

CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM
IN THEIR OWN VOICES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWEE: Benjamin Hertwig

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Benjamin Hertwig

Interviewed 23 March 2022

Michael Petrou (00:05):

All right. So, it's March 24th, 2022. I'm speaking with Benjamin Hertwig. Benjamin, you've signed the release form, yes?

Benjamin Hertwig (00:16):

Yeah.

Michael Petrou (00:17):

I might, if you don't mind, I'm gonna ask you to re-sign it with some sort of scrawled signature, if that's possible. I suspect the type thing is alright, but just to be safe.

Benjamin Hertwig (00:28):

Sure. Yeah, no problem.

Michael Petrou (00:30):

All right. I have a lot of things I wanna talk to you about, but especially your post-war and post-service life, but I'd like to begin by asking you why you enlisted in the first place.

Benjamin Hertwig (00:46):

Why did I enlist? It was very much a family thing. So, I joined at the age of 16, the Reserves. My brother was in the military, still is. My sister was in the military. At that time my dad was in the military, [he's] recently retired. I was not a particularly good student, and I did not like school at all. And I signed up between the summers of grade 10 and 11 thinking that I was [...], this would be the start of my career, and this is what I would do for the rest of my life.

Michael Petrou (01:35):

Tell me more about the family influence. How significant or how much of a factor was that, do you think?

Benjamin Hertwig (01:41):

I mean, no pressure, like no one ever said, this is what you have to do, or this is what you should do, but it was just very, very clear that this was an acceptable thing for people in my family to do, or just an anticipated sort of life progression. I had cousins who were in the military as well from both sides of my family. And so just a lot of people doing that.

Michael Petrou (02:10):

What seemed attractive about that option for you?

Benjamin Hertwig (02:14):

I mean, I don't know that I was thinking in it in terms of anything beyond, I think it looks like a cool thing to do. I definitely wasn't thinking of it patriotically or with any sort of [...]. Yeah, I

think my awareness or scope was quite limited and I saw sort of the, the Army-stamped t-shirts that my brother wore or things like that and thought that looks cool. I wanna do that too.

Michael Petrou (02:50):

You enlisted in 2001, if I recall correctly, is that right?

Benjamin Hertwig (02:53):

Yeah. Yeah.

Michael Petrou (02:55):

And were the September 11th [2001] attacks a factor or did you enlist before that took place?

Benjamin Hertwig (03:02):

Yeah, I'm trying to remember exactly, because in my memory they had nothing to do with it at all. But it would've been between the summers of grade 10 and 11. So, I was in grade 10 on September 11th [2001], so it would've been previous to that. I think I had already had the ball rolling or had wanted to start the process before the September 11th [2001] attacks, if I remember.

Michael Petrou (03:34):

When did you transfer from the Reserves into the regular forces?

Benjamin Hertwig (03:37):

Never transferred. So, I was a Reservist my entire time.

Michael Petrou (03:44):

You deployed in 2006, do I have that right?

Benjamin Hertwig (03:48):

Yes.

Michael Petrou (03:49):

Did you have a non-military job at the time or were you in school?

Benjamin Hertwig (03:55):

Yeah. So, I graduated grade 12, in 2003 and then I was studying at Concordia University [Concordia University of Edmonton], I believe, for a year and then took off the year for pre-deployment training and kind of the selection process and that kind of thing.

Michael Petrou (04:17):

And which unit were you in?

Benjamin Hertwig (04:19):

Loyal Edmonton Regiment.

Michael Petrou (04:20):

Okay. Did you return to Concordia when you got back or?

Benjamin Hertwig (04:24):

I did, yeah.

Michael Petrou (04:25):

Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your deployment? What was your role, what was significant about your time over there?

Benjamin Hertwig (04:35):

Yeah, so went over for Task Force 1-06. So, the first of the southern Afghanistan tours that would've been immediately after, Glyn Berry's death, I believe so. It was, I mean, it was pretty wild in a lot of ways in southern Afghanistan, Kandahar and Helmand province at that time. And I think no one really knew what to expect. I certainly did not know what to expect. My platoon was doing—DNS platoon was our name, Defence and Security, so we were doing convoy escorts—escorting the various of resupply convoys out to the FOBs [forward operating bases].

Benjamin Hertwig (05:27):

Then sometimes you would end up staying at a FOB for a while. Or you would get tasked out to do various different things. I was attached for about 10 days to a company from the 10th Mountain. Another Canadian trucker and I, a corporal, was providing security for his [H.L.?] and we were essentially just providing the Americans with rations. We drove around with them for about 10 days and that was one of the more significant times of the tour, certainly. And then, yeah.

Michael Petrou (06:06):

Significant, how so?

Benjamin Hertwig (06:09):

I mean, that was the first time that I experienced combat was with the soldiers there. And just because we were constantly sort of on the move driving around for 10 days, I think I saw a lot of Afghanistan that I had not previously seen.

Michael Petrou (06:35):

Was combat something that you had wanted to experience before deploying?

Benjamin Hertwig (06:39):

Hundred percent. I think that for an infantry soldier it is what you train for. And I think as a young man, it was sort of the measuring stick for what I thought a soldier ought to be. So, I think the desire to be in combat or experience combat was something that I certainly wanted, and the people I was serving with wanted as well, I would say.

Michael Petrou (07:03):

I think I recall one of your poems you describe, if my memory is correct, a more senior colleague kind of bringing you to the front so you could have your first experience of shooting. Do I have that right?

Benjamin Hertwig (07:19):

Yeah. And that was an American first sergeant, Rivers was his last name if I recall correctly. We were usually with First Sergeant Rivers and the captain and the headquarters of 10th Mountain company. We weren't attached to their sort of infantry fighting or whatever, but then when the battle was going on forward and he knew that I wanted to be involved in something like that. He just took one of the Hummers and just drove right up to the front and he's like, "Go fill your boots." And I was essentially free to kinda roam with the soldiers from the 10th Mountain at that period.

Michael Petrou (08:19):

And how did that experience compare with what you were hoping for?

Benjamin Hertwig (08:24):

Yeah, I mean, I think it was [...]. How do I answer that question? I would say that once you're in it, you're in it and you're not really thinking, you're just sort of reacting. And then when you are shooting, that's one thing. And then when you are receiving fire, that's another thing. And I remember receiving fire and no longer [...]. A very different response it's like, oh yeah, this is not a joke kind of thing. Not that I ever, I don't think, I mean, people were obviously dying at that point, so in my head I didn't minimize what was going on, but you're still approaching it as a 20-year-old and not really sort of thinking of the larger complications, more so just responding.

Michael Petrou (09:26):

You would've been 20 or 21 [years old], right?

Benjamin Hertwig (09:30):

Yeah, I think 20 turning 21 [years old] shortly after I returned.

Michael Petrou (09:36):

What was the return like?

Benjamin Hertwig (09:42):

Within a matter of weeks, I was at back at university. It was a very, very abrupt transition. And I think a lot of the— they were still figuring out, I think, how to effectively transition people. And in the Reserves, I think that transition was even more limited because you literally went from being surrounded by fellow soldiers all of the time to the Reserves, where, if you don't feel like it, you only have to show up once every—I forget what it was once a month—once every two months, once every three months. I did not want to kind of do things within the reserves at that point, so I was showing up very irregularly. So, going from immersed in a military culture to being, I would say, on your own which is what I wanted at that time, but which was certainly not healthy for me in hindsight.

Michael Petrou (10:53):

So, what was the unit you were attached to in that rotation in early 2006? What was that Princess Patricia's [Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry]?

Benjamin Hertwig (11:02):

No. So the DNS platoon was comprised of mostly Loyal Eddies [Loyal Edmonton Regiment], Calgary Highlanders, and a few others sort of thrown in, I think from a couple other western regiments.

Michael Petrou (11:19):

So mostly reserve regiments.

Benjamin Hertwig (11:21):

It was an entirely reserve regiment. Like the NCOs [non-commissioned officer] were Reservist, the platoon commander was a Reservist. Yeah, platoon warrant was a Reservist.

Michael Petrou (11:31):

Yeah. And then the main battle group was comprised of who?

Benjamin Hertwig (11:37):

At that time, yeah, it was, I wanna say first battalion. Yeah.

Michael Petrou (11:41):

Okay. I guess what I'm wondering about is you're with a platoon that draws from a variety of different regiments. Mostly are Western Canada. You're in Eastern Canada back at Concordia again, I guess—

Benjamin Hertwig (11:58):

I'm in Western Canada. It's a smaller Concordia in Edmonton.

Michael Petrou (12:05):

Okay. So, were you able to even, had you wanted to, would you have been able to spend time with folks you've been deployed with, or what was that [...]?

Benjamin Hertwig (12:14):

Yeah, certainly. I mean, and it's not as though I never saw anyone from the platoon again. But the platoon dispersed. Like, the Highlanders went back to Calgary, everyone else went—some people released, some people joined the regular force. Then a lot of the Reservists [...] I think I was— there would've been others I think as well, but I didn't necessarily wanna be in the military anymore at that point. I stayed in for another year after I returned because my dad asked me to sort of reconsider leaving the military. And so, I did that out of respect for him and then left as well.

Michael Petrou (13:00):

So, tell me why, you said you wanted to be alone, you didn't wanna be part of that Reserve kinda community when you came back? Tell me more about that thinking.

Benjamin Hertwig (13:09):

I think I was still very much processing what I had seen in Afghanistan and some of the incidents that occurred near the end of my tour. And I think in a lot of ways I was overwhelmed by what I had seen and unsure of how to process things and just didn't feel like the Army was the place for

me to do that right then. And it's not a [...] yeah, I don't think I had sort of the emotional language to put that into words at the time. I think that's what I was feeling.

Michael Petrou (13:48):

You said earlier that in retrospect kind of being on your own was not healthy. So, what's your thinking behind that deduction?

Benjamin Hertwig (13:59):

I think these last few years out at UBC [University of British Columbia], I've been—well, not during the pandemic and not over this last year, 'cause I was recently diagnosed with a multiple sclerosis, which is sort of put a bit of pause on some of the things I was in previously. But two years ago, right before the start of the pandemic, I taught a pilot project out at UBC, which is working to become sort of a veteran friendly campus. Through the Veterans Transition Network and the Centre for Trauma and Group Counselling [Centre for Group Counselling and Trauma], I taught an introduction to writing for veterans, many of whom were Afghanistan vets, and semester long course through the Faculty of Education. And the entire time I was teaching, I mean, many thoughts, but one of the things I was thinking was this is precisely what I needed when I returned, but did not have, or did not have access to.

Benjamin Hertwig (15:05):

I mean, obviously, veterans are a varied group and not monolithic in any way and will have as wide a variety of perspectives on the war or what it means to be a soldier or as any other group. But I do think that one of the ways that people move forward in a good way or heal is through narrativization, so developing a coherent inner narrative of your service, your experiences, your trauma. I think a program like that, where we worked with the vets to write down what they had experienced and what they had seen, helped some of them process or develop that narrative. And for me, I think I was, more or less, adrift and floating for a while. Not wanting to think about the war in Afghanistan, but also not having people around me who had experienced what I had experienced or seen what I had seen.

Michael Petrou (16:13):

What sort of support, did you get, or you know debrief when you got back, what sort of?

Benjamin Hertwig (16:20):

I mean, I did not receive much support, but I did not want support at the time either. I remember a very sort of rushed feeling process of having to do a basic psychiatric assessment before you left. And I remember it was just sort of a tick the box sort of questionnaire. I remember not reading the questions and just filling it out, 'cause I didn't want to deal with it. I just wanted to be done and move on. And I remember the—I don't know if it was a psychiatrist or who it was—but who had looked at the assessment and said, "It doesn't look like you've read the questions because you have contradicted yourself, clearly, a couple times here," and I'm like, yeah, I didn't read the questions.

Michael Petrou (17:19):

If you didn't want sort of official help, I mean, were there people that you could talk to or wanted to talk to? I'm thinking specifically you had this large military family you mentioned. So,

who could you talk to when you got back? Or, if you did, or if you wanted to. I don't wanna be presumptuous.

Benjamin Hertwig (17:37):

Yeah. At that point, I was the only—like my brother or sister or father had not been in combat, though my brother has since been in combat. My brother was certainly someone with whom I could share things. But I still felt, I think, unsure of who to speak to. I think even at that point I was still processing to the extent that I didn't really even want to share or want to speak with people.

Benjamin Hertwig (18:20):

But I remember one occasion which has definitely remained with me, and it was a large family gathering. Someone had mentioned something to do with Afghanistan or someone on my tour who had died. I remember crying and kind of it being a family gathering, just feeling very embarrassed of it and kind of trying to get away from people, or not speak with anyone or see anyone in the house. But it was crowded, and family everywhere. I remember my grandfather, like a World War II vet, who usually was sort of a very loud, domineering personality. Not someone with whom I had sort of deep conversations. But he was uncharacteristically like quiet, when he saw me and he kind of met me in the hallway and [...] yeah, I still get emotional.

Benjamin Hertwig (19:36):

Yeah. He met me in the hallway and put his arm on me and didn't try and talk. Didn't try and ask questions. He just said, "I understand." Yeah. And then he walked back to the living room and that was it. But I think that sort of very brief encounter with him has remained with me because I think I very much did not feel understood or did not feel necessarily like I understood myself, but yeah, his very brief sort of physical contact there meant a lot to me. Still does.

Michael Petrou (20:30):

I wanted to ask you about your grandfather 'cause you do write about him. He was a Second World War vet. With whom did he fight? Tell me more about him, if you don't mind.

Benjamin Hertwig (20:42):

Yeah. He was born in Riga, Latvia, and he was—now I want to say [...] then he moved with his father to Berlin [Germany]. And so, I am thinking it was the German military he fought with. Though, I don't actually know that a hundred percent, because later in the life he moved to Austria, so I'm wondering. No, I think, I mean—I can check that up—but I'm pretty sure it was the German military he was with.

Michael Petrou (21:17):

Is he still alive?

Benjamin Hertwig (21:18):

No, he passed away around the time I think I started to write the poetry book.

Michael Petrou (21:29):

Did you ever talk to him about war or military service after that?

Benjamin Hertwig (21:37):

No. Very, very little. I wish I had and often, yearn for that, but at the time, I think, I still wasn't ready to talk about it in great detail yet.

Michael Petrou (21:57):

You left the Reserves in 2008, you'd wanted to do so, I guess, for at least a year already. Why did you wanna get out?

Benjamin Hertwig (22:07):

I just didn't feel like it was what I wanted to do anymore. I was no longer sure how I felt about the mission in Afghanistan, whether I thought it was a good thing or something that was futile or, [...]. Either way, I just felt like it wasn't what I wanted to do anymore.

Michael Petrou (22:39):

And had you finished at Concordia at that stage or?

Benjamin Hertwig (22:44):

No. I think it would've been a couple more years before I finished my undergrad.

Michael Petrou (22:49):

And what was your undergrad and what were you studying?

Benjamin Hertwig (22:51):

I think I started out general studies. Thought I would do psychology and then an 8:00 AM psychology class that I was not very studious at, I think, broke me in that way. And then I was good at writing, and encouraged in writing and I thought, okay, this is what I'm gonna do.

Michael Petrou (23:19):

So, you studied creative writing then? Or you switched to creative writing?

Benjamin Hertwig (23:21):

English literature, yeah.

Michael Petrou (23:23):

And you mentioned you have an affiliation with UBC now, tell me about that.

Benjamin Hertwig (23:28):

Yeah, so I'm working on my PhD at UBC right now. So, I'm in year number six, hopefully finishing up within the next year.

Michael Petrou (23:38):

Wonderful. What's the focus of your thesis on?

Benjamin Hertwig (23:42):

Yeah, I'm looking at narratives of the war in Afghanistan, so I think very much [...].

Michael Petrou (23:52):

Did you take part in any other or belong to any other formal networks of veterans? You mentioned this workshop or this course, if I'm describing it correctly, at UBC. I mean, did you join a Legion or take part in Remembrance Day ceremonies, things like that?

Benjamin Hertwig (24:07):

No. No. I mean, I think over the year—like when I left the military, there were a number of years where I was completely out of contact with people that I'd been in Afghanistan with or the regiment that I'd served with. Kind of just thought that I could cut myself off from all of those things. But eventually—and a big part of that actually was through a tattoo shop in Edmonton owned by a veteran, where a guy I was with in Afghanistan works, just started going back for tattoos. And when I'd be getting tattooed, we'd end up chatting about any of a number of things, Afghanistan included, and it was very much a safe place for me, I think, to process. I think through that and through them, I became reconnected with a number of veterans I had served with.

Michael Petrou (25:07):

Are those connections kind of re-forged now, or?

Benjamin Hertwig (25:11):

Yeah. Yeah, definitely. And I would say even here in Vancouver [British Columbia] Now there's a guy I was with in Afghanistan and that's been really, really good and really healthy.

Michael Petrou (25:27):

Are there positive things about your time, the service with—when you got out, you were eager to get out in many ways—but were there things that you missed, or things that you miss now, or look back on fondly?

Benjamin Hertwig (25:40):

Yeah, I mean, all of that time together with the other soldiers, I think, was and remains sort of my favorite memory of being a soldier. Like, just loving some of the people I was with and feeling like I had a place or a sense of belonging or [...]. Yeah, it's a closed world where I felt like I had belonging and a place where I was known and knew others. And I think that's always a good feeling.

Michael Petrou (26:24):

I wanted to ask you [about] one of the poems, *Home Again*. You say, "Marry the first person who asks you not to go. Fold in the dead with flour and yeast. Watch the dough rise. Wash your hands. Wonder where the rifle's weight has gone." It's that rifle's weight that I'm curious about. Is this a good thing, something that you wish you still felt? I mean, what's behind that?

Benjamin Hertwig (26:57):

Yeah. I mean, it's a complicated question. At a surface level, I think for an infantry soldier, and for other soldiers as well, but I think particularly for infantry soldiers, your rifle is an extension of who you are, your job, and a very powerful symbol, certainly. And I remember waking up for a number of years after occasionally having—these weren't real nightmares, sort of, 'cause I did

have some of those—but they were more the sort of anxiety dreams where I had misplaced my rifle somewhere or lost it in the training area and then kind of woke up feeling stressed out that I didn't know where my rifle was. But I think at another level, like not having a rifle in civilian life, and I was never someone who was particularly into guns or a gun nut, like someone who loved shooting for the sake of shooting or anything like that. But not having a rifle, I think kind of represented a finality that I was no longer a soldier now. That whatever I was, I was no longer a soldier.

Michael Petrou (28:33):

Is that a moment where you kind of wanted that back or you're just aware of its absence?

Benjamin Hertwig (28:38):

I think that when you're holding a rifle in a war zone, a rifle is a powerful thing and that feeling I think for good or for ill can be pretty intoxicating. I think there was always a part of me that perhaps missed that feeling, but yeah.

Michael Petrou (29:12):

Another poem, *Iconoclast*, you say, "The war's over and we're still here." Tell me about that.

Benjamin Hertwig (29:17):

When I had written the poem and the book, even then I knew the war was not over, I mean it had not ended yet, but the war, my war, had ended in the sense that my time in Afghanistan had ended. Although I think what I was trying to get [or] hint at in that poem is that the war is very much not over, and the veterans are still here. Even those who are no longer fighting are still, [...]. The war is living for them as it is for, I think, the people of Afghanistan right now, and civilians who sort of experienced the trauma of war as well, who are all still processing what they had seen.

Michael Petrou (30:16):

Tell me more about that because I don't think the war Afghanistan—it's still not over, but certainly a phase of it is. And certainly, you know, the mission that Canada was a part of is. How did it feel for you to watch the Taliban success this past summer, in the summer of 2021?

Benjamin Hertwig (30:37):

Yeah, I mean, it was very difficult. I ended up writing fair bit at that point and I wrote an op-ed [opposite the editorial page] for *The Globe and Mail* about sort of the feeling of watching the war end. And I think in a lot of ways I had known that it would come to this eventually and had already prepared myself. But I think just sort of the heartbreak for the people of Afghanistan who had hoped for a different result and just to see the desperation, of people trying to leave and not being able to. And then feeling guilt over the West's ability to sort of go in and then leave and for things to be over for the West. Although, yeah, obviously the people of Afghanistan still [...] carry the burden of two decades of war as well as now living under the Taliban.

Michael Petrou (31:56):

Are you still in touch with anyone in Afghanistan or Afghans living elsewhere?

Benjamin Hertwig (32:02):

No. No. Even after immediately when I returned, I mean, I think a couple of the interpreters I had a lot of a respect for, but no one that I had sort of contact information for or anything like that.

Michael Petrou (32:21):

When did you—discover might be the wrong word, but I'll use it for lack of a better one—when did you discover writing's value to you as part of this post-war process for you?

Benjamin Hertwig (32:40):

Yeah, I think in undergrad the majority of the writing that I did was sort of your typical sort of analytical essays about modernist poetry or the Victorian era or things I think in a lot of ways that felt very removed from Afghanistan in a good way. So, I don't think I felt—I liked the process of writing and I think it was a way for me to get out of my head, but it had not yet sort of provided a narrative about my own life or experiences. And I think the poetry book was probably the first time where writing felt like it was addressing a need I had as a result of my service in Afghanistan. I was working through a lot of things at the time, the death my grandfather, recent divorce, and a lot of the things that I had pushed aside for the greater part of—not quite a decade—but for a number of years, were just surfacing and I could no longer ignore them. I think writing helped me approach them in a healthy way.

Michael Petrou (34:10):

And you suggested this is, I believe the term used was narrativization. This is a process that is useful, not just for you, but you found it within your own experience a useful thing for other veterans, too. Tell me a little bit about why that is helpful and how so.

Benjamin Hertwig (34:39):

Yeah, I think for people who have experienced traumatic events—and not necessarily even veterans, but sexual abuse victims or survivors from the Indian Residential School program, like some of whom I've worked with it as well on writing—I think that the things we have seen or experienced can feel overwhelming and we're not necessarily sure where we fit within that trauma, or how to regain a sort of sense of individual identity in relation to that trauma. And I think when we write things down or try and develop a narrative about what happened to us, it's just sort of easier to comprehend where we belong in that story or gain some amount of control over that story, I would say. Where it no longer feels like the trauma is in control. It's more that trauma is a part of our life, but not necessarily something that controls who we are.

Michael Petrou (36:00):

Another poem I wanted to ask you about, which is some of the themes similar to the *Iconoclast*, is *Apple Picking After Afghanistan*, and you say that, "When you awake, you were still asleep, waiting for the war to end." Can you tell me what you're getting at there?

Benjamin Hertwig (36:20):

Yeah, I think for me, those were the years, very much where I was still pushing the war away or talking about the war away or memory of the war away, but I think still realizing that there was something that I had not contended with or there was something that I had not mentally dealt

with yet. So, obviously the war in Afghanistan, too, but the inner war, the feeling of that this is something I need to deal with in some way though I don't know how to, or I'm unsure of how to proceed.

Michael Petrou (37:03):

There's another poem where you have a quite serious line where you talk about—*Alternate* is the title—where you talk about envying the dead. How deep-seated was that emotion and where did it come from?

Benjamin Hertwig (37:17):

Yeah, I think I was not someone who, for whatever reason, contemplated taking my own life, although I did have a man from my platoon who I think was one of the many, many service people or civilians impacted by war who ended up taking his own life. But for me, I think it wasn't that I wanted to take my own life. It was more that I just did not want to exist. It was a passive, like suicidal ideation I would say. That life felt overwhelming, that I still hadn't processed what I had seen and that I just didn't want sort of the burden of those feelings anymore. I just wanted sort of to cease to exist.

Michael Petrou (38:15):

How long after Afghanistan was this?

Benjamin Hertwig (38:18):

I would say it was later. It was about not quite a decade after my service, but sort of in that range, seven to 10 years. I think initially after Afghanistan I was still just so wired and hopped up on what I had seen and experienced that it wasn't until sort of my mind and body had calmed down after a number of years that I think some of those feelings began to emerge.

Michael Petrou (38:56):

I've heard that other veterans describe that process of calming down or unwinding, 'cause as a soldier you're trained to be tightly coiled in a lot of ways, and it's not an easy thing to loosen that. That rings true to you, does it?

Benjamin Hertwig (39:18):

Yeah, for sure. I would agree with that, and I think for some people it's a shorter thing and for some people it's a long thing. I think if it's not dealt with it can extend for who knows how long, because I don't think those experiences go away quickly. I think for people like me, who try to push those things aside, in some ways that's almost a guarantee that you will have to deal with it at some point, whether physically or psychologically, that it will demand a response of some kind.

Michael Petrou (40:01):

There's another poem that struck me, *Winter Buck*. You know, lots of people [...]. Do you hunt yourself, or did you hunt?

Benjamin Hertwig (40:15):

I was sort of hunting adjacent, I would say. Family members hunted and I went out with them sometimes, but was never, never a big hunter or anything like that. But would accompany them.

Michael Petrou (40:27):

Was this before or after Afghanistan or both?

Benjamin Hertwig (40:29):

Yeah. Both.

Michael Petrou (40:31):

I'm asking only because, again it could be a coincidence, but you're not the first veteran that I've spoken to that's thought a lot about hunting in the context of post-military service in Afghanistan. I'm just wondering, did your perspective on hunting change at all as a result of your time in Afghanistan or?

Benjamin Hertwig (40:52):

No. I mean, for many years after Afghanistan I didn't touch a rifle. But I think if anything now, because I had not been a big part of that sort of the hunting world before, but I think now I would love to hunt again and to be a part of that with sort of the appropriate respect for what it entails, what a healthy relationship with the land and hunting can be, I think.

Michael Petrou (41:37):

Is that the attraction to it? That healthy relationship?

Benjamin Hertwig (41:41):

Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

Michael Petrou (41:44):

I promise I'll stop making you analyze your own writing soon.

Benjamin Hertwig (41:54):

All good.

Michael Petrou (41:55):

This might be me reading [into it], but a couple of your poems, *Remember Your Body Again* and *View From a Slide You Once Slept Under*. I mean, what I understood was like a nostalgia kind of a, there's the imagery of return to childhood. What was motivating those thoughts and that imagery in your poetry, do you think, after Afghanistan?

Benjamin Hertwig (42:25):

The return to childhood?

Michael Petrou (42:29):

Childhood memories, childhood places, I mean the slide, I mean, well, but you tell me, you wrote it.

Benjamin Hertwig (42:35):

Yeah. I should have actually grabbed the poetry book. I mean, I wrote the things. I'm like, do I remember that poem? Well, yeah, so, I mean, the slide for example was after the war and I was doing a lot of bike touring at the time, and I would say engaging in some somewhat risky behavior. Sort of extended solo bike trips, like in Yukon [Whitehorse] and Alaska [United States] and biking to Prince George [British Columbia] and tree planting and things like that. And just sleeping in random places, sleeping on the side of the road or sleeping under a slide in a park and stuff like that.

Benjamin Hertwig (43:15):

But I think kind of the, in terms of the return to childhood, I think at a very basic level, the difference between innocence and experience. Just the desire to return to sort of my pre-war self in some ways, which was never going to happen, but I think the desire to not be burdened by some of those memories, I would say was at the heart of thinking about childhood again.

Michael Petrou (43:48):

This is a broad question, but you talked about some of the connections you've rekindled or that you forged with other veterans, a connection with your own grandfather. I mean, are there universal veterans' experiences you think that might even span different generations or different wars or?

Benjamin Hertwig (44:11):

Yeah, I would say definitely for me and my grandfather, even as he fought for the Germans and for the Nazis and things that, I mean, that I do not in any way agree with. I think that most people in Canada even would say the same, but also recognizing that he, as a young man, did not choose to participate in the war and was sort of wrapped up in something that was much, much larger than he was, but that his experiences of combat or of losing friends, of trauma after the war, maybe pushing that trauma aside. I think probably his fellow veterans from Canada and the UK [United Kingdom] and United States would sympathize with him even as they fought against him.

Michael Petrou (45:28):

That's why, again, I guess he and you had fought for different armies, decades apart, but at that family get-together, he told you that he understood what you had gone through. He didn't say more than that. You described him putting his hand around you and telling you he understood. And then—

Benjamin Hertwig (45:50):

Yeah, just his hand on my shoulder, said "I understand." And I think it was because he was usually so loquacious and so, like, always talking and all sort of the life of the party that that uncharacteristic quietness and brevity, stuck with me. That he wasn't sort of, he wasn't bullshitting, he wasn't joking around, like that it was very serious for him. So serious that it required very few words, I think.

Michael Petrou (46:29):

And what happened after that encounter?

Benjamin Hertwig (46:32):

I think I still did not process things for many years. I think still tried to push those things aside, but I think when I needed to, and when I was ready to start doing some of the work of trying to heal the memory of that encounter with him, I think was one of the things that sort of gave me strength or gave me a roadmap to what feeling understood or seen might look like.

Michael Petrou (47:10):

And after that encounter in the hallway, you returned to the dinner table or?

Benjamin Hertwig (47:15):

I don't remember. Yeah. I think I probably went down in the basement for a while or something, but, yeah, I don't exactly remember.

Michael Petrou (47:29):

Another broad question. It's a huge question. And maybe it can't be answered, or maybe you've been answering it for the last—since we've been chatting—but how do you think your time in the military has changed you or shaped who you are today?

Benjamin Hertwig (47:48):

I think probably the six months that I spent in Afghanistan are among the most influential in my life. I think because that time really shook me and sort of made me question a lot about myself—things that I had assumed, made me question my faith, made me question my understanding of politics, made me, I think, really, really question who I was and how I wanted to sort of exist in the world.

Michael Petrou (48:32):

Faith imagery, church imagery, runs through your book quite a lot. Tell me more about that questioning that it provoked for you.

Benjamin Hertwig (48:43):

I think that for 19–20-year-old Benjamin, I think I had sort of a coherent narrative of what I thought the world was and who I was. I think kind of the war took some of those things away from me for a time that I just wasn't. I mean, where, where, where was God in all of the suffering that I had seen both, like, from soldiers who had died or been killed, that I had seen dying, or in Afghan civilians that I had seen dying, like in Afghan civilians who at the end of a suicide bombing were thrown in the back of a pickup truck, like where [...]. Yeah.

Benjamin Hertwig (49:53):

So, I think seeing some of those things just made just sort of stripped away some of the easy narratives I had. It's also just the process of growing up, which I think everyone is confronted by when what they see does not fit in with what they had previously thought about the world. It can be a very unsettling or upsetting thing. And I think war is such a compression, a time of compression, where all of those things are experienced in a very sort of compressed format that I think it can be one of the most unsettling of human experiences.

Michael Petrou (50:44):

So, you're hoping to finish your PhD in a year or so. What are your hopes or plans after that?

Benjamin Hertwig (50:54):

Yeah, I'd like to continue writing. I'd love to continue teaching. I think I find a lot of value in teaching other people to write and to process their own experiences. I really love that. Yeah, I think those are some of the things.

Michael Petrou (51:14):

Can you tell me a little bit more about that workshop at UBC? Is it ongoing or?

Benjamin Hertwig (51:19):

Yeah, so it is in its—I think for the first year of the pandemic, it took a break if I recall, and they had asked if I wanted to teach it again, but that was just right around the time I was diagnosed with MS [multiple sclerosis] and had to step away from teaching things for a bit. But it's going on right now still. The Veterans Transition Network, I think is one of the sort of agencies or organizations that is doing a lot of the work there through the Centre for Trauma and Group Counselling. Dr. Marvin Westwood is one of the people heading the program. They're doing a lot of really good work, I think. For me, that course was such an honor to teach, and it was also really difficult because I think as someone who was, and still is processing my own experiences, feeling the very raw emotions of some of the soldiers who had been in Afghanistan and seen difficult things. I mean, I don't wanna say it was triggering for me, but it was definitely difficult, I think, to process or absorb all of their emotions while still trying to sort of teach a class and help and challenge the soldiers at the same time.

Michael Petrou (53:02):

What was the class called?

Benjamin Hertwig (53:05):

Introduction to Writing for Veterans, I believe was the name of it.

Michael Petrou (53:10):

And that's at UBC.

Benjamin Hertwig (53:12):

Yeah.

Michael Petrou (53:14):

And the Veterans Transition Network, where are they based?

Benjamin Hertwig (53:18):

Faculty of Education. Veterans Transition Network, I mean, a lot of the work they're doing is facilitating or encouraging veteran healing or transition from the military into other things by programming, such as like education at UBC, seeing how some of their previous military experience might help them in a different context. I think because academia can be a frightening place for anyone, but I think for veterans, some of whom might have some amount of skepticism

of about sort of the academic enterprise, that having other veterans who have done that or gone before in that way can really help that transition into the school life, onto campus, into academia.

Michael Petrou (54:30):

So, the Veterans Transition Network is a UBC enterprise.

Benjamin Hertwig (54:34):

Yeah.

Michael Petrou (54:37):

Benjamin you've been very generous with your time and insights. Before I do let you go, are there things that we haven't touched on that you think we should or things you'd like to add?

Benjamin Hertwig (54:52):

No. I mean you've asked lots of thoughtful questions and, yeah, no, can't think of anything else. If you have any other questions, I'm happy to engage so.

TRANSCRIPTION ENDS