

**CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM**  
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**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

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**INTERVIEWEE: Dillon R. Hillier**

**INTERVIEWER: Michael Petrou**

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## Transcription of Interview Number 20240004-010

**Dillon R. Hillier**

**Interviewed 9 February 2024**

**Michael Petrou (00:04):**

Today is February 9th, 2024. I'm Michael Petrou. I'm here with Dillon Hillier, a veteran of the PPCLI [Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry] and a tour in Afghanistan and also fighting with the Peshmerga, and PKK [Kurdistan Worker's Party] in Iraq. That's just in case we lose the paperwork. So, Dillon, let's start off with the easy stuff. Can you tell me where you were born and grew up?

**Dillon R. Hillier (00:25):**

Yeah, I was born here in Ottawa [Ontario] and I grew up in Carleton Place [Ontario] and Perth [Ontario].

**Michael Petrou (00:32):**

Was there a military tradition in your family or?

**Dillon R. Hillier (00:35):**

On my mom's side her dad was a Royal Navy pilot. Not the Canadian Royal Navy, like Britain. And then his dad was an engineer in the First World War. And then, yeah, my mom's dad, he transferred to the Canadian Navy, flew corsairs in World War Two. And I'm not too familiar with my great-grandpa on that side. Yeah, all I know is he was an engineer in World War One.

**Michael Petrou (01:15):**

Was this an influence on you growing up or?

**Dillon R. Hillier (01:17):**

Not particularly. I'd say my dad was more of an influence on me during the military. He doesn't have a military background, but I grew up [...]. He instilled a lot of curiosity about the military. History was big in our family. Military history was big in our family. He taught me a lot about that stuff and that kind of intrigued me and helped form my desire.

**Michael Petrou (01:50):**

OK, tell me more about your decision to enlist in. How did that happen?

**Dillon R. Hillier (01:54):**

Out of high school, I was a bricklayer, like a labourer for masonry companies, odd construction jobs. And then I believe when I was 19, I went and worked in Iceland as a bricklayer. And that kind of gave me—it sparked my desire to want a more adventure and travel. And yeah, the military is always something I had always kind of wanted to do. I think, like I said, the history that was prevalent in my family from my dad, and like the movies we watched, it kind of glorified warfare and being in war. And yeah, I guess that [...]. It's hard to say when I started

thinking certain things. I know, when I was in the military, certainly I had that desire to want to test myself. And that was probably part of joining as well.

**Michael Petrou (03:30):**

You signed up in 2009, right?

**Dillon R. Hillier (03:34):**

I think I signed up '08, but I got it in '09. March '09.

**Michael Petrou (03:41):**

So Canada had been at war in Afghanistan for a while. Did that factor into how you're thinking at all?

**Dillon R. Hillier (03:46):**

Yeah, like I wanted to go. I never really believed in the mission, but I wanted to experience it.

**Michael Petrou (03:54):**

What did you want to experience exactly?

**Dillon R. Hillier (03:55):**

Like I wanted to experience combat.

**Michael Petrou (03:58):**

Why?

**Dillon R. Hillier (03:59):**

Again, I think it's like [...] you know, like part of, like, I felt like it was like what a man should do. And that is a very, like, immature, like, reasoning and thinking looking back. But yeah, that's, I thought it was what a man should do and, like, the test of a man.

**Michael Petrou (04:25):**

I mean, I'm jumping ahead a little bit here, but in your book, when, so years later, when you do go to fight ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] in Iraq, you do speak at the same kind of desire to test yourself.

**Dillon R. Hillier (04:35):**

Yeah, so I mean with Iraq [...] like after I left the Canadian military, I put in my volunteer release while I was in Afghanistan because I was on the last tour. I knew there was nothing else coming. I had no desire to be in a peacetime army. And when I got out, I felt like, the way I put it to people is I felt like I had done, like, hockey drills for five years, but never got to play a game. That's the best way I could describe it to people.

**Michael Petrou (05:07):**

OK. I do want to talk in detail about Iraq but let me just back up a little bit to your military. You signed up, hoping to get into Afghanistan, to get into combat. It took a few years before you

could do that, so how did you enjoy the first few years before you were deployed? What did you like? What didn't you like?

**Dillon R. Hillier (05:26):**

[ponders] So I didn't like the monotony. Garrison is really boring, it drains you. I didn't like being posted in Shilo [Manitoba]. Now, looking back on that, I probably could have made it a lot better. There's lots of outdoor stuff to do. But I was kind of bitter about being posted to Shilo because an injury before I even did battle school got me punted onto another battle school course. So I was originally slated to go to the Third Battalion, and I always hoped to be a jumper paratrooper. So I was pretty bitter about having to go to the Second [Battalion]. And I also didn't want to be in Manitoba.

**Dillon R. Hillier (06:15):**

I mean, like, garrison life is dull. You, like, you sit around and play Nintendo 64 and sweep cement floors and count equipment that has been locked up since the last time you counted it. And check serial numbers of stuff that it was locked up since <laughs> the last time you counted. I mean, it's [...] you feel like you're not accomplishing or producing anything. I did like the training. I loved the training.

**Michael Petrou (06:45):**

What did you like about that?

**Dillon R. Hillier (06:46):**

I guess developing your warrior skills.

**Michael Petrou (06:55):**

So did that kind of feeling of, I don't know, kind of bitterness or boredom change when you deployed?

**Dillon R. Hillier (07:00):**

Not really. So I went in 2013, we were basically tearing down. It was not the tour I wanted. I mean, the second night I was there, like a huge VBIED [vehicle-borne improvised explosive device] went off, I think, like, only 800 metres at another base. But like that was pretty exciting. I saw some tragic things, but we never, like, we never fired a shot in anger, which wasn't what I was there to do.

**Michael Petrou (07:37):**

What were your duties?

**Dillon R. Hillier (07:38):**

We were on convoy duty and quick reaction force. We just basically, drove RG 31s [Nyala], from several bases around Kabul [Afghanistan] to the airport, and that's about it.

**Michael Petrou (07:53):**

So when you say it wasn't what you were there to do—

**Dillon R. Hillier (07:56):**

Well, it wasn't what I wanted to do there.

**Michael Petrou (07:58):**

So what did you want to do?

**Dillon R. Hillier (07:59):**

So I wanted to be in direct action, going out, finding the enemy, close with and destroy the enemy.

**Michael Petrou (08:06):**

People might have a hard time understanding that desire. Is there—can you explain it for someone that maybe doesn't or wouldn't be familiar with those emotions?

**Dillon R. Hillier (08:23):**

[ponders] Well, I don't—it's hard. Why do people want to climb mountains? Why do people want to base jump? Like it's, it's not even. Maybe that's a bad example as well. Yeah, I guess going back to what I said, it's just, like I thought combat was the ultimate test of a human and a man. I'm not saying specifically men, but you know what I mean. It's the ultimate test of will and courage and bravery. That's probably the easiest way to sum it up.

**Michael Petrou (09:06):**

So you start thinking about leaving. I think you said you signed your, you put your papers in while you're still over there.

**Dillon R. Hillier (09:10):**

Yeah.

**Michael Petrou (09:10):**

Tell me, walk me through that decision.

**Dillon R. Hillier (09:13):**

[ponders] We had a lot of issues with our leadership, my platoon did. And actually, so I think out of however many of those 40 people, I think it around 15 people put in their releases. Now they got talked—everyone else got talked out of it except for me. Basically, yeah, I just I knew there was just no other wars to fight. I wasn't going to sit around for five, ten years before deploying again. And they were also—they force you into, like, leadership positions. And I never had much interest in being a master corporal or sergeant. I wanted to be a grunt, and that was another contributing factor.

**Michael Petrou (10:15):**

What was it like to come home from Afghanistan?

**Dillon R. Hillier (10:18):**

[ponders] I mean, we got two months of leave after. It was awesome. <laughs> I mean, like, after I—because I got out shortly after. I think we got back in, like, basically Christmas, 2013. And I

was out by March 2014. Two months or maybe a little bit more than that was leave. So I was just so excited to be—I was so done with the military by that point. And I was very excited. After I got out, I think, I started getting the feeling of not having accomplished my goals of joining. And [...] that was hard. And thinking back, I even started exploring options while I was in Afghanistan to get out and find <chuckles> like a real conflict to fight in and do my job as an infantry soldier.

**Michael Petrou (11:35):**

So what other options were you looking at?

**Dillon R. Hillier (11:39):**

Well, I'd rather not get into it.

**Michael Petrou (11:42):**

So you come back, you're feeling a little bit lost. Was there any kind of leaving ceremony for you or?

**Dillon R. Hillier (11:47):**

No, no. I think we had a company—we gathered the company in the bay, like the LAV bay. And like it wasn't a parade, like we just kind of gaggle and my OC [Officer Commanding] said some nice things and then out the door and I found work really quick.

**Michael Petrou (12:17):**

What kind of work did you find?

**Dillon R. Hillier (12:20):**

First concrete in Calgary [Alberta] and then, like, heavy civil construction.

**Michael Petrou (12:26):**

Was there an emotional transition to being a civilian for you or?

**Dillon R. Hillier: (12:30):**

Yeah, I think you lose a huge part of your identity. Being a soldier was my identity for five years, right? And then to not have that anymore, there's definitely an emotional component to it.

**Michael Petrou (12:47):**

I think you already said, "I was a soldier, and this never leaves you."

**Dillon R. Hillier (12:51):**

Yeah.

**Michael Petrou (12:51):**

And you said, "The uniform becomes part of you." Explain what you mean by that.

**Dillon R. Hillier (12:57):**

I think it's like, you see this with other jobs as well. The first one that comes to mind is like a cop, right? That becomes like, uh, like part of your—your work becomes your identity. And then to all of a sudden lose that, it's like a tough transition. I don't know how much more I can explain that.

**Michael Petrou (13:26):**

So you're looking at other options, but when and how did you first start thinking about going to Iraq?

**Dillon R. Hillier (13:33):**

It must have been August 2014. It's probably, that's when it first entered my thoughts. And that's basically when—I could be wrong, this is going back ten years now—but I think that's when, basically when ISIS came out of Syria and attacked Kurdistan. I thought that was like an excellent opportunity because I could do this without being a criminal and without getting like crucified by our government. Like the other options I looked at around the world, like, probably would have not boded well. Like if you go fight with someone who might not be necessarily aligned with Canadian interests. But the Kurds were a great team to join because they are like a relatively uncorrupt democracy in a bastion of authoritarianism. And so there is that. It was a good cause to fight, I think.

**Michael Petrou (14:48):**

How much did you know about it? How much did you know about the Middle East and the Kurds and Iraq and all that stuff at the time?

**Dillon R. Hillier (14:54):**

I was no expert, but I was certainly familiar with the Kurdish struggle going back decades. And I was very familiar with what they endured under Saddam [Hussein] and in Turkey.

**Michael Petrou (15:10):**

So walk me through, the extent that you can, I mean, walk me through the process of making contacts and putting this plan into action.

**Dillon R. Hillier (15:18):**

So that's, like, really interesting. And I can't even remember how much I wrote about it in my book, but. So there was this Facebook, hidden Facebook group, that I got invited to. There's probably about 20 people on there. The person who made the group, their name on Facebook was Kerry Dragon. I have no idea who this person is. I've always suspected that there were some sort of, like, spook, or some sort of intelligence operative. Because she—I don't even know if it was a woman—but I'll say she because Kerry, but she connected us, like this group, with the Peshmerga officers.

**Dillon R. Hillier (16:05):**

But they were low ranking officers. Like my fixer, for lack of a better term over there, was, like, an Lt [Lieutenant]. And so I have no idea who this person is. Only one other person from that Facebook group ended up coming. He's in my book as Ethan. He's an American marine. So I have no idea, like how this all got put together behind the scenes.

**Michael Petrou (16:33):**

How did you even find this—this was a closed Facebook group?

**Dillon R. Hillier (16:36)**

Yes, so I think—so I was asking how to join the Peshmerga on a Peshmerga Facebook page, like public page. And then I got added to this secret group.

**Michael Petrou (16:50):**

OK. So what kind of precautions did you take, or research did you take, to kind of mitigate some of the risks?

**Dillon R. Hillier (16:57):**

<chuckle> None. It was so terrifying when I [...]. The last leg of my flight, was from [...] my memory is awful.

**Michael Petrou (17:12):**

Qatar, I think.

**Dillon R. Hillier (17:14):**

Yeah, yeah. Or was it? I thought maybe the UAE [United Arab Emirates], but regardless that last leg of the trip, like getting on that plane to Iraq, like I was terrified because I didn't know if I was walking into my own kidnapping. And when I was at the airport before that flight, Ali, my fixer, he's like, "Oh, I can't meet you at the airport. Some other guy is going to meet you there." So I was like, Jesus Christ, what am I doing with my life?

**Dillon R. Hillier (17:41):**

And then I landed, like, I have body armour, like all military gear. And the Kurdish border people are like, they don't speak English. And they're like, what? And then I see this guy in camo, and I was like, wave at him. <laughs> And he comes over. He doesn't speak English either, but he ends up being the guy that Ali sent to pick me up and leaving the airport, they have AKs [AK-47; Avtomat Kalashnikova]. Yeah, it was terrifying.

**Michael Petrou (18:15):**

Let's back up a little bit. First of all, you must have had conversations with your family and friends before you left, I'm assuming. How did you—

**Dillon R. Hillier (18:25):**

No, I like <laughs> completely surprised my parents. I sent my dad an email, as I was boarding my flight in Calgary and I was like, "Oh, I'm going to help train them. I won't be in any combat." And he's like, he knew I was full of shit. And he tried to stop. He tried to, like, he called, I think, the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mountain Police] and like, "There's nothing we can do about it.:

**Michael Petrou (18:51):**

Had you been in touch with the RCMP because you might have been worried about breaking laws or anything like that?

**Dillon R. Hillier (18:57):**

No.

**Michael Petrou (18:59):**

So you mentioned all the gear you brought. Tell me about your preparations. What did you take over?

**Dillon R. Hillier (19:03):**

I brought, like, a plate carrier, mag pouches, just like combat uniforms, a rucksack, stuff like that.

**Michael Petrou (19:19):**

Was this army surplus stuff or from your own gear?

**Dillon R. Hillier (19:22):**

No, no. I sold my car to finance this. It was really expensive.

**Michael Petrou (19:26):**

Where did you get it?

**Dillon R. Hillier (19:27):**

It was called a SEALS Action Gear in Calgary.

**Michael Petrou (19:31):**

And I wanted to maybe just probe the decision a little bit more, like, because you—I think, you know, you open your book saying, wondering, “Is there more to life?” “Is there more to life?” Well, let’s look at your book. “There’s more to life than the one I’m living. Who among us can honestly look in the mirror and not say the same?” Try to explain that dissatisfaction for me and why you thought Iraq could solve that.

**Dillon R. Hillier (20:21):**

[ponders] This is so, like, basically just to like—I’m kind of struggling with what I want to share here. I was like [...]. Hm. I don’t know if I’m, like, completely comfortable sharing. If you turn off the camera, I’ll tell you.

**Michael Petrou (20:54):**

OK. We can do that.

**Carolyn (20:55):**

Yeah. Do you want me to leave the room as well?

**Dillon R. Hillier (20:57):**

No, no, no. It’s fine. [filming stops]

**Michael Petrou (20:59):**

[filming resumes] Well, use your judgment. If you want to turn it off again, we can. Again, I'm jumping ahead here, but you, when you do get to Iraq, and again, I'm jumping ahead and we'll back up afterwards, but you are professional and prudent. You're not reckless while you're there, right?

**Dillon R. Hillier (21:18):**

Yeah, yeah. And that's the thing. Is it? You know, all that stuff that was bothering me went away once I was in combat. Then, like, survival becomes the goal, and you kind of, like, forget about everything that was bothering you before.

**Michael Petrou (21:48):**

I do want to learn more about that. Well, actually, I'll ask you now. I mean, how is it that combat, I guess, helps relieve some of that—

**Dillon R. Hillier (22:00):**

<laughs> Yeah, I know I've struggled with that question. So, yes, this is what I'll say: so, like, I think I was, like, having a quite severe PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] symptoms prior to, like, after my time in the military. And those symptoms are contributed greatly to my want to go to Iraq. And yeah, it's, like, it's kind of a—what's the right word? [ponders] I can't like—you wouldn't think, like you wouldn't think seeing more awful things would help with those symptoms, but the, like, you forget about everything that was bothering you. You forget about the nightmares. But then, like, in reality, all you're doing is delaying and compounding those symptoms. Because when I came back from Iraq, I was even in worse shape, like I was a total disaster. Maybe it wasn't the most prudent <laughs> way to deal with my issues.

**Michael Petrou (23:18):**

So your hope was that Iraq would—you're motivated by the PTSD and [...].

**Dillon R. Hillier (23:24):**

Yeah, I think that was a huge contributing factor.

**Michael Petrou (23:28):**

Now, while you were in Iraq, in combat, did that help?

**Dillon R. Hillier (23:34):**

Yeah, like you completely—not completely, but yeah. I think I found [...] like maybe more of a [ponders] like, maybe, like, reignited my will to live, I guess.

**Michael Petrou (24:10):**

There's a detail in your book. You wrote that you're reading *For Whom the Bell Tolls* [Ernest Hemingway] on the plane. Did you see any connection between what you're doing and what the protagonist and the novel was doing?

**Dillon R. Hillier (24:25):**

Yeah, maybe a little bit, but I also didn't finish that book. <laughs>

**Michael Petrou (24:33):**

So what happens when Ali's guy takes you to the base?

**Dillon R. Hillier (24:42):**

<laughs> Well, the first thing that comes to mind is, like, it's kind of funny. I'd, like, I'd never used a—I really had to go to the bathroom, and I never used a squat toilet before, and so I actually looked up <laughs> on Google. I was like, because there's a jug and a tap and a hole in the ground. And I was like, how to use squat toilet? <laughs> That's the first thing I remember. And then like honestly and then, like, I wasn't really getting anywhere. After like, five days [...].

**Dillon R. Hillier (25:25):**

OK, another thing is like, Christ, one of my friends here, he's not my friend anymore, but an acquaintance. He convinced me to talk to this journalist. And so I'm, like, thinking that this is going to be like a little column, like somewhere in the back of the newspaper. I frigging wake up, and my face is on papers across the bloody country [*Ottawa Citizen*, [*The Globe and Mail*]. And I was just, like, I had a fucking panic attack. That's not what I was like—I was like—I was going crazy. I felt kind of betrayed. And I felt like they kind of, like, put me out a bit of risk. It's one thing if, like, maybe like ISIS wouldn't have picked up, if it was just some back page column, but, like, to have my face, like, on those newspapers is terrifying. And I did not like that.

**Dillon R. Hillier (26:37):**

So anyways, I basically, I was getting nowhere with [...]. I was getting no form of commitments with the Peshmerga about where, like, when I was going to be put into combat or anything. So then I got in touch with some—I think he was like a Swedish Kurd, maybe. And he had connections with the PKK [Kurdistan Worker's Party] and that's how I ended up with them.

**Michael Petrou (27:11):**

So we should say, you started off you were affiliated with the Peshmerga?

**Dillon R. Hillier (27:14):**

Yeah, but, like, it was only, like, five days, maybe after getting there that I ended up going to Kirkuk [Iraq] and linking up with the PKK.

**Michael Petrou (27:23):**

Did you know about the difference between the two groups?

**Dillon R. Hillier (27:28):**

Yeah, yeah.

**Michael Petrou (27:29):**

So walk me through your reasoning for feeling comfortable going with the PKK.

**Dillon R. Hillier (27:32):**

I just like <laughs> I wanted to be in combat. That was [...]. You know, maybe this might seem kind of, like, disjointed because, like, from what I told you earlier about my reasoning for wanting to go. And then [...] but then, like, I still, like, I had this, such a strong desire to be in

combat and to see if all that training I had done, if I was going to, like, people cower in combat, like, no matter how much training they've had. And, like, I so badly wanted to see how I'd react, and I didn't really care how that happened, who I was with. Of course, I wouldn't have never gone and fought with ISIS or anything, but, like, PKK, yeah, they are we [Canada] list them as a terrorist organization. I didn't care. I'm the furthest thing from a communist. Like I'm a super small government libertarian, right? And so, like, ideologically, I was opposed to these people completely, but, you know, they said they'd get me in the fight quickly. They did.

**Dillon R. Hillier (28:52):**

Being with them was terrifying. I'm sure you've read my book, right? Ali dropped me off with them. It was all, like, smiles, kisses, whatever. And then as soon as Ali left, they were like, "What's in your bags?" <laughs> And, like, the whole mood just completely changed. They watched me every second, listened, over my shoulder phone calls. They wanted to take my phone, right? They took my computer. They were like, "Give me your phone." I was like, "I'm not giving you my phone." And that was, like, that was a huge, like, I'm there alone. And no one's going to back me up if they decide they want to take my phone, and I just had to stand strong and tell them, like, "You're not taking my only way of communicating with my family away from me." And like, "I'm not here to join the PKK. I'm here to fight with you. I'm not becoming a communist terrorist," right?

**Michael Petrou (30:04):**

Did they try to indoctrinate you at all or?

**Dillon R. Hillier (30:06):**

Oh, yeah. But, like, I wasn't really with them that long until, like, things got so uncomfortable with them. But, yeah, they were always like, "Oh, what do you think about Castro?" "What do you think about Stalin?" "What do you think about Mao" Like, they're always, like, quizzing me. And, like, I just said, "Pretty great leaders." Right? <laughs> And they talked, they talked a lot about, like, FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia] in Colombia and stuff like that.

**Michael Petrou (30:40):**

So you did go into combat with him. Can you tell us about that?

**Dillon R. Hillier (30:44):**

Yeah, I think it was the second day I was there. They were like, "Grab your gear, we're rolling." And no one that was going on, like, the battle spoke English. So I got in the trucks with them, and we rolled, and I had no idea where we were going, what we were doing. I didn't even really know that we were going into combat until we started getting close to the front line, right? And I was like, OK, well, this is it. This is real. And then they did, like, they did their orders or whatever. And I'm just, like, standing there. I can't understand what they're saying. And then we rushed into battle, and it was fucking crazy. <laughs> It's like [...] I'm not gonna lie, I loved it. It was amazing.

**Michael Petrou (31:42):**

Tell us where this was and just walk us through it, if you can.

**Dillon R. Hillier (31:49):**

So our base was a somewhere south of Kirkuk. It was a shared base, like one half was Peshmerga, one half was PKK. Basically, it was just like unfinished blockhouses with like a berm around it and some razor wire. And I can't even like—the drive, probably 30 minutes, up to the battle through Kirkuk. And then west to a little canal. The village is called Tal-al ward [Syria]. We basically stormed across a bridge. ISIS had already pulled back a little bit from the village itself, and they had taken up a position with heavy machine guns and like a fortified hill. And then we spent the next, like, 12 hours basically assaulting the hill, or assaulting and holding the hill. Yeah, it was wild.

**Michael Petrou (32:56):**

This was something that you had hoped for a while.

**Dillon R. Hillier (32:59):**

Yeah.

**Michael Petrou (32:59):**

How did the reality play out for you?

**Dillon R. Hillier (33:02):**

Yeah. I mean, basically I reacted exactly how I wanted to. [ponders] It was so bizarre, like I started off fighting with the PKK in that battle, and then. [...] But, like, it was so, it was so disorganized. And I kind of just like [...]. I was kind of like. It's so fucking weird to think back. It's just kind of, like, maneuvering the ground as I saw fit. I wasn't really attached to, like, a unit. I didn't have a fire team partner and a squad. Sometimes I was fighting with Peshmerga guys, and then, like, I'd link back up with the PKK and then, like, but it was bizarre. <laughs> Especially, like, I don't know if I've ever sat back and really reflected on that aspect of the battle <laughs> until right now.

**Dillon R. Hillier (34:12):**

And also, like, I have most of this on GoPro. That's another thing I'll say is like, uh, you know, like watching my GoPro videos, it's, like, you're watching someone else doing—I don't actually have, like, a super clear memory of, like, those events. The timeline in my head is all obscure. And, like, certain events, I don't know if you've seen that video of me bandaging the guy up that got shot in the face. No? It's all over YouTube. So he got shot in the face, it was a PKK guy, and, like, I got him out of the fire and started doing like combat first aid on his face and, like, so I have a video of all that, but, like, I don't actually remember doing it. It's weird. It's like a very weird sensation to watch yourself do something you don't remember.

**Michael Petrou (35:21):**

You were in a direct firefight with two ISIS members as well, which you killed them both.

**Dillon R. Hillier (35:27):**

Yeah/

**Michael Petrou (35:27):**

How did you feel about that, then? And how do you feel about it now?

**Dillon R. Hillier (35:33):**

[exhales] It doesn't really bother me. You know, it's warfare. I've [...] like my [...]. People do what they have to do. Yeah, it's not something I think about, dwell on, at all.

**Michael Petrou (35:57):**

So the assault was successful?

**Dillon R. Hillier (35:59):**

Yeah.

**Michael Petrou (36:00):**

But there was an incident afterwards. I'm not sure how best to describe this, was it clearing up or [...]. But if you're comfortable, can you tell us about that?

**Dillon R. Hillier (36:12):**

Yeah, I mean, that's [...] I know what you're talking about and it still, like, absolutely haunts me to this day. Basically, we were doing, like, basically a patrol the morning after and this Arab guy <tears up> walked out of his house, and this PKK kid at the front of the patrol, uh, like, turned around and just like, the guy was waving and he just turned around and fucking aired him out, shot him in the stomach. He was, like, rolling around on the ground, dying. And his five little girls ran out of the house screaming, watching their dad die. And then we just turned around and walked away. I was like [...] yeah, it was like the most awful thing I've ever seen.

**Dillon R. Hillier (36:12):**

And like, I carry [...] you know, you can tell yourself, there's nothing you could do, but, like, it doesn't help at all. Like I still, I feel like a tremendous amount of guilt [wipes tears] for not doing anything, but I was, like, scared shitless at that time, too, because I recorded it. And I quickly turned my GoPro off, so they don't see the blinking light. And like, so I don't know what they would have fucking done. Maybe they would have taken my GoPro. Maybe they would have fucking killed me. These people, like these people didn't give a shit about my life either. They don't like [...]. Anyways.

**Michael Petrou (37:49):**

That contributed to your desire to leave that unit.

**Dillon R. Hillier (37:54):**

Yeah, yeah.

**Michael Petrou (37:59):**

You want to take a break?

**Dillon R. Hillier (37:59):**

Yeah, maybe. [filming stops]

**Michael Petrou (38:05):**

[filming resumes] Maybe before we talk about leaving the PKK, I'd like to ask a little bit more about the kind of relations you had with the other the other PKK members of the unit. How did you get along with them? Were you able to communicate?

**Dillon R. Hillier (38:18):**

There was one guy, he's probably, I think he's around my age. He's from England. He's a Kurdish guy. He's the only one I could really have any conversation with. And he was like, well, it was kind of funny. He was really envious of me because they would never let him fight because he's kind of a like chunky guy. <laughs> Yeah, but he was also like super weird. He had this, like, girl in England. And he got me to text her and she's like [...]. He was obsessed with this girl. And he got me to text her. And she was like, "I want nothing to fucking do with that guy." And he's just like, that's all he talked about was this girl. Anyways, yeah, he was kind of a weirdo. It's probably a good thing that he's not in England. He seems like the type of guy that would kill a woman for breaking up with him. <laughs> It's probably best where he is.

**Michael Petrou (39:43):**

What about the other people in the unit?

**Dillon R. Hillier (39:45):**

Yeah. I mean, I don't like [...] I don't really want to talk about some things, but the commander, also named Ali, seems to be a pretty popular name there. He didn't speak any English, but [...]. They were all, I guess, like, friendly enough, but at the same time, I think they did not trust me. They didn't understand—well, how would, like, how could they possibly understand my motivations for wanting to be there when we couldn't communicate in any in-depth fashion, right?

**Michael Petrou (40:26):**

You did again, if you're comfortable about it, you did have a romantic liaison with one of the [...].

**Dillon R. Hillier (40:31):**

Yeah, I mean, I, like, I'd rather not talk about that.

**Michael Petrou: (40:35):**

OK. Tell me about leaving the unit, then. Why? I mean, we know why you wanted to leave, but how did you put that plan into motion?

**Dillon R. Hillier (40:41):**

So basically, I had kept in touch with Lieutenant Ali. And wanted to—we were having a phone call one time, and he asked me how things were going. I was like, uh, like, you know, again, like, they're like, listening to me. I don't know why. <laughs> They're listening to me. But, again, like, I don't even know if they could understand what we were saying, but anyways he asked me how things were going, and I was, like, unsure of what to say. I was like, "Pretty good." And he's like, "I can tell that things are not going good." And I may have told him more by text

message before that phone call. I might have told him about what happened, what we just talked about, in that battle.

**Dillon R. Hillier (41:32):**

From what I remember, he was just like, “I’m coming to get you.” And then he’s, like, “Put your commander on.” Put the PKK commander on. And then they were yelling at each other. It’s like a heated conversation. And then, he gave the phone back to me and he’s, like, “I’m coming to get you.” And they, him and like three buddies came in, like, whatever, a little car, and they were all like, rolling, rolling, armed. Usually, they just, usually the Peshmerga guys just carry around their pistols, like, they came all with AKs. I don’t know what that conversation was about, but <chuckles> I got the fuck out of there as soon as I pulled up. It was very relieving. <laughs>

**Michael Petrou (42:27):**

Did you go back to the same base where you came from?

**Dillon R. Hillier (42:30):**

In Sulaymaniyah [Iraq].

**Michael Petrou (42:32):**

But now you’re on the Peshmerga side.

**Dillon R. Hillier (42:34):**

Yeah.

**Michael Petrou (42:34):**

OK, so what was that transition like?

**Dillon Hillier (42:38):**

Yeah, it was fine. Then I think very shortly after, Patrick, or Ethan, as I call him in the book, he showed up. We did—we mostly just hung out, worked out. We’d go into town, go smoke hookah with the other officers. It was pretty chill until, and then, so Ali was basically trying to find a higher-level officer that was, like, willing to take us on. And so we ended up going to, I think it was called—shit I don’t know when you read the book, but your memory is probably fresher than mine. We went to I think it was Ninth Brigade. I can’t remember the general’s name—Araz. General Araz. And then basically, for the rest of the time, we were in like, a defensive posture, so we’d rotate out to the front mostly—or, no, actually, that’s not. I forgot. <laughs>

**Dillon R. Hillier (43:44):**

First, we went with—we got, Ali took us to this other lieutenant who was holding a bridge and just like a small hamlet and a bridge just south of Tal-al ward, I think. It was along the same canal, I believe. That was pretty, that was a cool couple of days because this canal was only probably, like 150m wide, if that. Same with the bridge that crossed it. And there’s, like, fortifications on each side and like ISIS, ISIS’ flag is like, maybe 100m away. It was very surreal. The bridge is all criss-crossed with razor wire, and then basically—so during that, we didn’t do a ton of fighting, but it was kind of interesting.

**Dillon R. Hillier** (44:33):

So the PKK unit that I'd just been with, they would roll up to this position and they would start shit, like they would start a firefight with ISIS. As soon as things got hairy, they'd peel out and then we would shoot it out with them for a bit and then it'd quiet down. They'd mortar us, some one guy get his hand really fucked up by a mortar. Yeah. But I think we were only there for maybe three days.

**Dillon R. Hillier** (45:06):

Then we went more south to—I can't remember the name of the [...]. It was like a larger urban area where our main base was. And then, we basically just rotated in and out of the front doing defensive. I think we just manned the defenses. Sometimes there'd be attacks, but they weren't, like, super heavy. It wasn't like—no ground was changing. And mostly, yeah, and then we like, rolled around with the general a lot.

**Dillon R. Hillier** (45:45):

And I remember at one, that we were like, me and Patrick were manning, I was, like, at different times, but I almost, took a bullet twice, which was ins—. [...] Me and Patrick were, like, manning a machine gun post and like a bullet whizzed in between us, maybe a foot and a half apart. And I saw the bullet coming. It was fucking wild. And then the other time I went to the bathroom, just come back to the little bunker, and I guess I wasn't quite low enough, and, like, a bullet whizzed past me. All we could do is really laugh. <laughs>

**Michael Petrou** (46:28):

I'm curious. So you and Ethan, he's a former marine. You're a former PPCLI. Did General Araz or anyone else kind of question you to figure out what kind of experience you had.

**Dillon R. Hillier** (46:44):

Not really.

**Michael Petrou** (46:45):

And any kind of training or anything like that.

**Dillon R. Hillier** (46:46):

No.

**Michael Petrou** (46:47):

You just, kind of, folded right into the units.

**Dillon R. Hillier** (46:48):

Yeah, yeah. I did—so that's another thing—with the PKK, I tried to teach them some things about, like, moving around corners, not putting your barrel out of a window, sitting back and shooting out instead of leaning out. I call it telescoping your barrel. I tried to teach him stuff like that. They weren't having it. Again, language barrier. No one cared. Yeah, no one cared about, like, your experience. And that's kind of what led me eventually to leaving Iraq altogether is because Araz started getting, like, more foreign volunteers, guys who were totally full of shit

about their—like it’s easy for someone who’s been in the military to tell if someone else has been, right?

**Dillon R. Hillier (47:46):**

And then so there’s one guy, I don’t know much French, but this guy claimed to be an ex-French foreign legionnaire. And so, like, I said a few words to him in French and he didn’t understand, so I immediately know he’s full of shit, and he’s a loser. Other guys, like, showing up they were totally, they were like, “Yeah, I have no military experience.” And that’s when me and Patrick were like, this is not what, we don’t want to be around these people. Like, they’re giving machine, like belt fed machine guns, to people who have zero training on them. And we’re like, yeah, we’re out.

**Michael Petrou (48:27):**

You write that Araz was getting some pressure from, at various points, you mentioned kind of pressure from Canadian authorities.

**Dillon R. Hillier (48:34):**

Yeah, I mean, I think so. Well, so I think it was more pressure from Americans about, like, Patrick and other Americans that had shown up to the unit. I think they did not want [...]. So when it was just me and Patrick, I think we were flying low enough under the radar. But when all these other people started showing up, especially people with, like, zero military training, I think maybe the US [United States] was like, yeah, let’s not get these people killed. And that was like confirmed by the head boss of the PUK [Patriotic Union of Kurdistan]. We went and met him and basically after that I was like, “Yeah, they don’t want you guys in combat anymore.” That was basically the end of it.

**Michael Petrou (49:29):**

Before you left, I do want to know, were there, did you develop any kind of friendships or close relations with any of the Peshmerga guys or [...]?

**Dillon R. Hillier (49:37):**

Yeah, so I still talk to Ali. He’s in San Francisco now. He was an interpreter for the American military when, during the invasion, or during the occupation, so he got a green card. I used to talk to Lieutenant Dan, the guy who got that bridge. I had him on Facebook. I don’t really talk to him anymore. Usually he just started, like we used to chat, and then he’d basically just start bugging me to help him come here. And I was like, I have no ability to help you. <laughs> And then I talk to Patrick all the time, like weekly at least.

**Michael Petrou (50:22):**

What’s he up to now?

**Dillon R. Hillier (50:24):**

He’s got a great job in Texas, doing some sort of like—he’s not an engineer, but he’s doing, like, an engineer’s job for a big construction outfit.

**Michael Petrou (50:39):**

OK, so walk me through the decision to leave then.

**Dillon R. Hillier (50:42):**

That was basically it. We were told that we weren't going to be in combat anymore. And then we were like, OK, well, then we're leaving.

**Michael Petrou (50:49):**

And was it hard to leave? Paperwork and logistics and all that?

**Dillon R. Hillier (50:52):**

Yeah, a little bit. We needed an exit visa, or, like an exit permit, I guess. My memory's really foggy on this. I think we basically just had a letter from—I wish I could remember his name. I think it's in the book. Well, it is, but, we basically got a letter from him saying, "Let these guys leave without an exit permit." I think that's how it went. Again, I can't remember exactly.

**Michael Petrou (51:27):**

What kind of send-off did you get, if any?

**Dillon R. Hillier (51:29):**

None. It was pretty—I think it was just me and Patrick at, like, a hotel in Sulay a few days before we left. We partied and drank and then left and parted ways.

**Michael Petrou (51:53):**

How did you feel? How far did you—how many legs of the trip were you together on?

**Dillon R. Hillier (51:57):**

I think just the first leg. Yeah. We parted ways in Qatar.

**Michael Petrou (52:07):**

Did you have to pay for your own way home?

**Dillon R. Hillier (52:09):**

Yeah.

**Michael Petrou (52:10):**

OK. How did—what do you remember about that plane ride? How did you feel about heading back to Canada after this time with the Kurds?

**Dillon R. Hillier (52:19):**

I can't really remember. <laughs> I was probably really drunk.

**Michael Petrou (52:26):**

What about your homecoming when you got back?

**Dillon R. Hillier (52:31):**

I think my sister and her two little boys picked me up at the airport, and it was pretty amazing. It was nice to be back.

**Michael Petrou** (52:42):

This is kind of, I guess, your second transition from a war. So now you're a civilian for real. What was that like?

**Dillon R. Hillier** (52:49):

OK, so it was, very, fuck the media. They were like rabid hyenas. I didn't want to talk to anybody. And my dad was basically like, "They're not going to stop. You have to talk to them." So I did an interview with CTV [Canadian Television Network], I think, in my parents living room or kitchen. And that was fine. And then, I got contacted by, what's it called. INSET [Integrated National Security Enforcements Team]. I think it's like, an RCMP joint, RCMP, OPP, Ottawa, or basically an RCMP, Integrated National Security, something or other. They came out and interviewed me. It was fine. Didn't ask me. They—it was not what I was expecting. They basically were more—they were interested in my motivations of going and if that could help—if my motivations could help them identify people that were motivated to go fight with ISIS. They didn't ask me who I was with. They didn't ask me anything.

**Dillon R. Hillier** (54:04):

Another funny thing, though, is when I landed in Toronto, the CBSA [Canada Border Service Agency] guys, like, "What were you doing in Iraq?" I was like, "Fighting ISIS." And he was like, [nods] "OK." <laughs> Like, really, that's it? I always, like, kind of suspected that—well, I had been in touch with this INSET or whatever it's called. No, I was in touch with someone. I had an email address—I can't remember how I got it—but their email extension was just like Canada.Gc.ca, so, like, who knows where they're from. And, like, I probably still have the email somewhere. But yeah, it's basically like, I said, it was like, "You want to talk to me. That's fine. Let's do it not at the airport." So I kind of suspect that, they knew, they had a heads up that not to bother me at the airport because they did want my cooperation with an interview.

**Michael Petrou** (55:11):

So you wrote them from Iraq, then? And how did you get their number?

**Dillon R. Hillier** (55:15):

I can't remember.

**Michael Petrou** (55:20):

OK. Again, to the extent that you're comfortable, you do write in the book about, a rocky homecoming with.

**Dillon R. Hillier** (55:28):

Oh yeah, yeah.

**Michael Petrou** (55:30):

Tell me about that.

**Dillon R. Hillier (55:32):**

[exhales] So I got a job really quick after coming back in finance. It was weird. Basically, this guy had read an article about me. He's the owner and president of a small investment bank in Toronto. He got in touch with the author of an article, put us in touch, and he's like, "Yeah, come down for an interview." Went down. He's like, "Have you ever thought about working in investment banking?" I was like, "What do you guys do? I had no fucking idea." And he explained it and I was like, "Yeah, absolutely. I'd love to give it a whirl." And I excelled at that job. It was really fun. I learned—like I'm so grateful for that learning opportunity. I did it for five years, did really well financially, but it was sort of work. I was a fucking mess. Like lots of drinking, lots of drugs.

**Dillon R. Hillier (56:40):**

Like the worst thing I remember was I got in a fight with my younger brother, and, like, I held him on the ground, like, smashed a beer bottle beside his head and, like, held it up to his throat, like I was so quick to violence. It was scary. I also had some suicidal thoughts. Lots, actually. I really struggled with that event that I talked about. I still do, it's better now. But yeah, constant nightmares.

**Michael Petrou (57:19):**

Did you get any professional help?

**Dillon R. Hillier (57:22):**

Yeah, I mean, like VAC [Veterans Affairs Canada] is a great—but it didn't help me at all. I had no trouble getting help, but, like, I was in treatment for a long time. Like the thing I'll say about that is, like, it's so easy not to talk it, like, 'cause, like, I didn't want to talk about any of that stuff. And it's so easy not to, like, 'cause these people, whether it's a VAC therapist or like an outsourced contractor or whatever, I don't think they really [...]. Like they get paid by VAC for their sessions, right? I'm not saying they don't care, but, like, it's so easy to manipulate them into not talking about—or just making up other things to, like, avoid talking about the things that are actually bothering you. For me, it was the only time that helped.

**Michael Petrou (58:26):**

When you're working in investment banking, what kind of work were you doing?

**Dillon R. Hillier (58:30):**

So it's like equity sales, so basically raising money for early stage, pre-public companies. Selling securities to high-net-worth individuals and investors.

**Michael Petrou (58:45):**

I know you said time is what helped but are you still in therapy now or?

**Dillon R. Hillier (58:49):**

No.

**Michael Petrou (58:49):**

OK. You write in your book that it was useful to connect and talk with other veterans.

**Dillon R. Hillier (58:55):**

Yep.

**Michael Petrou (58:56):**

Can you tell me a little bit about that?

**Dillon R. Hillier (58:58):**

I mean, it's great to talk to other people that have been in similar situations, right? Like I can tell you about that guy getting killed, but, like, I think until you've seen someone roll around on the ground with their, like, dying while their kids are screaming like, it's like you can't [...] I don't think, unless you've been in a similar situation, you can't really understand that. So it's like, so even though, like, someone might not—no one else was there, but other Canadian veterans have experienced and seen similar things. It's just like, it's easy to relate, I suppose.

**Michael Petrou (59:53):**

Do you belong to any formal veterans' groups, either through the PPCLI or the Legion or anything like that?

**Dillon R. Hillier (59:58):**

No, I was part of a group in Toronto called Treble Victor [Group: Military Veteran Business Network]. It's for business, like veterans who are in business. I didn't really I didn't fit in, so I wasn't a member very long.

**Michael Petrou (1:00:20):**

What kind of work are you doing now?

**Dillon R. Hillier (1:00:22):**

I have a little welding shop. I've had to, after finance, I went and worked on diamond drill rigs, so mineral exploration. So a lot of the work I did in finance was mining related. And I got really sick of Toronto. I'm not a city person. So I went and saw how the things, the companies, the mining companies, I was helping finance, how they did their exploration. I worked on the drills. It was incredibly difficult work. Then I opened up a little welding shop.

**Michael Petrou (1:00:58):**

Where were the drills?

**Dillon R. Hillier (1:01:00):**

All over northern Ontario.

**Michael Petrou (1:01:05):**

Do you participate in Remembrance Day ceremonies, or do you attend them?

**Dillon R. Hillier (1:01:10):**

No, no. I mean, like I have been, but not generally.

**Michael Petrou (1:01:13):**

Well, I'm wondering 'cause you wrote, again and we've talked about this, about how being a soldier doesn't leave you. I'm just—when you kind of think about who you are and your identity, how important is being a veteran to you or how much [...]?

**Dillon R. Hillier** (1:01:27):

Like, less so now than when I first got out of the military. You know, I'm not the type of person that wears clothing and stuff, like identifying myself. It's less of a part of my identity now, for sure. And like being a veteran isn't my identity now.

**Michael Petrou** (1:02:00):

What about your time fighting ISIS? How do you reflect on that now, nearly ten years later?

**Dillon R. Hillier** (1:02:07):

Glad I did it. <laughs>

**Michael Petrou** (1:02:10):

Why? Tell me more about that.

**Dillon R. Hillier** (1:02:19):

[ponders] I think I found—I know now how I'll react in combat and that's what I always wanted. That's what I wanted. So I got what I wanted out of it, and I'm proud of myself. You know, it was, like, a pretty ballsy thing to do looking back and I'm glad because I know I would have like, just like, if I had never joined the military, I would have spent the rest of my life thinking, what if, what if? And then, I don't [...] 'cause I did consider turning back lots on my trip over there. Whether it be London, the UAE or Qatar, whatever it was. Like the whole time I was like, should I turn around? And I didn't. And I'm happy I didn't.

**Michael Petrou** (1:03:23):

What about, I mean, I understand you had, you know, these, you know, kind of personal motivations, in terms of the larger fight against ISIS, I mean, they were eventually pushed out of almost all their territory. Did you watch that? And if so—

**Dillon R. Hillier** (1:03:39):

Yeah, yeah.

**Michael Petrou** (1:03:40):

How did you feel to watch to watch that happen?

**Dillon R. Hillier** (1:03:42):

I was happy for the Kurds. I was less happy when they—because I kind of thought this was going to lead to their independence. And I thought they were going to hold on to the territory that Iraq had abandoned, and they defended. So I was kind of disappointed when the Americans yet again, screwed them, just like they did in the early '90s. But, you know, it is what it is. Nothing I can do about it. Yeah, I follow all conflicts very closely. To this day I follow—every morning I wake up in, the first thing I do is watch my YouTube videos about how the lines have changed in Ukraine.

**Michael Petrou (1:04:28):**  
Have you considered going there?

**Dillon R. Hillier (1:04:31):**  
No. There was always like, in the beginning there was this, it did cross my mind, I would say. But it's not a fight that I would ever. It's not my—my war fighting days are done. There's like, yeah, it's not for me. I don't really care. I don't know, I don't really have a stake in that conflict. I feel pretty neutral about it, so.

**Michael Petrou (1:05:06):**  
When you watched—when you did watch ISIS getting pushed back, did that cause you to kind of reflect back on your own role in that kind of larger struggle, I suppose.

**Dillon R. Hillier (1:05:23):**  
Like at the end of the day, I didn't change anything. You're just one soldier. My being there had absolutely zero impact on the outcome of anything. Yeah. Sorry, I don't really get—can you [...]?

**Michael Petrou (1:05:44):**  
Well, I don't want to be too philosophical, but, I mean, like anyone, any one individual could say that their role didn't change everything. But collectively, you were part of this larger effort that. I don't want to say ISIS is defeated, but it has a lot, basically compared to 2014, like, you were part of this much larger effort against ISIS that was largely successful. I'm just wondering how you feel about that.

**Dillon R. Hillier (1:06:09):**  
Good. I think they're a very evil group. [...] And I'm glad I took part in a small way in standing up and defeating them.

**Michael Petrou (1:06:30):**  
I have another, maybe philosophical question. How do you think your time, I mean, there's two because it's kind of two armed forces that you were part of. But how do you think your time with the Canadian military and your time with the Peshmerga and the Kurds kind of shaped who you are?

**Dillon R. Hillier (1:06:45):**  
Oh, absolutely. All my experiences, good and bad, have shaped who I am today. And I'm happy with that person, so, I wouldn't trade any experience, even the really, really bad ones. I would not—if I could go back, I would not change it

**Michael Petrou (1:07:04):**  
How has it? I mean, I hear what you're saying, like all—everything we experience contributes to who we are. But how do you think it's had an impact on who you are now?

**Dillon R. Hillier (1:07:15):**  
I don't know. <laughs> That's something I'd probably have to think about for quite some time.

**Michael Petrou (1:07:27):**

Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you personally think is important about your experience in the Canadian military or as a veteran or with the Kurds? Anything at all?

**Dillon R. Hillier (1:07:38):**

I think we covered most of it.

**Michael Petrou (1:07:40):**

I don't have any other questions, but it's been really good of you to talk to me. Thank you.

**Dillon R. Hillier (1:07:44):**

Yeah. Awesome.

**Michael Petrou (1:07:45):**

Thanks, Carolyn. Thank you so much.

**Dillon R. Hillier (1:07:48):**

No, that was really great. Thank you.

**TRANSCRIPTION ENDS**