

Episode 98: CQ was shot in an ambush

I believe that people, for the most part, are good. When a tragedy happens, we want to help.

That's really the whole basis for the GoFundMe website. You can read about someone who's in some kind of desperate situation, whether it's from an accident, or a critical illness, or something else – and you can literally help them.

And when something really devastating happens, and it affects a whole city, we see an immediate result – the psychology of community.

This is what happened in New York City right after 9/11. On any other day, people are out and doing what they need to do, going from one place to another, mostly preoccupied with what they have to do that day.

But in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack, that completely changed. Suddenly, New York City wasn't millions of individuals. It was a group; a community. Everyone's to-do list went out the window, and the immediate priority was to help those who needed it.

And it wasn't just the people in that city – all around the country, people donated money, there were long lines to donate blood for the injured, and some who were qualified literally went to dig through the rubble and find survivors.

And one of the interesting effects of that tragedy was a surge in young people enlisting in the military. Our country had been attacked, and many people felt that signing up for the military was a way to perhaps prevent future attacks.

My guest today is Michael, but he goes by the nickname CQ. He lived in New York City when 9/11 happened, and he was one of those young men who decided to join the military and help defend our country.

But then something happened that brought his military career to an unexpected early end.

Scott

This might seem like a random question but who's your favorite stand up comedian?

CQ

I thought about this a lot. My honest answer is that it changes very frequently for me. I love comedy. Today, some of my favorites are Tom Segura and Chad Daniels. Traditionally, I like people who put up a mirror and reflect society back. I love guys that can challenge the perception of the audience and go, like, "Oh, you think you're this?", put that mirror up and go, like, "Well, this is what I think." So guys like Daniel Tosh or Jerry Seinfeld were, like, poking the reality. "Why are waiting rooms this way? Why is the plane's food this way?"

Scott

The standard fallback - airplane food - am I right?

CQ

Yes. Those are the guys. Today, I like Chad Daniels. I just saw him live a couple weeks ago. Tom Segura is also really, really funny.

Scott

That may seem like a silly question to the people that are listening right now but we are going to circle back to it and, then, it will make sense. Let's talk about what happened to you before that day. You went into the military straight out of high school - was that always your plan?

CQ

Not at all. At the time when I was going through high school, I was on the wrestling team, I was also on the football team, I was also into drama, I was in musicals and plays and whatnot. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I was looking at colleges because it was, like, my junior year. I should specify that I was a senior in high school in New York City when 9/11 happened. So, that really kind of altered the trajectory of my life, obviously. Throughout my senior year, I kept bouncing back between what I was going to do and how the world was different. The military had never even crossed my mind, to be honest, prior to 9/11. Being a kid from New York City, I didn't know anybody that served, I didn't have family members that served, or anything like that. Obviously, after 9/11 happened, there was a lot of big recruitment drives. I started seeing them on commercials, advertisements, billboards and it started to creep into my consciousness as an option. When I graduated high school, I decided to enlist.

Scott

If you had not even thought about joining the military prior to this, how did you decide which branch to join and what your job would be?

CQ

That's a great question. I am going to tell you something that most people wouldn't even know about me, that I hide with great frequency.

Scott

Wow. So we got breaking news, right?

CQ

Yeah, you got an exclusive here. For anybody who doesn't know me, I was in the army - I was an airborne infantry. When I first decided to join, I wanted to fly fighter jets. I walked into an Air Force recruiting station and I said, "Man, I want to join the military." "Well, it's a great time to do it. What do you want to do?" I said, "Man, I want to fly fighter jets." Then, they kind of laughed at me for a number of reasons. I just walked in and wanted to fly fighter jets. They said, like, "Alright, cool! In here, there's just a laundry list of qualifications that you need to have and different things you need to do." I didn't qualify for any of that. I wore glasses. I had been on medication. So, that's why they basically laughed me out of the office. The military air force can be the pickiest of all the branches in terms of letting people in because of how many people want to join the Air Force as compared to any of the other branches. I didn't qualify for anything so they kind of left me at the office. I was, like, "You know what? Screw this!" It was a big recruitment center where all of the branches were represented. So, I walked out of that office and the next open door I saw was the army office. I was, like, "Hey, I wear glasses. I'm taking medicine. Will that be an issue?" They're like, "No, not at all. Sit here. You have to take this thing call 'ASVAB' which is an aptitude test to learn what jobs you would qualify for in the military." I scored really well, maybe, like 98 percent. So, out of the 240 jobs in the military, I qualified for about 230 of them.

Scott

The Air Force didn't know what they were missing.

CQ

There was a lot more to it than just being smart. I didn't look the part either, for those who don't know. So, I qualify for all the jobs. As I was sitting there and reading through it, nothing spoke to me. It was just, like, boring and not interesting. Then, I came upon infantry. Of course, they really sell it, like, "You're the frontline fighter. You're the tip of the spear. You're this and that. You're making the difference. There's infantry and there's everybody that supports the infantry. That's how it breaks down." That sounded awesome. Then, I added "airborne" in so that I could jump out of planes for a living. That's how I ended up in the Airborne Infantry.

Scott

And you had just barely signed up when you went right into combat?

CQ

Yeah, I joined in January 2003. I enlisted right after I graduated. There were so many people enlisting at that time so I was actually on what they called the "Delayed Entry Program." So I signed up, I did everything and, then, I just waited. I waited for about 8 months before I was finally shipped out. I graduated in June 2002. Then, I waited until January 2003 to finally enter basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia. I did my advanced infantry there. I did my Airborne School there. When I got right out of the gate, they went, "Hey, you're getting sent to the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Italy." I was, like, "Oh, that's great!" For years, it was like the best place in the world to get stationed at because it's Italy - it has gorgeous women, food, and all these great things. Well, post 9/11, it was one of the most deployed units in that section of the world. So, as soon as I graduated, I got to the base. Then, I got processed for about a week, and they're like, "Hey, get on this plane. We're going to Iraq." I was just, like, "Oh, okay. Cool? I turned 19 and I only know the basics. Now, I'm on a plane to war." We jumped into Iraq. We're there for about 15 months before I finished that tour.

Scott

So going into that, it seems like everything happened so fast. I mean, being from New York City, you think New Yorkers are scrappy - they're tough and they fight. I mean, you said you were in a drama club. Did you feel ready to go to combat?

CQ

No, for a number of reasons. You're right - it happened really fast. It was hard in the beginning because when I graduated, I only learned basic things. I learned how to march. I learned how to take orders. I learned how to shoot. I didn't really learn the ins and outs of the job, so to speak, especially with infantry. Infantry training is just running, shooting, jumping, and getting your body ready but the actual tactics of your unit depend on your unit. The guys that I was deployed with had been spending the last 6 months preparing for that deployment. They had been working on battle drills, assignments, and all of these things, but I just got there and they're like, "Get in this truck!" It's like getting signed to a football team and they're like, "Don't worry about the playbook. You'll figure it out while you're out there." During my first time ever in a Humvee, they told me to drive. In the real world - coming from New York City - I didn't even have a driver's license. I had never been in a Humvee before. I was in a combat scenario. We did a lot of night operations. When it was my first mission night operation. they're like, "Listen, we need a driver. Since you're the least experienced in combat..." They can't trust me, so they're just like, "Here, you drive! It's

the least responsible thing you can do." They didn't trust me to be a part of the team because I hadn't trained with them. They had no idea of my capabilities, so they just gave me the driving duty. I mean, I've driven before. My first experience in combat was driving in pitch black conditions - we had night vision and things. I had never used night vision before. When I was in basic training, we had one day of night vision training. That night, one of my battle buddies had been bitten by a snake, so they had me take him to the medics or whatever. So, in my first mission, I was using night vision goggles, driving a vehicle, and I don't know how to operate in a very active combat zone. So yeah, I was kind of thrown into the deep end of the pool and just had to survive.

Scott

That is some pressure knowing that your buddies' lives could depend on you.

CQ

Absolutely.

Scott

So you were in Iraq for 15 months. Then, there was a year of training. Then, you went to Afghanistan.

CQ

Yes.

Scott

After you had been in Afghanistan for about 6 months, you must have felt, obviously, a little more comfortable, a little more experienced about what's going on. Tell us what happened.

CQ

Yes, we survived 15 months in Iraq, had some close calls, lost some people, went through a lot, and we gelled as a unit. Obviously, after about 4 or 5 months of that first tour, I won the trust and confidence of the guys around me. We lived in the trenches together and we built a bond. So, I got pretty good by the end of that first tour. Then, that year, between deployments, we spent time on training. We got a bunch of new people in. Like I said, we lost people. So, when we got a bunch of new people in, I got to be their 'senior'. It felt weird to get new people in because I still felt new. Yet, these guys were looking at me, at this combat-grizzled veteran - I've got all the decorations and things. Now, they're the new guys and I had to mentor them up. So, we spent a year training. By the time we got to Afghanistan, I definitely felt much more prepared to do my job and to lead. I was just on the cusp of getting promoted to sergeant and having my own team. So it was a bunch of different experiences the second time around.

A lot of people don't realize that although they're both classified as a global war on terror, fighting in Iraq and fighting in Afghanistan were widely different. They were widely different fights, situations, setups, combat tactics, and everything. You might be fighting in the desert in one country and a different terrain in another country - like, it was just so completely different. We knew we were going to be there for a year. I made it about 6 months into my deployment. During one of our missions - we were doing air assault missions, coming in on helicopters, looking for high value targets that had been operating in our area - we broke a cardinal rule which is "You don't want to operate the same way multiple times." We did the same style of mission for about 5 days. On that fifth day, they set up an ambush for us. We were specifically looking for someone. Our intelligence was saying that he might have been, like, the right-hand

man of Osama bin Laden at that time. He had been operating in our area. We were just on the boundary of Afghanistan and Pakistan and we knew that they had been coming back and forth. That area is very mountainous - it's hard for vehicles to maneuver and get to places quickly - so we had been coming in on Blackhawks. I won't say how we were gathering the intelligence but we were finding out where he was, and every time we got there, we just missed them.

So, on the last day, instead of waiting for the word then gearing up and running to the planes, what we did was being geared up, sitting on the birds, and waiting. That way, the second we get that "Go", we would be up in the air very quickly. That cuts down 10-15 minutes of prep time because we were out there just sitting and waiting for about 30 hours. Finally, when we got the "Go ahead", we were up in the air quickly. I actually joked with one of my teammates, and I said, "Watch! Today will be the day I get shot." I said that before in a lot of missions, first of all. Second of all, I was due to go on R&R. When we spend a year in combat, every member of that team will disperse for 2 weeks - we all go on vacation at the same time. When my 2 week leave was coming up, I was joking, like "Watch! Today, I'll get shot. It's one of my last few missions and whatever."

As we were flying to the point - we all have headsets on because we fly with the doors open - I was looking out when the helicopter pilot came over and said that we're 30 seconds out. So I leaned out and I looked ahead. Because we're flying, I can usually see a city, a town camp, or whatever it is that we were coming on. I can then start communicating with my team on how we're going to execute the mission. One of the things we have to determine is if it's like a town, we could land on the outskirts, execute, attack, or whatever. Sometimes, it's cave systems or a fort on the top of a hill. We have to figure out, "Do we jump out? Do we have to hook up the ropes and repel down?" So that's what I was looking to assess.

When I looked out, I just saw a lot of hills, a lot of mountainous range, but I didn't see anything. I'm like, "Alright, maybe it's tucked away behind the hill and I can't see it." The pilot gave me the call, "Hey, we're 10 seconds out." I looked out again but I still see nothing. Now, it started to dawn on me that this is not a town, this is not a village, this has got to be one of those cave systems. They're either in transport, they're either moving from one place to the other, or they're hunkered down in some camp in the middle of caves. So, I told my team, "Hey, we're not landing because the helicopter can't land on a slanted terrain or else it'll roll up." I gave them signals that we're gonna hover. They were asking me if we're gonna hook up the ropes or not. I said, "I don't know. You got to see where we get to." Finally, the pilot goes, "Alright, we're here!" but I saw nothing. I saw that we were hovering and there's room for us to drop in. I said, "Don't bother hooking up the ropes. We'll just jump." We're airborne. We're used to taking bigger hits in training. We did 12-15 foot jumps. This was about 8-10 foot, so we're going to be fine. I was the first one out. I jumped and I ate shit at the landing - like, I didn't calculate it right. I mean, I just lost my balance. I fell like a sack of potatoes that rolled, I knocked the wind out of myself and I was just, like, "Oh, Jesus. That's embarrassing. Oh, God. I hope nobody saw that." I got up to a knee. I was like dusting myself off. I was looking around. I didn't see anything.

As the guys were dropping out of the helicopter, I can hear them hitting the ground. I looked back just in time to see the last guy coming out of the helicopter. Everything happened very slowly. I saw him not exiting smoothly. He kind of twisted-- it's hard to explain. He kind of just made a weird move, fell straight down, landed on his legs and, then, I saw him grabbing his leg. I saw that he was screaming but I can't hear anything because the helicopter's very loud. I was thinking in my head, like "Oh, he stumbled out! Best case, he rolled his ankle. Worst case, he snapped a bone or something." I had what's called Combat Lifesaver training. I wasn't a medic

by any means. I was trained on the very basics of medicine in order to keep them alive long enough to get to a medic - how to splint the leg, how, how to give an IV - very simple things. So, in my head, as the squad leader, I'm also going like, "Fuck. I'm gonna have to fill out paperwork about this and there's gonna be a whole thing. This just ruins the whole day." I got up and started walking over to him because I was gonna have to splint his leg and call it in. As I was about halfway there, the Blackhawk pulled away and that's the first time I can hear him yelling, "I'm hit! I'm hit!" Then, I started to hear the gunfire. As the helicopter pulled away, all that dust kind of settled, and I could start to see little pockets of dirt popping around him. That's where the bullets were impacting. They were shooting up dirt. It's hard to tell when there's a helicopter over you because it made a big mess. As soon as it pulled away, I could clearly see that bullets were impacting around him. He couldn't get up because he had been shot in the leg.

Scott

Was he shot before he jumped out?

CQ

He was shot as he exited. When he was taking his first step out, they were shooting at the helicopter. Later, we also found out that the door gunner who's part of the helicopter crew was also shot. He was shot in his leg and blood went out through his thigh/hip. They've been shooting at both of them on the same side. That's actually why the helicopter had pulled away so aggressively. Usually, they would softly pull away, but it aggressively took off this time. Now, I was standing out in the open in the middle of an ambush. I have no idea where it was coming from. My only assumption would be that it was coming from uphill. We were pretty close to the summit. We were still maybe 100 yards away from the summit of this mountain. It was a small opening that the helicopter was able to drop us off at. I had to assume that it's coming from uphill. There's this moment - it was a fraction of a second but it felt like an eternity - when I was going, like, "Okay, he's hit. They are trying to kill him. You can clearly see the bullets impacting around him."

I was over there behind this big rock thing and I wasn't getting shot at that I know of. So there's this split moment of, like, "Do I dive back for cover, or do I go out and get him?" It might sound heroic but it's just how we were trained. We don't leave any guy behind. I don't know where the rest of my team were, but they knew what they have to do because we had done this a million times. We've trained for this. We had been in firefights. I can trust my guys to do what they have to do without me saying anything. So I just charged at him, grabbed the back of his vest, and started dragging him to what I could only assume was a good covering, concealment, and safety, and then figure out the next steps - gathering intel, figuring out where my team was and, kind of, pressing the enemy. We always try to gain the upper hand as fast as possible. We have overwhelming numbers. We have overwhelming weaponry and better training. The last thing you want to do is be on your back foot long enough that they can then get the upper hand. Obviously, in the ambush situation, they have the upper hand right away. We have to use overwhelming force shock to gain that upper hand. My thought was just getting back to safety, assessing the situation, and, then attacking. Again, this was all happening in about 20-30 seconds.

I got to him, grabbed his vest, and started dragging him back. At that moment, it felt like his vest or his belt or something got caught on a branch or something because I was dragging him fine and, then, all of a sudden, stopped. I looked down and I don't see anything that he's stuck on, so I just slung my weapon behind my back, and then just pulled as hard as I can and get him moving again. What I didn't realize was he wasn't stuck on anything. I had been shot right

through the bicep that was pulling him, so I had severed all the muscle and shattered the bone in my arm that had been dragging him. I was just basically pulling at my own arm at that point. I was grabbing and pulling him and I didn't realize that I've been shot at that point. I was dragging him and almost got there. Then, it happened again. I felt like I was dragging the Titanic behind me and I couldn't understand it because we trained, we do stuff like this, we drag guys, we carry them on our shoulders. My brain couldn't process why is he, all of a sudden, so heavy. I'm like, "Did he grab onto a rock boulder? Does he not want me to drag him?" No, he was still grabbing my arm and yelling so I just pulled with all my might. What had happened was, at that point, I had been shot at my right shoulder. It actually went through my shoulder - and was actually headed towards my neck - hit my clavicle, and came out my back. So in one arm, I was basically separated at the bicep. In my other arm, they had just blown my own shoulder through my back. There was just nothing, basically, connecting my arm. There was no shoulder joint. There was just nothing. I didn't feel a thing. Adrenaline was doing its thing.

So, I got him back, I dropped him, and I just said, "Stay down." I went to have a peek. In my head, I was like, "Lift your weapon up, look through the scopes, try to assess the situation, start giving out orders and let's do this." But as I went to lift my gun up, my arm just kind of dangled at my side and I'm like, "Well, that's weird" and my brain was just screaming, "Pick up your damn gun!" My arms were just kind of flopping around. This is two minutes of me going, like, "Hey, what is going on? This is so weird. I can't be in combat shock... I mean, I'm used to this! I've done this a million times on my first rodeo!" The next thing I know, I felt like I got hit by a bus because I was blown off my feet and landed on my back. What had happened was I had been shot twice in the chest. I had body armor on, thankfully. The armor stopped the two rounds from penetrating me but the impact of the force had actually shattered my ribs and collapsed my lung. So, I was laying there, I was having trouble breathing, and my brain is screaming, "Get up! Get up!! Get up!!!" But my body was like, "Nope, you're on timeout." I just couldn't move. I was laying there, rocking back and forth, trying to get my body to get up and get back into the fight. "There was no time for this. Come on!" I was just laying there. I was wheezing. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even call out because I couldn't catch my breath. All I remember was one of my other teammates came over.

Funnily enough, every four-man team has one Combat Lifesaver guy. I was the guy for my team. There were two teams on that hill that day. The other Combat Lifesaver actually ran over to me, got on top of me, and looked down at me. Mexican kids love him to death. He is a super brown dude with a very thick accent. He said, "Hey, are you okay?" I was like, "I can't catch my breath..." He saw that I was trying to stand up and he's like, "No, stay down! Stay down! The whole while, there were gunfire and explosions. I mean, they were throwing grenades, launching RPGs, and all types of stuff. I could hear my guys yelling orders at each other, firing, and whatnot. We were very lucky that we had Apaches. They were hovering over, firing down, and doing all of this stuff. He's like, "Hey, man! You're hit!" I was like, "Okay. Where am I hit?" He's like, "I don't know, man. There's a lot of blood!" He was patting me down and looking. He was like, "There's blood everywhere!" I was like, "Oh, God damn it! All right, look for the exit holes." Because entry holes are very small and exit holes are very large, typically - where you bleed out from - especially in combat where they're firing 7.62 rounds. These are not 9mm little bullets - they're armor piercing 7.62mm bullets that are very high caliber and very destructive. They're meant to stop vehicles. They go through bodies and leave a mess. So, I'm like, "Check for exit holes!" He was patting me down and he's like, "I see a lot of blood. I don't see any exit holes." At this point, I was starting to feel like my energy draining like a battery - just slowly dying. I'm like, "Oh, man. I think I'm going into shock. I think I'm bleeding out." I've been in combat a million times. We've been in firefights and lasted for hours but this was weird. I just felt like I was literally draining.

At that point, I was laying on my back. The only way I could describe it is like there was a big rock under my back and my right shoulder. I said, "Hey, man. Check my back. Something's weird." So, he slid his hand into my vest and immediately yanked it out. As we were both looking for it, he dipped his hand and it was just bright red. He's like, "There's a hole in there." I was like, "Alright. How big is it?" He just kind of balled up his fist and showed it to me. I was like, "Alright, that's priority number one. We got to fix that." In the middle of the battlefield, he took off my vest. We had things called "kerlix" which was like a bandage roll - you typically unroll it and use it. I said, "Man, just open it. Don't even unroll it. Just shove the whole thing in there." So, he shoved it in there. That was the first time I really felt the pain that was excruciating. He started putting bandages and tourniquets around my arms.

I remember that he was a private at the time, but he starts yelling over at our platoon sergeant - a much higher ranking official - and he's like, "You got to get those fucking birds back here now!!!" The platoon sergeant was like, "Look, there's no way! It's too hot! They're not going to come back in! They're not going to fly into gunfire! They're just not going to do it and risk everybody else!" The number one rule they teach you in CLS is always reassuring the patient, "Hey, you're going to be fine. You're gonna be okay." But this private was like, "If we don't get those fucking birds here now, he's gonna die! He's fucking dying right now!" I was just like, "Oh, man. Come on. What you'd want to say is, 'He's gonna be okay. We just need a little help.'" But he's like, "You get those fucking burns in here now!"

So, they called it in. What they did was they hovered way down the mountain way to the point where - when I saw them - they look like an ant. A big Black Hawk looks like an ant down from the bottom of the hill. Then, another guy from the team came running over. We have this thing called a SKEDCO which is, basically, like a canvas that you use as a stretcher. He thought, "Hey, you don't need the poles, you just need this canvas." We just had this rolled-up canvas that we carried with us and he started unrolling it. He's like, "Alright, we're gonna roll you on to this thing, we're going to drag you down to the helicopter, and get you out of here." In my head, I'm like, "No. I'll be dead before you drag me what felt like three football fields down this rocky, dirty mountain. I'll be dead before we get there." So, I told them, "Pick me up. We're gonna run." This whole time, I've been like, "Move with your feet" because my concern was that I've been shot in the spine and become paralyzed. The whole time when they were working on me and doing all this stuff, I'm just like, "Move your feet." My feet had started to move and I'm like, "Alright, cool. I'm not paralyzed. That's good." They're like, "Nah, man. There's still gunfire and explosion."

At one point, a grenade landed right behind the little divot we were in, and both guys kind of threw their bodies over me. I was like, "Why would you do that?" They're like, "Well, you were already so fucked up that we didn't want anything else to happen." I'm like, "Yeah, but you risk your body to cover my already wounded body." They're like, "It's in the moment. It was just a natural reaction to it. We don't want you to take any more damage."

Scott

It seems like that to you, but to anyone hearing this story, the whole story is filled with hero characters.

CQ

Nah. This is typical for us. Don't get me wrong. If it was a cook who was doing this stuff then that was heroic, because that is above and beyond their call of duty. This is what we were

trained to do. I hate the whole hero thing because if a football player makes an amazing play, you're not gonna be like, "Well, he's the hero." But that's his job. He's paid to do that thing. For us, we were more concerned about keeping each other alive than being heroic. I couldn't really care less about the medals, the awards, and whatnot. I'm super appreciative that these guys did their job and it kept me alive. They picked me up after much insisting. I said, "You will fucking pick me up because you're not going to let me die here! So, they picked me up, put one arm over each guy, and went down the mountain.

My team was doing the things they needed to do to give us cover. They stayed and fought. They got me out of there. Once I got on the bird - the guy that got shot in the leg was there - and they flew us out of there. The rest of my team and my crew stayed, fought, and won that battle. Within 15-20 minutes, I was already back to the base. As soon as I hit the flight line of our base - they have, like, an emergency trauma center - they basically put me right into surgery. As soon as I touched down, they grabbed me, knocked me out, and put me in surgery. I didn't lose consciousness throughout that whole process. Luckily, we had a really good combat medic who was on the flight with us. We had, like, a lower-level medic, usually, within our teams. For whatever reason, we had, like, the head medic or captain - I don't know why he was with us - on that mission. Thank God he was there because the whole time we were flying back, he started working. I mean, he was putting in IVs, he was giving me fluid, and he was working on keeping me alive throughout the 15 minutes ride back.

As soon as we hit the ground, they rolled me right into surgery. I didn't lose consciousness right up until they put me on the surgery table. I'll never forget that because there was a buddy of mine who was one of the medics there. When they put me down, I kind of looked at him and I could tell that he looked at me like, "Oh, God..." I asked him, "How bad is it?" He just kind of shook his head very lightly. Then, they knocked me out. That was my last memory of him, kind of, looking at the floor and shaking his head. I'm like, "Oh, well, fuck. I guess that's it for me..."

Then, I woke up three days later in a whole other part of Afghanistan - I was in Bagram which is the main base in Afghanistan. They kind of walk me through what happened and the extent of my injuries. I spent a day or two there. From there, they flew me to Germany. There's a place called Landstuhl Regional Medical Facility. It's our army medical facility overseas. If you took a bullet in the leg, that's where they patch you up and, then, they'll figure out what to do with you. They basically told me, "The extent of your injuries are too severe for us to deal with here." So, I was in Germany for maybe 3-4 days while I was waiting for a flight to take me back to the States.

From Germany, I went to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC. I spent the next 2 years in and out of the hospital - 6 weeks in ICU, 6 months as an inpatient, etc. It should have been longer but, at that time, there were just so many people so they needed the beds. I could kind of walk around. Then, they put me in a house right outside the hospital and just kind of made me walk back and forth for my surgeries, appointments, and things. So I spent two years recovering. After those two years, I was medically retired from the military.

Scott

So your two-week vacation turned into two years.

CQ

Yeah.

Scott

Oh, wow. Now I understand that while you were recovering, you met your future wife?

CQ

Yeah. I mean, that's another whole long story. The short answer is "Yes." When my wife was in town, she was a tourist. She was in town visiting. I had been in the hospital for 8-9 months at that point and I was going crazy. I was like, "I just need to get out. I need to go." So I asked the doctors, "Can I go outside? Can I walk around?" They're like, "Alright, just go. You can tour the gardens and things like that." They're just like, "Don't leave the base." I got a taxi and I went to the mall. That's where I bumped into her and then we started talking. I looked straight up dead. I've lost like 80 pounds. I was like a solid and muscular dude but, now, I've lost so much weight. When I was in a cast, when I was in a sling, my eyes were bloodshot, we just started talking and hitting it off. I asked her to go out with me. I was super high on painkillers so I had no filter on. She was out of my league so there's no way I would consider talking to her, but I was so drugged out and I was just like, "Whatever."

Scott

What do you have to lose?

CQ

Yeah. So then, we went out and had a good time. My story was fascinating enough that it kept her interested. Now, we're together.

Scott

After a couple of years, you were at least good enough to live on your own and not have to stay in the hospital or be an outpatient anymore. How did you figure out how to transition back into civilian life?

CQ

When I figure that out, I'll let you know. Again, it's different now. When I medically retired in 2007, there were hundreds of thousands of guys getting wounded and injured. They were overwhelmed. There was no exit program. I remember that I was going to physical therapy, occupational therapy, appointments, and checkups. I remember one of the docs going, like, "Hey, man. You're looking great! You're doing good! You need to go to this office." So, I went there. They were like, "Hey, can you sign this?" I was like, "Sure." Then, they were like, "Alright, cool. You're now medically retired." I was like, "Wait, what?!" They're like, "Yep, good luck!" "So what do I do now?" "Well, you don't have to do anything. You're gonna get your medical retirement, your pay, go home, and just enjoy it. You've earned it." I'm like, "What?!"

Scott

And you were, like, 22 years old then?

CQ

I think I would have been 24-years-old when I am officially medically retired. That's it - I was out just like that. I didn't really have anywhere to go. I had no plans. I never even thought about what was next. I honestly and foolishly - me being stubborn the way I am - assumed that I was gonna recover and go back to duty. I had some family in Pennsylvania at the time so I was just, like, "Well, I guess I'll just go there." So, I went there. I bought a house in the mountains - far from anybody - because I didn't want to be bothered by anybody. It was rough - I'll be honest. I literally died twice. I had 44 surgeries and hundreds of hours of therapy, but never once had I

taken the time to really, kind of, reflect or check in mentally on how I'm doing. At first, it was like, "Oh, this is great! I'm a retiree. I can sit around, watch TV, and get a check. It wasn't a lot of money, but it was enough to survive on. I could afford food, mortgage, and things, but not go on trips or anything. My wife was working at the time so we were okay. So, I did that for a while and didn't realize that I was sinking slowly into, like, a dark depression. Like the PTSD part of it was not something obvious, like, "Oh, there it is. It's there from the get-go. Everything's fine. I'm doing okay. I only need to worry about my physical health and financial stability. Can we financially support each other and go, 'Okay, we're good!'" Six months went by. A year went by. My wife's at work and I'm just kind of chilling and doing my thing. I got into little projects around the house - like, I painted this, I built that, I cut the grass, I dug a hole, whatever it is - and it just kept me busy. All the while, I was kind of shrinking further and further inside of myself and I didn't know it. I didn't know what it was. I didn't know why I was this way. My wife and I were arguing and fighting but it was nothing violent.

PTSD is a big spectrum. Obviously, the headlines really capture things like blackout drunk, violence, and drug abuse. However, the other side of the spectrum is isolation, depression, social anxiety, hypervigilance, insomnia, and all these things - that's kind of where I was. I wasn't sleeping. I'd be patrolling my house at 3 o'clock in the morning. There'll be a week or two that I didn't even step foot outside my house. This was years ago, I was spiraling and it was getting worse and worse.

Scott

When they said, "Okay, you're done here. You're on your own," was there any recognition that PTSD might happen? Like, "Hey, watch out for this. If you start to think these things are depression—" Did they warn you about any of that possibly happening?

CQ

At that time, no. It's a lot better now. I've talked to people who have transitioned in the last couple of years and there are programs. They realized where they kind of screwed up so there's like - you have to take classes now - financial classes on "Here's how to claim your benefits." I didn't know any of these things. I didn't know how to get my benefits. I didn't know how to do any of that stuff. They were just like, "Here's the door." It was really hard for many years. I was very fortunate that I met the right person at the right time. My wife was always super supportive, but she didn't know what to do. She's not a clinician. She didn't know what I needed. She was just there to be supportive, but she had no idea how to help me.

I met this guy and he recognized really quickly what I was going through. He is a veteran and had been through something very similar. He was like, "Hey, man. You got PTSD - you need help." I knew guys with PTSD. I know those blackout drunks who put their fist through the wall - they get arrested every weekend - and that's not me. He asked, "Well, do you sleep well?" I answered, "No, but I'm a night owl." He's like, "Oh, well. You have a lot of anxiety." I'm like, "Well, the world sucks." Then, he was like, "Well, are you eating okay?" "I'm not that hungry." He was giving me all these things and was like, "Dude, you just checked off every single box of PTSD." I was like, "Huh?"

We sat down, talked for hours, and he kind of made it his mission to coach me up, like, "Look, man. I've been through this. I know what I'm talking about. Like, let's research it, let's do it." Then, he started dragging me out of my house. He would come and pick me up to do stuff. He's like, "Hey, man. we're gonna go fishing." Because I gotta get out of my funk and I gotta get out of my bubble, we just started doing stuff. Little by little, I learned what he was talking about. I

listened and I would see him talking to people about his experiences. He had been through some crazy stuff. In my head, I was just like, "How do you do that? How do you just talk about what's inside? We were trained to not show any weakness. You don't show you're hurting - you suck it up, drive on, take a knee, drink water, eat, and fight on." Here, he was being very vulnerable and open about these really hard experiences. It baffles me - how could you do that?

Then, he goes, "When you carry that stuff, it's like you're carrying little baggage. When you open up and talk to somebody about it, you're basically asking them to help you carry this baggage so that the weight gets lighter. I was like, "Man, that's some psychobabble nonsense, this and that." One day, I talked to my wife a little bit about some stuff I saw and did - she was very receptive and listened. I remembered that I felt a tiny bit lighter and better. So, little by little, I started opening up and sharing more and feeling, maybe, not just better but also lighter. I felt that a lot of that weight came off me. Then, I started seeing a VA, I started taking medicine, I started opening up to the fact that maybe I'm not doing okay, and maybe I'm not the best person to help me through this situation. I went to see a lot of smarter people, started listening, and started trying to get better. It's not an overnight thing. I participated in different programs and different therapies, and I tried different things. There's no one pill. There's no one therapist that's going to fix everything that's damaged. I got tired of life just passing me by, so I just started saying, "I'm going to be open to things. I'm going to try things. Although it's scary, I'm gonna push myself and I'm going to try to get outside of this bubble that I've created."

Little by little, things got better, things got brighter, I started being active and doing more. I didn't work for many years. I mean, I retired in 2006 and I didn't work any jobs until 2013, so it's been almost 6-7 years. During that time, I had to kind of find out who I was and rebuild myself physically, obviously, but really more emotionally and spiritually. It took me a long time to realize that the uniform got ripped away from me, literally and figuratively. Guys still have trouble and struggle when they transition out of the military even on their terms. My identity was fully wrapped up in me being a soldier - like, it was 98% of my identity. So, to literally have that ripped off my body and not given a choice to have closure - since that day, I never saw my guys again, I've seen only maybe 4 or 5 of them here and there as we've crossed paths in life through Facebook and things like that - it was very hard. It took me a long time to come to grips with it. Luckily, as I've said, I had the right people, the right organizations, the right treatments, and everything.

Finally, in about 2013, I realized that "Maybe, I have more to give. Maybe, I have more left inside of me." I wanted to work and I wanted to contribute because, as I've said, we were getting by. I mean, again, we're not rich by any means, but we were getting by. I figured that if I work - I still get to collect my retirement money because I've earned it - we could live a better life. So, I got back into the workforce. Then, I started getting more involved in things and things have been getting better and better since.

Scott

And you have done a lot of stuff. I mean, you got into skydiving, scuba diving, and - kind of circling back to the question that I asked you almost an hour ago - comedy. How did you end up getting into stand-up comedy?

CQ

I got into a lot of stuff and it was all part of challenging myself. There was a turning point when my post-injury is better than it had ever been pre-injury. It was a very long road to get to that

point. Once I realized that, the sky's the limit. I started getting certified in deep-sea scuba diving and skydiving, driving race cars, shooting, and doing all this crazy stuff. I've driven a NASCAR around the track and I was on the stage at the NFL Draft. I got to announce one of the draft picks. I opened myself up to all these opportunities. I've also done a lot of volunteering. I've worked with "Habitat for Humanity", "Project USO Elf", "Armed Services Arts Partnership", and all of these volunteer opportunities. I wanted to make something of myself to keep challenging myself and to do more. I've been doing well many years into the process which would have been about 2015. I volunteered, I mentored, and I've done all these different things. One of the things I do is run a support group for disabled vets. One day, one of these guys came in and he was talking about a program he had gotten involved with, and he was like, "Oh, it's so cool. It's like an arts program. It's free for veterans and their family members. They do creative writing, they do acting, and they do all these artistic stuffs. One of the things he said caught my attention was they had a stand-up comedy boot camp. It's a 6-week class that will teach you about the fundamentals of stand-up comedy. I thought, "Man, I love comedy growing up, and I really felt like I've always been the class clown." I was in drama, obviously, like I told you. After my injury, I lost that part of myself. I wasn't making people laugh. I wasn't laughing. I became somber, serious, depressed, and all of these different things. I said, "Man, I really love to re-capture that comedy and humorous part of myself." The other side of it was the idea of standing on stage and everybody looking at you - that causes you to be anxious and have nightmares - but that went into me wanting to challenge myself. I said, "Okay, if I can do this, I can do anything." I signed up for the 6-weeks class. Really, for me, it was just to check this off the bucket list. This was to say, "I once performed standup comedy. I did it the same way I did for all the other things that I've done - fly fishing, flying an airplane, and like all these different things - just to check it off. I've done it, I've experienced it."

In the course of doing that for 6 weeks, I fell in love with it. I really did. The organization is fantastic. I highly recommend it if anybody's interested - Armed Services Arts Partnership (ASAP). I love the people. I love being around vets, making each other laugh, and cracking each other up. That spirit just kind of reawakened in me something that had gone to sleep when I got injured. I performed on stage at the DC Improv - legendary stage - in Washington, DC. There are clips out there. You can go on YouTube and look for my name up there. I think I did a good job. I fell in love with it and I wanted to do it every chance I got. The trouble with performing comedy is that if you're not in a major city, it's very hard to have opportunities. If I'm about an hour outside of DC, and if you're pursuing comedy, like you have to be out there like every two or three nights and it's not gonna hit up to 2 o'clock in the afternoon. They're all 10, 11, or 12 o'clock at night. So I did it for a while and got pretty good at it.

I entered the world series of comedy and got placed in the top 40. I stopped at the top 40 because my son was born that week. There's the next performance which would then get you into, like, the top 10. I actually pulled myself out because my son was due to be born that week, and I'd rather be there for my son's birth than. If I do good, I'll be placed in the top 10 and the next stage would be in Vegas. But I made my choice and I'm still happy with it - no regrets. I got to perform in New York City on Gotham Comedy Club. I've performed with Nikki Glaser, Roy Wood Jr, Janeane Garofalo, Seth Herzog, and a bunch of other comedians. I got to perform at a private event for former President Jimmy Carter - he had a private event that he asked me to perform. So, I've gotten to do really cool things with comedy. However, it started getting hard to keep up with because I do have a day job, a new baby, and my wife to look after. I didn't like working all day, and then having to be gone all night. I never thought, like, "I'm gonna commit to this all the way and, like, be a traveling comedian and all these things." Like, I loved it, I absolutely loved it! But I also had to recognize that this was not something that was gonna pay my bills, this is not something that I'm not going to end up on, like Jimmy Fallon or anything like

that. So I had to figure out, pick my spots, only do certain things, and appear for certain friends or charity events. I wasn't gonna be the guy that's traveling or out there every night. I had to figure out another way to channel that energy, creativity, passion, and that led me to do other things.

Scott

That's the next thing I want to ask you about. You have a weekly live show online on WTFnationradio.com, and it's called "Pop Culture Warrior." Please tell us about that.

CQ

Pop Culture Warrior was born because I was doing comedy and was having a fair amount of success with it. Right at the time, when I was kind of starting to get burned out. WTF Nation Radio is a veteran-owned, veteran-operated, kind of, internet radio station. I guessed that they heard about me or saw one of my clips or something, and they reached out to me. They're like, "Hey, man. We'd love to have you as a guest for an interview on one of the shows." I've never been a guest on a show or podcast or anything like that at that point. So I was like, "It's something that I've not done. Let's cross it off the bucket list." So, I came on as a guest, and it was great. I had a lot of fun. We're laughing, joking, and all this fun stuff.

As a couple of months went by, other stuff had been happening to me. There's this award and recognition that I earned for community service. I had become friends with some of the guys at the station on Facebook and things. They saw that I won that award and they're like, "Hey, you should come back on the show and talk about it." I was like, "Okay, I'll come back on." So, I came back to the show. Again, we had such a great time. We were laughing. I was telling stories and doing all these different things. Then, they're like, "Man, you should have a show on the station. You can talk, you're great, and you have a story. I was like, "Oh, that's a nice thing to say." It's one of those things that nice people say, like, "Oh, yeah. You're great!" and I was like, "Sure, sure."

After we finished the taping and the show, they're like, "Hey man, we're serious! You should consider joining us here at the station!" But I was like, "Nah, I'm okay. It's not really my thing and whatnot." They kind of hounded me about it until I finally listened. I was talking to the station manager and he's like, "Man, we'd love to have you. You've got great energy and that's not just it. We'd love to have you!" Then, I asked him, "Well, what would I do? Am I just gonna come on and tell stories? Am I doing comedy or other the thing?" He goes, "It could be whatever you want it to be. Like, it'd be your show. You can make it whatever you want it to be." When I started sitting down and thinking about it - I love pop culture stuff, I love movies, I love TV, I love collectibles, I mean, you can see the background of all the stuff I love - I said, "Well if I were going to do this, I would want to talk about all the nerdy, geeky stuff that I like to talk to my friends about such as video games, Marvel movies, TV shows, and the stuff that I love. I could talk about them for hours. I love talking about the military stuff I did but that was a small section of my life. I love talking about comedy stuff and it's been a small section of my life. However, I grew up loving comic books, cartoons, movies, and things, so this is deeper embedded in me as a person than any of that other stuff. So, I was just like, "Well, I'd love to do a pop culture show." They're like, "So do it!" I was like, "Oh, really? Okay, cool."

The funny thing is the one comment that I got was, "This is a weekly show, so you're gonna do 2 or 3 hours live. Do you think there's enough pop culture stuff to talk about? You could do this weekly." I was like, "Oh, come on, dude. Like, are you kidding me? There's something new coming out every day." So we launched in February of 2020. In March of 2020, the pandemic

shut everything down. There were no new movies, no new TV shows, and no new video games. So, the whole first year of my show, I had almost nothing to talk about and it was crazy. Literally, I would be scraping the bottoms of the internet barrel. Like, we were talking about, "Oh, they're doing a weird challenge of burying you alive for \$50,000." We were just talking about stuff like, "This movie has been canceled, that movie has been canceled, but this is what I think that movie will be about" and we made do with what we had.

That actually, kind of - because this was supposed to be just 2 or 3 hours of, like, "Pop culture headlines" - birthed the idea of, "Man, I'm running out of things to talk about, but I know a couple of friends of mine who are comedians. I'll have them come on and we'll talk about comedy. That'll fill some time." When that was well received and I was like, "Okay, well. I have friends of mine that write plays, do scriptwriting, and things like that. So, we talked about that." Little by little, it was like, "Oh, through a friend of a friend, I know this director, and I can have him come on." So, it was still an hour of pop culture headlines, but then it was like, "Oh, I can talk about the industry. I can talk about entertainment in general. I had stuntmen on, I had writers, producers, directors, actors - you name it - everything up to the craft services department. It was really well received and everybody always said, "Oh my God. It's the best interview I've ever been a part of." I ended up interviewing Louie Anderson, who's been in the show business for 35 plus years. He's also like, "This is the best interview I've ever been on. I've done this a lot but this is the best interview I've ever had."

I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that I've done a lot of talking. I guess I know the questions I like to answer. It's not like, "What do you like about being an actor? How did you start acting?" Those questions are like, "Dude, just Google it. It's out there." So, yeah, I just didn't want to be that. I'm fascinated by the industry, all the behind-the-scenes stuff, and a lot more practical things that we don't get to hear about a lot. Now, obviously, I do kind of pay tribute to the guests and be like, "Hey, let the people that don't know you learn a little bit more about you." So, it got better and better.

In our first two years, we were nominated for a Best Entertainment Podcast award, which we didn't win, fortunately, because we were still figuring things out. We had the freakin Webby Awards just reached out to us and they're like, "You should consider entering." I was like, "Oh, okay. I didn't know that was a thing, but all right." So, it's been going great. Just last week, I talked to Robbie Amell, who's a phenomenal actor, who is going to be one of the biggest actors in the world in a couple of weeks when he comes out in Resident Evil. It's been an absolute blast. I've really enjoyed it.

To plug it real quick, it's Pop Culture Warriors, Tuesday nights, 8.00 PM, Eastern time. We do an hour of, as I said, Pop Culture headlines - we talk about movies and stuff and, then, I typically have a guest in the second hour who is speaking live. You get to interact with us on Facebook, YouTube, Twitch, Twitter - anywhere we're live in. Obviously, it'll also be recorded and then released as a podcast on top of that, but I love doing the live thing because the audience can watch and interact as it's happening. So, if you love this actor, if you love Robbie Amell, you can join us there, send the question to the chat, and I'll ask him. If you want to ask him a question yourself, then you can record yourself asking the question, shoot it to me, and I'll play it for him. So, you get to ask your question personally to that person. Also, it's been a lot of fun. And I mean, we play games, we do giveaways constantly - I just love giving stuff away. It's been so much fun. I'm loving it.

Scott

It's so clear that you are just in your element, to have such passion and have so much fun. It's just awesome for me to see how far you've come to where you are today. That's just unbelievable. Thank you for your service.

CQ

That was a long time ago. It feels like a lifetime ago.

(OUTRO)

Scott

If you'd like to see a video of CQ doing his stand-up comedy, I've got that on the podcast website at WhatWasThatLike.com/98.

And if you'd like to hear another really intense story of war, one of the earliest episodes of the podcast was with Josh. He was in Iraq, inside a tank. Here's a clip from that episode:

Josh

I had, like, my life flash before my eyes - like, I lived my whole existence again within a split second. Everything hurts. It felt like my outsides were on my insides and my insides were on my outsides. Then, I kind of snapped and was like, "What in the world?! Where's my cigarette?! I was so dead certain. I can't believe this just happened!" Slowly, all my senses came back to me. I could start hearing and smelling again. Then, I was, like, actually looking around and went, "Holy shit."

Scott

You can hear Josh tell that whole story in episode 6, at WhatWasThatLike.com/06.

Well, the wait is over. You've heard me talking about setting up the new podcast listener community, and now it's ready. Up til now, we've been using a Facebook group. And that was okay for a while, but there are a whole lot of reasons I wanted to get away from Facebook. And that has now happened. So, I'd like for you to go and check out our new place. It's at community.whatwasthatlike.com. Just go there, set up your new profile, jump into some of the discussions, just kind of get familiar with it. I think it's gonna be great. And since it's still kind of new, let me know if you come across something that doesn't quite work like it's supposed to, because I want to fix those things. But so far it's looking pretty good. I've had a few of the current Facebook group listeners come over as beta testers, and now I'm inviting you. This is our special little place! So go check it out, at community.whatwasthatlike.com.

And one other thing I want to mention – if you have a product or service that you'd like to advertise here on the podcast, get in touch with me. The host-read ads on here are very effective, and you can reach many thousands of people pretty efficiently. So just drop me an email at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com and we can talk demographics, listener numbers and all that, and see if what you have is a good fit for my audience.

And now, we have this week's Listener Story, from a rather animated story teller, about his experience in a steam room. Stay safe, and I'll see you in two weeks.

(Listener Story - Steam Room)

My workplace had a gym with it. The gym costs a lot of money. It was like \$60 a month. Well, I'm cheap. I don't pay for stuff like that. I'm just, "Nah, that ain't for me." Well, one week, they

were like, "Hey, we need some more members, so we're going to make it free for anyone who works at this company." I'm like, "Okay, but because I like working out, trying to stay in shape, and stuff." So, this gym is nice. They've got a pool. They've got a whole decked-out weight room with dumbbells that I can't even wait to pick up. They had a punching bag area. They had a track. It was dope. So, I was getting my workout, getting my pump, working up a sweat, and getting a sore. I know that this gym has a steam room and I'm like, "Oh boy, this is gonna be nice. I'm gonna go chill in the Steam Room." I was going to, kind of, just cool down which I find is hilariously ironic because it's a steam room. So, I went into the locker, I've stayed in my shorts because I'm not a weirdo, and I'm like, "Alright, cool. We're gonna hit this steam room." So I hit up in the steam room and I'm by myself, which is even better because that means that I don't have to make any awkward conversation with people. Then, lo and behold, a guy decides to join. I'm like, "Alright, that's fine, whatever." This dude comes in with nothing but, essentially, a loincloth of a towel around him. This is like a big old swole dude - like, the dude's got muscles on muscles - and I'm like, "Okay!" Then, that guy gave a little head nod and sat on the other side. I didn't know what day this guy was having, but this guy was just fuming and throwing random swear words. I'm like, "Okay, that's a little crazy but that's fine. You stay on your end, I stay on mine, and we're gonna be good." This homeboy - out of whatever pocket he had - pulled out shake weights and I'm like, "Bro... what?!" Ooookay then." Then, he's getting all the poses - he's hitting it from the back, he's hitting it from the front. If he wasn't in a steam room, this dude would be looking like Opal Silhouette. It felt like an eternity up in there and I was sitting there like, "Oh, this is kind of weird because he's grunting. This is really weird..." Eventually, he slams the shake weight down, drops a major F-bomb, grabs his shake weight, grabs his towel, and walks out stark naked. I'm like, "Bro, what just happened? Was that a mating ritual?! Does this guy want me to go home with him? Is he the alpha now?" I don't know how to feel about this. So, the next day rolls around and I'm like, "Alright, man, that was a statistical anomaly. Worst case scenario, I'm gonna hit these weights and I'm gonna hit the steam room. I might have some weird old guy with the saggy everything hanging out, and it's gonna be a good time. It'd be fine. It's gonna be fine. That ain't gonna happen. Again, that is just a statistical anomaly." So, I'm in the locker room getting ready, again, and wearing shorts because I'm not a weirdo. I opened up the door to the Steam Room and it was like putting cheese on a mousetrap. The shake weight was sitting there by itself catching all of that steam. Then I said, "No. Nah, fam. It's a trap right there. That ain't happening." So, I never went into that steam room again.