

Tom Laaser (TL) talks to Niall Munro (NM)

Niall Munro Thank you very much Tom for speaking to me about some of your work and experience. What I thought we might start with is just if you said a bit about your military background and experience that would be great.

Tom Laaser OK, so I enlisted in the United States army in 2011. I was enlisted as a field artillery cannoneer. I shot 105 mm originally. And then I was later trained to shoot triple 7 155 mm when I went to Afghanistan. The entirety of my military service was out of Fort Drum, New York with the 10th Mountain Division. I deployed with 4th Brigade 25th Regiment Field Artillery in 2013 to 2014 for nine months. We were in Camp Clark, Khost province on the Pakistan border where primarily our mission was to support the Afghan army as well as provide security for the Afghan elections that were happening, provide training with the understanding that they would take over the battle space which never actually happened. I also was able to receive linguistic training in Dari which wasn't too useful because it was a Pashtun speaking area but I was able to work somewhat as a liaison while people were training the Afghans and sharing guard duties and things like that with them. During that time I was injured in very minor ways that compounded so that I was physically unable to do the physicality of the military job. However, the majority of my injuries were invisible as they call them which became more apparent within a month or two of returning to the United States. I developed a number of social anxiety and PTSD disorders and was in treatment for the last year and a half of my military service before being medically retired for that.

NM Yes, it's interesting that you call them invisible injuries. Where does that language come from?

TL That's... It's a big movement within the VA and also a lot of PTSD literature today. There's a move for people to call it PTS. That it's not a disorder. Or post-traumatic growth. Many people call it post-traumatic growth. A large thing that came out of--is it Jonathan Shay?--his work, *Achilles in Vietnam*, was the idea of moral injury. The idea that you can not only be wounded physically but that also on a moral level you can also be wounded. And that those wounds have a healing process or scarring that happens because there's typically a divide between the physicality, you know, if you see somebody, an amputee and things. There is a difference in how people treat that and somebody who looks very high functioning and "normal" who has a similarly disabling thing about themselves, it's just invisible. So more and more in the literature it's equating the two. The body and the mind are on equal footing, so.

NM So when you came back and that happened, I think you've spoken previously about kind of demilitarising yourself, something you, a process you undertook yourself, something you wanted to do or that you decided you had to do?

TL So my process out of the military was unpleasant. It was in and out of treatment centres for a year and a half while waiting for retirement orders which come down at any moment and then you have thirty days to get out of the military. And it was also my situation was very unique also in that all of a sudden coming home from deployment, I was broken, emotionally unstable. My family became very... we had a lot of debt, unable to... It was too many life

changes at once and I was retired quickly. And we stayed living on the military base. As a retiree you can do that in America. We did that for several months before finally moving back to Massachusetts to live with family and it was around that time when I started to really heal and to bridge the gap. When I was applying to the university, I met somebody who said to me there are three types of veterans you will meet: those that are all about being a veteran and that's all they've got in terms of identity; those that want nothing to do with veterans, they won't go to the VA, they won't get any of the benefits that are deserving of them, they won't even tell you about their military service; and the third one and he said it is the hardest but the most healthy, is those that have integrated their past experiences with the creation of what they are becoming. That was really profound to me because...

NM Who told you that?

TL That was an advisor at the university I went to. He was the son of a Coast Guard captain. And he was working... my university has a number of veterans, supports a very strong community. The first year that you're there you are in a cohort of military veterans and you take your English class, your public speaking class with veterans. And they have a number of tools to help you transition with that understanding that it is difficult and it is a culture shock. And so for me, there was a process of demilitarising because I feel there were aspects that I definitely wanted to hold onto and honour and also there were aspects which just weren't me anymore. And there's kind of some freedom to that I guess especially coming out of the military where you can start to feel OK with choosing things again. I think some veterans like to... I was messing with one of the guys about that. Veterans will still typically be fifteen minutes early to everything. I purposefully try to be ten minutes late to things, you know. You begin to play around with the idea of identity. And what I found was that creativity that's there was more liberating than anything. Yeah, I enjoyed the structure of the military and the culture around it, it's own, you know, vocabulary, and everything about that. And there was freedom in that structure. And then becoming a veteran you have this ability where you can take the power and pick and choose almost within certain constraints of where you wish for that aspect of you to come out and when.

NM That's really fascinating. And I wonder, so you're talking about creativity, I wonder what writing does for you then?

TL Yeah, writing is a huge thing for me. So I know not every veteran sees it that way. And I think this is the beauty of writing is that it can be done for a number of different reasons. For me, it's cathartic. And also it's almost a spiritual... it's as close as I can get to a spiritual exercise in that a number of workshops I've gone to or just freewriting or things that I just start jotting down will typically teach me more about myself than I consciously know. I really enjoy especially trying out different poetry forms because when you become constrained by a form, you realise these aspects of you that are a little subconscious and so for me writing is kind of... it gives myself, I guess I called call it my true self deep in there, the ability to talk to myself which I find fascinating. And I really love the communal aspect of writing, the workshops, the growing number of veterans that are coming around, the veteran-civilian dialogue. That writing for me can be solitary if it needs to be and in communion at the same time. Or when we all come together in a room and we're all writing quietly there's really something profound about being a human being desiring to be alone with others. I think writing really does that in all shapes and forms.

NM Is there a similarity between that kind of, if you like, camaraderie and something you might get in the military?

TL Definitely, yeah. I think the writing community you find has its quirks. It has its own culture, its own lingo. And just like the military with different branches you have your poets, as you have your marines, you have your armies, you have your fiction writers. But it is kind of cool because there is also some blurring in that. You can write poetry and fiction whenever you want. So yeah, I think writing and the arts in general are similar enough to the communal aspects of the military but you can also have it both ways. I think that's a cool part of it.

NM And you're also talking there very interestingly (this is the last question) about the civilian-military divide or bridging that divide. So that's something you think poetry can do?

TL Yeah, I cannot for the life of me think about who said it but after the September 11th attacks there was somebody that said "Get us the poets. We need them to tell us the story to deal with this". I really think that's very true that as wonderful as medical science and things like that, it really comes down to the poets and the story-makers who kind of keep humanity going. Because it's like a bigger version of the microcosm of a human is we have to have a voice to tell us the story of what we're doing while we're actively living it. I definitely think what this divide is now... I think divides ebb and flow over cultures. I don't think poets can fix things but I do believe that they are extremely vital, they're the lifeblood of the body as it were, that sort of continues it to the next step.

NM So is that about communicating ideas, saying this is my experience as a veteran, this has been my experience and now I'm going to put it into words in a way you will be able understand it?

TL Yeah, I mean, well for me, I think the beauty in it is writing to be done for its own sake, that... I do truly believe that there's benefits in giving everybody a voice and giving people forums for which to have those voices. I don't think the goal of connections and bridging has to be as overt. I think if we just concentrate on making the forums, making the spaces, and making the tools as accessible as possible then the connections will come naturally from them. For me personally, I'm more focused on you know workshops and meeting veterans and things of whatever form it takes, that they have an avenue of expression. And I think not just veterans but I think if everybody had that and communally the forms with which we can actually share it, benefits would come from that.

NM Well we're very glad you are able to come to this workshop with so thank you so much Tom.

TL Oh, thank you so much. This is incredible.