

WAR STORY, PART 1 (STEVEN AND BROOKE ELLIOTT)

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Ryan: In April 2004, Army Ranger Steven Elliott was deployed with the 2nd Ranger Battalion to Afghanistan. The objective of operation "Mountain Storm" was to kill or capture Osama Bin Laden. On April 22, Steven's squad was attacked by enemy combatants which resulted in 4 casualties, one of whom was former NFL safety, Pat Tillman.

Steven: It was told very plainly by all of us what happened, and it was concluded very clearly that it was friendly fire. That was the first time that the possibility that maybe I had fired on Pat and maybe hit him in what was practically darkness had occurred. That's when, for me, the real survivor's guilt started kicking in. That's when the posttraumatic stress really started kicking in. That's when the nightmare started kicking in. That's when I started self-medicating with alcohol.

It was the point when you're pulling a handgun out of your gun safe at home and just thinking about the fact that this could all be over really easily. Not because I didn't have things I wanted to look for but because I didn't know how to rest. I didn't know how to make it stop. A lot of questions.

A lot of questions like, "Why? Why did that happen? Why me? Whose fault is it? Is it my fault? Am I solely to blame? Is the chain of command's fault? Are they to blame? Are we both to blame? How do I deal with the guilt that I feel for having done what I've done? How do I deal with the shame that I feel for not just having done something potentially harmful? Am I the thing that I did?" We all have the same need to answer the same question of who am I? And why am I here? And in being here, what do I do with the fact that I hurt people, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes on purpose, and they hurt me? What do I do with that?

Ryan: This is part one 1 of a conversation we had with our good friends, Steven and Brooke Elliott. Theirs is the story of tragedy, depression, heartache, grace, and redemption. It's our prayer that by hearing their story, you can marvel with us at the goodness of God to repair and restore lives even when all hope seems lost.

Selena: Hey, guys, welcome to the podcast. We're so happy to have you, Steven, and Brooke Elliott. Welcome. How are you guys?

Brooke: Good.

Steven: Doing great. Thanks, guys.

Ryan: Awesome. This is our second ever in-person interview.

Selena: Yes. It's awesome.

Ryan: We get to look into your eyes and make sure you're not lying. I'm just kidding. It's going to be real treat today. So, Brooke and Steven, you guys have an incredible story. I think I probably alluded to it in past episodes. But essentially, it's a story of hope and redemption. And we just want to get into kind of what that story is-

Selena: Well, first of all, they are our friends.

Ryan: Yes, they are.

Selena: And they've been our friends for a very long time.

Ryan: For the past 11 years now.

Selena: Well, I know. But we knew them when?

Ryan: Steven was on the TV.

Selena: We knew them when?

Ryan: We knew them... oh, gosh. I feel like Steven I met you like in 2004-ish?

Steven: Yeah, it would have been in 2004.

Ryan: Yeah. Because we were at church, and I don't know, you came in with a new crop of like Ranger guys or something.

Steven: Yeah, I did.

Ryan: You all just showed up.

Steven: We just all. They just dumped us off of a bus and we came to church. No, we did. That's where we met.

Selena: It's kind of interesting because I met Brooke at college. I was in a summer course or something at Pierce for just a short stint, and we had a class

together. And I was so drawn to you, because she's so smart and she said the most intellectual things. I was like, "Wow, I gotta know this girl. She seems just so awesome." So we kind of became friends that way. And then I worked with her brother at Starbucks. Some random connections, remember?

Brooke: Oh, my gosh

Selena: And he was like, "Yeah, this is my sister." I'm like, "I know you." So we were friends before all of them.

Brooke: Yeah.

Ryan: You didn't meet each other through us.

Selena: No.

Ryan: You met each other in another way.

Selena: Through other mutual friends.

Ryan: So just explain that for us. Give us the context of the Elliotts.

Selena: Who are you. Tell us who you are.

Ryan: Who are you? How did you meet? Go.

Steven: Do you want me to start or do you want to start?

Brooke: I think you should start.

Steven: So you want me to start and then you will stop me and tell me how it actually happened? I'm totally fine with that. So I joined the army in 2003 or I started my enlistment with the army after I finished my undergrad, my bachelor's degree in business, graduated from Oral Roberts University. And then three weeks later, I started base training at Fort Benning, Georgia.

And then when all that was said and done, by that fall of 2003, I was assigned to second Ranger battalion just down the road at Joint Base Lewis–McChord, which put me here in Puget Sound at the end of 2003. And during that timeframe, started going to church in Tacoma area that you guys were at the time, and Brooke was also attending at the time. That's the initial real basic brushstrokes of how I came to even be in the Puget Sound and Brooke and I came to meet in the end of 2003, beginning of 2004.

- Ryan:** Wait, so did you guys meet at church?
- Steven:** Yeah, that's where we first met.
- Ryan:** Gotcha.
- Selena:** Interesting.
- Ryan:** How did that go? What are the juicy details? I know you guys are brilliant people. So I know that your intellects were just like magnets drawing to one another. Did you put off the vibe, Steven? I mean be honest.
- Steven:** I was reading one piece and I bumped into a-
- Ryan:** In the rushing. You're reading it and rushing.
- Steven:** You should tell that.
- Brooke:** Oh. It was actually at a friend's house where we met. And it was a friend where we would go and play games and hang out like a young people's group. At the time I was 23, I think. Which I felt like an old maid because I already had a little toddler at home. Steven walked in. He walked in and we were hanging out. He was with one of his friends Josie and Devan, who he's still friends with. I remember thinking that he was the hot one. That was my first-
- Ryan:** There it is. Ladies and gentlemen...
- Selena:** There it is.
- Ryan:** ...I have to do this. So Steven has a book. We'll talk about it later, but it's called "War Story." And in the back flap... Look at this picture of Steven.
- Brooke:** Yeah, the smolder.
- Ryan:** The smolder. I'm going to post a picture on the interwebs for everyone to see. But I see why. I see why you thought he was attractive.
- Steven:** See, the thing is, I had at the time... it's funny you think that because I look like either... Well, you look like a cop or a mental patient. In between those two, you just have a bad haircut in the army. Devin and Josie and I, we were kind of aliens from different planet landing in that apartment that night. But yeah, that's where we met.

Then we just sort of bump into each other randomly at things at church. And then I deployed that spring, my first and only deployment to Afghanistan in May of 2004. And when we got back is when we started dating. We dated throughout that summer and then continued to date at a distance when I got reassigned from JBLM that summer.

Ryan: So that there's a lot that happened in that little moment that you explained. So I don't want our listeners to wonder. So if you could, I know it's a very complex, complicated thing. But I'd love for our listeners to hear exactly what happened on that first deployment and help connect those dots for what happened later in your relationship and kind of why you had some traumas and things you're dealing with? So what happened when you were in Afghanistan?

Steven: As part of weaving our Ranger company, we went to the Afghan Pakistan border as part of what they call a Spring Surge. So mountain passes open up and people are able to move much more freely. And so there is a more of a true presence that was needed, particularly at that point. I mean, it's crazy that it's been 18 years effectively, where units like the Ranger Regiment have effectively been continuously deployed since 911.

Ryan: Wow.

Steven: So while the troop presence in Afghanistan in aggregate has reduced drastically, the operational tempo for units like Ranger, SEALs, etc, hasn't really changed. So, we were early on in the war, relatively speaking, and we were there to conduct raids and patrols.

So the platoon that I was a part of had also two brothers that were in it, Pat and Kevin Tillman. And Pat had gained some level of notoriety, although I hadn't really honestly followed it all that much. But Pat had given up a multimillion-dollar contract extension in the NFL in favor of military service. His brother Kevin joined as well. So they were guys that I worked with. I worked with Kevin pretty closely because we were in the same squad and then Pat was in the same platoon. So we were all deployed.

And then on April 22, 2004, our platoon was ambushed and there was a variety of confusing and mitigating circumstances. Our platoon had been split prior to that ambush to accomplish two separate objectives, which was highly unusual. That helped kind of perpetuate a lot of more confusion in the midst of that engagement.

But as that engagement concluded, it was evident that we as platoon had sustained four casualties, two dead and two wounded. One of those killed was

an Afghan military soldier who was fighting with us, and the other one who was killed was Pat. And then as things begin to further develop and become known, it was evident very, very quickly, like within 24 hours, that all of those casualties, the two KIAs and two that were wounded were all as a result of friendly fire, where one part of the platoon had mistakenly fired on another part of platoon believing them to be the enemy.

And then as that continued to unfold it, it was evident, you put the pieces together, that there was probably... and we don't know to this day who fired the rounds that killed Pat. But it's likely that one of two Rangers fired those rounds. And I'm one of those two men.

Ryan: Wow.

Steven: So that was the deployment. There was investigations that took place and debriefs and all sorts of stuff. And then they tried to get us back in the field doing more raising controls as quickly as they could to try and get some positive momentum, if you can call it that, in the midst of war zone before coming home.

And then we came back and then not long after Brooke and I started dating. I mean, in fact, really that events and that deployment from even our very first date was something that's been part of our relationship.

Ryan: Wow. I want to make sure to redirect our listeners to that whole... you share your whole story at great length on the Nations Podcasts. Steve and I get to share some privilege of serving on the board for Nations Media. And so I don't want to gloss over that. That's a very intense story. A lot of complex things that happened there. And you go through that in excellent articulation, excellent detail.

Actually in your book too "War Story." It tells your whole story. But the thing is, and that's where I want to get is it's not just about this sensational story. And what I mean by it's been sensationalized because you have Pat Tillman, who was kind of this picture of patriotism.

And I remember so vividly, I was a janitor. So I wasn't quite as patriotic as you. But I remember I was mopping this floor... I can picture it. I was approaching the door mopping the floor. I was listening to headphones, probably radio or something. And I remember it came out on the TV screen in the workout room. And it said this is what had happened.

Steven: Wow.

- Ryan:** This guy Pat Tillman had been shot and it was friendly fire. And I remember thinking, "Oh, my word I can't believe." As a young man, I was just like, this picture of... and they were spinning it in that way. Right?
- Steven:** That's right.
- Ryan:** And I remember that so vividly. I'm just so blown away at God's kind of sovereignty in all this in that we're friends now looking back on it. Not so that we can wallow in it, which is what I love about how you share your story, it's so that we can see God's redemptive power in that. And so that's what we're going to spend our time talking about is how He has redeemed you and where you went. So you come home-
- Selena:** Or redeemed you and your relationship. Because you said this is kind of the first. So, Brooke, talk to us about when you guys met. Did you share any of this information with her? Were you allowed to share? How did that kind of affect and begin your relationship, I guess?
- Brooke:** So our first date I think we ended up spending like six hours together. It was just this ongoing one thing to the next, bookstore and out to eat. And then we ended up at 72nd Starbucks in Tacoma.
- Ryan:** Wow.
- Steven:** And I saw his KIA bracelet, which was another guy who had... he passed away in [inaudible]?
- Steven:** It was a... brief segue or interjection. You're always encouraged at Regiment anyway to learn the story of a fallen Ranger and then wear... sometimes you see those silver KIA bracelets. And the guy whose bracelet I wore was a guy by the name of John Mark Price, who I was in his platoon and he died on the jump, jumping into Panama in 1989.
- Selena:** Oh, wow.
- Ryan:** Wow.
- Steven:** There's memorabilia and pictures of John Mark and his family in our platoon. So you know the stories of those guys. So I had that bracelet on and she asked about it.
- Steven:** Because I literally knew nothing about the army. I mean, I can't even tell you how little I knew. And so he began to tell me the story of what he had just very

recently experienced. Because our first date was I think July 7 that year. And he had gone through everything in April.

So he tells me the whole thing and this guy named Pat Tillman, which I had no idea who that was. I mean, I was a college student, single mom, not really following what's going on in the news, or definitely not football. And I was just like, "Okay." Just the gravity of it definitely did not set in or how he was impacted by it or anything like that.

Steven: The reason I even shared that on our first date wasn't for lack of other things to talk about. It was because during that time, between the time that I got home and just the month of June, a lot of things transpired when we got back where the news that we thought was obvious in the world have been told that Pat was killed by friendly fire, turns out that's not the story that was being told back here. And so the wheels were kind of falling off the narrative the army was telling.

And then I went from being part of the unit to basically being told that you're fired and that we're going to send you to the big army, but I didn't know where. And so part of that was, frankly, it was like this big can of worms. It was sort of like, well, I want to continue dating you essentially but my future as a... and it also felt somewhat like she's asking you about the bracelet I'm wearing and that's part of the sort of identity as a ranger. And it almost felt disingenuous to just be like, "Oh, yeah, I'm a Ranger," when I knew very soon I wasn't going to be. So it was sort of like, well, it's a lie of omission if I don't say that. And then if I just say... you know what I mean? Like just open up this like, well, I guess we're talking about it.

Ryan: Yeah, there's no shortcut.

Steven: I mean, it was surreal, but also normal. It felt very normal to speak of it with you. I remember that. That conversation I remember it only felt surreal or strange to the extent that in my mind, it should feel strange. But it didn't feel strange.

Brooke: No. It didn't actually because our relationship just from the very beginning, it felt ordained. It felt like this is what is happening. We're not going to just try this on and see. I mean, I had a spiritual experience, which I did not tell him about the time because it would have freaked him out probably. He would have run for the hills. But I mean, it was just maybe four days before that, where I had an overwhelming spiritual experience of knowing that this is who God had for me.

Selena: Wow.

- Ryan:** That's the best way to scare a boyfriend.
- Selena:** Number one.
- Steven:** It is. Good news.
- Ryan:** Yeah, good news.
- Selena:** God told me.
- Brooke:** Yeah, God told me. That's always a good one to start. What was I going to say?
- Ryan:** It felt really natural. Even though it was a tough conversation it was natural.
- Brooke:** Yeah. We were just from the beginning, like, "This is a very serious road we're walking down." For him, I think it was too because I was a single mom. I had been praying for a year for God to just bring my person, bring my partner to me. I don't want to date. I don't want to mess around. I don't have time for that and I'm not going to jerk my daughter around. I just was like that he's my answered prayer.
- Ryan:** So I remember Steven, listening to that podcast that I mentioned earlier, this was a big thing for you to join the army. Right? Because it's a generational thing, it was a family thing. There's a lot of pride that went into that. Also the kind of spirit of patriotism after 911, this decision after college not to go into the officer candidacies, whatever, OCS.
- Steven:** That's right.
- Ryan:** You went straight into enlist because you wanted to be a ranger.
- Steven:** That's right.
- Ryan:** So this effectively was your one deployment, and I read this in your book, and it was like you didn't feel like you really earned the Ranger title. At least that's what it seemed like to me.
- Steven:** That's right.
- Ryan:** And you're bringing that back with you along with the regret of being a part of this tragedy. So there's a lot going on in your heart at this time and that's sending you down a road that you maybe weren't aware of at the time, the anxiety, the depression. Let's kind of flesh that out, how that aspect of your

trauma really affected your early dating years, early married years. So you date for a period of time, at some point, you got married...

Steven: Yeah.

Ryan: I'll let you go from there.

Steven: We look back, and certainly in writing the book and this whole journey has provided ample opportunities for reflection. And there's been certainly when you experience something it's your normal. And so it's hard to have any sort of context beyond sort of maybe an intellectual appreciation for "that was bad," or "that was hard."

But I think when we look at both our early years dating, marriage, whatever, it's just like, how are we not divorced sooner? Frankly. I mean, because I was coming home with war trauma that I didn't have a name for. And at the time we started dating, I was in shock, frankly.

Brooke: Actually, the symptoms hadn't kicked in for quite a while.

Ryan: Really?

Brooke: Yeah. So we started dating in July, and by September, he was shipped off to the East Coast.

Ryan: Oh, wow.

Brooke: So we had two month or so normal dates where he would pick me up in his cool car and we'd go out for dates.

Ryan: The cool car. We have to hear about this one. Was it the Camaro?

Steven: It was a Subaru sports.

Ryan: Oh, do you still have that car? I feel like you might still have that car. You had a Subaru for a while, didn't you?

Steven: That was it. That was it. It's always a 19-year-old who appreciate it from what that is. But I miss it. I miss it. That was being the Northwest [inaudible] that car.

Ryan: Sorry, Brooke.

Brooke: No, no, it's fine. So we spent two years and eight months...

- Selena:** Wow.
- Steven:** ...but nobody's counting, apart.
- Ryan:** Wow.
- Steven:** ...with him on the east coast. And we couldn't justify Gracie and I moving there. Gracie has a really good relationship with her dad. [inaudible] that time apart. So when we're separated, we got married, we bought a house, two houses actually...
- Ryan:** Got married while you were apart.
- Steven:** We got married the following summer, following August of 2005. And I still had almost two years left in my enlistment. Gracie had visitation schedule and stuff with Christian who's in Seattle. But then also my job on the East Coast, I was working for basically as an aide to a couple different general officers.
- So technically, my stuff and my address was in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. I was never there. So like where they would have been authorized to live would have been Fort Jackson. Meanwhile, I'm traveling like five or six days a week. So then it was just like, well, if that's going to be reality, why bring them out here where they have no family, no connections, no community? It just felt like, all we have to do is just sort of wait it out, essentially until I get out and then I can move back to Puget Sound.
- Ryan:** Wow.
- Steven:** But then during that time, there's a myriad of things. One is you're a part from somebody that you love and you want to build a life from and the army is between... and there's a million reasons at any given point in time. And anyone who's listening who's been a military spouse or been in the military or whatever, there's a million reasons at any given point to be frustrated with the military. There just is. It's just difficult.
- Brooke:** You feel powerless in a way.
- Selena:** Yeah. It's service to the nth degree. But during that time, that's when hyper-vigilance and depression, anxiety, nightmares, and all that stuff really became much more pronounced. We had done two investigations in country, and sort of the lesson that you're learning. You're always learning whether you're learning the right thing or not. And we're always following a narrative, whether we want to believe we're following a narrative or not.

And the narrative that I found myself following was, this will never end. Because we're in the FOB in Afghanistan, we do critical incident debrief, everyone understand it's an accident, and then we're back out doing missions. The Ranger Regiment is not a unit that you continue to be a functioning part of the unit if there's any question about your professionalism.

So then the lesson you learned from that is, I guess that's over. Then there's another investigation. It's like, "Well, okay, I'm not sure why that was the case. But I guess it's over." And then you go home and then you realize, "Oh, wait a second. Now I'm leaving Fort Lewis and I have a job in... Then it's investigation number three, and then it's investigation... It was literally the investigations didn't stop until I was two months from being out of the army.

Ryan: No kidding. Wow.

Steven: So that continued to perpetuate. And then during that timeframe, we're apart, that's stressful; I'm working a ton, that's stressful; I'm finishing my MBA, because I'm trying to basically stick it to the army and show them that that's fine. If this is how it's going to go down, I'll use your money to burn down tuition dollars. It wasn't quite that bad. But some days that's what it was. And so you have all these stressors on top of that.

Brooke: I remember there was a period of time where we didn't know if he was going to face criminal charges. I remember that being really stressful.

Steven: That was the final investigation.

Ryan: That's terrifying.

Brooke: Yeah, it was.

Ryan: Because you've already been a part all this time and now you're just looking at...

Steven: Yeah, we didn't know how the future holds. So during that time, I was self-medicating a lot. I was drinking a ton, high functioning, you know, drink myself to sleep, wake up. You know, just not taking care of myself in general. That in and of itself that's not healthy. And that's going to affect your mental state. So that's what happens. You get things piled on top of one another and then you're just in a downward feedback loop, where you're using things that make things worse to try and make things better. And that just doesn't stop.

Selena: Let me ask a question. How were you guys feeling about God in this whole thing? Was God just kind of like, well, he's there, but I really have some bigger stuff. Where are you, God? What were you all feeling kind of in terms of your faith? Because obviously you were both believers and you met each other knowing that. But in the midst of everything sort of blowing up and falling apart after your deployment, where would you say God was or your perspective of Him, your experience of Him or lack thereof?

Ryan: Good question.

Brooke: For me, I was still building that relationship so much. Like I felt really new to it. Honestly, I had started seeking at a really young age and as a teenager. I didn't grow up in church or anything like that. So it was all really new for me. I don't think that I had necessarily a solid foundation to stand on.

Selena: Did you deal with anger towards God at all?

Brooke: No, I never did. I never did have any anger towards God. Steven on the other hand-

Ryan: So you're on the East Coast, you're dealing with all this internal turmoil, self-medicating with alcohol, high functioning, starting to question your faith, I'm assuming. Brooke, what are you seeing as a wife now? What's happening in your husband from thousands of miles away? How is that making you feel?

Brooke: Well, because Steven is so high functioning just like a human being, it was actually really hard for me to even know. I didn't really know the depth of what he was going through. I didn't know that he was having terrifying nightmares that were keeping him up at night. I didn't know that for years. And I remember because he was totally new to drinking. He didn't drink in college, and it's just very straight edge.

Ryan: I was straight edge in high school too by the way.

Brooke: Which I was not. I was completely the opposite when I was a teenager and stuff. And so I remember him telling me like, "It's so weird. I had some wine and then I woke up and I don't remember anything. And I woke up in a different place and all this." I was like, "That's called blackout drinking."

Ryan: Got to be more than some wine.

Brooke: Not a good sign. Not a good sign. I think that I was putting some pieces together because I was taking a psych 101 class, and I learned about PTSD in

my textbook. And I was like, "Get a load of this." And I read it to him, I was like, "I think this is what you have."

Ryan: Wow.

Brooke: But even at that time, I didn't realize how bad it was or how bad it was going to get actually. I thought, "Oh, you know, you could just get..."

Selena: "Okay, we know what it is. Now let's-

Brooke: See a counselor. I think I still felt very hopeful. And probably a lot of it was naivety.

Selena: Steve where were you at in this?

Steven: It was the beginning of a pretty long, dark tunnel. Some of it self-imposed, frankly. From a spiritual standpoint, to answer that question, the way I describe it and I think the easiest way to summarize it is going into Afghanistan in 2004, in hindsight, I was very much the older son from the story of the prodigal son that Jesus tells in Luke 15. Where I'm not necessarily the villain, I'm not the bad guy in the story, but I'm the guy that believes that he has a seat at his father's table, because he's actually a pretty good guy and he works hard and he tries hard. That's why I have a seat at the table.

Selena: Because you deserve it.

Steven: Because I deserve it, frankly. And I'm pretty good at not bragging about it, which-

Selena: Which should count for something.

Ryan: Still humble.

Steven: Exactly. So then I was effectively the man who was building his house on the sand. I mean, that's what Jesus talking about. He's not talking about complete pagans. He's talking about the religious. He's just like, "You can build on the rock or you can build on the sand and you're building on your own self-righteousness." And that's what I built it on.

So when that's all torn away, then you realize that "Oh, God was really my insurance policy," where I'm pretty good. I'm like, 88%, 92% good most of the time, and I'm paying my dues with whatever spiritual discipline, you know, however, you want to define that with going to church reading the Bible and whatever else. And so then that means that it's God's job to underwrite

whatever it is I feel like He's leading me to do, which means it's going to look a certain way, and it's going to wind up a certain way. And then when it doesn't, then you basically...

And it not just an "Oh, gee, I didn't get that promotion," or gosh, "darn it, we didn't get that house we wanted." But it's, "I have soul crushing guilt and shame that I have to live with. I'm still alive and I just wish I wasn't. So why did you leave me alive? Why did you take me down that path if you knew it was going to bring me here."

And so then you go from being the older son to being the younger son. And you basically say, "Fine, if this is what it looks like, cut me a check. I'm out of here." You can take your table, you can take your feast, you can take whatever it is you got going on here. and I'm going to go do my own thing. I'm a good person, however, you wanted to find that.

We always seem to find ourselves on the right side of that line. I'm a good person. I don't need the complexities of trying to reconcile a God who is supposed to be all-loving and all-powerful with what I'm doing. Because if He's all-loving, why is He allowing this to happen? And I basically came down in the sight of "which one? He's not both? He's one of the other. But in any case, I'm not interested."

I tried to attend church a couple times, when I was out, not that going to a building per se is but as far as like that's what I knew how to do. And I remember walking into is a giant, great... in retrospect, it's like, "Oh, those are really good people." Giant Baptist Church, because that's redundant. I'm in South Carolina. Just walking in this church, and I remember sitting there and it was as though I was in a room with just foreign language written all over the wall, where I was just like, "Why, what is this? Why am I here? Why are you here? What is this for?"

I had been culturally just swimming in those waters my entire life, and I just sat there, and it's just like, "This is a stupidest way that I can spend an hour and a half on a Sunday."

Ryan: Wow.

Selena: And then I went maybe a couple times, and then people will try and talk to you at church, which they're so nice. Then I realized pretty quickly that, well, if I'm going to do anything beyond just listen to the sermon, I'm at risk of actually having to tell people what's going on with me or just have to lie to them. So then I would maybe go on like a Wednesday night, and I'd sit in the

back and get there late and leave early. And then eventually, it was just like, "This is just a waste of my time."

And it was just I had built on the wrong foundation. So what happened there was me, walking away from the Lord because He was not giving me what I thought I deserved.

Ryan: I'm hearing a theme. And it's kind of an obscuring of yourself to yourself also, an obscuring of God. We talk about living transparently, and this feels like the opposite of that.

Steven: Yes.

Selena: Oh, yeah.

Ryan:

Ryan: You're doing that to church people. I mean, he's doing that to you, Brooke to the point where you don't even know what's going on from 2,000 miles away or whatever. So not a good path. Now, we can agree in hindsight, not a good path. So at some point, you were let go with it from the army. Right?

Steven: Yeah. Well, I finished my enlistment. I was released for standards from the Regiment in the summer of 2004. And then my enlistment ran till 2007 and I served honorably.

Ryan: That's what I meant. I don't know how to say it. You were released not let go.

Steven: I got randomly fired.

Selena: Military lingo.

Steven: I would have run away sooner if I could have, but no. For a brief period time there was some conversation around am I going to stay in or not? But that pretty quickly, it was just like...

Ryan: Sure.

Steven: To just kind of even sum up that point as far as where I was at, I was externalizing all my problems when I was the common denominator in all of them. The easiest villain, which is always an easy, cheap shot villain is the military. It's the Army's problem. I have been trying to get reassigned back to Fort Lewis. It's just like, well, if I could at least get back there, there's infantry

units there. I'm an infantryman. I mean, just put me in a squad. I can do that. For who knows why that never worked.

So it was basically just, I'm drinking, I'm unhappy, I'm depressed because I'm separated from my wife geographically, and because I'm in a job that I hate. So once that's done, once I come home... in hindsight too, that was so dangerous because then there was two years and eight months worth of build up to me coming home.

Selena: Yeah, the expectation and pressure.

Steven: "When he comes home and he's not in the Army, it's just going to be all better."

Ryan: It's going to be smooth sailing.

Selena: Which is not the story.

Ryan: So, what happened when you got home? Let's talk about that. What was that like?

Brooke: It's hard to remember exactly. I remember opening the door when he first got there. He drove across the country. He stopped in Kansas for a little bit and visited his family and then drove on to see us. He was arriving to a house that we had bought that he had never seen. We had bought it a few months prior to that in Olympia. He had gotten a job in finance. And I had started at the Evergreen State College to finish my undergrad and Gracie was starting at the Waldorf school, and we were so excited. It was like, "Yes, this is where we're supposed to be." I really, really felt that.

I think part of the reason he could manage so well was because he was just living this bachelor life over there. So coming home, and having an instant family with a wife he's never lived with no, that's hard enough.

Ryan: Wow.

Brooke: And then a little girl who's going into kindergarten.

Selena: There's a lot of different dynamics. And kids that age are so much more aware and able to verbalize what was going on around them. Question things innocently, I think.

Steven: Yeah, sure.

Brooke: Yeah.

Selena: But also been picking at you. And you're like, "I don't want to deal with this."

Brooke: Combined families are really, really hard. I've seen that over and over with various friends and stuff. That's just a difficult thing. Gracie had me to herself for five and a half years, and now she has to share me with this stranger that she barely knows. You know, he would come to visit but it would be like a week here and a few days there over that period of time that he was gone.

And so Gracie would do normal little girl things. She would scream about something or she would drop something and make a loud noise or run through the house. And Steven would be visibly, and sometimes he would verbalize his frustration and his startled response that you would have to her. And even to this day sometimes, something will be really loud and I will look at him and just be like...

Steven: She has a startle response looking for my startled response.

Brooke: So I feel like in a way, I've been conditioned and I'm having to uncondition myself for his responses that he would just... it was completely out of his control.

Ryan: Wow.

Selena: And obviously, this would start perpetuating I guess sparks flying and not the good kind between you two, because you're trying to be a parent, which Grace is learning that both of you are her parents but trying to manage both of them basically.

Brooke: It was really, really difficult. And Steven was very withdrawn. And so the happy home that I was hoping we would have where Gracie would be able to build this really beautiful relationship with Steven, that wasn't happening.

Ryan: Make sure you listen to the next episode for Part 2 with Steven and Brooke's story, you can find Steven's book "War Story" wherever books are sold. Additionally, Steven and Brooke are the founders of the Elliott Fund, which exists to advocate for reform and how the unseen wounds of war are viewed and treated so that the broken places can be made whole. To learn more, visit Elliottfund.org. I hope you'll join us for part two of their story.

In the meantime, please remember to subscribe, rate, and review this podcast, wherever you get yours, and consider joining our Patreon community

to help us produce more content like this. Visit patreon.com/fiercemarriage to learn more. Till next time, stay fierce.

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- Recommended Resources:
 - [Steven's Story](#)
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