was the, you know, the advent of the antibiotics and that allowed our Veterans to start living longer. And it was—paralysis was something that nobody ever survived before. And so, you had all these guys coming back from World War II that were paralyzed. They were just basically either warehouse or out in the community, and then they just kind of disappeared. So, a handful of paralyzed Vets said, “You know, one voice doesn't get very far, but if we have one collective voice, we might get a little bit further. We need X, we need accessibility. We need college education, you know, VOC rehab. We need help with healthcare, etc. We need long-term health care, something that will be taken care of for the rest of our lives.” And the VA doesn't know what to do with us. So, they establish the Paralyzed Veterans of America in 1947. And it was such a novel organization and such a novel, now survivable, disability that nobody was familiar with. Then Hollywood got involved and the president of Paralyzed Veterans of America at the time sold a story, it was mostly based on himself, to the Hollywood producers. And it was Marlon Brando's first leading role in a film. And the movie was called “The Men.”

(TI):

Really?

(AK):

Yep. 1952.

(TI):

I had no idea. Wow.

(AK):

And it talks about a Veteran, an officer, who was shot by a German sniper and comes home and is introduced to 20 or 30

other guys living in a spinal cord entry unit. Actually, it wasn't a spinal cord injury. It was just a general med unit, med surge unit, that all these guys were being warehoused. They weren't leaving the hospital. They were afraid, and he wasn't going to be a part of that. He wanted to get out, and he met a beautiful nurse and the two of them got married. And, Hollywood, it falls apart. Then it gets back together again, and there's a happy ending. But that's really the introduction to Paralyzed Veterans of America. So, that is why probably your grandfather knows us is that PVA came to the forefront in the 1950s. And then when Vietnam happened, we had just a tidal wave of paralyzed Veterans coming back from Vietnam in 1972. I think it was Life Magazine, did a story on paralyzed Veterans that were being warehoused in VA facilities throughout the country and the conditions were deplorable. And the VA was so embarrassed and wanting to fix the problem that they contacted Paralyzed Veterans of America. And that's when we established our Medical Services Department, where we now employ architects, doctors, nurses. And we have become the experts. We know more than the VA does about spinal cord injury care. And so, we then also worked with the VA to, you know—we established a standard of care, how many wheelchairs we get, you know, annual exams. We have to standardize, you know, wound care, urology, all that stuff. We came up with a playbook, a standard of care that all Veterans with spinal cord injuries should receive from the VA Hospital. And then we went to Congress and had it legislated. So, basically, it's a law of what you, what the VA has to provide us. So, then our medical services go to every one of the 25 spinal cord injury centers across the country and audit the quality of care that our Veterans are receiving. So PVA staff actually interviews all the clinicians, even the admin staff, the patients, and we find out whether or not the VA hospital is living up to our expectations when it comes to quality of care. And those reports are given to the Secretary of the VA and they go no further. When I say that, I mean, they're not made public. It's a gentleman's agreement between PVA and VA. We don't want Congress getting a hold of those because they can certainly make political hay out of it.

(TI):

And that's not what it's about at all. It's about just to, at the end day, it's just about taking care of the Veteran.

(AK): And that is the common bond that the PVA has with the VA is that we're here to serve the Veteran. Now the VA has something like over 9 million patients to deal with, and we have to be that squeaky wheel.

(TI): Sure.

(AK): But it certainly has paid off. We have an office building about a block away from the VA headquarters in DC. And any given day, you'll see PVA employees going back and forth on the sidewalk. The VA has offered an office space in the VA Headquarters for PVA employees to help adjudicate some, you know, like our appeals department. Every spinal cord injury center has a PVA employee working there as a service officer to help paralyzed Veterans get their benefits. And if they have any issues with quality of care that they certainly run it through our service officer there. They are Johnny on the spot. And so PVA is—

(TI): Wow. So, you're pretty deeply ingrained.

(AK): We're embedded, I think is the term.

(TI): Yeah. No, and yeah, exactly. So, but so it turned in from a Life Magazine to a partnership that's been held to this day. I had no idea.

(AK): Yeah. And, you know, thanks to that partnership, you know, paralyzed Veterans in World War II were living a couple of weeks to, you know, if they didn't get any infections, maybe give them a couple of years. But nowadays, thanks to the partnership between Paralyzed Veterans of America and the VA, we have patients that are living over 100. I, we, PVA, lobbied Congress to get a long-term care facility built in Long Beach. And their very first patient lived to be 102, I believe.

(TI): Wow. Now, when you were president of the organization, what was one thing that was a priority for you?

(AK): Paralyzed Veterans of America really saved my life on a number of different occasions, and I'm not—that's not hyperbole. I literally, if they had not come to my aid, I don't think I'd be talking to you. And I felt like, not only did I need to pay them back, but I also wanted to pay it forward. And thanks to some of my

brethren, my brotherhood, they mentored me and helped elevate me to be the President and CEO of Paralyzed Veterans of America from 2014 to 2017. And what I found was that because of the incredible work that all of these Vietnam Veterans had done, you know, my life is so much better. But those Vietnam Veterans are in their seventies. And I felt like we needed to have someone speaking for the newest generation of Veterans but not forget where we came from, of course. And that was one of my biggest challenges was gaining the trust of the former generation while also having the trust of the current generation. It was really a remarkable, rewarding experience. You know, being able to testify in front of Congress and represent all the Veterans that we serve. I did notice something that when you're testifying, the hard questions about healthcare were directed at Paralyzed Veterans of America. We seem to be at, that seems to make us different from all the other VSOs is our knowledge of specialized healthcare. That's one of the reasons why we work with blinded Veterans is they too are, you know, a specialty-focused, specialty healthcare focused organization. But we work with all the VSOs. Matter of fact, I don't want to go get off target here, but Paralyzed Veterans of America works with Disabled American Veterans and Veterans of Foreign War to develop the Independent Budget. And that is something that Congress uses as a tool to develop the VA's budget every year.

(TI): What is the—what's that? What's the Independent Budget?

(AK): So, the Independent Budget is something that Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars and Paralyzed Veterans of America work together to provide a roadmap for Congress and the VA as far as benefits and healthcare as well as employment and education for our Veterans. So, we will break it down into what the critical issues are. We identify those critical issues and then how we would recommend fixing those issues. And those recommendations are pretty well detailed, and it's the Veteran's voice playing a role in helping life, helping to make the VA better, helping make Congress be better overseers of the VA. And in the end, what matters most is that the Veterans are benefiting from it. I remember when I first got started, it was hard to get Congress to go along with our independent budget, but since 9/11, I remember that first budget coming in and the

Bush administration actually recommended more funding than what we had recommended. So, we were very happy, and it's great to see that the Congress and the VA are listening to us.

(TI): So, when we talk about non-profits, what's the difference between a nonprofit and a VSO? That's the difference. Big time.

(AK): So, after 9/11, there was something like 45,000 charities that all wanted it.

(TI): We're up to 56,000 now, as of last year is what I heard. Yeah, so.

(AK): A lot. And, you know, and a lot of them were just mom and pop. Some of them are just barely meeting the standards of the IRS.

(TI): Yeah. But there's also a lot to do a lot of good too though.

(AK): Oh, absolutely. I think most of these charities want to do the right thing, but they don't have the knowledge and the history like PVA. And so, we're actually chartered by Congress. A lot of people don't know what that means, but basically that was something they did up until recently that it's Congress' recognition that you are experts in your field. And. It was back in the seventies and eighties I know that we received our charter, and basically it was Congress saying that Paralyzed Veterans of America knows what they're talking about and they should be heard.

(TI): Gotcha.

(AK): That's really—it's something that's like our secret weapon.

(TI): So that, yeah. So, you know, if you're running a nonprofit out there, you're listening to the episode, and you're always wondering or if you're a Veteran and you're always wondering what the difference is between a recognized VSO and a nonprofit, that's it. That's it right there.

(AK): Yes. And like DAV, VFW, PVA and VETS. They're all, those are the ones that the Legion—

(TI): I think the Legion's another one.

(AK): The Legion, another good one. So, Vietnam Veterans also. They, you know, those big six is often what they're referred to. We often work together because we've been doing this for so long, and what's really neat is just that it's Veterans speaking on behalf of Veterans. Up until the seventies and eighties, being a Veteran, it was almost a prerequisite in order to serve in Congress. But in 2016, '15, '14, when I was there, they had barely 16%, 17% with military service. And so that made them rely even more on Paralyzed Veterans of America and other VSOs for their expertise because they really didn't know what they were getting themselves into. It's, you know, basically the Senate and the House's Veteran Affairs Committee, basically the Board of Directors for the VA, and they have very little military experience.

(TI): Yep, absolutely. Now you're still on the board, right? For PVA?

(AK): Yes. The way it works is once you serve as the president and when you step down, you serve as the immediate past president. And so currently the Paralyzed Veterans of America is using me to help improve the quality of services that our chapters are providing our members out in the community.

(TI): What's the priority now, or, you know, now that PVA—heck, what's been the priority over the past year plus with COVID? Are you operating any differently? Are you guys seeing new challenges? How are you mitigating those challenges? Because I'm pretty sure with your community there are some unique challenges, especially in terms of this disease that we're all going through?

(AK): Yes. You know, in the past, the big challenges were, you know, like the Americans with Disabilities Act, you know, or, you know, some big thing like that. And then for a while, it just, it kind of got quiet, then all of a sudden COVID happened and, boy, has, it really changed the way we operate. Guys in wheelchairs used to be flying all over the country. Trying to fix our problems. And now we can't do that anymore. And we're having to rely on these computers to conduct business. Our membership really represents some of the most medically fragile Veterans. And so, we were in crisis mode trying to figure out how can we make sure that our Veterans are getting the proper care they need

while they stay at home. I mean, the VA healthcare system was trying to deter patients from coming into the VA because unless they really needed it. But you know, when you went into the VA, you weren't going to get any visitors. And so, many of our Veterans are in the hospital for months, sometimes years, and to deny them access to their family, which is their support network isn't okay. It's just not right. So, yeah, you know, we're trying to figure out how do we get care delivered to the Veterans at home. And so, the chapters around the country were literally calling every single member of Paralyzed Veterans of America to make sure they have what they needed. And, probably Paralyzed Veterans of America took the lead in communicating with the members and communicating with folks like yourself to help us get the word out that we're here to help.

(TI): Gotcha. Very good. What are some of the specific challenges that you guys are running into with some of this other than the communication aspect and not being able to fly around? Like say, you know, paralyzed Veteran in West Virginia, you know, what is he running into with the current status quo of America?

(AK): Well, when it comes to the members of Paralyzed Veterans of America, our biggest concern is that there's only 25 spinal cord injury centers around the country. So, all of our 17,000 members and other paralyzed Veterans, they have to get on the airplanes to get their healthcare. And so, some are, you know, driving six, seven hours to get to a hospital or they have to get on an airplane. And that's a real challenge. And with so many of us and myself included where I have a compromised respiratory system, if I get COVID, I'm in a world of hurt. So, you know, I'm in my little bubble of my wife and my two little foster kids, and my 1,700 square foot condo has gotten a lot smaller. That's for sure.

(TI): Gotcha, gotcha. Has community care made an impact in some of that, some of those issues?

(AK): We were talking with the Independent Budget. That's one of our priorities is getting the VA to work closely with people out in the community to help deliver quality care to our members. Unfortunately, the way it is set up right now, PVA doesn't have any oversight of care in the community. We only had the influence in the VA. You know, our charter doesn't—our charter

doesn't necessarily allow us to. We can't have our service officer go ask a private doctor, "Hey, what's going on with Al Kovach's healthcare?" So, you know, and if you get paralyzed, if you're a paralyzed Vet and you're out in the community getting care and there's some mishap, you're going to have to go hire a lawyer to go fix those problems. The VA doesn't have that problem, but I've had to go out in the community to get quality care. Excuse me, I had to go out to the community to get my healthcare, and I did not get that warm and fuzzy feeling that I get when I'm at the VA.

(TI): Interesting. So very interesting.

(AK): It's yeah, because I know that there's no PVA looking over my shoulder, you know, there like to catch me if I fall off

(TI): And that's a perspective I've never heard of it. I've never heard of it like that. That's interesting.

(AK): Again, the, the quality of care at the VA is so much better than what the community has to offer. And that's why we, you know, we want our Veterans to go to the VA to get their care. We really get nervous when they start going out in the community. That's from the patient's perspective. Now, from the way PVA operates, we have a lot of virtual programs. Like we have a virtual hand cycling or yoga, you know. There's ways that we can communicate with our Veterans at home so they can feel like they're still engaged. The isolation is, well, I think you've, if you haven't done a show on it yet, you probably will in the increase in suicide and suicidal ideations that are going on in the Veteran community just because of COVID. And that is particularly the case with our members. I just talked to a Veteran out, a paralyzed Vet, out in Montana, and, boy, is he lonely.

(TI): Oh my gosh. I can only imagine.

(AK): And, you know, sometimes, you know, we're social creatures, right? And we need to, we have our brotherhood that we want to remain in touch with, and Paralyzed Veterans of America and it's 33 chapters have really gone miles to make sure that we stay connected.

(TI): I didn't think about going out in town and not having that warm and fuzzy of a VSO that's really looking, digging in, making sure that they're giving you the proper care. Very good. What's one thing that you learned during your time in the military that you apply to what you do today?

(AK): Mission focus. I've really found it when I stay focused on the mission, whatever that might be, I stay out of trouble. When it comes to the way I felt like I was leading Paralyzed Veterans of America, I had to assure all the people that I was representing, that I had their best interest in mind and that we were focused on improving the quality of life of all Veterans, not just those of one generation or one gender or the guys that served in the Navy, you know. We were there for everyone. And there is one area of demographic that is increasing and that we've been focusing on, and that is females. As you know, there are more females in the military. More females therefore are becoming injured, and females tend to get multiple sclerosis more often. And that is one of the conditions that Paralyzed Veterans of America certainly advocates to assist. When you say Paralyzed Veteran of America, it's not just a spinal cord injury, it's also the diseases. And I'm talking about multiple sclerosis and, and Lou Gehrig's disease. Now, you know, you're not paralyzed just because of a bullet to the spine. And so, the demographics of the younger guys and gals, the ones that are currently serving, you know, they were in the eighteens, nineteens and twenties. So, there's certainly—there's been a bit of a shift. I think when we're dealing in the eighties and nineties, it was mostly, we're just focused on men who were paralyzed in Vietnam and then our focus has had to change. And so, you know, the old saying in the military is to adapt and overcome.

(TI): Al, is there anything that I may have missed or haven't asked that you think is important to share?

(AK): PVA has taken a leadership role in spinal cord injury and disease. We don't, even though our focus is on Veterans, the work that we do, actually, I hate to say it, but it has a ripple effect. It impacts millions of people with disabilities. PVA took a leadership role in getting the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, that, you know, we've got something like 60 million people with disabilities right now living in the United

States and other countries are looking to us to see how they make their country accessible. When I say accessible, I'm not just talking about parking spots, I'm talking about employment and living, long-term care. The work that we do really has an impact on millions of people, not just paralyzed Veterans, you know. We also have developed not only a standard of care for our Veterans, the VA health care system, but we've also—we published something called Clinical Practice Guidelines, and those are available on the internet and clinicians from around the world can go to our website and download how to care for a paralyzed person.

(TI): Al, is there anything that you would like to say to the audience that may be listening to this? Maybe it is a paralyzed Veteran that doesn't know you exist or that doesn't know PVA exists or, or maybe it's a, you know, someone that's caring for a paralyzed Veteran or maybe it's a VA employee? Is there anything that you'd like to say as like a parting shot?

(AK): I remember when I was first paralyzed, I felt like I was so, so damn lonely that I was the only person on the planet that was going through what I was going through, but there are 20 million Veterans out there and only 9 of them are using the VA. And, I wish there the other 11 million Veterans would use the VA because it is a wonderful source for quality care. Despite what you might hear coming from Congress or the media, you're not alone, and you're not the first person to go through what you've gone through, and you need to be able to swallow your pride and reach out for some help. And I think the first step if you don't feel comfortable going to a VA clinician, reach out to Paralyzed Veterans of America or any of the other Veteran service organizations that we talked about today because you will be talking to a fellow Veteran on the phone who can help you through that.

[01:14:29] Music

[01:14:33] PSA:

Man: The VA does a very good job on the medical side. I don't know of anybody that has any complaints. My primary care doctor's probably the best doctor I've ever had in my life.

Woman: My friend, a good patient of mine, he only comes once a week but I enjoy him.

Man: She comes in special, early in the morning.

Woman: Early in the morning—

Man: —Just for me. That’s exactly why I choose VA.

Narrator: Choose VA today. Visit va.gov [Link: va.gov].

[01:15:04] Music

[01:15:08] Closing Monologue:

(TI): I want to thank Al for taking the time to come on Borne the Battle and for his patience in getting his episode released. You can also find more about Al Kovach pva.org/about-us/leadership [Link: pva.org/about-us/leadership]. You can see him there as the Immediate Past President position. All right. This week's 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 writeup 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, and a short writeup to newmedia@va.gov. Ben Kuroki was born in May 1917 near Hershey, Nebraska. He was the son of Japanese immigrants and grew up with his nine brothers and sisters. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Kuroki and his brother Fred wanted to enlist in the Army. They drove to the recruiting office in North Platte, Nebraska, but recruiters turned them away because they were Japanese Americans. Undeterred, Kuroki and his brother drove another 150 miles to a different recruiting office, where they finally enlisted. Kuroki began his journey in the Army Air Forces at Sheppard Air Force Base near Wichita Falls, Texas, where he and his brother completed basic training. Initially, Kuroki wanted to be a pilot, but due to the Army banning soldiers of Japanese descent from serving in bomber crews, the Army assigned Kuroki clerical duties. Later the same year he would get his chance. Slipping through the filter that placed Japanese American soldiers into segregated units, he transferred to the 93rd Bombardment Group as a gunner. He deployed to Europe in December of 1942, where he took part in 30 missions taking

on extra missions because he wanted to prove his loyalty to his country. In August of 1943, Kuroki took part on a mission to bomb critical Nazi oil fields in Ploesti, Romania. It was a mission that saw 313 fliers from his group killed during the battle. For his acts of bravery during the war, his crewmates nicknamed him "Most Honorable Son." In December of 1943, Kuroki deployed to Japan. At the time Japanese Americans could not serve at the Pacific theater, but through special permission from the War Department, he deployed. Kuroki served with the 505th Bombardment Group at Tinian Island. He took part in 28 combat missions, becoming the only Japanese American to fly in combat against Japan. He was also one of the few airman to fight in both the European and Pacific theaters. Later on in life when he was asked about his battle to overcome the prejudice, which almost prevented him from being allowed to participate in overseas aerial combat missions, Kuroki stated, "I had to fight like hell for the right to fight for my own country." Once the war was over, Kuroki began several self-funded speaking tours fighting against what he experienced and telling the story of what he saw in Japanese American internment camps when he was asked to recruit for the military. He attended the University of Nebraska where he earned a journalism degree. Kuroki moved on to work for numerous newspapers focusing on telling the stories of what was unfolding in the South in the 1950s and 60s. During his service, Kuroki received three Distinguished Flying Crosses and an Air Medal with five oak leaf clusters. In 2005, he received a Distinguished Service Medal. Sadly, Kuroki passed away in 2015 at the age of 98. Army Veteran Ben Kuroki, we honor his service. That's it for this week. So, if you yourself would like to nominate a Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week, you can just send an email to podcast@va.gov. Include a short writeup and let us know why you'd 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 on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcast, iHeartRadio, pretty much any podcasting app known to phone, computer, tablet, or man. For more stories on Veterans and Veteran benefits, check out our website, blogs.va.gov [Link: blogs.va.gov]. And follow the VA on social media: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, RallyPoint LinkedIn, Pinterest. DPTVetAffairs, US Department of Veterans Affairs, no matter the

social media, you can always find us with that blue check mark. 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 you're hearing now is called "Machine Gunner," which is courtesy of the nonprofit Operation Song. And it was written by Marine Veteran Mick McElhenny, Nashville songwriter Jason Sever, and Mykal Duncan. Thank you again for listening, and we'll see you right here next week. Take care.

[01:20:25] Music

(Text Transcript Ends)