Summary of Oral History Transcript
Student, Citizen, Soldier: Oral History and Student Veterans

Landers, Tom

U.S. Army, Cavalry Scout

Interviewer: Andrew Darien

Interview conducted by Andrew Darien, Salem State University, on 04/04/2016

Summary of transcript:

Landers was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania and grew up in the small, working class town of Factoryville, Pennsylvania. He joined the Army in 2009 and became a Calvary Scout Specialist. He was stationed in Fort Knox, KY, Schofield Barracks, HI, and Fort Benning, GA. Landers was deployed to Iraq's Diyala Province from 2010 to 2011 where he worked with the local Kurdish forces. His unit endured firefights, IEDs, and rocket attacks. By the time Landers returned to civilian life in 2014 he had accumulated severe back and hip injuries . He discusses the challenges of pain management and veterans' services. Landers works as a Ranger for the National Park Service in Salem.

Tom Landers
Narrator

Andrew Darien
Salem State University
Interviewer

Aries Wigfall
Transcriber

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at Salem State University
Salem, Massachusetts

Andrew Darien: Good morning, today is April 4th, 2016. My name is Drew Darien. I am a professor of History here at Salem State University and I have the great pleasure of being joined today by Tom Landers, who's a US Army Veteran and served in the Iraq War. Tom, thank you so much for being here today.

Tom Landers: Thanks for having me.

AD: It's the third week in April here in New England and we're about to get six inches of snow on the ground. I wanted to talk to Tom a little bit about being transplanted to New England from Pennsylvania. So I guess that's where I wanted to start. How are you feeling about living in this climate?

TL: It's not that much different. You know, It's a little bit colder up here, the ocean, but overall it's about the same.

AD: So one of the things that I definitely want to do is to talk about the trajectory of the different places that you've lived, from Fort Knox, to Hawaii, to serving in Iraq, to coming here and being in New England. But maybe let's just sort of start at the beginning and think a little bit about your hometown. You're born in Scranton—

TL: Yes.

AD: You grew up in a town called Factoryville, which I think is a pretty small town of about a thousand people. How would you describe it to folks who have never been there before?

TL: It's pretty much a dead end town. North-east Pennsylvania, the economy's been going down the tank for years. Scranton's the big hub, most people work out of there and the only thing that's really left is medical jobs. There's a lot of older people, retirees, there's a lot of people coming in from the cities. Everyone leaves, a lot of people come back. People that stay there, it's fifty-fifty. Some have been successful, but the vast majority are staying right on about the same level as their parents.

AD: And just give us a little frame of reference. How far is the city from New York and Philadelphia?

TL: We're about two hours North from Philly. I think it's about two and a half, three hours, from New York City.

AD: And what would you say is the regional identity of the people who live there?

TL: Very ethnic, a lot of Poles, a lot of Irish. Italians, there's a good number of them. It's coal country and farming country. Where we were, where I grew up is predominantly rural. A lot of people farm, a lot of mechanics, a lot of blue collar jobs. Scranton, there's a few people that I went to school with growing up that had white collar jobs but by and far they were lower middle education.

AD: So of course you're looking at all of this with a little bit of historical hindsight. I imagine that you don't grow up, at least at an early age, thinking that you're living in a dying town. It's just sort of the norm, or was that something that people talked about and when did you become aware of it as, kind of, it being defined that way?

TL: I think it was probably toward the end of high school. We had a lot of people going off to college, lot of people looking at different fields and realizing that jobs weren't available in the area. I went in EMS during high school, I believe my junior year I started, junior or senior. And there wasn't really that much mobility unless you stayed in the medical field. You know, it was assumed that if you worked in EMS your plans were either go get your paramedic or go to nursing school and stay in the area. And that's what a lot of people I worked with did is they ending up being a paramedic, they'd stay in the area, very few left and you know the economy, paramedics don't make great pay there, nurses make better pay but for the area it's still, it's not a great living.

AD: So it sounds like your folks had pretty representative jobs there. Your dad was a mechanic and your mom was a certified nurse's assistant.

TL: Aide, yeah.

AD: Did they talk very much when you were growing up about their jobs. What was your sense of what they did and did you think that you were gonna follow in either of their paths?

TL: My mom would always work around the medical field. She didn't talk about it overly much, you know it's the usual complaints that you have your certification, you'd like to go to nursing school but having a family it balances out and you really don't have time for it. She's actually just now going back to school for her paramedic. My father there were a lot of mechanics in the area. It was kind of, it was, it was very representational and it wasn't, it's not a bad job. You can make a decent amount of pay, he owned his own garage with a friend for a while. So—

AD: Did you ever work for him?

TL: No, I, as a kid I would do like a little bit of tinkering here and there. But it was something I found interesting but it wasn't something I wanted to do.

AD: Yeah, I'm actually interested in learning about you as a child a little bit just to get a sense of your larger trajectory. You're the middle of three children. You've got older and younger sisters, you're all spaced apart by about five years.

TL: Yes.

AD: I know of course that you have two daughters now, so it seems that your fate, for better or worse, is to be surrounded by women. So tell me a little bit about your siblings and how you fit into the family and what your personality was like as a kid.

TL: My older sister—kind of the black sheep of the family. I don't speak to her anymore. I've attempted to get most of the family to stop speaking to her. She went, kind of, off the beaten path, she spent a lot of time in juvenile detention as a kid. Got heavily invested in drugs. She had my nephew when she was—

AD: That's a bad investment from my point of view.

TL: Yeah, very bad. You know, and she's been a big source of drama which I try to stay clear of. My younger sister she's—she just recently graduated last year with her B.A. in psychology.

AD: Nice.

TL: Doesn't know if she's gonna do-—going to continue. She was interested in grad school but she was just offered a position as a manager for a salon she was working at while in school. So she's making good decisions but she's still kind of staying in the area.

AD: Where did she go to school?

TL: Keystone College, which is in Factoryville. And, you know, she's done the same thing, she's made some bad decisions. I mean, we all have, but she's getting past them, which is great. But I still, like, keep urging her to get out of the area because there really isn't-—there's not much room to grow. As far as me, I was always kind of quiet, reserved. I spent a lot of time with both my dad and my grandfather growing up. Lot of time fishing, hunting, outdoors. It-—I was always active, which was kind of nice and we grew up-—I spent a lot of time with my grandparents as a kid—small farm. We had cattle when I was younger, horses. Ended up getting rid of those because they were too expensive.

AD: Mhm.

TL: But yeah, it—yeah know, just kept busy, kind of myself. I was more of a loner but I tended to get along with everyone. You know, I still have people from previous jobs, from high school, that I don't remember, that will run into me once in a while and be like, oh hey, and I just kind of have to fake until I remember who they are.

AD: Mhm and you talked a little bit, tell me if I'm mischaracterizing this, but as maybe serving as a little bit of a buffer between yourself and the dysfunction of your older sister and did you feel protective of your younger sister? Did you feel like since she was so difficult and challenging that there's maybe more pressure on you to be more mature, adult, or competent? Or did those things just come natural to you?

TL: I think they just kind of came. Because of the five year gap I was never really close with either of them. My older sister I was just never close with at all. My younger sister, we're a little bit closer now but, you know, we're not—It's more of just like a plain friendship. We don't talk overly much. We give a phone call every now and then.

AD: And your step father served in the military?

TL: Yes.

AD: So what exactly did he do?

TL: He was actually a Cavalry Scout also.

AD: Interesting.

TL: I was playing with the idea of joining for a while. My mom informed me after the fact that she kind of assumed I always would. And he, I'd say definitely influenced me on going that route. My full time partner at work, he was also, he was an artilleryman, and he was the one the kind of finally pushed me that direction, to finally—because I was playing with the idea of a few months. I played with it at high school—

AD: Was this when you were an EMT, or—?

TL: Yes.

AD: Okay.

TL: He kind of pushed me that way and my step father— everything he had told me kind of influenced me to go the cavalry route.

AD: So where did he serve?

TL: He originally, he was an engineer in 101st out of Fort Campbell and he did his initial enlistment with National Guard and he was a 2nd 104th at Pennsylvania.

AD: And so what kinds of things did he say about serving in the military that sounded appealing to you?

TL: Just—there's a lot, because he was on, I think it was his second deployment before I had decided and a lot of the decision was hearing him, hearing my partner, hearing other people I worked with, hearing them go one about the Iraqis didn't really want us there, they didn't really care that we were there and—

AD: So he was in the Persian Gulf War, or—?

TL: No, both his deployments at that point were Iraq and he did a third after I enlisted. They didn't, they didn't really care that we were there. In contrast, everything you saw on the news was, oh we're doing great things, they love us. So it was kind of a—I was at a point in my life where I wasn't really happy with what I was doing. I was looking for something else and I decided you know what, maybe go find out. And obviously there's benefits to it on top of that but I was just curious, that was my main point for joining.

AD: So I wanna kind of return to that point in a bit but let's step back a bit chronologically. I guess you would have been thirteen years old when the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked on September 11th. Do you remember where you were when you heard the news of that?

TL: I was in in school—I think it was eighth grade, I'm not sure. I know we had, we had an exchange teacher from Estonia that year. Our school joined in a program so we sent out teacher there and they sent a teacher over to us and I remember being, I believe it was in her class, or I had her class just after, but I remember her leaving early. It didn't really mean much to any of us at that point. You're thirteen years old, I didn't even know what the World Trade Centers were at that point. Obviously I had heard of the pentagon but it just—I don't know, like, obviously you know something big is going on but you don't understand it. I'd say that's probably about where I was at that point.

AD: Do you remember the adults in your life talking about it very much?

TL: Not that much, I mean obviously we knew something was coming but whatever was gonna happen, it wasn't gonna affect our area that much. It's a small area, its rural, our largest city is Scranton which—

AD: How far was the fourth plane that crashed from where you live?

TL: That was out toward Pittsburg, so that's, I think that's around five to six-hour drive. It's a relatively large distance.

AD: So it's in your state but it's really not in your periphery—

TL: No, not at all.

AD: It doesn't feel like it's hitting home.

TL: No, not at all. I don't think—If I remember correctly, I don't think we anyone in the school who had relative that was involved. So, I mean that was a plus. I did have one family friend, he was actually working in New York, and I talked to him a few years down the road like he had mentioned it but even then it wasn't—he had seen the second plane, if I remember correctly, or at least heard it but it still just, it wasn't something that was relevant that was a great impact on the area.

AD: And did you grow up with, like, a very strong sensibility of nationalism or patriotism or did you think very much about the place of the United States in the world or was that not really on your radar till later on?

TL: Not overly much. I kind of remember my grandmother telling me about when she was a child in World War II, like, how they had that little (*unintelligible*) around the corner. She had, I believe that her cousins or uncles had served in the Pacific. I remember her mentioning, for example, one had been wounded and he ended up having seizures the rest of his life. But honestly, it wasn't all that big a thing because it was because it's farm country and traditionally it tends to be like a big recruiting spot but it's not—we don't really worry about the whole national aspect that much because we're too busy worrying about our own little area, we're too busy—we're working, we don't have time to worry about what's going on in, say, Boston or New York or California. It doesn't matter.

AD: So just help me to understand this because I'm really confused, New York is not the center of the universe?

TL: (*Laughs*) Well you know, the only thing we worry about when it comes to New York is the New York drivers and the New Jersey Drivers. So, yeah—

AD: That's a problem. Transplanted New Yorkers coming into your town
TL: Yeah, a lot of people from New Jersey buying property in the area and then posting it off limits for hunting. That was a big, big issue and—

AD: So hunting—you grew up with guns, comfortable with guns, enjoy using guns?

TL: Yeah, I got my first 22 was a Christmas present when I was six and I used to, in the summers, I'd take it go up on the mountain behind their house my myself, come back a few squirrels, a few rabbits. I was constantly in the woods. If I wasn't doing that I was usually fishing with my grandfather on the weekends or my dad. Yeah, the outdoors were always a part of life. I'd say that probably had some in influence. But—

AD: So let's talk about the decision to become an EMT out of high school. That's a job where there's often a lot of adrenaline. You see some bad stuff. Was that something you went into just because the medical field was one of the few thriving areas of employment in your area and you had the connection with your mom or was this something specific that you were interested in doing?

TL: I think it was more connection wise. Like, it—anatomy, everything like that, it always interested me. I thought they'd be good skills to have. That had some bearing. My stepfather, he

was also a paramedic, so that had some influence. My first job actually was—he was actually the one who had talked me into it. I did a few ride-alongs, signed up for a course. And my first year or so as an EMT was as a ride along and I'd go with him on the weekends when he was working. So, it—I think it was a mixture of everything.

AD: Did you anything when you were an EMT that was difficult to witness?

TL: There were a few. You still remember certain calls. Like, I can still remember the first cardiac arrest we had. Was an elderly lady, it was at, I believe it was her granddaughter's graduation party or birthday, and like that, you always remember it because it's your first. At least in our society you don't see dead people and generally when you do it's in a nice sanitary situation. They're in a hospital or in hospice care, they're pain free and it kind of strikes you as fast, cold. You kind of realize, well, maybe you don't have as much control so you kind of learn to ignore death I'd say. You just kind of accept it as part of life.

AD: So seeing death made you more comfortable with it?

TL: I'd say so. It, like, I grow up hunting. You're used to dealing with dead things. I mean obviously there's a big difference between butchering a deer and taking someone to the hospital in cardiac arrest or somebody in a car accident but you kind of learn to look at it as an abstract, like, ok, it's a person but you don't register it. You kind of dehumanize it so you don't recognize it—you know what I mean?

AD: Defense mechanism.

TL: Yeah, in a way.

AD: And I imagine it's hard to know how much of one's reaction to that sort of thing is socialization versus biology because there are certain people, and I put myself in this category, that would feel very anxious about something like that. But you've got a pretty calm demeanor. I mean, I've known you for a little while and it's been pretty consistent. When you decided you were gonna go into the military did you at all contemplate your own mortality?

TL: Not really until deployment. I was twenty-one at the time. You're young like that you think you're immortal, you really do. Nothing's gonna happen to you, you know what you're doing. When we got to Iraq, it wasn't that bad when we first got there. I slept through just about everything. Every once in a while, like, a rocket would come there and I'd sleep through it. Sleep was more important than worrying about it at that point. I got to a point, I think it was about halfway through deployment and we were supposed to be going out on a mission up north into Kurdistan—the truck—another platoon ended up taking the route we were planning on taking

that day and they ended up getting hit by, it was a 120ml mortar that was on the side of the road and luckily there was no major injuries. I think the gunner had a scrape across his hands and that was it. But the truck was pelted. Seven tires blew—these were on Strykers—seven tires blew out, the transmission was mangled, the differentials were mangled and they still managed to make it about halfway back and, like I said, no injuries which is amazing. But I think that's probably around the point that I realized, you know what, it doesn't really matter. Because it you're in that truck and you get blown up and you get killed you're not gonna know. At that point you kind of would prefer to be killed than end up losing a few limbs. The VA's health care and the Army's health care isn't great and dealing with these disabilities long term would be horrible but if you're sitting here having a discussion with someone and a mortar lands in the housing unit that you're living in you're not gonna know so there's no point in worrying about it. I—(*laughs*)

AD: You're really good at rationalizations. (*laughs*)

TL: Yeah, well I try. You've got to figure out—you've got to get over it. Like, our—

AD: So, I thought you were going to say that that was the juncture at which you started to think about your own mortality but it sounds like it's the exact opposite, that that's the moment where you just kind of came to terms with the fact that you had no control over it and if you were going to go then so be it.

TL: Pretty much. Our medic, he was an alright guy but he was very high stress. The whole way into Iraq he was stressing out, freaking out. The first day we were there—

AD: It's like having me as your medic.

TL: Pretty much. The first day we were there a mortar came in—the first night—and he dove from the top bunk on this side (*gestures to the right*), underneath the bunk on the other side. Like, I didn't even see him move, he was just there and most of the deployment that's how it went. He was very skittish. You don't want to live like that. When you're constantly worried about what's going to happen you don't live. So, you just kind of accept it and here we are.

AD: So when you joined the military you knew that almost certainly you were going to be deployed?

TL: Yeah.

AD: And I know that you're a very cosmopolitan student who's well aware of most history and contemporary politics now as all our majors are. But six, seven, eight years ago what's your

understanding of the war in Iraq? Do you believe that it's a just cause and then what specifically is your understanding of your own role in that mission?

TL: I definitely come a ways from that. I was just curious that was the whole reason I joined, or at least a major reason I joined. Deploying—I got lucky, I went to a Stryker unit, which was what I wanted to do. I went to Hawaii, which I wasn't thrilled about. But you end up working with some great people. We had a great command group. They did a really good job of kind of buffering us. The State Department, even then, and I still feel like it today, the State Department had no idea what they were doing. And they kind of—my belief is that our command group saw that it was an unattainable position and they just kind of tried to make it nice, calm, easy and bring home as many people as they could. Obviously the mission was important but I think they were well aware that whatever we did there wasn't going to have a lasting impact.

AD: Why not?

TL: Or at least was likely not to. For one, the area we were in, Diyala Province, it's borderline—our mission we had five trilateral checkpoints. So it was US forces with Iraqi Army and Peshmerga, which are the Kurdish forces. The Kurds are very Western if you drive up north in the Kurdistan towns, Kalar was the major one, very Western. There was a women's school across the road from the police station where we always used to go. And the girls would come out wearing slacks, blouses, buttoned blouses, and just a head scarf. In contrast, the town right outside of our base, Jalula and on the other side As-Sadiyah, they were almost entirely Arab, and women—full length burkas. You never really interacted with them much, I mean, you couldn't see their faces for the most part. And there was a lot of issues between the Pesh and the Iraqi forces. We actually, outside of Jalula when the elections were coming up, we had a major standoff with an Iraqi Army company. It moved into the town, which was strictly the Iraqi police in the town. They didn't want Pesh, they didn't want Iraqi army, they wanted to keep it sort of neutral. Iraqi Army moved in the edge of town. The Pesh sent an entire brigade down and there was a huge standoff, took about a week and I found out afterwards—after we left they ended up coming to confrontations again and the Iraqis and the Pesh have a history of it. The Kurds, they want their independence. First Gulf War they had kind of stood up, expecting maybe some help from the west and it didn't work out. So of course they had to deal with the repercussions of that and then during the invasion again they came and stepped up and now with the rise of ISIL you see the same thing happening. They're kind of left out there hanging. But at the time, like, the Kurds you could kind of empathize a bit. The Arabs—we had a working relationship with them, we just really didn't care about them as much because it was obvious they didn't care. The Iraqi army, they received a lot of equipment, a lot of training from the US and they were still abysmal.

AD: And did you have much interaction with the local population?

TL: We had a good deal. I was on the security detail for the squadron commander. I was the Sergeant Major's driver and we would have a lot of meetings with a lot of the leaders, a lot of the sheiks and it felt like a lot of these meetings were just we were there to be there. No matter what we did they would come, they'd ask for money, they'd ask us to do a project, and they wouldn't really want to give anything in return. We were very non-confrontational as a unit. We tried not to go into the areas that were highly contested, where we knew there was a history of insurgency, such as Jalula, we tried not to go in there too often. The unit that replaced us—I ended up at another duty station with one of the guys who had relieved us and a month after we left they ended up having three guys killed maybe a mile down from the front gate. But they were also 1st Cavalry, 1st Cavalry has a reputation for kind of going in, nobody's going to give a shit and—they were aggressive, they ended up being attacked. We were kind of neutral the whole way, we had a few small IEDs, I think our worst injury was a camera fell on somebody—a camera fell on somebody and one of our .50 caliber's blew out and injured a guy and that was probably our worst injury.

AD: So that's really fortunate from a casualty perspective but I'm wondering a little bit about what happens to the morale of your unit when everybody kind of understands that what you're doing is either futile or that you're just kind of a place holder?

TL: Morale wasn't that bad. Our command group, they did a lot for it. They kept improvements up. We always had decent internet. We were always able to talk to people back home. I think everyone sort of accepted the mission. There were some people that did really believe we were making a difference. I definitely wasn't one of them and even now I still don't think we were one of them. Morale was generally pretty good. We had a few people that kind of went off the reservation mentally speaking, got sent back. We had one guy who ended up forging paperwork and got all the way back to Hawaii before anybody really noticed. It was a bit odd.

AD: When you said left the reservation do you mean went AWOL or mentally?

TL: I mean mentally, mentally, yeah.

AD: And any sense of what pushed those people over the edge?

TL: I don't really know. One of the cases I know that he had had multiple deployments and he just sort of, like, snapped one day. He wasn't violent toward anybody but he had walked into the operations center with his rifle loaded and that was sort of a quick, okay, took his rifle off of him and he was sent home within, like, another two or three weeks I believe it was.

AD: And did you witness that?

TL: I wasn’t there for that. The talk was right across the road from where our vehicles were staged and the S3 Shop, which runs the operation center, they’re kind of part of the command group, so we hear about it regularly, we interacted with them regularly. So we knew what was going on but we weren't there for it. And there were a few other cases of—psychological cases, people getting sent home. It was usually the high stress people, like our medic, who were constantly on edge even though we weren't really at a high risk position.

AD: And tell me a little bit about your training before you deployed. You were in Fort Knox and then you were in Hawaii?

TL: Yes. Fort Knox we did one station unit training, which is was combat arms do. You have your first nine weeks, which is your basic stage but there’s some skill training for your specific MOS involved, and then you had a weekend off—you’d come back and you finish the rest of your training and it’s all cast out, specific skills. Vehicles, weapons—things of that nature. We did have some really good leadership. Our drill sergeants were very on point. They constantly pushed you which, of course, was great and you needed it. Obviously at the time you’re thinking this is horrible, this sucks, why did I leave this job where I just had to worry about paperwork and maybe carrying somebody up and down stairs, to carrying a forty-five-pound rucksack. But the training, I think, was okay. It was good general training. You get specific training when you go to your unit because those are they guys you’re going to be with, you learn your SOP’s, you learn what to expect because you’re talking with people that had been deployed. All of our drills, I believe except for, maybe, one had been deployed but it had a small part because they have a specific curriculum they had to tie into. The unit—you get guys that that have been all over. We had guys deployed from 1st Cav, 101st, 3rd ACR and you get these little snippets. Everyone’s deployments different. Everyone has different losses, different gains. I’d been very lucky. We got there—I had gotten there in I believe it was in early July, late June or early July was when I had arrived at the unit and in October we ended up going to India for a month for training. We got to do a lot of vehicle time—it was a great training exercise and it kind of prepares you for that cross cultural. A lot of the Indians, at least the officer corps, would speak decent English. But a lot of the soldiers you—

AD: Where in India?

TL: Babina. (*unintelligible*)

AD: And why there?

TL: The army and the Indian army have had this training exercise—they switch back and forth every year. Like, the Indian army will send a unit to, say, Alaska or Hawaii to train. The next

year the US will send people. That year the Indian government actually bought a bunch of Javelins which are anti-tank missiles—

AD: And they do this because Kashmir and Alaska are exactly the same environment. (*both laugh*)

TL: There's actually a lot of glaciers up in northern India. So they are—the Indian army, they're plagued by a lot of economic issues. India has a lot going on. They don't have that much funding for the military so everything is strictly rationed. But as far as that they're probably some of the most disciplined troops you'll ever meet. I think the training—I think it was good because it—a major part of it was the US has been trying to get closer relations with India. It was stuff I learned after the fact obviously. But that one as I said they had purchased Javelins and they used us as an opportunity to give a display on it. So the Indians were impressed with that. I remember one incident. We gave an entire crate of 556 ammo to one of the Indian captains and it was more ammo than their officers had shot in their entire careers.

AD: Wow.

TL: Because there, everything—If you fire a round you have to give them the casing back or they'll go on lockdown until someone finds it because that's how tight their budget is.

AD: Wow.

TL: So it's great for them, they love it. It's great for us, we get that cultural effects—

AD: And you can go back home before being deployed?

TL: Yes. I had a few leaves there. Because I had to go home at one point because my aunt had died and then—my wife had come out before deployment—yeah, before we had gone to NTC in January I come home for a week—

AD: She was not your wife at the time—

TL: She was not—

AD: Maybe tell us about how you met her.

TL: So, high school both of us snowboarded. We actually met online, snowboard.com, it was, like, a social group for snowboarders. We met, talked a bit on there. Stopped talking, talked again. It was kind of like one of those friendships you just keep talking once in a while. It's

nothing serious and then I had talked to her a few months. I decided to join in September. I left for basic in January. I hadn't talked to her that whole period and we had phone calls one afternoon and nobody answered at home so I was like, who else can I call I have five more minutes for a phone call break. So I called her and let her know. Of course, bit of a shock. We kept talking one and off and then when I got to my duty station, found out I was deploying, we decided we'd meet. I was home, as I said after NTC, so, April for, like, a week and a half and she came down to visit for a few days and we went back—or, I went back—and as we were getting ready to deploy you have a leave block you can take beforehand and she flew out to Hawaii and we ended up getting married.

AD: Wow. Wow, that's pretty amazing. So what drew you two together? Or what drew you to her?

TL: There was a lot. As I said we talked since high school. We still do this today—we tend to, like, complete each other's sentences. Kind of, get out of my head type thing and I think we're both sort of the same. We tend to not be huge on social interaction. Obviously we know it's important but we're just as happy, kind of, by ourselves, reading a book not dealing with all the drama. She comes from a large family, I come from a family with a lot of drama so they kind of even out. There's just—

AD: So was it harder to go back once you were married and connected to this person or did that sort of reinvigorate you?

TL: We were young at the time. I was still twenty-one, no, I turned twenty-two at that point. And it didn't feel that much different because we hadn't had that much time actually together. When I came home on mid tour leave I ended up coming up here—she's from Lexington—and met her family for the first time. We got a lot closer over leave and leave is one of those weird things where your whole deployment you're like, oh I just want to go on leave. You finally go and about halfway through it because you have that constant nagging in the back of your head knowing I'm going to have to leave anyway, so about halfway through you start getting anxious and just want to go and get everything done with so you can come home for good. So that sort of made a difference.

AD: And so did that expedite your decision to leave the service?

TL: I had been, during deployment, kind of on the wall whether I wanted to stay or not. Deployment army and garrison army are a lot different and I think that definitely made a difference. I debated for a short while staying in. Then while I was in Iraq I hurt my back and I spent the next two years trying to get a diagnosis. We got back and it was, oh, well you know,

you're just sore. Here's some muscle relaxers, here's some Ibuprofen, here's some Tramadol and that's basically—

AD: Like bartenders.

TL: Yeah, exactly. Because my back had started about halfway through deployment, I think it was right after I had gone on leave, and through the rest of deployment—because there's nothing you can do, you can't really be, like, oh, I'm going to call in sick today. So you just deal with it. But after I got back I dealt with that for a while and I think it was about a week before I had left to go to Fort Benning, my next duty station, that they finally did X-Rays. A whole year— (*both talking*) and, oh yeah, we'll do something now.

AD: And what did they find?

TL: I have—It's, like, a bone island. One of the doctors I had had later on said probably what happened is somehow I ended up chipping my hip. So now I have a small bone island but it's under the muscle so it irritates both the muscle and the nerves. So a lot of it's, like, sciatica. I'll get shooting pains down my leg if I'm sitting for long periods, such as driving. Which of course we did a lot of in Iraq so it made it worse. Running—anything where I'm doing a lot of raising and lowering of my leg it tends to irritate it. So of course you run every day. We tended to run stairs a lot. Sit Ups—anything that had a lot of motion with my lower back or my hip would irritate it severely. But they finally sent me to a chiropractor and I had my first chiropractic appointment the day before I left island. So I couldn't continue care there and then you go on leave and I get to my next duty station and I have to start everything all over again. They have the medical records but it's a new doctor, they have their own way of doing things. Fort Benning—the medical care was a lot better and I've heard that from a lot of people because you go from a portable unit—

AD: That's in Georgia?

TL: Yes. Columbus, Georgia. You go from a deployable unit where they want to keep as many people as they can on the line, so, they're just trying to keep you going until they're getting rid of you. Then you go to Fort Benning, which is a training indoctrination post where they have so many new soldiers coming in and they want to get rid of them quickly. If you're in basic training and you're broken they don't want you because you're just going to end up giving more issues down the road and the doctor we had also did basic training so that was, sort of, his mindset was ok, well, let's find out what's wrong with you and get you where you need to be. He put me in for X-Rays, MRIs. That's when they found the bone spur—or, bone island, and it was constant physical therapy, back traction, acupuncture, chiropractic care, surgery consult. Everything. He just kept throwing things. Pain management—I ended up doing pain management for a while and

that's when they decided it's not going to get any better while you're in. I was right around five years at that point. My contract was five years and sixteen weeks and I was right at that point where I was about a year out. So they pushed me toward med board and the med board took fourteen months I believe it was. So that whole time—

AD: And did you have surgery?

TL: No. They said I wasn't a surgical candidate and I think even if I had to I definitely wouldn't have gotten it while I was in the army. There's some really bad horror stories. We had people—I know of at least two people that had surgery while they were in and both of them are permanently crippled. So—

AD: So from your point of view your experience is pretty representative in not getting great care.

TL: Yeah. The ongoing joke is surgeons in the army are butchers and it hasn't changed so much for the past hundred, two hundred years. Because if you're a physician, especially if you're a surgeon for the military, it's kind of a good meal ticket. You're probably not going to be fired, you can't be sued by people if you screw up during surgery. Most you're likely to get is a negative bullet on an OER, so you might get passed over for promotion. But the army needs so many doctors and surgeons that they're not going to kick people out unless it's a very, very bad screw up.

AD: So I think there's certainly a willingness among the American public to support veterans, particularly those who are injured, but there also just seems a disconnect between that willingness and the actual care that they're getting. Do you have any sense of what would make a real difference to deliver the kind of care that they need?

TL: If there was a larger percentage of the population being affected by it. Veterans make up less than a percent—one percent of the population and it's not going to make a difference politically. All these scandals that you hear about with the VA—how people are put on lists and they're dead. I think it was Arizona where forty people died on a waitlist, something along those numbers, but when it's less than one percent of the population nobody cares. Every politician that you see is, oh, we're going to fix the VA, we're going to increase spending and, yeah, they may increase spending but when the elections over they don't care. They want the people that are, like, oh yeah, that's are really good idea, we should take care of the veterans but the moment the spotlights off, the moment the elections won they have nothing to keep them doing it because—well why bother. And if nothing gets done I can always just blame, oh, well, we tried to do something but there wasn't enough support for it or there wasn't enough funding or we're giving them funding it's just an overbearing issue. The VA wastes money constantly. The army

wastes money constantly. So until you can fix that and until you make some heads roll at the upper levels—nothing's going to change.

AD: Are you still in pain today?

TL: Yeah. Pain management, they've come up with a pretty decent cocktail to kind of—it took the edge off. It took the edge off of everything. I was practically zombie when I was on it and I got to the point where I decided, you know what, dealing with a little bit of pain was better than constantly not knowing what the day was. I had two friends that I deployed with that—both of them ended up dying. One, it was an accidental overdose on the painkillers the VA had prescribed him that he had been on for months. You don't prescribe narcotics for long term. Anyone can see it's foolish. You're obviously—you're going to push addiction; you're going to build a tolerance. You're going to make it worse and worse and worse. I've seen addiction a lot. I know a handful of guys from Hawaii in the unit that I deployed with that ended up having to go to rehab at some point. I know people that were on narcotics for years and that was a big joke. A lot of people, yeah, my back hurts I'll go into the aid station—doctor will give me a handful of narcotics. So the drug addiction issue has been an issue with the army for decades and it's continuing to be. I think they're starting to notice but I don't think they're doing that much because it's easier to cover up the pain than to deal with the underlying cause.

AD: So you're still in a bit of pain today. You've found some ways to manage it on your own. Are you bitter about that?

TL: You shouldn't be twenty-eight years old and crippled and I know a lot of people who have dealt with that. I'd say I'm a little bit bitter. If it had been caught earlier I might have been able to do something differently and not irritated it, but what's done is done. I can't go back and change it. Hopefully something can change for somebody else down the road. But, like I said, there's not enough people that really give a damn that anything of any impact is going to happen.

AD: Do you think if you weren't in pain and hadn't been injured you would have stayed longer?

TL: I don't know. Especially now because there's been, like, a major cultural shift in the Army. I think I probably would get out. Because as the army was downsizing—we were pulling out of Iraq. Things changed a lot. You have the change now for women in combat arms, which I support but I think you also need to look at the standards because right now men and women have different standards and you can't say you're qualified to do this job but you're not qualified to meet the standards of the other people who have been doing the job. There's women that can perform better than men, no doubt it my mind. But it's not a majority and you need to take that into account.

AD: And there's some men that are built like me. Right? So there's that too.

TL: Yeah but you run, so—(*laughs*).

AD: Yes, I can run away from people. It's my primary skill.

TL: My idea is—if you have to run away then you screwed up somewhere along the road. There was that—during a conflict the army tends to be very good on picking soldiers that are good for the conflict. When you have your best combat leaders—they're efficient, they know what they're doing, they keep people alive. You want them to get promoted. And a peacetime army you end up with bureaucrats. You end up with people that know whose side to get on. We had that—that was another case we had during deployment. We had a soldier who was actually, I think he was about three years in, he was a specialist and he actually cried to the platoon sergeant—literally cried—because his first line told him that he was a horrible soldier and he never wanted to see him promoted. He became buddy-buddy with the platoon sergeant and he was promoted shortly after we got back and that was sort of the mentality that was taking over because it was all—

AD: (*both talking*) There were multiple fronts on which it felt like the right time to get out. And did you know what your trajectory, other than reuniting with your wife, would be? You knew you were going to go back to school?

TL: Well when I came back from deployment she had moved to Hawaii with us. She went to school for a bit and then she stayed—obviously we went to Georgia and had our first child. I wasn't sure. I know I wanted to do school. I had no idea what I wanted to do. I wanted a career that paid decent. I didn't really want anything that had to do with the military anymore.

AD: And you chose history? (*laughs*) Sorry—

TL: Well, originally I chose STEM. But I took a few history courses. I had some really good professors and—

AD: You were at Mass Bay first?

TL: Mass Bay, yes. Down in Wellesley. I decided, you know what, this is something I actually enjoy. I know the job prospects aren't great. History and English majors, kind of, — you should at least know by the time you're declaring your major that that's what the job market looks like. But I had my veteran's preference. I had the top priority for the veteran's preference for federal jobs. So I decided that's probably going to be the way to go. Looking around decided I wanted somewhere I could work outdoors. I couldn't stand sitting inside, bright lights all day. I'd lose my mind. (*Unintelligible*) mobility. Put me in an uncomfortable situation I could grow in. That's

why I chose it and I think I'm going to stay with doing the National Parks. I think it would be a good career choice. History is relevant. So, yeah.

AD: What do you like about history?

TL: We learn a lot about ourselves and where we fall in. Especially now with the humanities kind of dying out in early education, secondary ed. There's such a focus on repetition, repetition and you don't understand who you are, where you fit into everything, what your legacy is, what the legacy you're inheriting is and I think it's kind of a shame. There's so much—everything we do is interconnected and if anything else, history connects us with other people. We realize that besides skin color, besides religion, you're still a human and you still—innately you should, ideally care about others. You should care about where you fit in with everything. So I'd say that was probably one of the driving factors.

AD: And have you found it at all difficult to acclimate back to civilian life in general or being back in college when you're so much older and have so much more life experience than the typical first year student?

TL: Civilian life not so much but I had also had a long enough period before joining where I knew what to expect and I think that made a major difference. If I had been eighteen, right out of high school and joined, the army probably would have been my defining experience in life and I probably would be like you see with a lot of young vets when they get out where they strongly identify with it. They kind of wear it on their sleeve, want everyone to know, oh hey, I'm a veteran. So I think that definitely, kind of, gave me a bit of a head start over a lot. For college itself—hasn't been that bad. If I have a class where it's, kind of, hey these are the assignments turn them in when you want to, I procrastinate. But I can procrastinate anyway and I did before. I think generally it's pretty good. I think there's enough structure but there's not so much that I'm overwhelmed. That was a big issue I have with the military. You don't have that independent space so I always sought out positions where I would have some. I would say generally I haven't had that many issues. It is kind of nerve-racking when you have a class with someone who was born a decade after you but overall I'd say I haven't had that many issues.

AD: Do your fellow students know that you're a veteran?

TL: Some do. It generally ends up coming up at some point or another. A lot of the people that I talk with more often obviously know. I try not to bring it up. It's one of those, if people ask I've got no problem with it but it's not something I feel like I need to announce to the world.

AD: But now you're going to be projecting it through video to tens of thousands of people.

TL: Yeah but nobody's going to watch this so it's ok. (*laughs*)

AD: Yeah, that's probably true. You've got two daughters now. When they're old enough to understand a little bit better what is it that you want them to know about your military service?

TL: I honestly don't know. Obviously they're going to know about it. I think let them understand that there's more to life and—war, if it needs to happen, I think is perfectly acceptable. If you have, like, the Just War Theory I can understand that. But I think that's something that the US especially hasn't had in seventy some odd years. If they were to, say, for example with now women getting in combat arms. If they opened up the draft and something happened and one of my daughters was drafted, I'd ship them to Canada in a heartbeat. I don't want them to take part whatsoever. Be outspoken. I think that's one of the big issues with America right now. People say, eh, somebody else will take care of it and it's not right and no one will. If everyone is thinking someone else will take care of it nothing even happens, nothing changes. Hopefully I can instill in them that they have a voice and it should be heard.

AD: And would you say that prescription for going to Canada applies across the board or if in fact there's a war that you, and more importantly they, deemed as just would you support them going into the military or you oppose that across the board?

TL: (*laughs*) It's their life. It's their decision to make. I would hope that they wouldn't join period. Even if we end up going into a just war at this point I feel that the State Department and the Defense Department are just inept. I think that it's strictly too bureaucratic. We don't have a clear objective. We don't go in quickly, do what we need to do. We focus on nation building, which I think is important. Nation building can be make a difference but there needs to be a long term plan before you ever put feet on the ground because that's what we're dealing with Iraq right now. You can't completely ignore the cultural issues and say, oh, here's democracy in a box and expect it to work. I don't know. I can't say that I would or wouldn't support something. For example, the big thing right now with ISIL. Everyone's arguing, oh, well you know, it's just and I can see the benefit in it. I definitely feel for the Kurds in Northern Iraq that are dealing with it. But there's a point where you need to fight your own fight so I don't think that we should be involved.

AD: Are you proud of your service?

TL: (*Laughs*) Uhm, I don't know. I once heard somebody describe it as the most fun they never want to have again and I thought that was ridiculously accurate. I think it did shape me as a person. It gave me some insight and it's not something I wish not to have. But I'd say I'm pretty neutral on it. I—I don't know. I really don't know.

AD: We're sort of heading toward the end of our interview here and this has, kind of, been an interesting conversation because I think I wrote out of list of thirty-five questions and I've got them all down here and, it's sort of a testament to the ease with which I've been able to speak with you that I haven't referenced them at all. But I did a little bit of homework for this and I was looking at the definition of Cavalry Scout on the US army website and under the section "future civilian careers" it says quote there is no direct equivalent in civilian life but the skills of teamwork, discipline and leadership will help you in any civilian career you choose. And so I'll just leave you to respond to that as my last question.

TL: Well, they're being a little more honest than they were when I joined. It was, oh, law enforcement, truck driver, heavy equipment operator. And I think that's fairly accurate. You do—you learn to work as a team, you learn to work with people that you don't necessarily like because you have no other options. I'd say the skill that is probably the best that it taught me was, you know what, sometimes you can't change things and you just have to keep pushing until it changes. It definitely gave me benefits to working in a team environment, to working with people I may not necessarily agree with but, yeah, it—combat arms in general outside of those abstractions, no direct translation whatsoever. None.

AD: Tom, well, thank you so much both for your service and for taking the time to talk to me today. I appreciate it

TL: Welcome.