Sebastian Junger Transcript

Sebastian Junger: Some sand sort of sprayed into the side of my face.

I was like, damn, what was that?

At that distance you don't hear the gunshot for a while. And then I heard the burst [makes gun shot sounds] duh, duh, duh, duh. And it was, you know, the first round of the first burst of a 30-minute firefight.

I realized what that sand was. And I realized how very easily any of us could die out here without any warning whatsoever.

And it was completely random.

Ramita Navai: From *Aurra Studios*. This is **The Line of Fire** with me, Ramita Navai. I've been working in conflict zones around the world for nearly two decades. And in this series, I talk to fellow journalists about covering war and the life-changing moments of confronting death. Welcome to **The Line of Fire**.

Ramita Navai: My guest today is Sebastian Junger - a number 1 New York Times best-selling author and multi award-winning journalist. He's also an Oscar-nominated documentary maker – his film Restrepo chronicles the deployment of US soldiers in the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan – then considered one of the most dangerous postings in the U.S. military.

Sebastian, welcome.

Sebastian Junger: Thank you for having me.

Ramita Navai: Sebastian, you were already working as a journalist when you decided you wanted to become a war reporter. Why?

Sebastian Junger: Well, yeah, let's take a closer look at that. I was struggling to become a successful - meaning that I could support myself - freelance writer and it wasn't working.

And I was writing for sort of regional publications in the US about things that weren't that interesting. And I was recovering from a pretty bad injury. I was a climber for tree companies. So I was the guy at the top of the tree, on a roof, on a rope with a chainsaw, taking trees down in pieces.

And I hurt myself pretty badly. And while I was recovering, I thought about, you know, writing about dangerous jobs. And that led to my first book, the Perfect Storm about a sword fishing boat that was lost off the coast of New England in 1991. But, you know, one of the jobs I was going to write about was being a war correspondent and there was a civil war in Bosnia.

I was a young man. I had recently tragically, in quotes, "tragically," been cut loose from a personal relationship. And...

Ramita Navai: Does that mean dumped?

Sebastian Junger: Yes, I was dumped. Yes. I knew there was an English word for it. Cut loose didn't quite capture how it felt.

So there was a civil war in Bosnia. I'd heard that you could sort of go over there and freelance and sort of offer radio, voice spots, or newspaper articles to publications back home. So you weren't a salaried correspondent. You were sort of out there on a fishing trip. But you could kind of make it work. And so off I went and I really fell in love with all kinds of things about that, including the incredibly powerful narrative of a city, a civilian population fighting off a modern mechanized army. Which of course we're seeing all over again in Ukraine. But, you know, Ukraine reminds me an awful lot of Sarajevo in 1993, 1994. And so being part of the drama and, you know, in some ways what felt like the nobility of that even as a journalist felt like a kind of transcendent moment for me.

And, you know, I grew up in a very safe American suburb which was a very unsatisfying place to grow up. And suddenly this was real life, you know? It was a long time until I could support myself doing this, but that was what led me into the idea of being a war reporter.

Ramita Navai: Sebastian just the way you're talking about this now, the nobility of covering the war and the way war is depicted, especially in American literature and culture, is very much a kind of rites of passage. That it can be this noble pursuit where deep bonds are formed.

And I worry about the romanticization of war.

Sebastian Junger: The thing about war is that it's all things. But it's all things more intensely. So it can be intensley romantic. It can be intensely sad. It can be intensely exciting. I mean, it's sort of all those things amped up to, you know, 11. But the reason I went into it, and I'm glad I did, is that I was really looking for something where I would be playing a meaningful role in human affairs, you know, at the end of the day.

And that I would be called upon to act in ways that felt mature and selfless and unheedful of danger to myself and unselfish ultimately. And so that's, you know, those are ancient, ancient human virtues, and they're not needed in the American suburbs. But they are needed sometimes in war time.

But it's only part of the emotional experience of war.

Ramita Navai: How much do you think before you went out to cover the war you were influenced by the way war is depicted in popular culture?

Sebastian Junger: My father was a war refugee and I was much more influenced by his experience.

He grew up in Spain. He was born in Dresden. His father was Jewish. His mother was Austrian Gentile - rare in those days. And he was born in Dresden and after the Reichstag fire they went to Spain. And then they left Spain when the fascists came in during the civil war in 1936 under Franco. And he went to France and then eventually the US, so war affected my family, affected him enormously. And I remember, you know, I grew up during Vietnam and actually my understanding of war was not romantic. It was the exact opposite.

I was from a liberal family during Vietnam. War was if anything it was painted in a completely negative way with no conceivable human virtues involved, right? Which obviously isn't true either.

I got my selective service card when I turned 18, you know, girls don't at 18, but boys do still, just so the government knows where you are in case they need to impose a draft. And I showed this to my father. I said, I'm not signing this. I'm not telling them where I live.

Are you kidding? So they can send me off to one of their wars, which for me meant Vietnam. And he was like, oh no, you're definitely signing it. I was like, what? And he said you don't owe your country nothing. And you might even owe it your life. Ask people in Ukraine right now what they owe their country.

Right? And, he said, if the next war is this kind of immoral war, unjustified war, that Vietnam was, then it's your moral duty to oppose it, to go to prison if you need to, to oppose it. But if, but if it's a war that has to be fought, like world war II had to be fought, it's your moral duty to fight it.

And you might die in that. And so, yes, you're sending that card in because your government might need you. And when he put it that way, I was like, oh my God, this is what I'm looking for. I want to be part of something greater than myself and that simple, bureaucratic act of sending in a selective service card made me part of something greater.

And so long complicated answer to your very good question about romanticizing war, actually, I think in my particular case it was far more complex than that. You know, maybe some of what sent me to Bosnia was some ideas I'd picked up from Hollywood movies, but that wasn't the driving narrative.

I don't think.

Ramita Navai: And how was it for you when you went to Bosnia, how different was covering war to what you'd expected?

Sebastian Junger: I expected something a lot more horrific and violent. I got to Sarajevo when the frontlines had sort of stabilized.

And so there was sort of occasional shelling and shooting and, you know, I had a couple of what at the time seemed like close calls, but I realize now that they weren't. To me, my overwhelming impression, because everything had stabilized, was that it was just a gigantic tragic waste of time.

And particularly of young people's time. You know, the young people not going to school, you know, spending weeks, months, years in bunkers waiting, you know, 200 metres across from the Serb bunkers, you know, like it just like, oh my God, this is a society that is just wasting away. This is 1993, 1994.

I was not in Rwanda. If I'd gone to Rwanda, of course, I would have had a very different reaction. And the times I've been in war where I was exposed to sort of mass atrocities like that. But I never was in Bosnia. I mean, those experiences were deeply, deeply traumatic and really affected me. But that just wasn't my initial experience.

Ramita Navai: And what was it about covering Bosnia that you decided yes, this is it. I've done it now. And this is what I want to dedicate my career to?

Sebastian Junger: Yeah. I mean, there was something about being part of history and that society counts on journalists to communicate what's happening around the world so countries, populations can make wise decisions. Something about communicating, you know, sending the sort of message from the besieged city to the world, you know, "help us" like, "we need help here." People are dying. People were desperate. You know, men, women, children, everybody. Being in that messenger role felt - you know, I'm not a violent person, I was not called to war as a combatant at all. Right? But in that messenger role, it felt morally defensible, noble, important, and, I mean this very specifically, it felt mature. It felt like oh now I'm finally in a sort of mature adult role.

You know, I'd screwed around for a lot of my twenties, frankly. You know, and I didn't have a family, I wasn't taking care of kids. I, you know, whatever. I was, you know, I was having a good time. And suddenly I was like, oh, this is what it feels like to be an adult and to have people count on you and to take risks for other people's sake. And once I'd tasted that, that was all I wanted.

And, you know, I'd written a really successful book. I was a best-selling author back in the states, you know, conventionally my career was calling me to write my next book in a hurry, sign a big check. You know, the career of a well-known author in the US for many people was a very appealing one. You know, to me, it wasn't at all. What I really wanted to be doing was that work overseas, because it just felt more meaningful, more urgent, more necessary, and not about me. Being a best-selling author felt like it was about me and I was the last thing I wanted to have to pay attention to.

Ramita Navai: How was your agent coping with this?

Sebastian Junger: Well. Yeah. I mean, you know, I was getting sort of these absurd offers, you know, like a two-book contract on anything, fill in the number, you know? I mean, it was just all sort of mortifying to me. Because I realized that there's no way, when the expectations are that high and the financial incentives are that high, there's actually no way, almost no way, to fulfil your promise. It's just set up to fail. Like the second book after an initial success, the second book is almost always a disappointment to everybody and I didn't need the money.

And so what I really needed was a life that felt meaningful and challenging. And that wasn't about me. I mean, that's really what I needed. And so I told my agent. If I just signed up another book right now, I'm going to be very unhappy and the book's not going to do very well. I mean, I can't possibly write a good book in these circumstances. Off I go.

And so I started covering, you know, conflicts around the world. You know, I was writing long form for a magazine, so it's not like I was in Sierra Leone for two weeks and then skipped straight to Rwanda. I mean, I would come back and many months would pass before I went overseas again. So different from a sort of hard news reporter that's skipping from frontline to frontline, that wasn't me at all.

But I was doing conflict reporting and trying to write about it in a sort of really meaningful, affecting long form format in Vanity Fair which would get people that don't maybe ordinarily think about these things to think about them.

Ramita Navai: Now you said that after Bosnia you went to Afghanistan and then Sierra Leone, how were the experiences of covering these wars changing you and what patterns were you seeing? So you're still quite fresh into your career as a war reporter.

Sebastian Junger: Yeah, I mean, so I found the process of being a journalist, particularly - in any situation, but particularly in a war zone, to be incredibly exciting and compelling and fulfilling. People say that, you know, war reporting is addictive, you know, if it was addictive for me, it was that sense of meaningfulness that was addictive, not so much the sort of adrenaline. But it was also incredibly exciting.

And the bonds that I experienced with other journalists because, of course, journalists stick together in bad situations were also off the charts. Sort of like pleasurable to experience that close fraternity was tremendous. And, so I was changed because I felt like it sort of supercharged me. Right? But I was also starting to, I think, sort of understand the sort of tragedy of human affairs and just how ghastly power can be in the hands of amoral people. You know, I grew up in a fairly peaceful democracy and, you know, to me, power was like, well, democratic power is part of the equation so that we can all live in a peaceful, safe country, you know? And then you got to Africa or the middle east or Bosnia, like, "Oh, this is what power does." You know, we're seeing what power does in Ukraine right now with Putin.

Hundreds of thousands of people die when powerful people insist on having their way. And that casts me back to my father's experience.

And I've always been an implacable antifascist and so part of that, you know, it allowed me to step into my father's shoes a bit, I think. And finally, the final component was of course I was getting regularly traumatized. And the wars that I covered were increasingly brutal or I was exposed to increasingly brutal things and I was getting affected.

And sometimes in kind of severe ways that I didn't understand because PTSD wasn't something anyone was talking about. It was 1998. It was 2000. I was in Afghanistan in 2000 with Massoud and some very hard things happened. I came home and I couldn't take the subway because I kept having panic attacks. I had no idea it had to do with what I'd experienced in Afghanistan.

But it clearly did. So that was quite hard and affected me enormously actually.

Ramita Navai: And that was the head of the Mujahideen group, Ahmad Shah Massoud you're telling me about now? And can you, I mean, he's such a legendary figure, can you tell me about your time with him?

Sebastian Junger: Yeah, so I was there with an Iranian born photographer who lives in Paris now. Amazing man. And he knew Massoud very well from the eighties. And we went in together through the north from Dushanbe and Tajikistan and we were with Massoud and his forces for two months as they fought the Taliban in the north, trying to keep their supply lines open before winter came. Along with the time I later spent with American soldiers in Afghanistan, it was by far the most meaningful experience of my life as a journalist.

Ramita Navai: Why?

Sebastian Junger: Well, I mean, again, here's a besieged population who were fighting an authoritarian regime and, you know, just the stakes involved, the civilian suffering, the human suffering, in that situation was absolutely devastating.

And we saw horrific things and I came home really quite unable to process them. As my good friend, Scott Anderson, brother of Jon Lee Anderson, both well-known reporters, said he wrote an amazing essay in Harper's magazine in 1996, he was a long-time war reporter, he said, "I should be punished for the things I've seen."

That's exactly how I felt.

But I also feel like the window was open into, "Oh, this is how the world really works." This is really it, you know, like there's no public affairs officials, this is humanity suffering and enduring and surviving. I was never the same after that.

Ramita Navai: When was it, when was the first time you realized that what you were doing was having an adverse effect on you?

Sebastian Junger: Well, let me start out by saying if something happens where you're in danger, that's a trauma that passes quite quickly.

The really enduring trauma is seeing harm come to others. And I don't say this in an attempt to sound noble, right? This is diagnostically true, right? This is medically true. Psychologically true. And now 20 years on, the only thing that can quite quickly bring me to tears if I'm not careful is thinking about or talking about the suffering of others and I've almost been killed several times that I can think of.

And, you know, those are just sort of good dinnertime stories. They don't really have any emotional weight for me. Transient consequences afterwards, panic attacks, that kind of thing. But what has really endured in me is the things I've seen situations where civilians, particularly children, have suffered.

And, I think I first realized I had a problem I was in Liberia during the civil war and it was absolutely horrific and there were a lot of civilian casualties. It was a very, very, very tough time. And I was in a lot of personal danger.

So there were two things going on. First of all, the Taylor regime had decided I was an American spy and kicked me out of the country but I couldn't leave because the rebels had besieged the city and they knew that.

And 24 hours later, they called me and said, we know you're still here, we're coming to get you. You know, which with a regime like that is a very unpleasant message to get. And I sort of went into hiding and I just tried to keep low and the rebels were on the attack in the city. I was like, with any luck, the rebels will take the city and I'm good. Right? And, you know what ensued was some days of really sort of terrifying cat and mouse. I was hiding on the hotel rooftop for a little while when the security guards came to the hotel.

I could see the US embassy, like a couple of few blocks away, you know, I couldn't get there. And I was sort of up there smoking cigarettes, you know, waiting for them to... and never happened.

I hid my passport at the checkpoints. I would pretend I was French. And, you know, the government also had other problems on their hands. You know, if they'd really wanted to find me, I assume they could have, but at any rate the embassy finally got me out of there along with some other at-risk people.

But the other thing that was very painful that happened was that there were a lot of civilian casualties. And at one point in a desperate attempt to get the - the Liberian people wanted America to invade, which was quite ironic because it was 2003. We'd just invaded Iraq. And clearly the Iraqis didn't want us to invade. And, you know, as a good liberal with lots of liberal friends, the idea that any good can come from an

American military action, sort of, you know, is a kind of liberal heresy, right? But here I am in Liberia and the population is like, "Why won't you invade us like you invaded Iraq? We need you. You have to stop this awful civil war."

And in a desperate bid to provoke an American intervention, there was a mortar attack that hit a refugee compound of refugees of IDPs near the embassy. I was out on the streets nearby when the mortars hit and they brought all the casualties. Men, women, little children, everybody, they carried them all over and piled them in front of the embassy. And I was sort of caught unawares by this. And, I sort of went into a state of shock. And I started counting them. Like, I didn't know what to do. I mean, I just short-circuited, and I started counting them.

I just thought somebody should at least know the number, but of course what I was doing - I had no feelings at all. I wasn't horrified. I wasn't anything. I was just like, oh, we need to know how many bodies there are. You know, I was counting little children. Just horrific. And the thing that was so traumatizing was that what I was looking at didn't trouble me. Of course, it was a massive defence mechanism, right? I mean, I'm not a shrink, but I assume that's a pretty easy conclusion to draw.

Ramita Navai: So, you were disassociating?

Sebastian Junger: Totally disassociating. And then, you know, a couple of weeks later, I finally got back to Paris, and I was meeting my girlfriend at the time. She was going to meet me after a couple of days. And so I was in Paris on my own for a couple of days. And I just had this most horrific just ongoing anxiety attack. I mean, I was so messed up. And at one point I was sitting in a cafe having a coffee, I saw two men carrying a mattress across the street, you know, mattresses are sort of hard to carry, the same sort of sag that a body does. And so what I saw was two men in Paris carrying a mattress, right? And I knew that's what I was looking at, but I reacted as if it was a body and I was in Liberia and I went into a full-blown panic attack, knowing intellectually that I wasn't in danger but my body didn't believe it for a second. Right? And that was the first time I realized like, oh, this is - something's wrong with you. Like, you're in trouble. And it took a long time, took a very long time, to sort of work through that.

Ramita Navai: Sebastian, has there been a moment in your career covering wars that has changed you?

Sebastian Junger: Oh God. I mean, all of it. I mean, I don't know. I mean that moment with the bodies outside the Liberian embassy changed me. The truck load of guys who'd had their legs blown off by landmines in Afghanistan in 2000.

There was a big offensive, Massoud was trying to take a hilltop position from the Taliban and Al Qaeda called Kata Qala which was a position from where they were able to shell the supply routes, Massoud's supply routes.

And he was trying to push them off this entrenched ridge top position at night. And there was basically a mass infantry assault up this ridge. And by mistake, they went

through a minefield and they brought these guys back. You know, it happened, we were right up there. It happened minutes earlier.

You know, they brought these guys back in a flatbed truck and you know, a dozen guys or so and, I mean, horribly mangled and maimed and I'd never quite seen human anatomy torn apart in quite such a way and on such a scale, right? I mean, these are the truckload of dismembered men who were still alive.

And, you know, again I went into shock and they brought them into this, you know, field tent. They had kerosene lanterns and I mean, I can't even describe what it looked like. And I couldn't take it. I walked out. I got dizzy and I walked out. And I was out there in the colds of the Afghan night looking up at the beautiful stars.

I could hear the battle thumping away, you know, near me. And I smoked a cigarette and sort of thought about it. Like, you know, if you want to be a war reporter, you can't only participate in the acceptable things. Like you have to go back in that tent, if you can't face the ugliness of that you have no business being a war reporter at all.

It's cheap. It's cheap, man. If you just take the parts that you can deal with. You have to deal with all of it or none of it. And I had that conversation with myself and then I walked back into the tent and I was like your job is to write it down. Right? Like you just write down what you see. And as soon as I had my notebook out and my pen all of a sudden I had a mission and I had something dignified to do with this carnage, which is tell people back home what it looks like, what it feels like, you know?

And then once I was in that role, I was okay. Obviously, you know, a month later I'm having panic attacks on the New York City subway, you know, like that was part of it. Right? But I just, you know, took a while to figure that out.

Ramita Navai: How did you work through that?

Sebastian Junger: You know, I mean, psychological effects dissipate over time. You know, the loss of a spouse, you know, you're grieving very hard one weekend and then three years in less hard, you know, whatever.

I mean, people, you know, humans are, we're wired to survive adversity and trauma and danger and hardship. And if we weren't, the species wouldn't exist. So over time, those reactions dissipate. The reactions are, I think, self-protective and healthy at first and then they dissipate hopefully in a healthy way for most people. And so they slowly dissipated.

But of course I was also sort of re-traumatizing myself over and over again. And that continued on up through 2008 and then culminating when Tim Hetherington was killed in 2011.

Ramita Navai: And when you say you're retraumatizing yourself over and over again, you mean every time you went out and covered another war?

Sebastian Junger: Yeah. I mean, the times that I covered wars and saw or experienced difficult things, yes, it would re-traumatize me. And, you know, I didn't realize, you know, I came back from Afghanistan in 2000 and, you know, as I said having panic attacks, I just had no idea it had anything to do with combat. Well slowly because the US was at war, PTSD was something that people talked about more and more.

It finally sort of dawned on me like, oh, this is classic. Like, there's nothing wrong with you. I mean, I thought I was just finally going crazy at age 40, and you know you're not going crazy. This is a known thing. Like, this is how people deal with trauma and you're exhibiting those symptoms.

You're going to be okay.

Ramita Navai: But Sebastian, what you just thought you were having a midlife midlife crisis? How could you not have related it to the terrible things that you were witnessing?

Sebastian Junger: Because I didn't connect the fears I was having with combat, right? It's not like, I mean, look, if you're in a lot of gunfire and you hear a loud crack, like you can be on the golf course and you'll still jump.

Like, I mean, there are sound triggers that clearly, you know, that's obvious. Like, I mean, it doesn't have much emotional consequence that kind of, you know, reaction. But the real panic attacks I was having were in situations that had nothing to do with war. You know, one was in a ski gondola and the other was in a New York city subway or a crowded room.

And I was like, it never occurred to me that that was about combat because those were situations that I wasn't experiencing in Afghanistan. I just didn't know how it worked. So I just thought, all right, you're 40, like you're starting to lose your mind. What a pity. Like, I mean, I was quite fatalistic about it and I was also getting very angry and very depressed and in ways that were very new to me. I'm not an angry person. You know, like at all. And suddenly I had a temper for the first time in my life and I would get very, very depressed sometimes. And it would go away, you know? And, I just thought it was some psychological issue finally catching up with me.

Ramita Navai: When did you seek help?

Sebastian Junger: I never did.

Ramita Navai: You never went to a therapist?

Sebastian Junger: Not about that, no. No. I mean, I've talked to people about other issues in my life, but no, not about that.

Ramita Navai: And you've never wanted to speak to a therapist about the PTSD that you've had from covering conflict.

Sebastian Junger: No, because I feel like the reactions that I had were in evolutionary terms adaptive, right?

I mean, humans are, we're adapted to survive and the reactions that most people have to trauma are adaptive in the short term and they only become problematic if they're chronic over many years. And that didn't really happen with me. Like, finally, finally at the end, in 2011, after Tim was killed, my first marriage was falling apart.

Some of that process was related to trauma that I'd had. And I was doing, you know, a lot of work on myself. And part of that work was sort of like acknowledging the effect of trauma on my life, but it wasn't like I sought counselling to deal with trauma. Like that it didn't. And because I watched the effects dissipate over time and I was confident that they would, you know, ultimately that I'd be okay.

Ramita Navai: So are you, because I'd been speaking to some of our colleagues, our colleagues kind of seem very split. Those who seek therapy, counselling, try and deal with the trauma that way and those who maybe disassociate and say, well, if you're going to put your hand in the fire, it's going to get burned and you seem to be of the second school.

I'm quite surprised.

Sebastian Junger: Yeah, I can see why you'd say that. You know, if the consequences had continued for many years and if they were really diminishing my life, my personal relationships, you know, if I were turning to alcohol to self-medicate, you know, things like that, I would have sought help. But they weren't expressing themselves in that way.

And, you know, the panic attacks stopped. Right? I mean, I can still get sort of teary. I can get choked up talking about say Liberia. Thank God, right? I mean, if that were no longer a reaction I had to a pile of bodies, God help me, you know? So, you know, I'm not sure all of it's negative.

[FIRST AD]

Ramita Navai: Sebastian, what has been the war that's affected you the most?

Sebastian Junger: Well I would say Afghanistan in 2000 and Liberia affected me the most in a negative way. I would say Bosnia, it was such a seminal moment in a young man's life probably affected me the most in a positive way. And then leaping forward to 2007, 2008, when I was for the first time in my life with American forces in Afghanistan, briefly two years earlier, but really for long-term off and on for a year with one platoon in Eastern Afghanistan and quite a lot of combat. That affected me enormously in positive ways as well because it was the first time that I'd really been

sort of part of a group. It was such a primal human experience. And, if I can say it, sort of primal male experience. It was all men out there. And there was something about being in, you know, what anthropologists would call a survival group in a hostile environment. There was something about the bonds that were required in that that transcended likes and dislikes, right?

I mean, those guys were bonded to each other, regardless of who they liked and didn't like in that platoon, it had nothing to do with it. And there was something about being included in that situation with those young men that was really profound.

Ramita Navai: Can you tell me what it's like spending such an intense time in combat with men that you don't know?

Sebastian Junger: Well, I did know them pretty quickly. Like, you know, like very, very quickly people become your brothers. Or if it's a mixture group, your brothers and sisters. And I think, you know, there's sort of like territorial defence groups in Ukraine that were formed quite hastily to confront the Russians.

I think that, you know, if you could talk to those young men and women, I think they would say exactly the same thing. Like, wow, it took probably a week, you know, and we were brothers and sisters. And then in a single-sex group like an all-male group, like I was in, then you're not even dealing with the sort of slightly complicating effects of a two gender group, right?

Just all men. It's extremely simple, like emotionally, very, very simple, but also extremely profound and solid. And the loyalty between those guys that I was honoured to be sort of included in after some time. Right? It took a while. You know, it just felt like the most profound experience of my life other than, you know, having family is the only other thing that I could equate it to.

Ramita Navai: And what did that teach you about yourself and about male friendships and relationships?

Sebastian Junger: Well, you know, I was sort of stunned by how hard it was to leave there every time. Because I came and went and I never wanted to leave. And, you know, I had a nice life back home, right? Except it missed that basic sense of inclusion in a group, which of course is the human norm. Right? If you look at our evolutionary past, humans have survived for hundreds of thousands of years in groups or platoon sized groups, typically like 30, 40, 50 people, maybe a hundred people, that's the human norm.

And to be able to experience that as a sort of modern Western society human in such an elemental place played to I think very, very ancient profound human values, human virtues. And, so you know, what I learned was like, oh, this is what it feels like to be human. To be part of a group of other people that I care about as much as I care about myself in some ways. And I desperately want to be respected by them and trusted by them as I trust them.

You know? And God forbid I do something that causes a problem or have a sort of failure of nerve at a crucial moment and I create a problem for this group and God forbid like that ever happened and, you know, it never did happen. And that, to me, I was like I finally got to experience humanity in the most ancient sense.

I mean, I grew up in Belmont, Massachusetts, like the odds weren't great for me having that. And I got it and it was a high, absolutely a sort of transcended moment of my life.

Ramita Navai: Talk me through the moments in the Korengal Valley that you treasure the most, that have stayed with you forever?

Sebastian Junger: Oh God. I'm not sure. You know, I mean, the combat was quite intense and that stands out. It's hard to say that I treasure it, but I mean, I wouldn't want to have been without it. Some of the conversations that would happen, you know, sort of at dusk, like I was trying to not smoke cigarettes.

So, you know, I had some small cigars I would take over just to sort of give myself a little bit of a ritual at the end of the day. And I would sort of smoke one of those. The boys obviously all smoked like crazy. Cigarettes. And we sat and we just sort of talked and it was like this just completely unfiltered unselfaware unburdened sort of male experience.

And you know, there weren't specific moments particularly, but just that, that reality, it was so simple. Right? I mean, there was just nothing to worry about. And, it was so relaxing. Like society is stressful and it's not relaxing, it's tiring, you know? Like, and family relations, like your bills, whatever, like just the complexity of modern life. It can be really hard. It's not hard out there, you know, other than staying alive, it's extremely simple and very, very relaxing in its own weird way. And that to me was like, God, if you could bottle that, you know, and bring it home like that was probably the high point.

Ramita Navai: And you said that experiencing long periods of combat will also stay with you forever. What was that like? Can you describe that for me?

Sebastian Junger: Ah, at first it's very confusing, you know, because if someone's shooting at you, it's hard to tell at first, oddly. Like, I mean, gunfire is loud if you're standing near it, but if someone's shooting at you from a few hundred metres away it's not loud at all. I mean, it's just a sort of weird disorganized, you know, tapping sound. Right? And everyone kind of looks at each other like, "Are we getting shot at?" Like, I mean, it actually kind of starts as a kind of question mark. "Did you hear that?" Like that lasts for a moment and the sound of bullets going past you - I think maybe they break the sound barrier or something. I don't know what it is. But they make this really weird snapping sound but it's fairly subtle, like, and everyone sort of cocks their head. Like, "Are we?" "Yes!" And then it's very frantic and sort of disorganized but quickly falls into a sort of rhythm.

I mean, American soldiers are very good at retaking the initiative after an ambush, after getting attacked, they retake the initiative, retake control of the tempo of the combat, you know, within a minute or two. I mean, really they're tactically extremely good. And, so then it settles into the sort of rhythm, you know, they're talking the guns back and forth between the heavy weapons and mortars start ranging in and, you know, then it sort of starts to fulfil the sort of choreographed process that you start to recognize from previous firefights.

And so if you're behind something solid and the enemy is not sending indirect fire like mortars, you know, then you're quite safe and it feels quite fine. And I'm shooting video at this point. So I have a purpose. And so I'm mostly focused on getting good video. And so it's, you know, like at that point, once you make it past the first minute, you know, I wouldn't say it's particularly stressful.

Those first moments can be sort of terrifying.

Ramita Navai: And so when that would happen when you'd come under attack, you'd come under fire, you would start filming?

Sebastian Junger: Yes.

Ramita Navai: Had you gone through this with them beforehand, areas that you should be standing in that would be safe or was it just chaotic?

Sebastian Junger: No, no, no. I mean, you're a big boy. I'm a big boy. They expected I could stay out of the way. And whether we were on patrol or in the outpost. And you know, if you're on patrol, you never know where you're going to get ambushed. Although sometimes we'd get radio communication, we'd pick up radio communication from them where we actually knew we were about to get hit, like, oh, they're going to hit us in the next hundred metres.

Like, so sometimes there was some warning, but mostly you don't know.

So in September of 2007, we were out at OP Restrepo at this remote sort of exposed outpost with, you know, 20, 30 men in it that were getting hit almost every day. But this one day it was very quiet and very hot. I was leaning against a sandbag, you know, watching the guys dig. They were digging, they were filling sandbags, actually building the outpost. And, some sand sort of sprayed into the side of my face.

At that distance you don't hear the gunshot for a while. So what I felt was sand - the bullet impact on the sandbags sprang sand into my face, I just had time to think what was that? And then I heard the rest of, you know, the burst the [makes gun shot sounds] duh, duh, duh, duh. And it was, you know, the first round of the first burst of a 30 minute firefight.

And you know quickly one guy got hurt. He was on a HESCO and he jumped off the HESCO and completely shattered his ankle and they sort of dragged him out of the fire. There were bullets hitting the ground everywhere. I mean, just a massive amount of return fire, you know, within seconds from the outpost and it was just complete, sort of orchestrated chaos for a while.

And, you know, I pretty quickly got my gear on and my camera running and it was all okay. And then afterwards I sat down and I realized what that sand was. And I realized what that angle had to have been at 500 meters. And I realized how very easily any of us could die out here without any warning whatsoever.

And it was completely random. And that was a bracing thought. And it made me think that only this might be the place where I die, this hilltop, it's possible, but also what a universe we live in, like, are you kidding? This is all random for you up there. It's just angles and like, that's all this is? Are you kidding?

And that was the same thing that happened after I was hit by an IED, you know, that went off under the engine block instead of under us. And you know, it was a matter of half a second difference that spared us something, if not death. And I was like, damn, it really is random. That's cold. Like, the alternative is you believe in God, it's like, God, why would you do this to me?

Like, why would you have the bullet come anywhere close to me? If you're running all this stuff, can you just stop with the three inches from my forehead? Just like skip all of it. Thank you.

So I mean, the first thing you do, you know, I had a camera, if it wasn't, in my hand, it was hung on a hook on my bulletproof vest. The first thing I would do is hit the record button, even if it was still hanging on the hook to get the camera time, to get spun up and level it, waist level. And move to cover. And once I'm behind cover start trying to take long calm shots. I remember during one firefight, Tim Hetherington came up behind me. He was my colleague in this project. It was a crazy firefight going on. And my camera was just swinging back and forth at whatever gun was loudest.

And Tim came up to me and said, "10 seconds! 10 seconds on each shot! 10 seconds! Count them." Like because it's useless video basically if the camera's moving like your head moves reacting to every sound. It's useless video. So, you know, he was right. He had a great presence of mind in those moments that, you know, I eventually acquired.

Ramita Navai: Were there any moments where you just felt really scared and you couldn't film?

Sebastian Junger: Once. Only because I was separated from my camera, we got hit very suddenly and there was so much gunfire coming in. My camera was about 10 feet away behind some sandbags and across an opening. And there was a lot of gunfire coming through the opening and my bulletproof vest was there as was Tim's.

There was some ammunition there and we're all sort of pinned down. I couldn't get to the camera. And so I was like, because I had nothing to do, I was quite scared. And Tim who had also had his own moments like that as well, I think, but in that moment he was totally present and he sort of leaped across this sort of gap with this gunfire pouring in.

I mean, the sand was moving, right? I mean, it was serious business and he leapt across this gap and started throwing ammo to the soldiers because they were separated from their ammo as well. And threw me my camera and my vest and he was a total hero at that moment.

And, you know, once I had my gear on, I was totally good because I had a job. And suddenly I realized like, if you're on the 240 or something, if you're a soldier and you have a job, which is to return fire, your fear goes somewhere else because you're focusing on doing your job. And the person who has no job is the person who's terrified.

If you have a job - and likewise if I were in a dangerous situation with my children, I don't think I'd be scared. I'd be so worried about them. You know, you wouldn't, you don't think about yourself if you have a job to do. I think that's again, ancient, adaptive, and very, very human.

[SECOND AD]

Ramita Navai: [INSERT] *Hello, it's Ramita Navai here. Before we continue the conversation, I want to thank you for listening to my show. I hope you agree that these stories are not only powerful but important. As I speak to some incredible journalists from around the world about what they've learned from working in dangerous places and how it's changed their perspective it would be great to get your help in sharing their insights.*

So please do spread the word and subscribe, rate, and review wherever you get your podcasts. I hope you continue to be inspired by the series. And I look forward to you joining me for more episodes. Now back to the show...

Ramita Navai: Sebastian, how did losing your friend and collaborator Tim Hetherington change you?

Sebastian Junger: Well, you know, in 2011, I was a few years out of the Korengal. I was getting over I think some of the emotional consequences, psychological consequences of that experience. Both good and bad, I should say. I was in a, you know, struggling marriage. Someone that I really loved but the marriage was not working for either of us, I think.

And then Tim got killed and I just went into this spiral of guilt. Shame. Like, I mean, he and I were supposed to go on that assignment together and at the last moment for personal reasons, I couldn't go and he went on his own and he got killed. And you know if...

Ramita Navai: That's in Libya.

Sebastian Junger: Yes, I'm sorry, in Libya. He was covering the civil war in Libya. And Tim and I were going to cover the Arab spring together. The last moment I couldn't go. And, you know, had he died in a car accident in Libya, I wouldn't have felt guilty about it. Or had he died in combat and he was just a friend that I hadn't been in combat with, I wouldn't have felt guilty about it. But if you're in combat with someone and then they die in combat and you're not there to protect them, you're guilty. It should have been me. I should have been there to help him. I should have, you know, blah, blah, blah.

I really, then at that point, I, you know, like now I'm suffering consequences I can actually recognize as trauma. That are drilling a hole through my life and destroying it. And I was in, you know, quite a dangerous depression. And I remember finally realizing, wow, you got to deal with this when not only was I quite estranged from my wife who I love, but suddenly she seemed like a stranger. Like somebody I barely recognized. Terrifying feeling. But also I remember thinking, "Wow, Tim, might've been lucky. Like he died before his life turned really bad. He died before life turned disappointing. He died before he turned disappointing to himself. He went out at the right moment. You're going to have to see this thing through to the bitter end." And then when I realized that I was seeing Tim as the lucky person, I was like, oh, that's a bad thought. Like you have to deal with this.

Ramita Navai: How did you deal with it?

Sebastian Junger: Well, a number of ways. I got divorced, which was an entirely healthy good thing for both of us. We're still friends, you know, so that really helped. I was living the wrong life. I was living in the wrong life. And, I was already talk to somebody, to a therapist, and I started talking to them about this specifically. Right? And once I identified it for what it was then I was able to talk about it. And, you know, I think that helped. And I'm going to try to say this without irony or sounding flip. I drank for a while. I drank. I did some pretty good drinking back then. You know, I sort of numbed myself as long as I needed to.

And then there came a moment where I was like, "Oh, I'm good." And I stopped and I haven't had anything to drink since then. So there was a sort of moment of tumult and really profound experiencing of feelings that I sort of had to go through. It took a couple of years and then I sort of came out the other side.

I was like, I'd felt like I'd sort of been reborn. But it was dangerous and it was very, very scary. And I didn't recognize myself. The first time in my life I was like, "Who are you? What is going on? I don't know you. Like, and I don't know what you're capable of like I used to."

Ramita Navai: Did that experience change your work, the way you approached work?

Sebastian Junger: Well, after Tim was killed, my wife at the time said, "You know, you can't do that work anymore. Because even if nothing happens to you," - I mean, she really loved Tim. You know, it was devastating to her as well. And you know, the news came in a phone call to the apartment.

I mean, it was horrible. And she said, "You know, even if nothing ever happens to you, it's statistically, like the odds are pretty good that you survive your job, your career as a war reporter, the odds are pretty good. Right?" She said, "But even if nothing ever happens to you, every time the phone rings, I'm going to think it's that call.

“And the fact that you might come home a lot, you might come home alive every time, it doesn't mean that I'm not going to be traumatized by the possibility." And she was absolutely right.

It was like time to grow up. Like it's time to put other people's feelings ahead of yours. You want to be a war reporter? Too bad. Like other people are paying the price for what you want. That's not being a man. That's not being an adult. That's not being mature. You're being a child. Like stop. So I stopped. And you know, I had to give up that identity which rocked me a little bit because it's such an easy identity to, you know, coast on.

But it did, you know, force me to do other work that is ultimately more profound, more meaningful and frankly, more helpful to other people.

Ramita Navai: And how do you think that experience and the other experiences you've told me about have changed you?

Sebastian Junger: Well, I think ultimately it's all humanized me quite a lot. I mean, everyone thinks that war dehumanizes people. I think unless you're a sociopath, it's the opposite. I think what actually dehumanizes people is living in the kind of like, say formulaic pre-programme high-technology cookie cutter, you know, 40 hour a week grind that many Americans, both affluent and poor, wind up living in.

I think that dehumanizes people, but you know, trust me, the people of Ukraine right now are getting humanized probably more than they want to. Right? And likewise, as a journalist, what started out as an embarrassingly exciting lark for me, to be sort of brutally honest about it, you know, kept progressing and progressing until by the end, I was, you know, fully laid open emotionally to what war really is. And by that, I mean, everything. By how exciting it is. You know, how terrifying it is. But ultimately how incredibly sad it is. And that's what I mean by fully humanized.

Ramita Navai: Sebastian, was it addictive?

Sebastian Junger: I mean, I'm kind of a literalist, right? So for me the word addictive, it has a very specific meaning.

You know, it's already a chemical addiction. I wouldn't say it was addictive. What I would say is the process of covering war you become psychologically dependent on it because it makes you special and different from everybody else. So you walk into the dinner party or the cocktail party or whatever, and you're the guy that covers wars. Right? And so your self-esteem issues are immediately bolstered by your uniqueness in a social setting where maybe you'd be more self-conscious without that. Right? So I would say you become psychologically dependent on it, and you're sort of what feels like an outsized kind of an in quotes, heroic role and outsized and quote heroic life that you're leading. Like you become dependent on that.

Addictive I think is a little too strong. I mean, there's a sort of adrenaline addiction. You know, I don't know. There's a lot of ways of getting your adrenaline, you know, I'm a very cautious person, it's the sense of meaning in war reporting that I think you become dependent on.

And I remember thinking, wow, if I wasn't a war reporter I would feel like I was nothing. Right? I mean, I was like suppose I worked in the library, like, what would I think of myself? You know, like that's unfortunate that you would see yourself in that way. That there's some kind of work so undignified or unimportant that you wouldn't like yourself, like, are you kidding?

You've got more work to do. Wars aren't going to solve that problem. Right?

Ramita Navai: Well, I think that's incredibly honest. And many of our colleagues in these conversations have said exactly the same thing that it does make you feel - it gives you confidence and you can walk into that dinner party and you can feel good about yourself.

Sebastian Junger: Right.

Ramita Navai: And how do you adjust to coming back to normal life and not having that in your life?

Sebastian Junger: Well, I mean, humans are very adaptable and resilient and we are good at adjusting to things that are way harder than that transition.

You adjust as you can and you just sort of reset your norms. And I remember that. I mean, look, I'm 60 right now, right? I look back on my twenties with great fondness. Right? How did I adjust to being 60? You just have to, you don't have a choice and would I want to be 25 again? No, not really.

You know, but that doesn't mean I don't look back fondly and likewise like what I want to be back in the Korengal Valley right now? No, absolutely not. Do I miss it? Absolutely. Right? And that feels contradictory. It's actually not. If I look around me at my life right now, I have two little girls, a five-year-old and a two-year-old, you know, the feelings that I have about them, I can't even put those feelings in the same conversation in the same thought as any other thing in my life. And my wife, of

course, any other thing in my life. Like my family is like orders of magnitude more powerful and moving to me. So do I miss that stuff? Yeah, of course I - who wouldn't, right? Do I want to be back there?

No, I want to be right here where I am right now at age 60 with my family. Like, that's it. End of sentence.

Ramita Navai: You said that it's not the danger aspect of it that didn't attract you but you said that you started off by doing a really dangerous job, the tree cutting. And I did wonder, because one thing I've noticed with all of our colleagues is that there is that thirst for adventure, that there is that bit of us that, you know, we're risk takers.

And it sounds like you're the same kind of person.

Sebastian Junger: Oh, you know, I would never say it wasn't attractive. You asked if it was addictive and I don't think it's addictive strictly speaking. But attractive? Oh wildly so. Absolutely. And you know, particularly I can only speak as a man and formerly as a young man, like, but particularly I think for the young man that I was like, I'm not sure that it's an uncommon, the prospect of facing risk and surviving it, was very compelling and seemed to mark a rite of passage that many young men feel that they need to undergo.

And they don't know how to undergo it in safe circumstances, in comfortable circumstances. And, you know, the tree work, I mean, I was working 80, a hundred feet in the air on a rope with a chainsaw taking trees down, like a mistake will get you killed. Right? And I did get hurt doing it. What I realized in tree work is that you're just dealing with the forces of physics, it's nothing random. So if you get killed it's because you made a mistake, so don't make a mistake, right? Not true in combat, right? There's a random element in combat or in driving for that matter that you can't control. But in tree work it was actually quite comforting, it became a kind of Zen presence of mind. Like just don't screw up. You'll be fine. Right? You're safer a hundred feet in the air on a rope with a chainsaw than you are 10 feet in the air on a ladder, you know? Like just don't screw up with. So that became a very compelling state of mind for me.

Ramita Navai: Have you missed the work? Have you missed covering wars?

Sebastian Junger: Oh, I miss it like I miss my twenties. I mean, yeah, of course I miss it. But again, would I want to be doing it now? No, absolutely not. I mean, it's hard to take a one night business trip, you know? I don't want to be away from my family. Like I don't even want to go to LA on a business trip or whatever. Like thank you, no. Like I've no interest in anything like that right now.

Ramita Navai: Has it been worth it? Are there any moments you regret or you wish you hadn't witnessed?

Sebastian Junger: You know, if you start saying, "Oh, I wish I hadn't witnessed that." Then you're saying I want the good parts of being a war reporter, not the bad parts. So, no, I cannot say that I regret anything. And I like who I am now. I like the way I've written about war. I like the fact that it seems like the sense I made of a war has helped other people make sense of war. I like all of that. And so I can't change anything because I might change that outcome. So no, like, I don't regret any of it.

Let me just backtrack and correct myself a little bit. One thing that I do regret now I'm a parent and I know what it feels like to be worried about not only your child's safety, but your own safety, because they need you to be alive, right? They love you. They can't lose you. Right? And so now I look back on the wars that I covered and I realized what I was blind to at the time, I now see. I was surrounded by parents who had children. And how terrified were they? You know, it just never occurred to me, right?

Like, oh my God, these aren't just wars with a bunch of young men shooting at each other. These are wars filled with children and families and people that are terrified something's going to happen to their child or to them and they won't be able to take care of their child. And all of a sudden, you know, west Africa, Afghanistan, Sarajevo, like all of a sudden I saw it all differently.

And my regret is that I didn't see it for what it was back then. And I couldn't because I wasn't a parent. But I regret that I didn't. That's the ultimate truth about war is that parents are worried what's going to happen. What's going to happen to their child. At the end of the day, that's the ultimate truth about war and if you can't focus on that, you're not really covering war. You're covering a kind of performance, which has all kinds of energizing and traumatizing effects on you. But you're missing something, the core truth about it. It's like, what about the parents?

Ramita Navai: From what you're saying now, how do you now feel looking at Ukraine?

Sebastian Junger: Well, you know, I had the predictable, "Ugh, I kind of want to go." Once in a while I see someone drinking a whiskey and I'm like, "Ah, that looks pretty good." It's like, and then very quickly I'm like "No, no, no that's not the life you want to lead."

Right? And so I sort of had that initial reaction and it reminded me so much of Sarajevo, which was a part of my life that, you know, so affected me and it was so important. But then, you know, of course, as the news came out about what was really happening, you know, I mean, Bucha, I mean, all of it, I mean, I don't even want to go into the horrors because we all know.

But incredibly depressing and you know, it fills me with a kind of rage, you know? Like, powerful people and I mean, people, not men, people. Men and women. Powerful men and women all over the world make their power and make their fortune on the suffering of others. And, you know, when you start to see the world like that, I mean, how can you not be rageful?

Like, and so that's what Putin is doing right now. And it's a thought that feels so poisoned. It's hard to hold it in your heart for very long.

Ramita Navai: So the question that I had asked is what has covering wars taught you about the way the world really works?

Sebastian Junger: Well, okay. First of all, people are willing to sacrifice other people's lives for their own power and benefit. And, you know, it's even possible that leadership qualities are selected for - the people who become leaders are often people who are willing to do that, which is what allows them to become leaders.

And that's a sort of grim reality. The way the world also works is that people, you know, humans are unique as a species that we are willing to die to protect people we don't know personally, right? I mean, someone comes into my home and is threatening my family, of course, I'm willing to die to protect my family. I mean, if it goes without saying. But humans are willing to die protecting other people they don't know. That's not true in any other species. Only in humans. People will run into a burning house to save other people's children. Totally unique. Right? And so what you see in Ukraine, what I've seen as a war reporter, is the depravity, the moral depravity of the powerful, not all powerful, but many powerful people.

The Taliban, for example, the Saudi Royal family, you know, whatever, many people who are allies of the United States, and occasionally us ourselves, right? But then also the unbelievable courage and nobility and generosity of people that are protecting each other, protecting themselves, protecting their community, protecting the innocent.

And, you know, because of the, sort of, the way the world is put together right now, I would say those two forces are in sort of rough equilibrium. You know, about half the time you wind up with these authoritarian countries where their own population is oppressed and then about half the time you have sort of fairly egalitarian societies, you know, there's, there's some economic inequality, of course, that I think is a shame and tragic, but, you know, basically there egalitarian societies that at least strive to be just. And, you know, I feel like those two kinds of systems are in rough equilibrium in the world.

So I assumed they were in rough equilibrium within the human constitution. The human psyche.

Ramita Navai: Has covering wars made you more cynical towards humanity?

Sebastian Junger: Well, yeah, it's made me more cynical and more in love with it. I mean, how can you not be in love with the people that are defending the steel plant in Mariupol? Come on. You know? And how can you not hate it when you contemplate why they need to do that in the first place?

Like it's both. I mean, you can't reduce a reaction to war to one thing. Because you can't reduce war to one thing. And if you try to reduce it as the left tries to do and the right tries to do, if you try to reduce it, you end up with a lie.

Ramita Navai: Sebastian, I always end my conversations by asking my guests the same question: if there was one piece of wisdom that you could give to our listeners from having covered war and from your experiences facing danger and death, what would it be?

Sebastian Junger: Okay. I mean, for starters, I don't know who your listeners are, but if they're in the Western world and in fairly safe circumstances, and if they're not concerned in a really immediate and terrifying way about the safety of their children, if they're not worried about if they're going to eat in the coming weeks, if those are your listeners, I would say, thank God, God bless you.

I say that as an atheist, but I like using the phrase sometimes. It has a nice ring to it. God bless you. And please understand how rare and lucky your circumstances are. And they are not the result of any of your own doing. You drew a lucky lottery card in history. And, if you really understand that luck, you don't need to feel guilty about it, but you do need to feel responsible, responsible for others.

That's it.

Ramita Navai: I love that. You know what, you saying you're an atheist reminded me that I do have another question. I'm so sorry.

[Both laugh]

So it's been really interesting talking to our colleagues that they seem pretty split between those who believe in God and those who don't and the ones who believe in God have experienced cheating death as being a miracle.

As an atheist, how do you explain that you have survived, covering all these wars and these terrible situations you've been in?

Sebastian Junger: Well, I mean, I know in an immediate physical sense I survived because I was standing three inches to the right at one point when a bullet hit a sand bag next to my forehead. What put me in that spot rather than in the path of the bullet, which is fired from like 500 metres away.

So think about the angle that spared my life and spared my life in a way that I never even would have known about. I just would've stopped existing. What put me in the right spot rather than the wrong spot was a reflection of absolute nothing except random chance. So I survived because I think I try to be smart about risks and I'm lucky, and I don't think there's any...

I would hesitate to ascribe a sort of moral cause to my survival, because then you're starting to say, "Oh, well then Tim must have sort of deserved to die." Right? Like if you were spared, why wasn't he? I remember talking to the - Oh, this was a moment that really almost broke me. I met at Sundance, our film Restrepo was showing and it won the grand jury prize.

And I met a girl, the girl was seven or eight years old whose father had been killed in the Korengal, Larry Rougle. And Tim had, you know, was right near him. And had filmed the aftermath including Rougle's body. And that was in the film and the girl had watched it and she said to me (and Tim actually was so upset by the whole thing he actually couldn't bring himself to meet the family). And so I sort of, they were very nice people and the little girl said to me, "Why did my daddy die out there?" I said, well, um, it was a very dangerous place. A lot of people got killed out there and she said, "Well, why didn't you get killed? It was so dangerous." I said, “well, I got lucky”. And she looked at me, said, "Why didn't my daddy get lucky?"

You don't want to start to think there's meaning in that luck, because then all of a sudden, Larry Rougle deserved to die. Or there was some purpose to it, some inevitable outcome to it.

I don't think philosophically, theologically, any of us want to go down that path. So I'm going to have to say it's all random.

Ramita Navai: As a fellow atheist, Sebastian, I'm fully on board.

Sebastian Junger: Thank you very much.

Ramita Navai: Sebastian, thank you so much for our conversation today. It's been an honour and an absolute pleasure.

Sebastian Junger: I really, really enjoyed it as well. Amazing questions. And yeah thank you. Thank you.

Thank you for that.

Ramita Navai: To hear more of Sebastian’s astute insights and to get a real feel for his work, I would start by reading one of his books - all powerful stories, exquisitely written, exploring what it means to be human.

In FREEDOM he examines the concept of freedom through a journey along rail tracks on the east coast of America, and in TRIBE he shows us what we can learn from tribal societies about belonging and our quest for meaning.

You can also watch his Oscar-nominated documentary Restrepo on Itunes, Amazon Prime or Netflix depending on where you are.

Sebastian's Twitter handle is: @sebastianjunger and he's also on Instagram: sebastianjungerofficial.

Thank you for listening to this series of **The Line of Fire**. I hope to bring you more amazing stories and insights in the next series. If you enjoyed the show, please do rate and review. And tell your friends they can find us wherever they get their podcasts. Until next time…

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It was presented by me, Ramita Navai, and edited and produced by Chris Scott. Our executive producers are Claire Cottrell and Richard Osman.