

**AT EASE: Bridging the Military-Civilian Divide
Story Cycle Excerpt**

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1. THE EASY WAY OUT: ENLISTMENT, TAKE 1

(Male Military Veteran)

This idea that you enlist because you have nothing else to do is total bullshit. I could've gone to college, but I wanted to serve. I was gonna stay in 4 years, get some money for college, get out.

I was special forces; it's not like I was some deadbeat that barely passed high school and had no options. I got some college money together, then September eleventh happened, and we started deploying.

We were at a bar one night, and this drunk guy asks what I do. Now, I'd already deployed twice, had a buddy get killed. I just say we're military, cause I don't want to brag about the special ops thing. And he's like, "Oh, so you took the easy way out?"

I'm sorry; are you kidding me?!

He goes, "Yeah, you didn't want to do anything real with your life. That's why guys join the military."

I almost lost it, because he had no idea how hard I worked to get where I'm at.

People like that don't have a clue. People in general don't have clue. I get questions all the time, like if I like Trump. It doesn't matter. That's what I tell everybody. I've got my personal opinions that I'll share with people close to me, but that's it. It doesn't matter who the president is and whether I like him or not. As a soldier, you follow their orders anyway. A lot of people just assume you're in the military, so you must love the President, or you must love the war.

I've spent over three years in Afghanistan; I'm sick of that place. Hopefully I'll never have to see it again. Just because people are in the military doesn't necessarily mean they agree with the war. I'm sure people in civilian jobs have things they don't like to do, but they do them anyway because it's their job.

So, just to be clear, this is my job and I invite anyone who thinks it's the easy way out to try it sometime.

2. ACTIVELY CONSTRUCTIVE: ENLISTMENT, TAKE 2

(Female Military Veteran)

Civilians and veterans both like to make snide jokes about the US military being merely a giant welfare organization, but there's nothing MERE about giving poor people either a military career or a monetary and educational springboard from which to build a civilian career, in exchange for doing menial or slightly dangerous work for 4 years.

So, if the advertising copy has to co-opt statements about patriotism, heroic destinies, and selfless service in order to entice people to join, so be it. I don't just think that's fine and acceptable, I think it's actively constructive for society as a whole.

People need structure and heroism. I can know in my brain that America is not the greatest country on earth, that it built its wealth off the backs of slaves and before that the British Empire, and that I owe nothing to "it" because there's no actual, concrete "it" to owe anything to. I can know in my brain that I am not a hero, AND YET I am still deeply moved by the US national anthem; I am moved to tears by the poem inscribed on the statue of liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free." And when I read "I lift my lamp beside the golden door," I absolutely feel that I belong to something pure, righteous, and noble.

3. A DIFFERENT WOMAN: BOOT CAMP, TAKE 1 (Female Military Veteran)

You have no idea how fast it changes you. When I went to basic training, the first time in the cafeteria we had to be at parade rest to stand in line, and there was somebody I knew from high school and he said "Hey!" and called my name. I turned my head and smiled. Because I was just shocked!

I will never forget that drill sergeant started shouting, "You fucking bitch; you damn ho; you gonna come in here tryin' to fuck somebody already?"

He cussed me out in front of the whole cafeteria. Maybe that doesn't sound like much, but at 18 and there's probably about 1,000 soldiers in that room. And my superior telling me I was a whore, a bitch, I wanted to fuck. Like he was inviting them to do what they wanted to me.

I never got over that. From that day forward, I was a different woman.

About two weeks in, we noticed one morning that this girl was missing. We'd been getting intensive PT, because she couldn't keep up. She kept saying "I can't do it." Breaking down, crying, because she couldn't get her bed correct; she couldn't fold her clothes correctly; she couldn't get any of it right.

And we found out she was missing cause she tried to kill herself.

How did we not see it? How did we miss it? But we had to act like it didn't matter. If you show emotion, then you're weak too.

She survived. Another girl didn't, later. But it was the first time I was that close to someone who broke. That whole veteran-suicide thing—I remember how many people attempted.

You can go to boot camp and your entire life has changed.

I don't regret joining, in any capacity. I don't regret it at all, even though a lot of crap happened. But I grew up fast. Real fast.

4. JUST A RELIEF: BOOT CAMP, TAKE 2 (Female Military Veteran)

The first time in America I felt like I belonged was boot camp. Because, with exceptions I can count on one hand, every veteran I know comes from a working-class background. And I value very highly being tough and working hard. So, I respected the people who were there and felt like I belonged.

Then, imagine coming out of boot camp during a rainy slushy gross spring and traveling to California—just amazing! I'm an E3 making like \$500 dollars a month and to wake up and see that view, see the ocean?! I can't even describe it. Not to mention having my own room!!! Which I never had before.

And the clothes—military uniforms are made out of really nice material. Me and my sister, we came up rough, so it was amazing just to have nice clothes. And a name tag. And ribbons. And rank. It was so great.

And the library. I can't even describe it. Just having a library with English books was amazing. And used bookstores?! And used clothing stores?! These are things that don't exist in my home country. There, people keep things until they can't be used anymore.

It was a mind-blowing introduction to American culture. People are wealthy here, but it's not just that; it's that they're wealthy and don't know it. So, even though they've had the privilege of not having to move around their entire lives, of not having to worry about food on the table or taking care of their parents or anything like that—even though they've always had a net under them, they don't see it! It's totally invisible to them.

So, even if we had nothing in common, not where we were born or ethnicity or anything, I still felt comfortable in the military. Because we all understood what it means to do something tough. For me, it's just a relief to be around veterans.

5. DON'T ASK (Male Military Veteran)

This is back during Don't Ask, Don't Tell. There was a soldier who was gay, everybody knew she was, knew who her girlfriend was, and because she did her job, nobody cared. They might not have liked it, they may have had a little discomfort, but no one said anything. It just wasn't a big deal.

So, I was surprised when they lifted "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" with how many people actually had a problem with it. Because I'm thinking, "Who cares?" Good soldiers are good soldiers. It's just another form of discrimination, like color or religion. I'd rather have a platoon full of homosexuals that was good than a platoon full of straight dudes that was just okay. At the end of the day, we need soldiers that are going to lead by example and be good people.

The thing about Don't Ask, Don't Tell is there were people who maybe wouldn't ask, but they'd stake out the parking lots of local gay bars to see who came out. Check license plate numbers. So DADT didn't really work.

There was a lot of pushback to the repeal, of course, but I think it was mainly officers. Generals saying soldiers would be killed, that it would affect combat-readiness, that it would adversely affect morale. But the great thing about the military is—we follow orders.

The first military ball after the repeal, there was this general who had been opposed to ending DADT. A gay officer was there in his dress uniform and his partner was in a tux, but the partner was kind of hanging in the background. And the general said to the officer, "Does your friend like to dance?" When the officer said yes, the general said, "Then get his ass on the dance floor."

So, basically it didn't matter what the general thought privately, he was going to follow orders.

6. G.I. JANE: RESPECT, TAKE 1
(Female Military Veteran)

In my earlier years, we females—18, 19 years old—we could outdo the men anytime, anywhere. Outshoot 'em, outrun 'em, we were the best!

We looked good, too. We looked better in our uniforms. We were that fighting machine. We would pick a fight with the men just to show we could beat 'em down. We were physical!

But when it came to promotion, that same male would get a higher rank than we would, even if we held a supervisory role over him. The excuse was, "You're a female; you're going to rank anyway."

You may be the "G.I. Jane," the hardest worker, the go-to person, but a male comes along that everybody knows is not as good, not as technically astute, and he'll still get a higher rank to help him promote, because you're a female and "you're going to promote anyway."

No one considering that we're entering environments where we may be one of only two females there. We are subjected to all kinds of harassment: profanity, men coming on to us, men groping themselves in front of us, all that garbage we just hate. But we have to accept it, because that's now our world.

You could even be sexually assaulted, as in my case, and it's swept under the rug. You're supposed to just deal with it, because if you show anything, now you're an "emotional woman." Now you've validated why I don't respect you. Now you've proved why women don't belong in the service.

And after everything we endure, we're still not worth putting forward over one of those men?
Really?

7. YOU SEE ME AS SOMETHING ELSE: SEXUAL ASSAULT, TAKE 2 (Female Military Veteran)

Being a woman in the military was difficult because they didn't respect women who served. Even the men you served beside didn't respect you. I was told point blank, "You do not belong in the military."

All women everywhere go through sexual harassment, probably on a daily basis, but when you're in the military and a rare commodity, then there's a lot of pressure. In civilian life, I can say what I feel. In the military because you outrank me, if I say something, I'm either gonna be reprimanded or I'm gonna lose my rank.

It's worst in a combat zone. Not only do you have to deal with combat, you have the pressure of all this sexual harassment. Because you're not respecting me to stand beside you as a soldier. You see me as something else.

I wanted to literally shoot my platoon sergeant. And if they had not removed him from my sight, I probably would have killed him. He had me behind closed doors one day and I finally just said, "Fuck you, first sergeant."

Nobody else heard, so what you gonna do? It's just me and you. But that's why you can't say nothing; you're silenced because of your rank. That's what kills a woman's spirit, why so many women suppress it, because nothing is ever going to be done.

My captain was a female. My lieutenant was a female. She actually came to me because she had seen his behavior.

And nothing happened. He just got moved. And when he got back to the US, he got to retire with nothing against him. My first sergeant was a rapist, and not a damn thing happened to him.

That's how much they respected women.

8. A BETTER WAY: SEXUAL ASSAULT TAKE 3
(Female Military Veteran)

Back in the day female Navy women were called “waves.” And the men in leadership would make a point of talking about “riding the waves.” They formed an alliance against you.

The sexual harassment starts as early as bootcamp. And you’re conditioned to accept it and deal with it. Because if you say anything, you’re a troublemaker.

But when I took command, and my first sergeant was harassing the women—let me be clear, it took forever for a woman to finally come to me and admit it was happening, but once she did, or actually once they did, those women believed I would do something. They were right.

He went under investigation; he got charged, everything. I pushed it to the limit, because I’m female, I understand. I’m gonna do everything I can to put a stop to this.

Things have changed, and they have changed because of men being arrested. Commanders, officers, you name it. Things have changed over the last twenty years, and I’m thankful that it’s not going on to that same level anymore.

I want the women coming in to know: we did our best to pave a better way for you.

9. YOU CAN SMELL THE IRON
(Female Military Veteran)

In Special Forces, the chaplains can't accompany you on missions. And our chaplain would always tell us, "God don't give you more than you can handle."

Well, nobody wanted to hear that, cause he's not seeing what we're seeing. So, we're coming back from a mission and the ground gets on the radio and asks, "What can we get for you?" And I say, "I want the chaplain at the end of my runway."

And they say, "Ma'am, you know we can't do that."

But they did. They brought the chaplain to the end of my runway. And I'm coming off the plane—let me help you paint this picture: I left my own children, the kids I bathe and smell the baby shampoo in their hair, I left those kids when I got deployed. And now I'm coming off a plane loaded with other children and every one of them seriously injured.

I'm holding this young girl and my uniform is saturated with her blood. It's warm, cause her blood is warm. You can smell the metallic iron smell of her blood mixed with the gas fumes of the plane. And as I'm coming down the ramp, that blood is getting cold and I can't look down—I don't want to look down—cause she's missing a leg and an arm.

And there at the end of my runway, is the chaplain. And as soon as he sees me and sees all these injured children, his knees hit the ground on the ramp and his hands go up in the air and he yells, "God!!! God!!! This shit needs to stop! And it needs to stop now!"

You can say "God don't give you more than you can handle" all you want, but it's a different thing when you actually see what "more than you can handle" looks like.

10. YOU CAN'T FIX IT: PTSD TAKE 2 (Female Military Veteran)

It's amazing what you can get used to. Enemies yelling at each other, shooting right at the outside gate, rocket flying over, a company out on mission and you hear them blow up. It quickly becomes just everyday life.

The biggest thing—I lost a battle buddy out there. It's something I'll never forget. Ever. He was a great guy and it was just a normal routine mission; you wouldn't think anything'd happen and in like seconds, he's gone.

You got people wounded, all this sand everywhere, and smoke and the smell of a dead person. People climbing out of the truck and they're all bloody and burned up and discombobulated, just walking around, trying to feel.

It's something I will never ever ever ever forget. I was the gunner that day. I was in the turret. So, what did I miss? What could I have done different? It happened right in front of me, so could I have done something to fix it? Could I have made them stop?

All these could've's. But at the end of the day I can't fix it. I can't bring him back. It's something I will always live with.

It's especially hard when you're not even sure what you're really fighting for anymore. You're just kinda there. And then you lose somebody. I mean people get seriously injured and for what? They clearly don't want us over there, so why are we still here?

Afterward, your superiors give you a day or two to breathe. And then you go right back to the same thing. All over again, so you kinda just get numb.

I'm pretty much still numb. I mean I have feelings, but most of my emotions are just anger. I don't really have anything else.

11. PUMPED UP: TRANSITIONING TAKE 3 (Female Military Veteran)

I can't tell anybody how to transition well or what makes you stop doing some of the things you do. I think certain things I'll probably do the rest of my life. Like being able to walk into a place and know where every exit door is. How many tables are in the room, how many people, what do they look like, how are they acting? I can do that in seconds.

Even driving, I analyze everything. Going through underpasses: what's on the side of the road, is there trash? Is there a car? And I know it's not necessary and I'm working to calm that down, but that is a work in process. It's extremely hard to take the adrenaline down. Cause you're pumped up on adrenaline the whole time you're over there. Bringing it down is tough.

When I first got back home it was hard to deal with a lot of things. I'd probably drink every day. No probably, I did. That was my coping. I was just kinda tryin' to forget about everything, but drinking doesn't actually make you forget about anything. So, there's really no point to be drunk all the time. You can't actually do much when you're drunk. And you sure can't afford it—I would be the brokest person ever!

But transitioning is hard. Real hard. Some days, I feel like it would be a lot easier just to go back. Instead of being here. But that's not really logical either. You can't do that for the rest of your life. I'd kill myself probably in the first couple years. The adrenaline. And the stress. That stuff's deadly.

Having a support system helps. Going to the Vet Center. Cause, we as veterans, most of us have always done everything on our own, so it's extremely hard to have somebody to support you. Very hard to believe and trust that.

12. THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE, TAKE 1
(Male Military Service Member)

I don't really know what to say back when someone says, "Thank you for your service." I used to say, "Well, thanks for paying taxes" just to get a laugh. Cause that's how I get paid.

But no, it's good when people say thank you. It's cool there's people out there who feel that way. It's actually lots better than I thought. When I found out I was on orders here, everybody's like, oh, you're going to hate it. It's so liberal, blah blah blah blah. But it's been the exact opposite. I know there's people here that don't agree with what we're doing. But most people I've come in contact with have been very supportive. They say, "Thank you for your service" even if they don't agree with what the military is doing. And that's the best you can ask for. They have their reasons. They aren't stupid; they have an informed opinion.

As long as they understand I joined the military because it was a family thing, but I stayed because I wanted to have some sort of say in protecting this country. The people in Afghanistan, in Iraq, don't want us there, and they're going to keep fighting because they want us gone. So, my feeling is I would rather them waste their resources fighting us over there, where I'm trained to fight, rather than planning another 9/11. Because it's a lot easier on them to fight us over there.

When people don't necessarily agree with the military and what we're doing, but they're still supportive of soldiers, that's pretty cool. I definitely respect that.

13. THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE, TAKE 2
(Female Military Veteran)

I used to feel kind of a lot of pride about it, but I don't feel good anymore when you thank me for serving. I don't hold it against someone when they say, "Thank you." How could they know? I wouldn't have. If I was a civilian and thanked somebody for their service, I wouldn't have known everything they've gone through.

Basically, what I did, I was in combat, truly in combat, life or death situations. I almost had to shoot kids. Had it come right down to it, we would have had to shoot these children. Thank God that didn't happen, but it almost did.

So much hits you when you come back. You don't know what you're really thinking. You just feel all these emotions. Anger mostly. I was just straight up angry. I don't even know who I was mad at. I was just mad.

I almost beat this guy up. He cut me off in traffic, and then I cut him off, and I jumped out of the car and thank God I stopped and said to myself "What are you doing?"

So, I quit leaving the house. I didn't feel sane, because I'm not that kind of crazy person. I was just forced to be.

So, I really don't feel like some kind of hero. I'm somebody who nearly had to shoot a bunch of kids and that is not a good reason to give me a discount at your store.

14. THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE, TAKE 3

(Female Military Veteran)

I hear a lot from veterans how much they hate being thanked for their service. Except the Vietnam vets. But the majority of veterans I know, the younger ones, don't like it. They're just, "It doesn't mean anything."

That attitude has almost become a cliché now. But I don't mind being thanked. It's a way for a disconnected populace to feel more connected and, hey, whatever makes you sleep at night.

We all do dumb shit every day and say stupid shit to people—I mean, we thank our bus drivers. And we thank our veterans because we want to feel good and we want to feel connected. I just say, "It's an honor to serve" and that's as unconsidered a response as the "thank you" might have been and it's all fine. The same way people say, "How are you?" when they're not really looking for an answer. They're just reaching out.

I understand why veterans have this thing now, "Don't thank me for my service; you don't know what I've done."

But I'm like, "Dude, we're all just trying to connect with each other. If that's how you gotta do it, that's how you gotta do it."

What's the problem? It's just words.

15. GIVE PEOPLE A CHANCE: CONVERSATION, TAKE 1

(Male Military Veteran)

A lot of it is just having the conversation. It's almost like people are scared to talk to us, like they think everybody in the military has PTSD or something. But if you just ask, "Hey, do you mind talking to me about the military for a few minutes?" I think most veterans would do that.

I'll talk to anybody. I'm an open book. I recognize there's lots of people that don't like the military and I'm good with that, that's one of your inherent rights as a citizen. If you don't like the military, and you want to speak out against the war? Then by all means, go ahead, voice that opinion. Just, give some thought behind it. Do some research. Watch Fox News, CNN, Al Jazeera, watch them all. Because it's easy to end up saying something that isn't necessarily true, if you come to a belief because of fake facts or whatever.

For a lot of civilians, the military is what "those people" do or did. "Those people" that weren't smart enough to do something else. There's no sense of having a connection or value for military service. So, the disconnect is real. But the American military is under civilian control. The American military goes nowhere that a civilian hasn't sent it. So, like it or not, you have a responsibility here.

Mostly, I would say just give people a chance. Talk to people, listen, converse. Most veterans are pretty open with their experiences, and it's a conversation this country needs to have.