

Borne the Battle

Episode # 247

Irreverent Warriors

<https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/90336/borne-battle-247-irreverent-warriors/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Music

[00:00:02] Opening Monologue:

Tanner Iskra: Oh, let's get it. Monday, June 21st, 2021. Borne the Battle, brought to you by the US Department of Veterans Affairs. The podcast that focuses on inspiring Veteran stories and puts a highlight on important resources, offices, and benefits for our Veterans. I am your host, Marine Corps Veteran Tanner Iskra. Wherever and however you're listening to Borne the Battle, be it Apple Podcasts, Spotify, iTunes, iHeartRadio, the player inside the blog, hope you're having a good time this week outside of Podcast Land. Personally, I'm doing all right. So, I hate going to the doctor, right? My wife, my ride or die, she says I need to go. I only really go if something is obviously wrong with me. Probably not the best practice, but that's just me. So, I did make a VA appointment recently. I went in there, and then they mentioned that, "Hey, you know, we asked you back in 2019 to come in and do some blood work and you never showed up. The lab is open. So, let's get in there." So, I went in and I remember my wife wanted certain blood test results done on me anyways. So, I went into the blood draw area and I asked the lady there who takes my blood if they can add certain tests to the order, like in the draw blood draw area. Like, as they're drawing my blood, I'm asking for extra tests. I have no idea what I'm asking for. I'm just reading the text message from the wife. They had another lady come in as well to figure out and double check to make sure I got the orders I'm requesting, make sure they got them right. Point being, the Fredericksburg Virginia CBOC could not have been more accommodating there in that blood work room to make sure that I got what I needed, so shout out to them. Couple ratings this week. Also, a new review came in, kind of falls in line with most of the feedback that we got from episode 245. This one is from AmyVACLO. I think VALCO is a VA clinic, right? Amy, you're just gonna have to email me at podcast@va.gov and tell me. It says, "Five stars. Love this podcast. And episode 245 - proud to work at VA, recognizing work-like Josh Seefried's and celebrating PRIDE

month." Absolutely. Amy, before my talk with Josh, I did not know that an unintended consequence of "Don't Ask Don't Tell," and I guess this happened frequently, was blackmail for sexual favors. "If you don't do X, I'm going to 'out' you." Something that I had never even considered. I'm glad that Josh was one of our service members to say, "Enough was enough," and "Let's just get it repealed." Glad to have that opportunity to bring that conversation to you during Pride Month. And thank you again to Josh for sharing it. Again, please feel free to get on Apple Podcasts just as Amy did and leave a review. Doing so helps us climb higher in the algorithms and gives more Veterans the better opportunity to discover and listen to the interviews, our benefits breakdown episodes, and discover what's in the news releases provided in each episode. Speaking of news releases I got two, and I'll touch base with one that's out there, one quick one. The quick one is that retired US Army Major General Dr. Stone is stepping down as Acting Under Secretary for Health. Serving since the last administration, he is stepping down to ensure that the incoming Under Secretary can fully assume leadership of the Veterans Health Administration, that's in charge of all the health in VA. Dr. Stone is leaving in July, and Secretary McDonough put out a statement thanking him and wishing him the best in his future endeavors, and we also wish him the best as well. Ok. The first big one says, "For immediate Release: The US Department of Veterans Affairs recently hosted the 2021 Minority Summit: The Power of Collaborating with VA on June 9 to strengthen and expand its relationships with minority-serving colleges, universities and medical school schools, and professional organizations. The Office of Academic Affiliations hosted more than 700 participants in a collaborative effort to increase academic affiliations with minority serving institutions to create a more diverse cadre of health professions trainees to learn and care for Veteran patients at VA. Summit discussions centered around affiliation, scholarship, and research opportunities available through the Department of Veterans Affairs. The Veterans Health Administration is the largest education and training program for health professionals in the US working with 97% of the countries and medical schools and more than 1,800 universities and colleges. Each year, over 120,000 trainees and over 40 clinical health profession education programs, including nearly 20,000 students from minority serving institutions, train in a VA facility. Approximately 70% of the country's physicians have participated in training at the department. To learn more about VA's mission of training healthcare professionals go to

www.va.gov/oa [Link: va.gov/oa].” Okay, and the last one says, “For immediate release: The US Department of Veterans Affairs is partnering with Salesforce to offer programs that will help Veterans and spouses develop skills and employment options in a tech-driven economy. The partnership will build on existing programs and add new ones, offering free technical skills training, career development and Veteran-specific resources in a variety of programs, including: VetSuccess on Campus, Veterans Opportunity to Work, the Hiring our Heroes Fellowships, and the Trailhead Military Program.” And there are links to each of these programs in the press release. So I'll provide a link to the news release at the bottom of this episode's blog on blogs.va.gov so you can check them out [Link: va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5682]. “The program includes a virtual, self-paced skills training and opportunities to take Salesforce certificate exams at no cost. Salesforce will help program participants connect with potential employers. The initiative will also educate Veterans and their spouses about VA benefits, vocational readiness programs and other resources. For more information, visit va.gov/healthpartnerships [Link: va.gov/healthpartnerships].” And that last part is all one word. All right. So, it is not only Pride Month. It is also PTSD Awareness Month. And I guess you would call it a symptom of PTSD for some, for many actually is suicidal ideation. Our guests this week are looking to bring Veterans together using humor and camaraderie to improve mental health and prevent Veteran suicide. They are Texas National Guard Veteran Cindy McNally and Marine Veteran, Nate MacDonald, the president and vice president of Irreverent Warriors, which put on silkies hikes all around the country. Enjoy.

[00:06:59] Music

[00:07:04] Interview:

Tanner Iskra (TI): President, Vice-President of Irreverent Warriors. Very thankful to have you both on the same time. Cindy, National Guard Veteran in your own right, but you're a military spouse, a widow as well. The second part of VA's motto calls on us to care for the widows and the orphans that have Borne the Battle. My predecessor, Bonnie—or my predecessor interviewed Bonnie Carroll from TAPS within like—

Cindy McNally (CM): Yes.

(TI): —the first hundred episodes of Borne the Battle.

(CM): She's amazing.

(TI): She is a very well-documented widow of a Veteran who died in a military accident, and it was the incident behind her starting TAPS. And Transition Assistance Program for Survivors has done so much for military surviving spouses and sons and daughters of the fallen service members. I say all that to say this, sometimes to tell the service member story the only way is to talk to their spouse. So please tell me the story of how you became so ingrained in this community.

(CM): Well, it started out with Rand and I met in the gym. And he was just an amazing, bigger than life guy, very driven, very, like I said, just bigger than life. He—everybody knew who Rand McNally was. And we had an amazing family. We had three kids, but Rand was tormented. He had his demons that he struggled with for years and years. We tried everything, family counseling, one-on-one counseling, his counseling, my counseling. We tried it all, medication, and he just wasn't able to overcome his demons here. And so, it was in 2007 that he ended that permanently with a single gunshot wound to the head. And, well, I guess you couldn't do more than that. [Laughter]

(TI): Yeah.

Nate McDonald: (NM): You can, but you're a bad shot.

All: [Laughter]

(NM): That's Irreverent Warriors—I don't know what to say.

All: [Laughter]

(CM): Yeah. But Stephanie, my daughter, was downrange at the time. She was active duty, and my other two kids were—

(TI): They were at the house when it happened?

(CM): No, he was somewhere else. He was somewhere else.

(TI): Okay.

(CM): And the unfortunate thing is that he didn't take his demons with him. He left them behind for my kids. And we've been struggling ever since.

(TI): Sorry to hear that. So, your husband Rand was a Marine Corps Veteran, correct?

(CM): He graduated the Naval Academy in class of '76. Went to BUD/S, washed out, and was in the hospital when the Marine Corps liaison came in. And the Navy wouldn't let him fly fighters, which is why he went to BUD/S. But the Marine Corps came in and said they'd let him fly fighters. So, he switched from Navy to Marine Corps right there.

(TI): I got a job for you.

(NM): They're like get up. Let's go.

(TI): Outstanding. Sounds very Marine Corps. For me it was I walked out of the Air Force dejected cause I had a speeding ticket and walked out of the recruiters, and my recruiter, my Marine Corps recruiter, was like, "I got a job for you. Don't worry about you. And I'll pay your tickets too."

All: [Laughter]

(TI): Yeah. That's how we take care of our own, right. And that's certainly on the brotherhood and all that. Yeah. So, you mentioned demons being left behind. What demons were left behind for you and your children?

(CM): Well, we have struggled as a family, but each kid has addictions is the biggie. But I think if you were to go to the self-help section of the library and pull out any book, my family, my three kids and I, have lived at least one chapter of every book that you could pull out of that self-help section of the library. We've dealt with everything from substance abuse to marriage problems to financial problems. They've all been diagnosed with various mental health issues depending on the therapist are seeing at the time, which is crazy in itself. So, we have struggled. I will say, it's—all three kids are now moving in the right direction and it's been a decade. So, we're over a decade. So, we are all—we came together like a pack. We're moving forward, but we will always—we will never feel at peace. We know that we will always be in recovery mode, and you just have to hold each other accountable and be there for each other. And that's kind of what brought me into Irreverent Warriors.

(TI): Gotcha. So, what you're saying is suicide did not solve anything for anybody in that situation?

(CM): No, it did not. And one of the things that people don't think about when they're entertaining this thought is the wake of destruction they leave behind. Financial is a huge one because unless your family finances are in order, that family they're gonna be

devastated. So, there's always the financial issues. Of course, there's the emotional issues. And then, you know, just to be really raw about things, who's going to clean up that mess? They don't think about those things. And it's usually your family that walks in, and you don't recover from that.

(NM): Yeah. It's amazing to think that in so many cases when a Veteran or anyone commits suicide, they have in their brains this idea that they're making an unselfish act happen, that they're saving their family or someone else from having to deal with their problems. And they don't realize, like Cindy was saying, all the backlash of that, the aftereffects, and just the emotional toll itself, even if the finances and everything else are in line, that's not something you come back from unscathed. There's trauma there.

(TI): Yeah.

(CM): There's trauma in, you know, for example, my son, at the time he was a cross country skier. He was a tri-state champion, junior Olympic champion. Rand was just, when Rand died, he was getting full scholarship offers as a freshman in high school. When Randy died, he hung up his skis. Hasn't put a ski on since. So, not only did he not go to college on a scholarship, he ended up going to the Army instead.

All: [Laughter]

(TI): Oh, man. Changed his trajectory.

(NM): He could've joined Marine Corps. We don't, we don't even know.

(TI): Nate, when did you know that the Marine Corps was going to be the next phase in your life?

(NM): Oh, that's a funny question, actually. So, I grew up around—

(TI): It's usually funny for most of us.

All: [Laughter]

(NM): I know, right? So, I grew up in a very conservative family. Most of my relatives were very respectful of the military, but very few had actually done anything with it. I think a few reservists, but my grandfather, who was a profound impact on my life without me knowing it at the time. I was very young. He served in World War II as a half-track commander. And anytime his service came up, anytime he talked about his service, it was this glowing pride. He didn't share war stories or, "Oh, I did so many amazing things." It

was just this sense of pride that he kind of communicated just with his countenance when he talked about “I served.” And it was such an amazing thing. And that was something I wanted to be a part of. I wanted to serve my country and then have that sense of pride having known that I did the thing. So, that's where it started. And then I graduated early, went to college, went to dive school, police dive school, and then was a dive master for a recreational dive company for a little bit. And I was like—

(TI): This was after you got out?

(NM): What's up?

(TI): This is after you got out?

(NM): No way before.

(TI): Oh, wow. Wow. Okay.

(NM): And then I was like, if I keep this up, I am going to be a beach bum. Like that's what's going to happen cause I love diving. I love the beach. This is amazing. And there was that sense of if I don't do this now, I'm never going to do it and I'll regret it for the rest of my life. So, I went to this little recruiting station in a strip mall in Baraboo, Wisconsin. And once again, no intelligence on what happens with recruiting side of things or how the military works. And I was like, they're all in one stop. It was like the Air Force, the Army, the Marine Corps, the Navy. And I was like, I'm going to get them all. This is fantastic.

All: [Laughter]

(TI): I'm going to do a tour of each.

(NM): So, I went down there. I did. So, I went down that went down the entire strip mall, walked in one, talked to him for a bit, walked in the other, talked to him for a bit. And long story short, the Marine Corps was the only one that was like, “Hey man, we're not going to try to sell you on anything. You're put together, you have college, you know what you want to do for the most part. But if you want to be a part of something special, we got you, boo, but you got to want it.” And I was like, “Ah, you got me.” So, I went home, and I presented all of this to my parents because, you know, that's the way I roll. “All right. Air Force does this. And Navy does this. And Marine Corps does this.” The whole time knowing I was going to join the Marine Corps the whole time. And by the end of it, my parents looked at me and they said, we trust you to make the right choice for you. So,

from then on, it was trying to figure out what I wanted to do in the Marine Corps and make it happen.

(TI): My recruiter—I made it like a matrix of all the four services and like a 10 point system. Like I analyzed the crap out of it. And he was like, can I—I showed him my paperwork. I was up late at night thinking about like, you know—I had like categories, like, who would I want next to me in a foxhole? Like, you know what I mean? Like I'm like 18 years old thinking this stuff. Iraq hasn't even kicked off. It was kicked off when I was in the delayed entry program. But he saw this paper, and he's like, "Can I keep this? Like, I want this." He still has it to this day. And, of course everything was like a 10 on the Marine Corps. side

(NM): I feel like had I done the graph and chart and cost and benefits and all of that, I may have been swayed even slightly away from the Marine Corps. But, yeah, it's a passionate decision. You just do it.

(TI): Right. Okay. So how long were you in? I know you got out in 2012.

(NM): I did. Yeah, I was in four or five years, total of just barely over five years.

(TI): Okay. While you were in, give me either a best friend or your greatest mentor.

(NM): So, I did this thing where I worked with a lot of teams all over the Marine Corps, especially once I got into the mix of things. As soon as I was through a school, joined special projects, I would integrate with a team and deploy and rinse and repeat over and over and over and over. So, operations never stopped.

(TI): What was your MLS? What'd you do?

(NM): 2621 Intelligence Ground Warfare.

(TI): Okay. Interesting.

(NM): Yeah, I thought so too at the time.

All: [Laughter]

(NM): No, an amazing thing that I didn't even know existed, but it was fantastic. It was a fantastic career. But because of that, I got to be exposed to a lot of different leadership styles, you know, a lot of different services, mostly the special forces community, but some conventional forces as well. And it was just such a mixing bowl. I got such a unique experience in the Marine Corps. But I'm going to say that my first mentor that really impacted me in the Marine

Corps was when I was—I had just gotten done with a school and I thought I was hot. I was great. I had everything put together and showed up to my school and had no idea what I was doing there. I showed up to Fort Meade, Maryland. And for everything I knew, that was where analysts go. Like people sit behind desks. And I was like, that's not why I joined the Marine Corps. This is messed up. So, I requested mast. Within days of arriving at my duty station, and I have since found out that's a great way to ingratiate yourself with your leadership.

All: [Laughter]

(NM): Turned out to be fantastic, but it meant I had to carry 160 pounds Commanding Officer Major Read up and down the obstacle course because that's how we train Marines. So, that was a great experience. But my platoon commander at the time was Gunny Scoggins. And he made that first initial, major impact in my career. And it was just with investment. Like he would still give you your rasher of what you earned anytime you messed up. But he would explain. He would take a moment to pull you aside and mentor you and teach you. And that little amount of effort, that emphasis on, "I'm going to invest in you because you matter." Suddenly, tables turned. And I was like, "All right, this isn't me having to obey, me having to listen to your mentorship. I want to make you proud. What you're saying makes sense because you're giving me a reason." And I've kind of mirrored that leadership style as much as I can in my life, trying to give people the reason behind what I'm saying.

(TI): So, why did you decide to get out in 2012?

(NM): I didn't really.

(TI): Okay.

(NM): I did it all the wrong way, honestly. I took a few TBIs during my service, and I was told that if I stayed in I was going to go strategic and not tactical. And I was not about that. That hurt my feelings in a big way. Pride is a huge thing, turns out. And at the time hearing you're not good enough, you're too broken. Obviously, this is what I was hearing in my head. You can't do what you want to do anymore. It broke me. And I was like, I can't be a part of the Marine Corps if it's not on my terms, like I want to do what I love to do. I want to do what I'm passionate about. I'm not going to just sit behind a desk for the rest of my career. So, rather than waiting for medical retirement or doing it the right way, I was like, "Oh, I'm out of here" and charged off into the horizon. And, yeah, I had to prove

something to myself after that. It was I need to prove to the Marine Corps and everyone around me that I'm still operational. So, that's when I went back as a civilian.

(TI): You went back and you went to contracting.

(NM): Mhmm.

(TI): Got you. How did that work out?

(NM): A much different experience. Very, very different. With operational side of contracting, once you're a part of an organization, a bigger thing it's different. But when you're a part of a civilian operational contractor side of that whole deal, you don't have that same comradery. You don't have the same connection. You haven't been through the same training.

(TI): Really?

(NM): You can, but it's tough to develop it. Because, you know, a lot of cases, you don't get integrated into a team and stick with it. You're a standalone capability. And they will plug you in wherever they can use you. So, it's really tough to feel that security in your team. And even the fact that in my Marine Corps career, I was plugged into a lot of different units. We had some sort of assemblance of workup, even if it was a few days. And I felt, personally, like we had a specific goal. I knew why I was out there. I knew why I was invested. And for a lot of that early contractor career, before I went back into the intelligence side of things, I felt like I was just there to earn money. I felt like a mercenary, and I was like, I don't want to die for this guy. I don't even know this guy.

(TI): Gotcha. Very good. Very good. Okay. So, two very unique places in life that you too came from. How did you both find your way? And we'll go with Cindy and then we'll go Nate. How did you both find your way to Irreverent Warriors and to what you're doing now?

(CM): I had heard about Irreverent Warriors back in 2015. And at the time my son was stationed at Fort Lewis, Washington, and Stephanie was at Fort Stewart in Georgia. And I just thought it would be a great idea. In January, there was a hike in Houston, and I live in the Austin area. So, I just called the kids and said, "Let's do this. You know, I'm not sure what it is, but it sounds like a good thing." So I brought the two kids in, and we did our first hike and we found our community. It was an amazing day and just the energy of having the two kids together and me being there and we just—there were so many other people just like us. And so, at the end of the day

Stephanie, my daughter said, we need to do a hike out in Savannah where she was stationed. And like, no, that's a lot of work. And she's like, "Yeah, we can do it". And so we did. We did our first hike and then it was a great height. And so, people were asking me to help them along the east coastline. And so, I started helping with hikes and then somehow Donny O'Malley found out what I was doing out there and asked me to come on and take over the hikes nationally for a couple of years.

(TI): And you've been doing it ever since?

(NM): Gotcha.

(TI): How about you, Nate?

(NM): So, the way it happened for me. One of my friends locally in Fayetteville, North Carolina said they were trying to get one of the hikes up and going in town and looking at the externals of the event. I was like, all right. We're doing a ruck march in tiny shorts. Sounds great. I'm in. I knew nothing about the mission. Absolutely, nothing. I'd never heard of Irreverent Warriors. I didn't know who Donnie O'Malley was or Vet TV. I was just rolling. I was like that sounds great. I'd been a part of, a lot of—

(TI): Donny's is the one that started this nonprofit, right?

(NM): Yeah.

(TI): Gotcha. Got it. Very good.

(NM): So, jumping into that, I just had no idea really what I was in for. But I've been a part of a lot of nonprofit efforts, and the suicide issue, mental health really in general, for Veterans and military weighed very heavily on me. I lost a lot of guys while I was in. And a lot of guys when I was out just to their own mental health. They lost that battle over and over and over. And I needed to be a part of trying to find a solution. Everything I was a part of up until Irreverent Warriors, it felt like I was doing something. I was making awareness happen or I was raising funds or something. So, I was very invested in that fight. Enter Irreverent Warriors. I was like, "All right, that sounds like a cool event."

(TI): Not knowing that it was part of combatting Veterans suicide or anything?

(NM): I knew the basic mission of it, but I didn't really connect the two. I was like it's another one of the marches. It's another one of - you know - whatever we're raising awareness. It's fine. My dumb Marine

Corps brain was like, "Hey, we're going to ruck on a Saturday. This sounds great. And I'm going to make everyone else suffer." So, I rolled out a, you know, a 14.7 mile hike that was, you know, intended to be challenging. And we had a blast. And over the course of that event, it was actually my second hike that I attended was the one that I helped coordinate. And over the course of that event, I just saw the unconventional therapy side happened. People were having fun. It was a great time. I was having a blast, but I was seeing people that didn't know each other 20 steps back pour their souls out to each other. It was all the barriers were down in a way that I hadn't seen before. People would push you toward a conventional therapy or clinical therapy. Those are so important, but there needs to be another side of that therapy. There needs to be that brotherhood, that comradery you had in the military. And I was seeing that happen in this dumb event that I was helping to coordinate. And it sucked me in, and I kept doing next event and next event and just kind of rolled into a leadership role. I would say, excuse me, by that fall—

(TI): No problem. No worries.

(NM): All the frogs and stuff. Luckily you can edit this.

(TI): Absolutely.

(NM): He's like, "I won't though."

(TI): Still keeping it in.

All: [Laughter]

(NM): But yeah, over the course of that event, just watching that happen. You know, people have that conventional therapy where they need it, but they didn't have what I was seeing happen out there. They didn't have that, that comradery, that brotherhood, that they had missed. And in my opinion, that is the lifesaving power of Irreverent Warriors is having Veterans come together. We don't have to show any magic art. Our magic is just getting them together and then they save each other's lives just by being there for each other. And I was watching that happen on the streets. And so, I was sucked in. Just kind of rolled into leadership, started helping to coordinate hikes without knowing it. It was very tricky. And then by the end of that year, Cindy had contacted me and she said, "Hey, you're doing all this stuff. I would like you to roll into a leadership position." And I was like, "Oh no, I'm doing that already. It's fine." And I knew what she was asking, but at the time I was really invested in my

contracting career and overtaxed. So, I was like, "I can't do it. I really can't." So, she kept asking. Right about, I think December, shortly after she took over as president, she asked one more time. And I had been invested enough to see the fact that I, that Irreverent Warriors didn't need me in the wings. They didn't need me in the background. Like I needed to just stand up and be a leader or not. Like that was where I could make my biggest impact was just getting involved. So, I said, yes, finally. And then turned out that I helped coordinate the first conference national conference we had. And it's just grown so professionally since.

(TI): Now, Irreverent Warriors. They put on Silkies Hike. Let's just give a broad overview of what we're talking about. Irreverent Warriors puts on Silkies Hike in order to give a—what's the mission. Again, if you've been on a hike, you know it cause—

(NM): You chant it over and over. It's a good reminder, man. You have to tell people the same thing over and over and over. Eventually it sticks sometimes. But it's bringing Veterans together with humor and comradery to improve mental health and prevent Veteran suicide. That's our mission statement.

(TI): Outstanding. Cindy, in your bio, you said that these hikes were life-changing for you, your daughter, and your son. Nate's kind of alluded to it as well. In what way has it been life-changing?

(CM): Well, primarily I saw the difference in my kids. You know, I wasn't a combat Vet. I was a peace time Vet a long, long time ago. But what I saw my kids go through and watching the devastation after their dad died. And then both of them serving when we got there that day. I saw both of us fight, both of them, that I hadn't seen, that the lights had gone out years ago. And while they were serving and loved what they were doing in the military, I just never saw that light. And in that day I saw it. It was sparked. And the two of them coming together and just watch the dynamics, I knew that we were going to be okay. I knew we were going to be okay. We weren't alone. They each had connected with so many other people that day, as well as connecting back with each other. I knew that I wasn't afraid of losing them at that point. Like I had been the previous few years, so it changed and saved our lives.

(TI): Wow. Veteran suicide is always a huge topic here at VA, as always right. We all know about the 22 a day. 21 a day. We also have a whole podcast on the research to battle Veterans' suicide. Or if, you

know, either one of you know, that it's the MIRECC Short Takes on Suicide Prevention. Have you heard of that podcast?

(NM):

I have not.

(TI):

Check that out when you get a chance. It's all about the research to prevent Veteran suicide. And they have a lot of really deep dives into like, you know, some of the factors that lead to Veteran suicide and how to fight them. I's a topic that we brought here on Borne the Battle a couple of times, both with stories of either Veterans coming close to committing the act or Veterans looking to help in the fight. Episode, I think 219, something like that, we had Chad Robichaux, Bellator, Strikeforce MMA fighter world champion with legacy FC. When he talked about winning a Strikeforce at the Toyota Center in front of 10,000 people, going home that night he was deciding that was the night he was going to take his life. Eventually he didn't do it, but honestly, really good episode about Veterans' suicide and how to overcome it. Then there's, I think, Episode 212, 213, something around there, but these, both Marine Veterans by the way. Marine Veteran, Aaron Quinonez, who again was homeless before and after the Marine Corps, almost committed suicide. And now he's developed an app that it's going through, Operation Pop Smoke. I don't know if you've heard it. It's going through some trials so it can be actually prescribed. For people with suicide ideations, an actual app on your phone. It's like a close knit buddy app. If you get a chance, take a listen to both of those. I say all that to say this you're both very involved in group think tanks and gatherings about how to help prevent Veteran suicide. You have a whole, you're running a whole nonprofit, that's kind of based off preventing Veterans' suicide. Have there been good programs within VA that you've seen in this effort? And what is the community asking for that? Maybe isn't there yet in VA?

(NM):

Sure. So, I'll take a whack at this one first. So, my experience, I think it's probably the best way to tackle this question. So, my experience with the VA, I tend to be a very guarded person. What I go through, I deal with—I'll joke about it. I'll have fun with my very close buddies. I will talk about it. That's about it. So, my experience transitioning from the Marine Corps into the civilian world and dealing with the VA system. It was very, very difficult to integrate into that VA system and communicate with people the same way I would communicate with my buddies. She was difficult to break down that wall. I understood the value in what they were providing, but it was really, really tough to make that connection. Same

connection I did with my brothers sitting around the fire in Afghanistan, you know, just, “Oh, that terrible thing happened today.” Yeah. Make a dumb joke. Roll-on.

(TI): I think that's fair. I think that's fair for any kind of hospital situation, you know, walking into a—you know, it's not, natural for a lot of us.

(NM): And we tend to be very abrasive. Like one of the things that we rely on as an organization, we really—we're going to hold to for, for the, for the rest of. The time that I'm involved in this organization is bringing Veterans together means something. It's not about the Irreverent Warrior's brand. It's not about, you know, “Oh, we're, we're better than any other organization.” It's not, we are a very, very small part of the solution to all of these health issues. We are part of the puzzle. We need the rest of the Veteran community. We need the VA. We need everyone to do their part of their job or what we're doing is useless. We are introducing Veterans back to a network that is going to change their lives. That is going to save their lives. We're giving the people that attend to our hikes a reason to care, a reason to go on, a purpose, a reason to live, but if they don't have those resources afterwards, all of that is useless. We can't provide clinical therapy. We cannot. We're not a pharmacy. Like we cannot help them or take that edge off what they're dealing with psychologically. What we can do is give them a reason to care. We can reintegrate them into a network that will care, and we'll pluck them up when they're having a bad moment.

(TI): Are you seeing anything within the VA that does help in this effort? Or is there anything in the community? Is there anything that the community is asking for from the VA that maybe needs to be provided a little bit more?

(CM): Yeah. On this? I think it was our Memphis hike. Part of our route took us right by the VA and the director of the VA actually came out and spoke to us. They arranged that ahead of time. He had popsicles for us. It was really quite, it was a hot day. He had popsicles. And normally about that point in the hike, people are pretty rowdy, ready to finish in the day. But when he came out, everyone was quiet. People paid attention. It was crazy. But the VA, the impact that he had, because the VA like it's this big entity that people are either frustrated with or in awe of. But it's bigger than them. And so, when this guy came in—

(TI): It's a big ship with a tiny rudder.

(CM): When that guy came out, as the director of VA, everyone listened. And in the information he shared, they actually grasped, which you could have it handed them pamphlets for years. You could have had all kinds of other resources out there for them. But when this man, the head of this VA came out, took the time to speak to these guys at their level, and connected with them emotionally, that was powerful, very powerful, and probably did more for the VA that day with everyone in that group than anything that had been a prior to that.

(TI): Yeah, they hit the human connection.

(NM): Exactly. That's that barrier. I felt trying to enter that it was difficult. There was no interpersonal connection. There was no automatic connection for, you know, from a similar service. And I've had some amazing people I've worked with in the VA, and the people are actually what makes the magic happen. And that sounds like a really dumb cliché thing to say, but it's true. The VA, as a construct, as a system, is—it's like I said, it comes almost as abrasive to a lot of our Veterans. They're like, oh, the VA, screw the VA. And a lot of times we're the ones that are like, "Hey man, have you ever submitted a claim? Because that would probably help, you know. You're really good at some stuff, they will help." But yeah, but I think that Cindy nailed it on the head. I think that that direct personal connection would change the entire system.

(TI): So, just that director being aware of the hike and coming out and just being involved in it and just showing that, "Hey, we support what you guys are trying to do."

(NM): Oh absolutely.

(TI): We're supporting the community in this way. Just being aware of it. Probably did the world for that Memphis VA at that day of bringing awareness to what they have to offer. That's good. That's good. It's a really good feedback. And I can't wait till this airs so everyone else can hear that. You know, and I've shared my—and I'd like to say, you know, I've shared my story about the VA on this podcast before I'm a VA employee, but I walked away from the VA for like four years. You know, I gave him, I gave him my own two middle fingers and walked away after I had a terrible service the first time. And it's amazing how one person can ruin the reputation of an organization. That's 400,000 people, employee-based, you know. And it's, again, it's just like the Marine Corps. It's just like the Army. It's just like any other service. It's a huge ship. DOD. It's a huge

ship, tiny rotor, hard to turn sometimes, like any other fortune 500 company. But I will say all that to say this, I think from the time that I walked away in 2014 to the time in 2021, I have seen a difference personally. And I think part of it's probably because I'm the employee there as well. But there's something to be said. So, what you're saying is, hey, that Veteran, that director of the VA medical center in Memphis came out and took part in what you guys were doing, showed his face, showed that he was aware of what you guys are doing and supported it. So that's really good to hear.

(NM):

The best way for me to put it, and Cindy's probably really sick of hearing this quote because it's kind of one of my mantras, but people don't care how much, you know, until they know how much you care. That's something I've embraced with my life. No matter what position I was in, what leadership position I was in, I wanted to make sure the person that I was trying to guide or mentor or lead understood that I was invested in them personally, not, you know, I need to take care of whatever you're bringing onto my plate. It was, "I want to help you out." And for me, that's that barrier that needs to be torn down. We need our guys to get that interpersonal connection, that, "Hey man, we're here for you. I am here for you". Not VA will help you because that's our job. And like it's tough for Veterans to ask for help, but we're terrible at it. And honestly, the VA could be a perfect system. And me knowing my friends, my Veteran friends, we would still crap all over it. For sure. We'd probably crap on it harder. That's just what we do. But that understanding from the other side of being like, all right, guys, all right, dummies, we love you. We're invested in you. This is for you.

(TI):

Most of us, you know, a vast majority of the VA, are Veterans. It's like, yeah, we get it. We're there with you, you know. We're trying to figure this out with you. I took the job as like, that's what I love about this podcast is that, you know, every five episodes we do, what's called the benefits breakdown. I go into an office or a program or benefit within the VA and I shake them, and I go, "What do you do? How do you help Veterans? And how can they be eligible for your services?" You know, so that's one thing that I love doing about this job is I get to—whatever I get to learn, whatever I learned from the VA, I get to bring out to everyone else. So, one thing I do know that the VA probably couldn't pull off, and maybe they could if the right person was there, but as what you all do, your bread and butter, these Silkies Hikes. I know from my experience in the DC hike before the pandemic, you guys catch the attention of a lot of Marines on these hikes

(NM): We do. I would say where we're much more diverse as far as services concerned recently than we used to be. But let's think about it. If you were to look at all the services as a whole and then present them an option of, "Hey guys, Saturday we can throw on a ruck and silkies and ruck around town a lot of times." Or you can do whatever. Make a choice. The majority of the time, the brains are going to be the ones that are like, "Yeah, let's do it." But it's been great. I would say when I started becoming a part of the Irreverent Warriors organization, my first few hikes, I kind of felt that even then it wasn't, "Hey, this is a Marine Corps effort." It was an us thing. Right. But I think just because of how it started with Donny and his connection to the Marine Corps and his buddies and how that grew, it had a Marine Corp flavor to it. And now honestly, I'll show up to a hike and I don't know who I'm talking to. I don't. I have no idea what service they're from. It's just—people are starting to realize it's not about the ruck. It's not about the hike or the silkies. There's something bigger happening here.

(TI): Yeah, no, it's the camaraderie that happens before, during, and after the hikes, you see it even afterwards when you guys get together. "Hey, let's all go out." And I think the only time I ever knew, really knew, what service a person was on these silkie hikes was this guy with a huge Navy Trident and a huge Navy Trident and a cape.

(NM): Mark

(CM): Mark.

All: [Laughter]

(TI): And I was like, I love it. I love it. Yeah. I was like, okay, that guy's Navy. I could figure it out.

(NM): I think he might've been wearing a cape and a singlet as well at the time.

(TI): Yes. Yes. It was amazing. That was amazing. And it stood out, and I liked it. It was all about it. I was there.

(CM): The other thing too about—yeah, we're Marine heavy for sure. But I think the other thing that's real attractive, and it maybe because we're so Marine Corps heavy, is that we aren't that pretty polished look that a lot of the other organizations are. You know, we're not out there with our families and we're not out there in our, you know, Nike outfits or whatever. We're out there and we're broken and raw. I mean, we are as real as it gets. And that is really attractive. We're

not for everybody. We understand that. There's a lot of people just feeling like they need to be part of that pretty and polished crowd. But for those that aren't, we're their family. We're their home. They're comfortable.

(TI): Yeah. Oh, trust me. It stands out when it's a flack and, and nothing but a flack and silkies. It's good stuff. It's good stuff. So, over 250 hikes within the past five years, 70 hikes within last year alone, which is very ambitious, might I add. Nate, you're the COO. What are the logistics like to pull that off? How is that organized?

(NM): It's something that we are beginning. We are beginning to professionalize on a whole new level. Over the last three years, we've come leaps and bounds from where we were. We were honestly a grassroots movement just a few years ago. And the amount of professionalism that has come on has been amazing. It's been astounding. And the fact that, I mean, we make no dollars. Really. We really don't. The salaries and what it's about, and the majority of our organization doesn't make a dime. The fact that they're just invested in the mission, making it happen is fantastic. And honestly, that's, what's required. Our jobs—

(TI): So, the money that gets donated, most of it is back into these hikes. I mean, obviously you're up to 70 in one year, you know. Like you guys just find another hike, you know what I mean? What are the logistics like though? Like how does one set up a hike?

(NM): So, in order to explain the entire hike, like planning structure, we would have to dive into an entire spreadsheet of timetables and specific tasks and POC. It's roughly 60 to 75 steps along everything from creating a city permit, getting insurance, developing that rapport with your local community, developing a hike route, then establishing a connection with the stops, finding a team of volunteers that will also help you plan the event from social media volunteers, public relations. It takes an entire team to make these things happen. And it's so involved down to how many coolers do we have? Do we have enough water? Do we have enough bathrooms on the route? Like dude, it's a ridiculous process. And the fact that people are doing it just out of their care and passion for the organization is phenomenal. We're talking about a 65 page SOP that we wrote a couple of years ago that we keep evolving. But just so much more goes into it than meets the eye. People look at the event and they're like, "Oh yeah, neat. You just threw up a Facebook flag and people showed up." Huh? No, dude, this has been a nine-month process to plan this hike effectively. Our

Veterans like us attending these hikes. We have to have everything planned for, because they will not.

(TI): Yeah, no. I mean I noticed it in the bathroom, you know, even with the bathroom breaks is like you guys had coordinated places where you guys are like, all right, cool. This is our bathroom break, blah, blah, blah. I was like, oh man, this isn't just like this. Like you said, this isn't just a Facebook show up type of thing. You guys actually plan this out. And you talk about developing a relationship with communities to make this happen to make sure that routes are unimpeded. How did you go about doing stuff like that? Developing a relationship with like a local community?

(NM): So, our mission is so very compelling. It's absolutely amazing. Like if we have our volunteers actually make that interpersonal connection, that face-to-face connection and share our mission and what it is accomplishing, it's so, so easy to get support. We live in an amazing country, and they really do back their Veterans and military for the most part. And it's a fantastic thing to be a part of on the receiving side. One of the things we've been—

(TI): Is it with like a local elected officials through the chamber of commerce? How do you guys go about doing stuff like that?

(CM): Yeah, it's different in every city, but there's two there's two key approaches. One is if you go through the city event process and the special event process and connect that way. If you have connections with law enforcement, that's another really great avenue because law enforcement will get you into the right places within the city to get that permitting process started. And so, once you get—because we aren't conventional. We don't fall under any normal category. We're not a parade. We are a moving element, but we're not a parade. We're not a festival, but we have many festivals along the way.

(TI): Not a protest.

All: [Laughter]

(CM): We have been known to. We do peacefully assemble. We do not protest.

(TI): Outstanding. So it's different with every city?

(NM): The one thing we require is like you said, we're not a protest. One thing we require is that our coordinators pass all of the local official checks. If they need a permit, they have to get a permit. If they can't

get a permit and they require one legally, you're not doing a hike there, bud. Like, that's just the way it is.

(TI): So, all that is done through the volunteers at the local level, at each local level. I know. Well, I know you've got an enthusiastic Marine out here in DC, Catalina. She—her and I served together. She was as a civilian Marine. I was a Marine. You got an enthusiastic one there.

(NM): For sure.

(TI): All right. So, so you had 70 hikes last year, 250 total within the past five years. Where can people find the schedule of like where hikes or when in what city?

(NM): Yeah, so our goal is to get hikes close to the people, you know, so you don't have to travel across the country to get to them. If you go to www.irreverentwarriors.com, we have a full event list [Link: [irreverentwarriors.com](http://www.irreverentwarriors.com)]. Just click on one of the hikes cities, and it'll take you to Eventbrite so you can register.

(TI): Where have you had hikes before? Give me like a top five cities. I know you've had Jacksonville. I know we've had Camp Pendleton. Do you have them in bigger cities as well?

(NM): We do New York City, DC, Baltimore. We talked about Oceanside, California, Dallas, Memphis, Tennessee, Nashville, Savannah. It goes on and on. So, they're all over the country all over. We just had our first one in Jack's Beach a few weeks ago, Jacksonville, Florida. That was amazing. They don't disappoint.

(CM): Yeah. We also just had a hike in Hawaii. So, first year in Hawaii, and coming up at the end of June we have a hike in Puerto Rico.

(NM): And we're going to London. Yeah.

(TI): Where do you find active duty guys or is it active duty and Veterans like?

(NM): There's a bunch of active duty and Veterans, but also our, our mission is going international. People are realizing it's not just about American Veterans here. And England has its own set of mental health difficulties. It's a lot of locals too.

(TI): So, like local Veterans from that country?

(NM): Yeah.

(TI): Hey, there's a lot of ex-pats in Philippines.

(NM): Hey, I don't know how many Marines I want to bring to the Philippines, but you're right.

All: [Laughter]

(TI): Outstanding. Outstanding. Can each of you tell me one thing that you learned either in the military or from the military community that carry weight, that you carry with you?

(NM): Oh he's just soft balling him now, that's not deep at all. Tell me what one thing the military did.

(TI): Pick one.

(NM): No, no, for me, I mean, it would be so easy. The easy button for me would be it gave me an opportunity to impact the world on a level that I did not anticipate. When I joined the Marine Corps, I was thinking pretty small level. I was thinking I'm going to do my job, and it's going to be awesome. I didn't think about second and third level impacts getting into the intelligence, especially the tactical intelligence community. Seeing the impacts of my operations was ridiculous. I loved that aspect of it. So, I could—easy button would be, it gave me a career, and it allowed me to be a part of the world on a bigger scale than I ever imagined. I would say the thing that stands out even more than that for me is the experience aspect of it. Not career wise, not profession wise. I got to experience life on such a gritty, ridiculous, granular level. So many people enter life, and they go about their career and everything is structured. Everything is beautiful. They have a process. I eat breakfast, three meals a day, go to the gym once, five or eight to five work hours. And I'm good to go. And I'm not going to say that I couldn't have been in that loop or that that's not someone's definition of happiness, but for me experiencing being up for 48 hours straight eating nothing and being in the most miserable circumstances on the other end of the planet, that gives you a perspective on life that I wouldn't have gotten anywhere else, that brotherhood and camaraderie that we were talking about. That's a feeling I could not have found in the civilian community. Couldn't have—never would have come across it. And you know, I could go on and on, but I would say that overall experience of taking life to the next level, understanding the fragility of life, for myself, the number of times I almost died. The number of people that I saw die that I cared about. Like I don't. I don't know how people commit suicide, personally. I understand. I understand they're struggling, and it's in the moment. It's just what they feel needs to happen. But for me seeing, so, so

many people go of their own hand or someone else's, seeing the fragility of life, I don't understand how you could let go of that gift. Be like, "Oh, I get to go on. I can make an impact. I can change lives. Nah, screw that." I just—it blows my mind and I don't feel like I would feel the same way as I do about life if I hadn't joined the military.

(TI): It's deep, man.

(CM): It is deep. How am I going to follow that?

All: [Laughter]

(TI): Going to be like, "Discipline, I learned discipline."

(NM): I learned how to organize my shirts.

All: [Laughter]

(TI): Cindy, one thing that you learned in the military that you, that you carry with

(CM): Yeah. Well, for me, I went in, enlisted, and then after a couple of years I went to the state OCS program. And I learned from my dad and I learned from that, having been enlisted prior to and then becoming an officer, I knew as an officer how to take care of my troops. So, when I started a family, I knew as a mom, I need to take care of my family. Start this organization. I'm a mama bear. I take care of this family. So, I put the troops before self and you can ask, Nate, any of the other leadership. I will go to bat for any hiker that's out there. And I make sure that at every hike, it's part of that 65 page SOP, the troops are fed. The troops are comfortable. The troops have options. If there's a problem somewhere, we take care of our element. We take care of our troops. We take care of our own. And so, I will. Yep. I learned having served under some crappy leaders how important leadership really is.

(TI): You take care of your troops, the mission will take care of itself. Absolutely. Is there a Veteran, and this is for both of you as well—is there a Veteran non-profit or Veteran in the military community that you've worked with or you've had an experience with whom you'd like to mention other than Irreverent Warriors?

(CM): Well, I—The Blue Star Mothers of America and Gold Star Mothers of America. They're a DOD authorized Veterans service organization. I founded the central Texas chapter. And I can tell you that when you bring military parents in, especially their mothers—well, I will also say that these mothers prepared me to work with

these Irreverent Warriors. The warriors are far easier to deal with than their mothers. I'll tell you that.

All: [Laughter]

(CM): I'd rather deal with those guys any day of the week than deal with their moms. But every state has Blue Star Mothers chapters. And so, if you are a mother of a service member, even if they've gotten out, because we realize now that a lot of the struggles we have are after our children are out of the service, re-integration or whatever. So, our chapters are not just for women who have children serving, but those who have children that have honorably served in the past as well. So, I would encourage people, encourage your mom. If you're listening to this, if you have a mom, get her involved in a Blue Star Mother chapter. That will roll right into the Gold Star Mother service work that we do because that blue star turns to gold. And, you know, but for the grace of God, it's—you never know. It could be our blue could turn to gold in a second. You never know, but every state has multiple chapters, and they're vital. Amazing organization.

(NM): I don't have a specific one. I was that entire time Cindy was talking, I was listening, but I was also just kind of racking my brain like, "Oh, what about this person and this person and that organization and that organization?". And one of the things that is so amazing about being a part of Irreverent Warriors is the fact that we get to facilitate connection. We had to help that network occur. So, I can't name one, but being a part of our organization, seeing the number of VSOs and not just VSOs, not necessarily nonprofits. People, entities, companies that are just purely invested in turning the trends that we're dealing with around is it's mind-boggling. We have people that are coming to us with startup businesses. Veterans got out and they're just trying to start their business and they're like, "Hey man, can I donate a portion of my proceeds to Irreverent Warriors? I love what you guys are doing." I'm like, "Dude, you're selling almost nothing. You can't even make a living on what you're doing, and you're donating what you're doing to our mission." It's something that is so ridiculously powerful. Being a part of the Veteran community, you understand there is an unhealthy culture that exists where people are worried about brand. They're worried about fighting over the Veteran market. Or, you know, I'm selling my shirts to these people. It's there. It exists, but being a part of our organization, the fact that we don't really deal with that. We don't deal with those companies, those entities. We have organizations

and businesses that are just invested in Veteran mental health on a different level. And that's at times talking about those individuals. They're compromising their own just to make sure that hundreds of others have the opportunity to connect to a healthy network.

(TI): When you see that, what does it do? I mean, what's your initial reaction when you see something like that?

(NM): My mind, like it was what I was saying to Cindy way back when we started, when I was like, "I will help as much as I can. However, I have this career that pays really well." I was making, you know, logic decisions, and that was a great, great thing for my bank account. But it didn't fuel my soul. Taking that paycheck and decreasing it by 99%, maybe it doesn't make sense with the bank account, but this is my passion. This fuels my soul. And yet still I see that passion in other people. I see other people that work 60 hours in a week. They're dog tired, and they jump in their car, load their ruck up. They've been to 70 hikes. They don't need that hike. They have that connection. They have the network. And they get done with their workday, throw their ruck in their car, and drive eight hours to a hike show up in the wee hours of the morning to help people set up for the event and rock the entire day. Not like, "Oh, I'm here. And I'm suffering." Like lifting people up, pulling them out of their trenches, and just being there for them boggles my mind because, logically, I'm like, "You're dumb. What are you doing?" But my heart, my passion, I'm like, "Yeah, bro, I get it."

(TI): You feel it.

(NM): Yeah.

(TI): Cause you know there's something to be said about doing something that's bigger than yourself. And I think that's what kind of what you're speaking to, you know, I was the same way, man. I was at NASCAR before this, and yeah, it was a great gig sports media. Cool stuff, cars turning left. Great to see your work on TV.

(NM): It's just like click, click, click, click, click.

All: [Laughter]

(TI): Yeah. But coming back to the—I was like, "I'm never going back to the federal government." Like that was like, when I left the Marine Corps, I was like, "I am so done with the government. So done." And here I am. Why? Because it's that like what you're saying, doing something bigger than something for yourself. And I think there's something to be said for that. And the—I think you're seeing

it out on those hikes. Absolutely. You know, we've covered a lot of ground. Cindy, Nate, is there anything that I may have missed or haven't asked that you think is important to share with anybody that's listening or watching this right now?

(NM):

I would say my last statement is kind of piggybacks off what we were just talking about a little bit, but it's the fact that this isn't easy. What we're doing is not simple. It's as complicated as it can be. Especially an organization like Irreverent Warriors. Like we're trying to walk a line between professionalism and open, unconventional therapy. And like it's very, very tough. Not to mention, it takes an emotional toll when the more you open yourself up to a mission like this, the more you invest in it, the more your emotions are involved. Every single loss, every single obstacle, everything you run into takes a toll on you emotionally, not talking about just the physical toll. Like our organization is volunteer based. These people are taxing themselves to the max in many cases just to make the wheels turn on this bus. But then on top of that, you add the emotional strain of opening yourself up to care about people that in some cases don't even care about themselves. It's difficult. This is hard work. And I am just so blessed to work with the amazing, amazing teams and volunteers that we do in this organization. I'm not saying that because it's obligatory or anything, I'm absolutely floored by their heart and their passion for this mission.

(CM):

For most of us, when you join the military, it's a calling. It's not necessarily a job. And because you have a servant's heart and you want to serve, and even after you've served your time, you're committed to serve. When you come out of one of the other things that brings you peace is that you have a service heart, so you need to continue to serve. So, our leadership are amazing. They sacrifice so much. Again, like Nate said, they're all volunteers. I think one of the things we haven't covered today about the hikes is that the hiking element itself is Veterans and active duty, reservists, and guard members only. There's no civilians in the actual element. It is your safe place. So, while you may feel safe walking with a civilian or your spouse or whatever, somebody else may not be. And anything that inhibits that safe place, we just don't bring it in. No, we love our civilians. In fact, we need them desperately to help our support element and to be at the stops. But that actual hike element itself, there are no civilians in that element. So, it is our safe place.

(TI):

Interesting. I didn't know that. For anybody that, and either one of you can go on this one, for someone that's listening to this right

now, do you have like a parting shot for them? Anything that you want to leave them with?

(NM): I always have parting shots. I mean, come on.

All: [Laughter]

(NM): I would say broad strokes. What Cindy was just saying was your support does matter. Like, sure, these elements are very, very close for a reason. We want to develop, cultivate, maintain an environment of unconventional therapy. We want you to be able to throw your arm over someone's shoulder and just gut your life to them. Hey man, this is all my darkness so that you don't have to hold it in so that you have somebody else in the trench with you. We want that environment to be maintained, but like Cindy said, that community support is everything. Having our Veterans know somebody cares is the reason why a Irreverent Warriors saves lives, and that doesn't stop at Veteran to Veteran connection. So, if you're listening to this and you're not a Veteran, please let them know. And I'm not saying thank you for your service. Like they get that enough. Show them. Whether it's supporting a Irreverent Warriors or some other VSO, encouraging them to go get the help that they need, giving them some extra encouragement or support on a dark day. This doesn't stop at the Veteran community. It will take the entire Veteran community to come together. If we're going to reverse the trends of mental health and suicide that are plaguing our Veteran military cultures, it's going to take us all. Like the VA, us, everyone has to come together. But we also need support from our significant others, from our loved ones, from the community. That's something that is desperately needed, both by the Veterans and by our organization. So, if you're listening to this and you're not a Veteran, you're not left out in many cases. You're the reason why we raised our hand, the reason we walked down range, the reason why it was important enough to throw ourselves into the line of fire, because we wanted to protect this, what we have you guys. So yeah, we need you. We need your support.

(TI): Very good. And for those, most of my listeners are Veterans. For those people, what would you say to them? Come on out,

(NM): Mama, you're up.

All: [Laughter]

(CM): Yeah, absolutely. You don't have to wear silkies. You don't have to carry weight, and you don't have to wear boots. Just show up.

(NM): One of my early experiences with Irreverent Warriors, I was trying to convince one of my buddies to go. I knew he was a recluse. And I'm saying that on purpose. I know it's probably an obnoxious way to say somebody who was isolating, but he was devastating himself with himself. He was by himself. And I tried, "Hey man, let's go to this event together," over and over and over. It didn't work. I grabbed him for a dinner with another Veteran, just kind of another strategy. And he spent one night hanging out with a couple other Veterans, and it clicked for him. And he's been invested in not just Irreverent Warriors but the Veteran community ever since. So, what I'm saying is it is intimidating. I get that. Like, especially if you're showing up by yourself, like no friends just walking up, but I promise it won't be intimidating for long. You're going to be surrounded by a bunch of people that are just being raw and emotional and care more than anything you could possibly imagine. Just do it, man. Whether it's showing up to a silkies hike or going in and showing up for that first Veterans Affairs appointment. Whether it's, you know, getting to the gym. Just do it. Make those healthy steps, one step at a time if you need to. No matter how daunting it appears we need you.

[01:12:13] Music

[01:12:14] PSA:

Man: Getting out of the military, I was missing this camaraderie.

Man: It's frustrating when you try to talk to people that don't understand.

Man: I still had the anger. I still had the addictions, but we didn't talk about that.

Woman: It came to a point where I was like, "I really need to talk to someone about this."

Man: Family really encouraged me to go to the VA.

Man: It's okay to go get help. It's okay to talk to people, because it takes true strength to ask for help.

Narrator: Hear Veterans true stories of strength and recovery at maketheconnection.net [Link: maketheconnection.net].

[01:12:44] Music

[01:12:47] Closing Monologue:

Tanner Iskra: I want to thank Cindy and Nate for a great conversation here on Borne the Battle. For more information about each of them go to

irreverentwarriors.com/about [Link: irreverentwarriors.com/about]. This week's Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week is from our VA Veteran of the Day program. Every day, our Digital Media Team honors a Veteran on all of our social media platforms and with a blog on blogs.va.gov [Link: blogs.va.gov]. You can nominate the Veteran in your life by sending in a short writeup and about five photos. Don't screenshot photos or take a photo of a photo. They make a graphic from what you send. But again, send an email with a short writeup and about five good photos to newmedia@va.gov. Beatrice Mary MacDonald was born in 1881 in North Bedeque, I hope I said that right, which is a small town in the Canadian province of Prince Edward Island. MacDonald came to the United States to study nursing at New York Training School for Nurses on Blackwell's Island, which is now Roosevelt Island. In 1905, she became a registered nurse and worked in New York City as a surgical assistant. In 1915, MacDonald experienced war for the first time when she volunteered for four months with Hospital B, American Ambulance in Juilly, France. I hope I said that right too. Then MacDonald returned to New York and resumed her job. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, she enlisted in the Army Nurse Corps. MacDonald joined a team of doctors and nurses from New York's Presbyterian Hospital to establish Base Hospital No. 2 in Étretat, France. And I hope I said that one right. For the next year at MacDonald served as a surgical nurse at Base Hospital No. 2 and at British Casualty Clearance Station No. 61, a mobile unit always within a few miles of the front line. On the night of August 17, 1917, MacDonald was at the clearing station in Belgium, four miles from the front line, when the Germans started an air raid in that area. MacDonald continued caring for the wounded until shrapnel hit her right eye, causing instant blindness. Surgical efforts to save her sight failed, and she was later fitted with an artificial eye. But, she insisted on staying. According to a Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study article, MacDonald declared, "I've only started doing my bit." She returned to her base hospital until May of 1918. MacDonald then got orders to report to Evacuation Hospital No. 2 and was promoted to chief nurse. She remained in Baccarat until the Armistice. After the war ended, MacDonald went to Germany to serve two months with Allied Forces, but then returned home and resumed her nursing career in New York. MacDonald received numerous awards, medals and accolades for her service for the United States, France and Great Britain. In addition to her service, McDonald made history as the first woman to receive a Distinguished Service Cross and a Purple

Heart. McDonald passed away in September of 1969 in White Plains, New York. Army Veteran, Beatrice MacDonald, we honor her service. [21-Gun Salute] That's it for this week's episode. If you yourself would like to nominate you Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week and let us know their story, 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, Apple Podcasts, 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—which Borne the Battle is also on—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 non-profit Operations Song. And it was written by Marine Veteran Mick McElhenny, Nashville songwriter Jason Sever, and Mykal Duncan. Have a great day. Thank you for listening and we'll see you right here next week. Take care.

[01:17:34] Music

[01:18:15] Bonus

(NM): We have two hikes that are beautiful, and we go into it knowing that they are going to be problematic. Those are going to be the ones near the largest Marine bases. They have the highest population of junior Marines showing up to these events, and they don't make the best life decisions.

All: [Laughter]

(NM): They haven't encountered the network of, “Hey, bro. Maybe stop drinking after 5. Maybe don't get wasted.” This is about creating a network so that you can remember people afterwards, not so that you show up the next day like, “What did I do yesterday?” So, trying to manage that immaturity level is interesting. So, here's the story, my first hike.

(TI): I'm ready.

(NM): I showed up to my first hike in Jacksonville, North Carolina. Anybody who knows anything about the Marine Corps knows there's some Marines there. A lot. That was my first event. There happened to be a drainage ditch alongside the hike. I'd never been to a hike before, ever. I had no idea what culture we were trying to cultivate or what we were trying to accomplish. I was like, "There are going to be Marines jumping in that ditch. I know it." Then I watched the first little pod of Marines pass military members, not just Marines, but that's Marine heavy hike for sure. Watch them pass. Wow, I'm shocked. And just out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash of green. Somebody just streaks past me and just faceplants into the drainage ditch. And I was like, "Huh, alright. I feel better about this now."

All: [Laughter]

(TI): The first one got out of the way.

(NM): And seeing the reaction. This guy just faceplants and lays there. I was like, "Wait, that was funny for a second. Now I'm worried." And seeing an entire platoon of Marines run down this ditch to pluck him out to make sure he's okay, I was like, "Oh, that's amazing. These are mature Marines. This is fantastic!" All of the sudden, five more people, swoosh. Okay, it's a combination of both. But that irreverent side of the element was fantastic to see. Veterans that had been out forty years just right alongside a PFC that just got out of A School making the greatest, most amazing bond happen and doing dumb together. It's a fantastic think to see.

(Text Transcript Ends)