

SaylorTranscript1

[Speaker 1]

All right, you're good to go.

[Speaker 2]

Let me just adjust that. Okay. All right, and same thing as before, John, there might be some stuff we edit out.

Whatever you don't like, once we get the video up, you just let us know and we'll take care of it.

[Speaker 1]

Awesome.

[Speaker 2]

Okay, welcome everybody. I'm Chris Magra. I'm the director of the Center for the Study of Tennesseans and More, and it's our mission to research, preserve, and share the stories of Tennessee veterans, and we're privileged to have a Tennessee veteran with us today.

This is John Saylor, and we're going to talk about his story. Welcome, John.

[Speaker 1]

Awesome. Thank you for having me.

[Speaker 2]

Good to see you. Yeah, thanks for coming. Can you start with your bona fides?

Where were you born and raised?

[Speaker 1]

So I am from northeast Tennessee, a little town called Gray, Tennessee, outside of John City, Bristol Kingsport. Born and raised there. If you can't tell, by the way, I talk.

And what year were you born? 1994.

[Speaker 2]

And can you tell us a little bit about growing up in Tennessee in the 90s?

[Speaker 1]

So grew up- Doing stuff around cars when you were growing up? Yeah, I'm a huge car guy. I grew up around hot rods and classic cars.

Loved to hunt, being outdoors, being around guns, typical Tennessee boy things.

[Speaker 2]

And- Military service in your family?

[Speaker 1]

Yep. So my grandfather was drafted during Vietnam. He never went to Vietnam, and my great, great uncle fought in World War II during the Battle of the Bulge.

I know seeing just- He never would talk about his time overseas. It was always time stateside, but that was definitely a big influence on me joining. And growing up, I would- My parents would let me watch war movies and stuff like that.

Me and my dad loved to do that together. And I think that's when I knew that's when I wanted to serve the country.

[Speaker 2]

You think you made a decision at a young age? Yeah. This was something you wanted to do?

Of course. And did you ever have a conversation with your parents about that, or did you kind of keep it to yourself until- So, believe it or not, at first, I wanted to join the Coast Guard.

[Speaker 1]

And I can't remember why it didn't work out, but I remember my- I was about a junior or senior in high school. I had my math teacher. Her son was in the Army, and I talked to her a little bit.

I went to go see her not too long ago. She remembered me, crazy enough. Do you remember her name?

Miss Hill. Shout out to Miss Hill. Yeah, shout out to Miss Hill.

And I remember all I ever wanted to do was join the infantry and go do all that cool guy stuff. And when it came down to it and I graduated, I really got serious talking to my parents. And we had a 68 Mustang at that time.

My parents didn't want me to join. And my dad said, if you join the infantry, I'm going to sell a 68 Mustang.

[Speaker 2]

And at that time- That was a big threat to John as a teenage young boy.

[Speaker 1]

What's funny is it ended up in my garage years later. I just recently gave it to my nephew, I think last November, to keep it in the family. So I remember they did not want me to do it.

So one day I went to the recruiter by myself. Was this the Coast Guard recruiter? No, no, no.

This is Army recruiter.

[Speaker 2]

Okay. So you had mentioned initially wanting to do Coast Guard. That kind of came out of nowhere.

Where did the Coast Guard come from?

[Speaker 1]

I could not tell you. And what's crazy is I can barely swim. I can doggy paddle, but I'm not a swimmer.

[Speaker 2]

We're pretty landlocked here in Tennessee. So not a lot of Coast Guard activity here.

[Speaker 1]

No. But I went up to the recruiter by myself. Because they wanted me to go to school, I wanted out of Northeast Tennessee.

And I had a friend that went to the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. I went down to visit her and fell in love with it. So me and my family and I kind of compromised.

And I called my dad while he was at work. The recruiter offered me, he said, now I can get you a \$10,000 bonus and horizontal construction engineer. And me being a car guy, I was like, I want to be a mechanic.

And they found a slot for me in a reserve unit as a mechanic and called my dad up while he was at work. I was like, dad, I'm about to sign this dotted line. If you want to leave work, you can.

But I'm signing this dotted line. I'm going to go serve. And he left work.

[Speaker 2]

And it was in the Army Reserves. Yeah. You kind of felt like, did you feel like your dad would be comfortable with it, since it wasn't infantry?

[Speaker 1]

They went along with it. At first, they were hesitant. What's crazy is my career progressed, which I'm sure we'll get into.

I eventually made E6. I got out as an E6. And they were begging me to stay in.

They wanted me to stay in.

[Speaker 2]

By the end of it?

[Speaker 1]

By the end of it.

[Speaker 2]

But initially, no. And were you thinking, this is going to be a compromise with my parents? Or were you thinking, the guy made a good pitch for taking this route and going with the reserves?

[Speaker 1]

Well, my original plan- Or both. My original plan was, I was going to join the reserves, go to school, do ROTC at UT Chattanooga, and then get infantry and commission there. Well, that

was back during the Obama administration, and they were downsizing, and nobody was getting a contract.

I mean, you had to be top of the line. And I was in school, and I did well in school, but just my heart wasn't there. I wanted to go serve.

So I did three semesters at UTC, and once I got into ROTC, it wasn't for me. I'm an NCO at heart. I'm a leader.

I like working with people, and as an NCO, you get to be with your guys. I wasn't an NCO at that time, but I was- You've since found out that's who you are? Of course, yeah.

[Speaker 2]

So what year did you sign on the deadline? What year was the enlistment?

[Speaker 1]

This is crazy. I did not plan this out, but it was about July. It was June or July of 2013.

I got to basic training. I started basic training August 6, 2013. My last day in uniform was August 6, 2021.

Then when I got out, I did my terminal leave, but my official end date in the military was October 7, 2021.

[Speaker 2]

So you enlisted in the Army Reserves, and you're at UT Chattanooga in the ROTC program. Yep. You did three years at UT Chattanooga?

[Speaker 1]

No, I did three semesters at UT. I did one semester in ROTC, and it wasn't for me. I ended up rushing fraternity.

Go, Pike. Rush, Pike. After my third semester, I was like, man, this is just not where my heart is.

So put in a conditional release to go active duty, and it was signed like that. They generally take six months. I think mine was signed in like three months.

This would have been around 2014? 2015. So I finished up the fall semester, 2015.

February of 2016, I was on a plane to South Korea for a year. I was stationed at Camp Casey, South Korea, with the 2nd Infantry Division, 210th Field Artillery Brigade. What's crazy is when I was in the Reserves, I never touched a vehicle.

They always had contractors, and I wanted to work on vehicles. Well, when I got to my unit in South Korea, I didn't touch a vehicle for like six months because I was put in a headquarters unit, and I ended up being the do-everything guy for my unit. I worked in the orderly room, and I cannot remember the commander's name, but 1st Sergeant Billings.

He's probably retired now. I know he made Sergeant Major. Shout out to Sergeant Major Billings.

That guy was awesome.

[Speaker 2]

And he got you situated in South Korea?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. They put a lot of trust in me. I was an E4 specialist.

I was a mechanic in a field artillery unit. In South Korea, they partnered with the South Korean Army, and we do a lot of joint operations, I guess, if that's the wrong word. We work alongside what they call CATUSAs.

I cannot remember what the acronym stands for, but one of the coolest things I got to do was job a group of field artillery professionals down to the South Korean Field Artillery School. We got to just see their day-to-day life. Got to meet their commanding general for the school, I believe.

[Speaker 2]

Was that your first time out of the United States?

[Speaker 1]

No. In high school, I got to go to Ecuador for student exchange. I am the only person in my family that's really left Northeast Tennessee.

I love to go on adventures and indulge in new cultures and see new things.

[Speaker 2]

You were looking forward to getting to South Korea? You were excited to be there? Not really.

[Speaker 1]

It was awesome. I feel like I was too young to go because I did exactly what they told us not to do. The first six months, I got out and traveled.

I went down to Seoul. I went to Jeju Island. I miss their Korean barbecue so much.

My last six months, I started buying a bunch of cars here in the States. My dad would go pick them up. I didn't have money to travel.

I would sit in my room and play Xbox. Looking back, I kind of wish I would have done it differently, but I'm so passionate about cars and collecting cars. I loved it and still had a decent, pretty good time.

I did get to go to the DMZ, too. That was incredible. You know the UN buildings on the DMZ.

Inside those buildings, there's a table that divides North and South Korea. If you go on the other side of the table, you're technically in North Korea. I can say I've been in North Korea before.

That was a super cool experience. Any more questions about Korea?

[Speaker 2]

Yeah. Cars was kind of your connection with your parents back in Tennessee. You're serving over in South Korea, but you're buying cars or you're having your dad buy cars for you.

That's kind of connecting you with your family back here in Tennessee.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. My dad got tired of going to pick them up. Yeah.

Funny story about that. My dad tried and tried and tried to teach me how to drive a stick. Never could get it.

Well, our unit got a Kiabongo truck and it was a stick. I hadn't driven one in a couple years or tried in a couple years. My unit was like, hey, we just got this stick Kiabongo truck.

We need somebody to drive it. I raised my hand and that was where I learned how to drive a stick. I had to make myself learn how to drive it.

Man, I drove that thing. I got to drive that thing all over. Well, I wouldn't say all over Korea, but I remember one time being in that headquarter unit.

There was a unit there that was on a training exercise and they weren't doing what they're supposed to. I get a call and they're like, hey, brigade commander's going out there. We need you to load the truck up and take him a tent, set it up.

I got to drive that Bongo truck to the east coast of South Korea. Gorgeous. Korea is beautiful.

That's where I perfected my driving of a stick. Every single car I have now is a stick except for my Falcon. What else?

[Speaker 2]

After this deployment to South Korea, what's after South Korea? How long were you in South Korea and then what's next?

[Speaker 1]

I was there for a year. While I was there, I still want a combat MLS. I made friends with the career counselor there.

He put together a voluntary reclass packet for me. I think it needed two different signatures. Well, my branch, I can't remember the name, but the guy that runs my branch did the first signature because they put me on orders to Fort Bliss.

This is the second time I've dodged Fort Bliss. When I went to MIPS for my conditional release, they said you can either go to Fort Bliss or South Korea. Fort Bliss was one of the one places I never wanted to go.

[Speaker 2]

When you're at Chattanooga, they offered you Fort Bliss, and you're like, no. Now you're in South Korea, and they're bringing up Fort Bliss again. It's like saying, no, so what happened?

[Speaker 1]

They canceled my orders to Fort Bliss. Then a week later, they put me on orders to Fort Bragg. All I need is that one signature to reclass.

Since they put me on orders to Bragg, they canceled that reclass. I was like, you know what? I'm not going to fight this.

I want to go to Fort Bragg. I'm close to Tennessee. I'm close to home.

This is my ticket to airborne school. Went to Fort Bragg to the 82nd Sustainment Brigade. It was the rigor unit.

I can't remember the actual name of it. Went to the rigor unit. There's two different rigor units.

There's one for heavy equipment and then one for regular parachutes. I went to the one where they pack parachutes for the paratroopers. I go there as a mechanic.

[Speaker 2]

What year is this at Fort Bragg?

[Speaker 1]

This is February of 2017, I believe. I get there. I'm there February.

If you go to that unit, the only way you jump is if you're on the command team or you're a rigor. Everybody else in the Sustainment Brigade is not airborne qualified. About halfway through, they start offering airborne to the higher performers within the brigade.

I was selected to go to airborne school. I'm so excited. I go to airborne school in September.

[Speaker 2]

What was it about the airborne school that got you excited? Most folks don't want to jump out of a perfectly good airplane.

[Speaker 1]

I love danger and excitement. I wanted to go do the coolest stuff in the military. I go to airborne school.

I don't think I've ever seen my mom more proud to pin on those wings. I went to airborne school. Get back.

They won't let me jump. I've got to be on airborne orders. I offered to jump for free.

I still couldn't do it. Shortly after I get my P status, promotable status, and then I think I pick up E-5 around February, March.

[Speaker 2]
2018?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, I think. Yeah, about that. Then they sent me down to the 249th Composite Supply Company.

That's where I got my E-5.

SaylorTranscript2

I'm going to be made the, as a 24 year old sergeant, the motor sergeant and platoon sergeant for one of the platoons. I can't remember which platoon. Now that's a big deal.

Yeah. But you're not jumping out of airplanes. No, I'm still not jumping out of airplanes.

So how did you feel about that? At that time were you a little upset about not getting to be jumping out of airplanes or are you looking forward to this next gig? It's a, it's a, it was a great opportunity. So I was going to take it, but yeah, get more into that here in a second. So go down there.

The, the units deployed to Iraq. So I'm rear detachment or rear D and they left me a mess. I, I, this is a guesstimation, but I inherited about \$70 million worth of equipment.

I've got anything from a Humvee to a fuel, fueler like fuel truck, um, lads, which the lads was the, um, laundry trailer that they take out to do laundry. I mean, it was, it was a mess. I had a seven page ESR, which is the equipment status report.

Well, I've got the rear detachment mechanics and about, I don't know, maybe 30, 30 people under me and from March till about to August and that time we were able to get that ESR down from seven pages to three. Um, it was, it was, it was a good time, great experience. And then in that meantime, and between then, I don't remember when, but got a wild hair and went down to the career counselor's office again.

And they offered me \$40,000 bonus hotel eight school, which is vehicle recovery school. Um, and six years of the army. I'm like, sign me up.

I'll take that 40 K. And I figured in the meantime, I'll just work with my first sergeant at the time and he can maybe help me get over to an airborne unit to get jumped because they're, they always needed jumpers. And you're still thinking about that as a possibility. Yeah.

And well, they put me on orders to Fort Drum, New York. That was the number one place I never wanted to go. They send people from Alaska to Fort Drum for cold weather training.

I don't do, I don't do cold weather training and not the biggest fan of the North either. Um, so at that same time, the army was building the security force assistance brigade or SFAB and at Fort Bragg, they had already built first SFAB pretty early. They may have still been building first SFAB, but I wanted to stay at Fort Bragg.

Well, I, uh, I went, I told them, they thought I was absolutely crazy. I told them, I don't, I'm not, I do not want to go to Fort Drum. And they, uh, they were offering like, if you got selected, you for SFAB, you didn't, you could cancel your orders or whatnot.

Well, went to selection for second SFAB and was selected for second, second SFAB at Fort Bragg. I had to give them that \$40,000 back, Hotel A school and stuck for six more years still. But that was one of the greatest decisions of my life.

And I still wanted to go do all the cool guy stuff. I tried twice to get a combat MOS. Um, actually before I went to re-enlist for that big deal they gave me, um, I tried to re-enlist as a cavalry scout.

I wanted infantry, but cavalry scout, well, there was some time in service stuff that didn't work out. And, um, God, God was doing, I didn't understand at the time, but God was doing some amazing things that like I said, I just didn't understand. So this is 2018, 2018.

Yup. Yup. And so, um, I get selected.

I'm so excited. I'm going to go to one of the, the cat teams. I can't remember what cats it's either company advisor team or combat advisor.

I can't remember. But so I waited forever. I was miserable in, in that waiting for my orders because I was, uh, I wasn't a motor sergeant anymore or platoon sergeant because I was leaving.

So they put somebody else there. You're at Fort Bragg and just kind of figuring things out in 2018. Yup.

And wondering what's next. Yup. Yup.

And so before I go, they finally send me my orders and where I'm going, put me on a logistics advisor team. I was not the happiest cause I didn't want to go to one of the, um, other battalions and, but you got to do what the army tells you to do. So August, I think it was August 31st, I reported to second S fab and I report to my company and battalion and I'm the maintenance advisor for lat or logistics advisor team 2612.

My company was lac or logistics advisor company 2610. Um, and report there and get started. Um, my team sergeant saw first class Williams.

He should be starting major. Now this leader I've ever had. Um, I love my team.

I loved my company. Um, and we are getting ready. We are first S fab I believe is already in Afghanistan and we are going to replace them around March, April of 2019.

Yup. So, um, we do all of our training and. Then you got to be excited that you're going overseas.

So excited. That's all I wanted. Getting that deployment that you wanted.

Yeah. That's all I ever wanted was, was the, because I, I, I remember when 9 11 happened, um, I was in first grade and I remember my teacher just coming in, freaking out and I, and we didn't know what was going on. A lot of us were freaking out.

Yeah. And, um, as I got older and learned everything, like I knew I wanted to do that. So, um, I'm so excited to go over there and about March, my team gets told, we don't have a mission for you yet.

And then April comes around and all right, we got you guys a mission. Did your family know about the first chance that you could get deployed? Yeah. They didn't want me to go.

They, they were not about it. Um, but at this time, like I'm an E five, I had made E five within my time's messed up like on paper. Um, cause they don't give you all your time from the reserves when you go active and within like two and a half, three years, I had already made E five.

I think that was about it. And what do you attribute that to? Do you think it's cause you kept going to the career people and saying, I want to do something? No, I was, I was motivated. Like I loved what I did.

I love being in the military. Um, uh, do not quit. I do not quit whatsoever.

Um, and I always do my best and try my best to be a leader. Uh, I'm not perfect. I'm not the perfect leader whatsoever, but, um, and I learned from my mistakes and, uh, learned from the leaders that I had.

Um, but so April, 2019, my four man team, I deployed with Captain Morris, Sergeant first class Williams, Sergeant Perez and myself. And we deployed to fob lightning in Gardez, Afghanistan. Um, we fall in, we were there to train, advise and assist the Afghan national army specifically to a third core.

We were up at the core level. So when, obviously it had been 20 years since we, about 20 years since we had went in. Yeah.

A lot of people don't know how long the war on terror lasted and how long we've been in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yeah. And we're still in Iraq.

Obviously we're not in Afghanistan anymore. Um, so you get there in 2019, get there in 2019. And after, obviously after all the time we had taken over, they had changed from RC, which was, I can't remember what RC stood for, but they changed the mission set from like us doing it essentially to train, advise and assist.

People's to do it themselves, to withdraw American soldiers as we had in previous conflicts, including Vietnam. Yeah. And, um, we, uh, we had our government set up their military essentially very, very similar to ours.

So when company battalion brigade and core, their core was similar to our division. So I was, my mission was to train an Afghan colonel and major on running their maintenance operations. So I never did touch any of the trucks or anything.

It was more, I don't want to say strategic level, but it was more, I wasn't on the ground with their mechanics, but, um, major pursuing, I cannot remember the colonel's name. I love major pursuing. He was awesome.

Um, and so we get there and I fall in on somebody that's already there, been built a relationship and whatnot with major pursuing and the, the colonel. And then the guy fell in on, he was at E-7. I'm a 20, I'm still 24 year old sergeant at this level, like working with five, 10, maybe 15 different NATO countries.

Um, and just taking it all in. I, I got a two letters of recommendation and in one of those letters of recommendation said that it was a major slide. So I'm working at a very high level, like I've got to lock in.

So. Were you excited about that? Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Oh yeah. I mean, I, I grew up real fast. And, um, I am sitting in the task force southeast meeting, briefing as an E-5, briefing a full bird colonel on our, um, progress we're making.

Now can I ask you to step back a little bit? Okay. Yeah, I'm going to ask you a political question. Okay.

But I want, I honestly want to know what you think about it. Something I've thought a lot about. Do you think the decision to train the Afghans to fight for themselves and then withdraw American forces was the right call? So, I, I. You can answer that however you want.

By knowing it. So, I obviously didn't see the whole picture. Um, I do know that, I mean, between my team and I and the other teams we were working with in that region, we made great progress, I think.

Um, a lot of people may disagree with me because, like I said, I didn't see the whole picture. But I feel like if, because we started the, to my knowledge, correct me if I'm wrong, anybody out there that sees this, um, we started the training mission well before SFAT was created. They, they had advisors out there.

But I, I don't know. I kind of feel like if we would have left advisors in there and our SF, it could have gone another way. I don't know.

I don't, I don't want to create any problem whatsoever. I just know what I saw, um, and, yeah, I guess. I don't know.

You're in there, you're doing good work, and you feel like they're good partners and you're working hard with them to get them trained up? Yeah, some of them, I mean, a lot of the, especially the high-ranking Afghans were great, great partners to work with. They wanted us there. They wanted our help.

And then some, some, some of the Afghans just wanted us to do it for them. And that was because we were doing it for them for 20 years. Um, and then some, some, a lot of the, so the lower enlisted Afghans, they, there was so much logistical nightmares within their... Existing infrastructure.

Yeah. Um, and honestly, the, the logistics, as in like supplies, stuff like that, was like terrible getting them that stuff. Because they were, I remember there were some Afghans that didn't want to go on some of those missions because they were so dangerous for them.

Um, does that answer your question? Yeah. Yeah. Any way you wanted to answer.

I mean, you're, you know, at the time, you're a young man and you're in, in Afghanistan really towards the end of the war on terror. And, um, you see these opportunities, you have good partners, you got your mission and you're getting after it. Yeah.

Yeah. And, but so halfway through the guy that I was working with, that was, we were both the maintenance advisors for task force Southeast, he leaves. I'm the last, I'm the only one there.

So as a 24 year old sergeant, uh, I turned 25 while I was over there. If, if I got my birth dates right. Did your dad get you or did you get a car while you were over there for your birthday? I think I did buy a car while I was.

Oh, I did. I bought me, I bought me a 2017 empty 54. I left my daddy.

Still connecting you back to Tennessee. All these cars. Yep.

Yeah. Um, and I took over the head maintenance advisor position. Um, so I am facilitating these meetings with NATO officials, um, running the advising operations for maintenance.

And there was one of the cat teams that was at the brigade level that fell under us. Um, major for NAFRA at the time. Now Lieutenant Colonel, he is another just awesome guy.

Like I've, I've kept in touch with him since, um, uh, I get to it, but I was an instructor at UTC, uh, ROTC instructor at UTC, um, in 2023, but, uh, he, he came up and did our speech for the ball, but he is awesome. He was one of the guys that wrote me the letter of recommendation. Um, I went down to help his team and Gosney at fall Sultan.

Um, that was, that was awesome. Um, and that's where I earned my cab. Um, uh, and it was, it was incredible experience down there working with him.

Um, but they, I had to go, I had to go back up to fog lightning because they didn't have an advisor up there. I spent about two weeks, no, three, maybe three weeks down there to help them out. Um, and then get back, uh, get back to it.

And at this time I am now I briefed, I can general Tingy. He was, uh, the British one star. That was the commander for task force Southeast.

I believe I'm bringing him. I'm like 24, 25 at this point, briefing a British one star general on, on that, um, on the advising operation.

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How do you compare your deployment to Afghanistan to South Korea, night and day different? Oh yeah, South Korea was a duty station and night and day, like obviously in Afghanistan you can't just go outside of the wire. In South Korea you can get weekends off, what not, you can go travel, do whatever you want to do. You can take that truck across the country.

A lot of people think I'm crazy, but I loved Afghanistan. I loved being over there. That was such a rewarding job.

Was it the job, was it the people, was it the country? What was it about Afghanistan you loved? Afghanistan is beautiful. Unfortunately it's war torn, but their food is so good. I mean, we built, I built impeccable relationships with my partners.

They would cook for me. One of the meetings I had, they put on a huge spread for us and I remember, and we always talked through interpreters, but one of them was like, yeah man, we went out and we bought this lamb last night and butchered it this morning, like it was fresh. I loved the food over there, such good food.

The experience getting to see how they live day-to-day lives, it's very humbling to seeing going from the United States and being as blessed as I am here and seeing that and building relationships with the other service members that I served with, like still keeping in touch with them this day and going through what we went through together, like that's a true bond. And the challenges of punching above your weight class and doing things that you didn't think you would be doing over in Afghanistan. So, what's next then? Do you come back to the United States? Yep, so after deployment we come back.

So I was over there, I was going out every day, almost. I'd say like the last couple months, there was, I can't remember if it was green on blue or blue on green, there was an incident where somewhere within the country there was an attack. So they got a lot stricter on going out because like when I was there, well before that attack, like all I had to do was, hey, I'm going out to see my partner, go get your security team, we're going out at this time.

And then after that they made us start riding in vehicles. Everywhere we went we had to do a big presentation on what we're doing and whatnot. So, but before that I was walking, like I would put in probably two, three miles every day, wearing my body armor and everything.

So that had a toll on my body and when I got back I started having back and knee problems. So, we, they had started regionally aligning the SFABs. There was, I think they just recently shut down one SFAB, but at the time there was six SFABs, five active duty and one National Guard, and they had regionally aligned second SFAB with Africa or AFRICOM, I think that's what it's called.

And we were going somewhere in Africa to train them on their, I think, I don't know, it changed so many times. At one point it was like Senegal, because we gave, our government gave them a couple of our vehicles and we were going to train them on that. But it changed so many times, I never made it or went because... Because of the physical issues, yeah.

So, I just, I started going to the doctor and then when I got back, we got back in December of 2019, and then I started going to the doctor about my knees and back. And then about September, everything really hit me and I really started struggling with not only physical pain. So, I don't know if I really want to talk about the mental stuff.

Yeah, because you had always wanted to fight, you had always wanted to do the cool guy stuff, like you said, and, you know, get hit with something that's beyond your control. But I wouldn't trade it for the world. I'm like, I loved it.

But I started, I struggled and we, so December of 2020, I had my first knee surgery. My, I had a 50% torn ACL, fluid under the kneecap, torn meniscus, and a lateral release. So, I was out for a while.

And then, God, that was a nightmare trying to get all that because it eventually happened. And then, I think it was January 21. They only wanted to talk about my knees for like a year.

They wouldn't look at my back. So, about a year later, I go in to see the doctor for my back, and it's a Duke spine doctor. That appointment lasts about six, seven minutes.

He walks in and he's like, dude, your back is way worse for a 26-year-old than what it needs to be. And they recommended me for medical discharge. And that process took about six to eight, about eight months, because that was about January.

And then... Do you want to give any advice to any other people maybe who are serving and going through that? Go to the doctor, always. Go to the doctor for everything. You feel there's a problem? Yeah, yeah, because I'm the type of person, I do not go to the doctor.

You're speaking to other people who are just like you, too. They're not going to go. Go get that stuff documented for when you do get out and get your VA.

And then, so... August 6th, I start my terminal leave, and I move back to Jefferson City. And that was when the real fight started. Because you're out of the military at that point.

This is 2022? No, 2021. 2021. I am just a huge advocate for transitioning veterans.

It is one of the hardest things you ever do. Unfortunately, we have 22 veterans a day that take their life because they can't get the help they need. And it is so hard to become a civilian after you've seen and done all those things.

Been mission-focused for years. Mission-focused. Years, yep.

And that is... It's definitely a lifestyle, but it's something very hard to leave, because that's what you've known. And I think what's the craziest, like 1% of Americans serve, or 30%, or something like that. It's hard to find people that understand.

Yeah. So, ever since I got out, I've tried to make it my life's mission to help other veterans. And anybody that needs that.

And I'll tell you about some of the stuff I want to do before we end. Do you want to talk about ROTC at Chattanooga? Yeah. Well, that comes a little bit later.

Gotcha. So, I get out, and I move to Jefferson City for a little bit. One of the worst things I did was not take a break.

August 6th, my last day in uniform. August 9th, I'm at a welding job that I took. I thought I had it all figured out.

I didn't. And just to talk about how God works in amazing ways. Like I said, my whole life I wanted to go do all that cool guy stuff and whatnot.

Well, I am so glad I was put on that logistics advisor team, because that paved the way for my future. I loved it. I love logistics.

I love supply chain. That's what I go to UT for now, is supply chain. But I didn't know that at the time.

And we never know in the moment what God's doing until later on. So, I get out, I lasted. I went through probably seven jobs once I got out.

Because I just couldn't take it. But I lived in Jefferson City from about August 21 to February of 22. And your family's still there.

Yeah, my family's in Johnson City, Bristol-Kingsport area. And they're still supporting you through all this. Yep.

And I went through two jobs. And then I was like, okay, I'm going to take a break. One of the biggest outside of cars for me, like my sanctuary, is being in the woods and hunting.

So, I just stopped, took a break, and I spent all of November and December deer hunting. Being in the woods is where I found my sanctuary. Peace and just reflection and whatnot.

So, I think I, yeah. Well, regardless, about January, my apartment complex, I think I'm a handy guy. I can fix just about anything.

They asked me to come do maintenance. So, I did that. And I just was not where I needed to be.

So, I moved to Chattanooga in February of 22. With the eye of getting involved with the ROTC program, or did that just come later? That came later. So, a bunch of my fraternity brothers from when I went to UTC worked for STEAM Logistics.

And that's where I figured out I want to be in supply chain and logistics. I loved it. They helped me get on to STEAM Logistics, and I worked there for about a little over a year.

And I left. It was very taxing. I built some impeccable relationships through my partners that I made there.

I loved it, but I got my experience there. I left, and then the ROTC position opened for a civilian at UTC, and I jumped right on it. I taught the sophomores.

And this is about a ten-year gap from when I was in ROTC there up until now. It was a world of difference. I love being an example to the younger generation.

Was it different for you, John, or the program itself was different than when you were in it? A little bit of both. So, when I was there, it seemed like everybody wanted infantry. And go do all that.

Now, it seems like, now that we're not in much wartime, ideas have changed. And that's totally fine. I went into the military, I feel like the mindset has changed drastically since I went in.

But I loved that job. That made me realize that someday I want to come back to UT and be a professor here. That's where I found my love for teaching.

I've always loved teaching, but I didn't realize it. And making an impact on young people and being a leader and building them in. I still talk to some of my students, some of my students still reach out to me to this day.

And it's so rewarding being able to build this nation's future leaders. I loved it. But I did that for about a year.

Sorry, any more questions? No, I think you're going to talk about them transitioning to the University of Tennessee, getting your degree, and the big goal, the dream of putting together the garage for the veterans. Yeah, of course. It was just like a contract that I was filling in for a guy that was in the Guard that deployed.

So then I left the ROTC position and took some time to remodel my house and whatnot. At the time, I had a beautiful place, man. I had six acres, huge house, three-car garage.

I was going to say, probably a big garage. Yeah, man, I had my own gun range at my house. I remember I killed the second biggest buck of my life in Crocs and Ranger panties.

Funny story, I loved it there. Then I went to go work for a hot rod shop right down the street from me. After I took that time off, it was awesome.

I learned a lot, but I just wasn't making the money. Then I went to work for Covenant Logistics or Covenant Transport. Great company to work for.

I mean, they were awesome. But I just wasn't fulfilled. I want one of my goals.

I want to go be a global supply chain manager somewhere, gain that experience, come here, teach, and then eventually open up my speed shop. Yeah, talk about that speed shop, too. All that takes time.

I worked for Covenant Transport for a couple months. Then about, I'd say, November or December of 2004, I started doing the math. I really realized my worth.

Even though I had all this experience from Afghanistan, I kept getting picked over for jobs that I wanted to transition to. Because I want to be the most well-rounded, knowledgeable logistician I can be. So I applied to the University of Tennessee.

This is my favorite place on the face of the earth. I'm like the biggest Tennessee fan you'll ever meet. Go Vols.

Go Vols. I got accepted and sold my place in Chattanooga. Moved here in April.

Started school in the summer. I knew this is what I wanted to do. I wanted to come get my degree in supply chain.

We have one of, if not the top, supply chain program in the world. I'm coming to my favorite place on earth. I get to bear the torch.

I get to be of all. What more can you ask for? You want more. You have this big dream, John, of establishing this speed shop.

Yes. I'll get a speed shop. As I mentioned earlier, I love cars.

I have found sanctuary in cars and hunting. I've had over 30 cars in my life. I turn 31 next week.

It's just in my family's blood. I've owned three and I'm 48. My dad's had over 100.

My great-grandfather was known to trade cars three times a week. I just know anytime when I'm down, I go hop in one of my hot rods. I've never seen anybody with a frown on their face driving a hot rod.

I'm a huge advocate for helping veterans. Make that transition from serving and being mission-focused to civilian life. I want to someday, after I've retired and I've made my money, open Sarge's Speed Shop.

I want to bring veterans together through cars. Not only through cars, just bring veterans together. Just find them the help they need.

Me and one of my other buddies, we want to start our own foundation. School's gotten in the way of that. We put it on the back burner.

You see the Tunnel to Towers building houses for veterans. I want to build cars for veterans. I want to employ veterans and bring them together and give them purpose.

When you get out of the military, I didn't realize it, but I lost my purpose. I had purpose. I'm finally finding it again, especially here at UT.

I've made some incredible friends, met some incredible people. I get to fellowship with other veterans and hopefully make an impact on them. I want to do whatever I can for veterans.

I have recently purchased that Shelby GT500. It's a super rare car, one of 17 built. Anyone that wants to donate and use it for pictures or whatnot, I either want to take that money and donate it back to a veteran organization or back to the school.

Just to raise awareness for our veterans that need help. If anybody out there is interested in using that Shelby and giving to a good cause, I encourage you to reach out to John. Of course.

I love it here. I just want any veteran out there to know that you are loved. There is support out there for you.

Do not be afraid to reach out for help. Anyone that knows a veteran, please. You don't know how much just a simple phone call or talking to them can mean to them.

Give them purpose. You always want to keep them in mind, if you will. One thing we hope comes out of stories like this is that veterans who are watching it feel like they're not alone out there.

If you have a heart for veterans like John and want to get in contact with him, the Center is happy to facilitate that. If you believe in his mission of starting up this speed shop for veterans, I hope you will reach out and contact him. Awesome.

John, anything else you want to say about your military service to close things up? Looking back? I don't. I've loved every second of it. I just cannot stress enough that there is hope out there.

Don't give up. I'll always believe and trust in God. You never know what He's doing.

I didn't know. Now, looking back, God has led me to where He wants me to be. You're right where you need to be.

Thank you, John. I appreciate you telling our story. Thank you all for listening.

Awesome.