

Perspective Shifts

Interviewer

So today is May the thirdâ€”

Sebastian Junger

Yeah.

Interviewer

2011.Â Â Weâ€™re in the studios of West Point Center for Oral History with Sebastian Junger.Â Â And Sebastian, I would like to ask youâ€”you know, thereâ€™s a lot of material we can go into, but since weâ€™re here at West Point Iâ€™d like to focus on your most recent work, and ask you to tell me when you first got interested in war.

Sebastian Junger

I mean, I just have the assumption that every little boy is interested in war.Â Â I remember growing up, you know, and all the adults that I knew had fought in World War II.Â Â And when we played war, some of the boys had to play Germans, and no one wanted to play Germans, and everyone wanted to be Americans.Â Â And the Vietnam War was going on, and so it started deploying with that.Â Â But you know, like Iâ€™”since I was a little boy, I mean itâ€™s justâ€”itâ€™s exciting to pick up a crooked stick and pretend to shoot it at somebody.Â Â I mean it says terrible things about the human species, I suppose, but thatâ€™s what little boys doâ€”or a lot of them.

Sebastian Junger

Andâ€”but then after Vietnam, the Vietnam War was so controversial, and Iâ€™”you know, I came from a part of societyâ€”Massachusetts, pretty liberal backgroundâ€”that was very, very against the war.Â Â And the whole enterprise and the military and everything, I was justâ€”found really unpleasant and distasteful, and that started to change after I started covering wars myself.

Interviewer

What was the first war you covered?

Sebastian Junger

I went to Bosnia in 1993.

Interviewer

Why?Â Â What was your impulse for going there?Â Â Assignment, or aâ€”

Sebastian Junger

I didnâ€™t have an assignment; I was desperate for any kind of assignment.Â Â I had been working as arborist, as a climber for tree companies, and I was trying to break in as a writer, but I couldnâ€™t do it.Â Â And I hurt myself pretty badly with a chainsawÂ up in a tree, and I just decided, you know, I was 30 years old and I had to just like go for it.Â Â And frankly, I was drawn to the drama of the war over there.Â Â And I went overâ€”

Interviewer

Let me pause you for a second.Â Â So you wanted to be a writerâ€”you knew that.

Sebastian Junger

Yeah.

Interviewer

So even when you were an arborist, you wanted to be a writerâ€”or was being an arborist just for the sake of earning a check, or were you interested in trees, too?

Sebastian Junger

Well, no.Â Â It wasâ€”I had waited tables for years while I was writing for magazinesâ€”or trying to write for magazinesâ€”and writing fiction, and all that stuff that people in their 20s do when they want to be writers.Â Â And I foundâ€”you know, I just stumbled into my job as a climber for tree companies.Â Â I was always very athletic and physically capable, and you know, I would work 80 feet in the air with a chain saw, taking trees down piece by piece.Â Â You know, lowering pieces on lines, and very athletic, dangerousâ€”

Interviewer

So it was very hard work.

Sebastian Junger

And it wasâ€”well, hey, then it was appropriate.Â Â I could work two days a week and write the rest of the time.Â Â And lâ€”anyway, I just realized, at 30, like youâ€™ve got to jump-start this thing, and I just went to Bosnia.Â Â And here is where my understanding of military force changed, and I think it did for a lot of sort of my fellow liberalsâ€”you know, sort of â€œanti-warâ€ liberals.Â Â There are warsâ€”there are civil wars, like Bosnia, and Rwanda, and Kosovo, and Sierra Leone, and Liberiaâ€”and the list goes on and on, unfortunatelyâ€”where civilian populations are paying the, you know, 99% of the human cost of these wars.Â Â And the warring parties have no real political legal responsibilities that theyâ€™re willing to own up to, and it does take the threat of armed force or the use of armed force by the international community to get this stuff to stop.Â Â Andâ€”

Interviewer

So you believe in Bosnia, the moment you went thereâ€”in our participation in Bosnia, or NATOâ€™s participation in Bosnia, right?

Sebastian Junger

Yeah, and I believed in it because here were these civilians who were getting shelledÂ every day, mortared every day, in Sarajevo, and my colleague, Tim Hetherington, was just killed by a mortar in Misrata, Libya, and I know what mortars do, you know?Â Â And the city was being mortared and shelled and shot at every day for years, and 15,000 peopleâ€”people just like my friend Timâ€”were killed in Sarajevo.Â Â Civiliansâ€”innocent peopleâ€”children, you know?Â Â And finally the international communityâ€”NATOâ€”conducted â€”I think it was a two-week, three-week bombing campaign?Â Â Not one NATO soldier was killedâ€”not oneâ€”and they stopped a genocide that had killed tens of thousands of innocent people.Â Â And I just thought, â€œWowâ€”thatâ€™s a different way of looking at military force.â€”Â Â And then I saw

itâ€™it shouldâ€™ve happened in Rwanda. A A I saw it in Sierra Leoneâ€™the Brits went in; they lost one guy.Â Â They stopped an awful civil war.Â Â Liberiaâ€™the U.S. warships showed up offshoreâ€™they didnâ€™t even have to fire a gun, and they stopped that war.

Sebastian Junger

And I started to get a moreÂ nuanced sort of understanding of, you know, âœgive peace a chanceâ€™as beautiful a sentiment as that is, in some situations actually allows killing to continue in foreign countries, andâ€™

Interviewer

This was the period of the sort of so-called humanitarian war, rightâ€™the â€™90s, or whatever.Â Â But then you got involvedâ€™well, then history changed, essentially, in the 2000s, largely driven by an event weâ€™re remembering specifically today and yesterday, 9/11, since we happen to be right on the edge of the news that Osama bin Laden has been killed.Â Â Where were you on September 11th, 2001?

Massoudâ€™s Prescient Warning
Sebastian Junger

I was on assignment. I was in the country of Moldova, Eastern Europe, the poorest country in Europe, and weâ€™

Interviewer

Howâ€™d the news come to you in such a remote place?Â

Sebastian Junger

My translator, a lovely young woman named Livia, her ex-husband, who was a bit nutty, called her and said, âœThe United States is under attack.â€ And she thought that heâ€™he was a little crazy, and she thought he was just messing with her, and she called her motherâ€™we were out in the countryside, and she called her mother, who did not speak English, and told her mother to turn on CNN, and just to tell her what she was looking at. And her mother turned on CNN, and just started sobbing, and we knew that it was true.Â

Interviewer

What was your reaction to that? Did you know anything about Muslim extremism at that pointâ€™are youâ€™Â

Sebastian Junger

Well, you know, I did. I mean I had just come back fromâ€™I was in Afghanistan in the fall of 2000, with Massoud.

Interviewer

Well, letâ€™s go back to that, then. Letâ€™s start with that.Â

Sebastian Junger

Okay.

Interviewer

You were with Massoud for an assignment, is that right?Â

Sebastian Junger

Yeah.

Interviewer

I mean Massoud was a charismatic figure, right? I mean he wasâ€”

Sebastian Junger

Well, on my firstâ€”yeah, I should back up even further. My first trip to Afghanistan was â€™96, in August â€™96. And I went in there to write about the training camps in the Tora Bora outside of Jalalabad, because guys from those camps had kidnapped some Westerners in Kashmir and killed them all, in 1994. And I was asked to write about that kidnapping, and I said, â€œThe only way to really write about it is to talk about the camps in Afghanistan; I want to go in to Afghanistan. It was 1996, and I was there; I saw the Taliban delegation arrive in Jalalabad to negotiate the surrender of Jalalabad. Jalalabad and then Kabul fell, you know, a couple weeks later, after I left.Â

Interviewer

So give me some history, then. The Taliban arrives when, then, in Afghanistanâ€”in 1996 isâ€”Â

Sebastian Junger

They started up in â€™94 in Kandahar, really coming out of Quetta in Pakistan, across the border, and they just pushed and pushed. And in â€™96, they suddenly made a big sweep and pushed the governmentâ€”you know, â€œgovernmentâ€”in quotes, butâ€”Â

Interviewer

Right.Â

Sebastian Junger

Including Massoudâ€”up into the northeast corner of the country, in Badakshan, that area.

Interviewer

And what was Massoudâ€™s role at that pointâ€”who was he then?

Sebastian Junger

I think he was minister of defense then. And so they pushed him out of Kabul. We were shot atâ€”I mean, the front line was right outside of Kabul when I was there, and we were shot at by Taliban gunners on the edge of Kabul. When we were in our car, the machine gunner shot at us. And then the city fell right after that, and I was already out. And then I went back, and I was with Massoud in the fall of 2000; I spent two months with him and his forces in the north, in Badakshan. He was fighting around sort of up by the Tajik border. And it was a completely forgotten, unknown war, and there was tens of thousands of displaced people from the fighting, and they were living in terrible conditions. And there was onlyâ€”the Taliban had jets, you know, they had MIGs, and they had artillery, and they

wereâ€”it was bad in there, and people were starving.A

Interviewer

Give a quick character sketch of Massoud. Massoud was â€”cause he was intimateâ€”his death, we think, was intimately connected with 9/11 as well, right, so.Â

Sebastian Junger

Absolutely. So when Iâ€”well, he wasâ€”I mean heâ€™s always attached to the word â€œcharismatic.â€ He was tremendously charismatic. I mean, I think he was more than that, though. He really had a kind of vision for his country, and it was a vision where his countryâ€™s, Afghanistanâ€™s path was not dictated by outside powersâ€”I mean neither Pakistan nor the United States nor Russia nor Iranâ€”he really believed in Afghan autonomy, and he believedâ€”as far as I could tell, I mean, maybe he was just saying things he knew I wanted to hear, but he really seemed to believe in an egalitarian society, where women had access to education and healthcare. And I was just really incredibly moved and impressed by him, as, clearly, everyone around him was.Â

Sebastian Junger

We were coming back from the front line once. Â There was a big fight going on, and we were coming back, and he stopped in at this school that was being built. Â And he said, â€œYou know, the schools are as important as the fighting,â€ like if you donâ€™t build schools, what are you even bothering fighting for? Â And he stopped in at a school that was being built that he had designedâ€”â€”cause he was an engineerâ€”and he inspected the desks, and he sat at one of the desks, and he yelled at the guys who were doing the work. Â And he said, â€œAre you kidding? Â These desks are too small. Â Students canâ€™t do their work at a desk this size. Â The books donâ€™t even fit on the top of the desk.â€ Â And he really chewed them out, and he said, â€œDestroy allâ€”you know, like take these apart and rebuild them, you know, decently.â€ Â

Sebastian Junger

And hereâ€™s a guyâ€”I mean heâ€™s down, heâ€™s micromanaging the size of the desks of the next generation of Afghans while heâ€™s running a front line war against a superior force. Â I mean for me, thatâ€™s an enlightened person.Â

Sebastian Junger

You know, itâ€™s very easy to say, â€œOh, heâ€™s just a warlord,â€ yet really, warlords arenâ€™t interested in the size of desks for children, you know? Â At any rate, he was warning about bin Laden and al-Qaeda when we were there, and then in Aprilâ€”exactly ten years ago, almost exactly ten years ago, in April 2001â€”he took his first trip to Europe. Â And he went to Paris and he spoke to the French Assembly, and he saidâ€”I mean, Iâ€™m paraphrasing, but he said, â€œThereâ€™s a cancer in my country, in Afghanistan. Â Itâ€™s called al-Qaeda. Â Itâ€™s religious extremism. Â And if the West does not deal with it in my country, the price that Afghans are paying for this cancer will soon be paid by the West, by civilians in the West, as well.â€ Â And a few months later, Massoud was assassinated, two days before 9/11â€”assassinated by al-Qaeda operatives posing as journalists, and then 9/11 happened.

Interviewer

And no coincidence, in your mind.

Sebastian Junger

No, no, thereâ€™ absolutelyâ€™ I mean thatâ€™s absolutelyâ€™ they were linked. Â I mean, what they didnâ€™t wantâ€™ they had been trying to assassinate Massoud the whole summer. Â What they did not want was to attack the United States the way they were planning to, and then have a capable commander on the ground, like Massoud, commanding the Northern Alliance to do the ground fighting for the United States. Â What they wanted to do was to force the United States to come in on the ground like the Soviets had, and get mired in a ground war. Â And what happened was they could not get to Massoud until two days before.Â Â

Sebastian Junger

They killed him, 9/11 happened, and the Northern Alliance realized, â€œIf we can hold our front lines long enough, the Americans are gonna come in.â€ Â And the front lines barely held, but holdingâ€™

Interviewer

The lines being Massoudâ€™sâ€™

Sebastian Junger

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

Unit, right, or whatever it was called.

Sebastian Junger

Thatâ€™s right. Â And so when I went back there as soon as I could, and I was with Massoudâ€™s fighters, his commanders that I had known in the, you know, a year earlier, and I was with them when they took Kabul, and you know, with U.S. air power in the air. Â But I mean, itâ€™s interesting to note that hundreds of Northern Alliance fighters died taking Kabul. Â Seven or eight journalists were killed taking Kabul. Â And not one American soldier died. Â I mean it was a ground war fought by Afghans. Â

Sebastian Junger

Unfortunately, tragically, the deaths of American soldiers was going to come later, but in taking Kabul and toppling the Taliban, the casualties really were entirely Afghan. Â And people forget that, you knowâ€™ the U.S. forces were really not on the ground at that point.

Preconditions for Tragedy

Interviewer

You talked earlier about your being moved by the humanitarian wars of the â€™90s.Â How did you feel about this war and this growing sense of a global War on Terror, as it was described by the president?

Sebastian Junger

Well, you know, terrorâ€™ I mean one of the ironies of terror in the last ten years is that itâ€™s killed many more Muslims than Westerners.Â Â All of the suicide bombings, the car bombingsâ€™ I mean the death toll among civilians from these terrorist acts is just

astronomical; something like 80 percent of the casualties in Afghanistan now are from Taliban attacks.Â Â Thatâ€™s one of the ironies of it.Â Â Another irony, I think, is that there was a real sense in Afghanistanâ€™it was such a desperately poor country, totally destroyedâ€™that 9/11â€™in our tragedy in the United States wasâ€™in that was actually an opportunity for Afghanistan to be helped by the world community out of its morass of violence and chaos that was triggered by the Soviet invasion.Â Â And then kept going, you know, kept going, and wasâ€™

Interviewer

Because suddenly there were klieg lights on Afghanistan.

Sebastian Junger

Thatâ€™s right.Â Â And I think there was an understandingâ€™maybe itâ€™s a simplistic oneâ€™but that al-Qaeda had a refuge there because it was a failed state;Â it was a rogue nationâ€™there was no rule of law, there was no international extradition treaties, there was no legal accountability between the Taliban government and other countries in the world.Â Â And so you could set up shop; sort of pay for your hospitality as bin Laden, and youâ€™re really beyond the reach of anything except a SEAL team, or a predator drone.

Sebastian Junger

And so it was a great place for al-Qaeda, and it wasnâ€™t just a cave in the mountains.Â Â They had international airfields; they had banking; they had global telecommunicationsâ€™they had everything that a country has except no legal responsibility to the world community.Â Â Perfect; perfect for an organization like al-Qaeda.Â Â And I think the thinking after 9/11 was failed states are dangerous because they allow for people like bin Laden to seek refuge there, and theyâ€™re beyond the reach of the international community.Â Â And we have to go inâ€™I think the thinking of the U.S. government, I think correctly, wasÂ we have to go in, we have to kill or capture bin Laden, and we have to reassemble Afghanistan so that it doesnâ€™t becomeâ€™we donâ€™t just go through the cycle 20 years from now all over again.

Sebastian Junger

I wish theyâ€™d thought of that in 1990 after the Soviets pulled out.Â Â We put tens, hundreds of millions of dollarsâ€™ worth of weapons in that country to fight the Soviets, and as soon as the Soviet Army pulled out, we pulled out.Â Â No more money for schools, for governance, for irrigationâ€™I mean, nothing.Â Â As soon as we won the war, we left, and that, to meâ€™in that sense, weâ€™re as responsible for the conditionsâ€™the preconditions that gave us 9/11 as the Afghans are; as bin Laden is.Â Â Weâ€™re absolutely part of the sort of recipe that produced that tragedy.

Origins of Restrepo

Interviewer

You spent some time recentlyâ€™which created the movie Restrepoâ€™in Afghanistan, embedded through successive months. Can you describe how that whole assignment began, and what you did to create it?Â

Sebastian Junger

In 2005, I went to Afghanistan for the first time to be embedded with U.S. forces. I was completely against the war in Iraq. When the war in Iraq started, what I saw, what I worried

about, was that Afghanistan would be forgotten. And so what had started as an easy warâ€”huge support among the Afghans, a complete discrediting and smashing of the Taliban regimeâ€”what was victory on a platter in â€”01, â€”02, â€”03, gradually soured, and by 2005, I realized that the United States just did not have the bandwidth to deal with a flawed war in Iraq and sustain the effort in Afghanistan. And by â€”05, I thought, â€œWeâ€™re going to be there for a decade, and Iâ€™ve gotta knowâ€”Iâ€™ve always been with the Afghans. Iâ€™ve got to knowâ€”now I want to know what itâ€™s like to be an American soldier in Afghanistan.â€ And so for the first time I did something I never thought Iâ€™d do as a journalistâ€”is that I embedded with U.S. forces in Zabul province. I was with the 2nd of the 503rd; I was with the same unit that I was with later, and under a wonderful guy, Captain McGarry.

Sebastian Junger

And I was just absolutely blown away by the professionalism and the competence and theâ€”well, the charisma, actually, of a lot of the soldiers that I was with, and dedication. They were incredible. You know, they were carrying 150 poundsâ€”one night they carried 150â€”they each had loads of 150 pounds. They carried those loads over 10,000 foot mountain paths all night long, in 10 degree temperatures, and they were working so hardâ€”they were in T-shirts and sweatingâ€”10 degrees, all night long.

Sebastian Junger

And they were doing this for Afghanistan, in some ways. I just couldnâ€™t believe it. I just fell in love with those guys, and I thought, â€œOkay, that was two weeks. I want to follow one platoon, the same platoon, or the same company, at any rate. I want to follow them for an entire deployment.â€ And Iâ€™m in my 40s, Iâ€™m marriedâ€”I canâ€™t literally spend 15 months, you know, under deployment, even if they wouldâ€™ve let me. But I knew that I could go back a lot, and probably cover enough of the deployment to get a sense of what their experience was.

Sebastian Junger

And it was my great fortune to hook up with Tim Hetherington. On my second trip I teamed up with Tim Hetherington. And between the two of usâ€”we did a total of ten one-month tripsâ€”between the two of usâ€”sometimes together, sometimes apart. And we ran video cameras the entire time. I wanted to write a book; I wanted to make a documentary. The vehicle for this wasâ€”were assignments for Vanity Fair to turn in two articles. I also had a separate deal with ABC to provide footage, but Vanity Fair paid all the travel, and they paid all the expenses, so we really were on assignment for Vanity Fair to provide two articles about this deployment. And that was sort of the basis for the book.

Interviewer

Tell me who Tim Hetherington was.Â

Sebastian Junger

Tim Hetherington is a Englishâ€”was an English journalist. Â Heâ€™

Interviewer

Photojournalist, is that right?

Sebastian Junger

Tim was aâ€”

Interviewer

A cameraman.Â

Sebastian Junger

Yeah, he was a photojournalist; he specialized in still images. Â Heâ€™d done some video work. Â His first war, I think, was the Liberian Civil War in 2003. Â He was one of two white guys with the rebel forces, the LURD, as they moved from the Ghanaian border to Monrovia on foot. Â Tim went with them on foot, and he walked halfway across Liberia with them and attacked Monrovia, and theyâ€”I mean just an extraordinarily dangerous situation. Â And I was in Monrovia on the other side, with the government forcesâ€”donâ€™t picture soldiers. Â Picture teenage guys in flip-flops, on drugs with AKsâ€”like thatâ€™s what it was on both sides, and I was on the government, and probably the most terrifying time in my life. Â

Sebastian Junger

And I didnâ€™t know Tim yet, but he justâ€”he went on to cover some of the most important humanitarian stories of theâ€”since 2003 until now. Â And I hooked up with him on my second trip to Afghanistanâ€”I knew he was an amazing photographer and had shot a lot of combat video. Â Tall, lean, fit guyâ€”he was exactly what I was looking for for a colleague out there in Korangal.

Interviewer

Was there something special not only to the daring nature of the assignments, but also to the work itself? Â Did you detect something in his work that you felt was sympathetic with your same kind of vision?

Sebastian Junger

You know, it was early on in the project, and I wasnâ€™t even sure what my vision was. Â I knew that I didnâ€™t want to do a political evaluation of the war, or moral evaluation, or a strategic evaluation. Â I wanted to show what it was like to be a soldier in combat. Â And I started to understand that soldiers in combat donâ€™t evaluate those sort of like large-scale concerns; like they want to do their job, withoutâ€”they want to do their job honorably. Â They want to go home without knowing that they killed civiliansâ€”thatâ€™s a terrible torment to many of those guys. Â And they want to go home, periodâ€”alive, and they want all their friends to make it home, and thatâ€™s what theyâ€™re focused on. Â

Sebastian Junger

And they join the Army because theyâ€™re patriots, or whateverâ€”whatever their reasons might be. Â But once they get out there, their perspective is like very, very narrow, and theyâ€™re like a quarterback in the middle of a football game. Â They are not thinking about the people in the stands; theyâ€™re not thinking about their school. Â Theyâ€™re thinking about whatâ€™s going on in front of them right now, and I wanted to capture that on film and in my book. Â And Timâ€”once Tim got thatâ€”Iâ€™d already kind of been thinking like that, but journalists are political creatures, and I wasnâ€™t sure, like, â€œoh, he's going toâ€”you know, the warâ€™s controversial, likeâ€”â€”and he completely got it; he was likeâ€”completely got it. Â

Sebastian Junger

And we had this idea that in our movie, Restrepo, we would not show anything that wasn't in the valley, so we couldn't go home and interview the families, because they're not in the Korangal. We were trying to capture the soldiers' experience. We couldn't talk to some general in Bagram about, "So what is the strategy in the Korangal Valley in the Kunar province?" They couldn't ask the generals questions. "Sir, why are we in the Korangal Valley?" They couldn't ask that question, so we couldn't. And even having a voice-over narration we couldn't do it. There's no narrator in the Korangal. There's no voice booming down and telling people what's going on.

Interviewer

So there are all these ways—it sounds like what you were trying to do was increasingly peel away everything, so that you're there as one of them. You're there—the eye of the camera never departs from it, and essentially the brain never departs from it, either.

Sebastian Junger

That's right. As soon as you hear a narration—you know, Morgan Freeman and his beautiful, deep voice telling you what's going on, I hope you [inaudible]—you know that you're not in danger, just unconsciously.

Interviewer

Yes, yes.

Sebastian Junger

As soon as you're in Bagram interviewing a general, you know that you're learning about something rather than experiencing the thing itself. And on an unconscious level, we wanted to give you the illusion of experience.

Sebastian Junger

The departure from that—because we did need some kind of commentary about things—was that we did studio interviews with some of the key soldiers three months later, at their base in Italy. It's now—they're safely back at their base; they're

Interviewer

But never anyone who was not there, still.

Sebastian Junger

No, it was all the same soldiers that you know from the movie—the same faces—except now they're talking about what had happened, from the sort of safety of three months later. And that delay allowed them much more emotional expression than they could've afforded at OP Restrepo, when we could've been attacked any time. They shut down all their emotions up there, and so what we really got in Italy was the full sort of like unfolding of these feelings in these young men.

Invented Responsibility, Irrational Guilt

Interviewer

Well, the truth of the matter is, of course, that soldiering doesn't stop once you leave a

battle site, right? A I mean it continuesâ€”the mind has to process that information, and you have toâ€”as most often happens now, thereâ€™s future deployments that are going to be informed by the previous deployments in terms of how you treat them.Â Soâ€”

Sebastian Junger

Thatâ€™s right.Â

Interviewer

Did you see that happen?

Sebastian Junger

Yes. Â I mean, I think so. Â Theâ€”

Interviewer

Well, I guess Iâ€™m saying that you saw reactive elements in terms of PTSD, for instance. Â Can you talk about that a little bit?

Sebastian Junger

Yeah. Â We saw young men in agony, basically, which is notâ€”I mean ironically, that was in Italy. Â We did not see agony at Restrepo. Â Combatâ€™s a pretty engaging, compelling thing, and those guys were into it, you know? Â And I think the adrenaline, the sense of brotherhood, and the intoxication of being necessary in a group and having a clear purposeâ€”I think that overrode some of the sorrow and tragedy that wasâ€”thatâ€™s unavoidable in war. Â And then they got home, and suddenly they donâ€™t have any sense of purpose.

Sebastian Junger

Guys who have never been in combat, never been shot at, are yelling at them to, like fix their shoelaces. Â The rules of the world have been turned upside-down. Â They call the base â€œcowardsâ€™ land.â€ Â They said, â€œThis is where cowards run the show.â€ Â I mean this place, cowards run the show. Â Back there in Afghanistan, courageous guys run the show. Â And the more courage and responsibility you have, the more youâ€™re respected, and itâ€™s the reverse here, and it drove them crazy. Â

Sebastian Junger

And so theyâ€™re in the middle of dealing with this sort of like cultural shift from front line to rear base, and itâ€™s starting to catch up with them. Â Theyâ€™ve gotten drunk, theyâ€™ve gotten laid, theyâ€™ve done whatever theyâ€™re going to do after they came off of 15 months on a hilltop without any women, without anything. Â And now itâ€™s all starting to catch up with them, and every single guy that came into this studio was either openly crying or struggling, barely able to keep it back. Â

Sebastian Junger

And what you donâ€™t seeâ€”because the camera is not on me, thereâ€™s no camera on me, or on Timâ€”what you donâ€™t see is that in all of the situations where theyâ€™re struggling to keep their composure, thatâ€™s exactly what Tim and I are doing. Â I mean they were really the most painful, gut-wrenching experiences Iâ€™ve ever had as a journalist, was in a studio in Italy, andâ€”

Interviewer

More painful than being in the Korangal Valley, then.Â

Sebastian Junger

Oh, God, absolutelyâ€”â€”cause thereâ€”the Korangal was exciting. Â It was traumatic, at times, but it was excitingâ€”and no honest journalist or soldier will deny the excitement of war, you know? Â Itâ€”such an unpleasant truth, but itâ€”the truth. Â And thatâ€”not all it is, but it is that, and in that studio in Italy, all there was, was loss. Â It was the guys who didnâ€”come home. Â It wasâ€”at the end of the day, thatâ€”what youâ€”re left with. Â Youâ€”re notâ€”the excitementâ€”

Interviewer

What drives the emotion, though? Â Is it guilt? Â Is it fear? Â Is it actually confronting some of the things that you did under pressureâ€”or did not do under pressure?

Sebastian Junger

I think for the guysâ€”I think I was so upset because my heart was breaking for them; and I think they were so upset because all of themâ€”I think all of them felt irrationally, somehow, that the guys who died out there shouldnâ€”t have died, and that somehow, if they had done something different, those guys wouldnâ€”t have died. Â

Sebastian Junger

Soldiers invent responsibilityâ€”thatâ€”how they deal with tragedy, is they invent a responsibility, and they hate themselves for failing. Â So Rougle gets killed, and Cortez is dreaming every night that heâ€”s running up the hill, trying to save his friendâ€”s lifeâ€”to get there in time to save him from the Taliban, who overran his position. Â Every night he has a dream that heâ€”s running up that hill, and heâ€”s trying to get there in time to save his lifeâ€”his friendâ€”s life, I meanâ€”and fails; every single night. Â That was the nightmare that woke up Cortez every night for months, and I always had trouble understanding that. Â Like okay, listen, itâ€”s warâ€”like youâ€”re not god; youâ€”re not omnipotent. Â Youâ€”re at the bottom of the hill, Rougleâ€”s at the top of the hill, he got overrunâ€”itâ€”s not your problem. Â I mean itâ€”s your problem, but itâ€”s not your fault.

Sebastian Junger

And then Tim got killed in Libyaâ€”I wasnâ€”t even over there. Â I was home, you know? Â I was supposed to have gone, and I couldnâ€”t. Â For family reasons I had to pull the plug on the trip, and Tim essentially stayed on, and he got killed, and I watch myself do the same thing. Â And I was trying to find a way that I had caused his death, and I was in the States. Â And I suddenly understood the power of that impulse to blame yourself and to find some responsibility.

Interviewer

Itâ€”s not even been two weeks yet, has it? Â Three weeks, maybe?

Sebastian Junger

No.

Interviewer

You must stillâ€”

Sebastian Junger

Two weeks tomorrow.

Interviewer

Two weeks tomorrow.

Sebastian Junger

Sebastian Junger

Yeah.

Interviewer

You must still be feelingâ€”you say it as if itâ€™s in the past tense, but you must be feeling this right now, Iâ€™m thinking. Â How did youâ€”

Sebastian Junger

Yeah.

Interviewer

Or if not, then how did you get yourself out of that soldierly sense of responsibility?
[0:31:00]

Sebastian Junger

Iâ€™m older than the soldiers, and I think the older you get, the better you get at processing the experiences of life. Â So when youâ€™re 18 and a girl breaks up with you, itâ€™s like the end of the world. Â You have no idea how to process it, right? Â By the time youâ€™re 40, you can deal with that. Â You know, itâ€™s miserable, but you deal with it, you know? Â All of these thingsâ€”you do get better and better at processing it, and I think whatâ€™s very tough for soldiers is they are processing the very heaviest things you can have happen in life when theyâ€™re 19, when theyâ€™re 20. Â They donâ€™t have the practice yet; you know what I mean? Â Like thereâ€™sâ€”

Interviewer

Yeah, but do you not see that among officers, then, who were on their, you know, eighth or ninth deployment, or something? Â I mean who are maybe 30, 32, 34?

Sebastian Junger

I think the officers get better at it, and I donâ€™tâ€”I think the confusion and the sort of moral bewilderment of a 19-year-old whoâ€™s lost his best friend, I think itâ€™s hard to surpass that. Â I think thatâ€™s the worst situation there is; theyâ€™re the most traumatized, and the least equipped to deal with it. Â

Sebastian Junger

And so now Iâ€™m in my 40s, and in two weeks Iâ€™ve dealt with a lot of the feelings that

Tim's death triggered; not all of it, but you know, I found out a few days into it that he was hit by a mortar. I thought maybe he died instantly. It turns out he bled out and he bled out calling for help.

Sebastian Junger

And what killed me was at Restrepo, we were worried about exactly that situation, and we asked the medic, Doc Kelso, at the time, to train us. Tim and I asked him to train us in how to in battlefield medicine, so if one of us were hit you know, if Tim were hit or I were hit, that the other could help. And so we each carried tourniquets, IV bags and a line. And so I just kept thinking: Tim bled out; I knew how to save him, and I'm home. I'm here, and I should've been there, and I could've saved his life. And it's completely irrational, but I watch myself do it. I'm 49 years old, and it gave me a real insight into what a 20-year-old goes through the torture he goes through as a soldier, trying to imagine his responsibility.

œAn Unimaginable World
Interviewer

You started this conversation by saying that you were awakened to the idea that war is sometimes necessary and there's a humanitarian purpose to war. But now you're talking, also, about the incredible price that the individual pays, right, to actually fight in wars, and I'm wondering whether you see this as an inevitable sort of perversion of the mind that comes with these acts, or whether this is a necessary and noble gesture still that serves a purpose.

Sebastian Junger

I think a world where the press does not cover human tragedy is unimaginable, and unimaginably bad. It was a miserable experience for me, personally, that a close friend was one of the ones who got caught in the sort of lottery, in the numbers game that war reporting is. Most war reporters do not get killed. Every year, a couple of them do, and Tim lost the lottery. And it was very, very painful; tremendously painful for me. But I can't imagine a world where those people are not doing that work, because if that were to happen, there would be no accountability, there'd be no scrutiny. The worst war crimes and atrocities would be going on and on and on, and no one would need to do anything about it, and I just it's miserable to say it, but I

Sebastian Junger

Tim died doing something that, in a general sense, needed to be done. He didn't need to be covering Misrata on that day, but all the Misratas of the world the Rwandas, the Bosnias; god forbid you pull all witnesses out all the humanitarian workers, all the press. You pull them all out, and that stuff just happens in a black hole. It's an unimaginable world.

Interviewer

And you feel the same way, I imagine, about the soldiers who are there to prevent those things from happening.

Sebastian Junger

In Afghanistan for me, Iraq was a very controversial war that I thought was it the wrong war at the wrong moment, and I don't want to link it with Afghanistan, because

the strategic and moral rationale for the Afghan war was completely different. But in terms of Afghanistan, which is the war that I know best, something like a million Afghans, a million and a half Afghans were killed when the Soviets went in in the '80s, in the decade of Soviet intrusion into Afghanistan; a million to a million and a half civilians. They pulled out. In the decade of the '90s, something like 400,000 Afghans were killed—civilians.

Sebastian Junger

That era ended with 9/11, and in the decade that NATO and the U.S. have been in Afghanistan, the uppermost estimates of civilian casualties are 30,000. In other words, this is the period of the lowest civilian casualties in 30 years in that country. It's the highest rate of economic growth in that country in decades. Afghanistan has the highest economic growth of any country in that whole entire region. That is because there are Western soldiers willing to follow orders and die, if necessary, fighting extremism in Afghanistan, and if we pulled out—I mean if we pulled out, Afghanistan's going to suffer.

Sebastian Junger

And as a journalist, my primary concern, my core sort of ethos, is what's going to produce the least amount of civilian suffering? Which decisions will protect civilian—human dignity and civilian lives the most? And if pulling out would do that, I would say pull out in a heartbeat, but it won't, it'll be the reverse, and so I'm in this weird sort of like odd position of advocating war, advocating use of military, in order to preserve civilian life. But I think that's the reality, and that's why it's so confusing. It's such a confusing calculation for liberals and conservatives in this country to wrap their mind around—you pull the Army out and civilian casualties go up? In a sort of Vietnam-era analysis that makes absolutely no sense, but that is the post-fall-of-the-Berlin-Wall reality.Â

Interviewer

Well, any country that's been under the authoritarian thumb, when the thumb is lifted, it creates a lot of chaos, right?Â

Sebastian Junger

Yeah.Â

Interviewer

And have—there's nothing there to sort of control that chaos, and it results in a lot of deaths, and Yugoslavia is an example of that.Â

Sebastian Junger

Yeah, that's right.

Afghanistan's Sights and Sounds

Sebastian Junger

Precisely. You know, a lot of cadets will be watching this, so tell—and many of them may end up going to Afghanistan. What does it look like? What are the people like? How much do they know about the world and what's going on?Â

Sebastian Junger

I really kind of fell in love with Afghanistan in the '90s. It's physically it's one of the most beautiful, beautiful, beautiful countries. It reminds me of America. You know, it reminds me of the Rockies in Nevada, and the most spectacular part of Montana; like that's what Afghanistan looks like. It's incredible.

Sebastian Junger

The light, the mountains, the people are just—the people have this incredible dignity, you know? I mean they're very poor; some of them are very poor, but they are tough, tough, proud people. And you can see it in their faces. And they are incredibly generous—I mean, not all of them. There are criminals over there, like anywhere, and there are people who'll cut your throat in a second for your wallet, you know, like obviously. But when I was over there, and when I was in the north in Badakshan with Massoud, I mean the hospitality, the gratefulness, just that we were there covering their tragedy—we, as Westerners—it was just—it was so moving. We got shelled once by the Taliban; we were on a hilltop position that had just been taken from the Taliban, and they were counter-attacking, and they started their counter-attack with a barrage of katyusha rockets, and we were just getting hammered on this hilltop.

Sebastian Junger

And this 18-year-old Afghan fighter, this boy—we were on the ground, and he lay down on top of me because basically like he was charged with my safety, and if I got killed under his watch, his life was not worth living. And so he just laid—and I was like I wasn't crazy about the situation, because as a man, I feel like, hey, we all take our own risks. I don't want to be protected by another man, you know? But that's a sort of Western idea, and in Afghan society it's like, 'œl was told to protect you, so I'm going to protect you. And it was such a moving moment, you know? And we lost our horse—our horse got killed—but we otherwise got out of it okay—and a few psychic scars—but I just—they're just an incredible, incredible place. And when you see it, Afghanistan, through the bullet-proof windows of a Humvee, you really—what you see is you see threat; you see an alien environment; you see potential Taliban on every street corner. But to go there as a civilian and really be with the Afghan people, that was just a profound, profound experience for me.

Interviewer

In doing that, do you get to know any Taliban? Have you met any Taliban? I mean what's the Taliban look like, what's it sound like?

Sebastian Junger

They look like everybody else. We met some Taliban prisoners that Massoud had.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Sebastian Junger

A lot of them were Pakistani. You know, they just—they had this idea. We asked them. We were free to ask them anything—this was in 2000.

Interviewer

Yeahâ€”I understand, I understand.A

Sebastian Junger

And we were free to ask them anything, and they were just like, â€œMassoud is the devil,â€ you know, â€œheâ€™s Satan, and heâ€™s the enemy of Allah, and we are here to create a Muslim republic in Afghanistan.â€ And it was just like they werenâ€™t even speaking their own opinions; they were repeating things theyâ€™d heard. And it was terrible. But they wereâ€”in some ways itâ€™s easy to brainwash poor people, and I think thatâ€™s what Pakistan did. They brainwashed a whole segment.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s what Pakistan did.

Sebastian Junger

Thatâ€™s what Pakistan did. They brainwashed an entire segment of the population of Afghanistan; of the Pashtun part of Afghanistanâ€”they brainwashed them as a way to control that country.

Interviewer

Where were you when you heard the news two days ago of the death of Osama bin Laden?

Sebastian Junger

I was in Massachusetts, and I donâ€™t have a television up there, and I donâ€™t evenâ€™m on dial-up, so itâ€™s like incredibly slow information. And I got a phone call from Cathy, and she saidâ€”Iâ€™ve had a lot ofâ€”the phone call that Tim was hurt, and turned out deadâ€”also came from Cathy. So Iâ€™m now a little bit like when Cathy calls, like, â€œOh, what now?â€ And she said, you know, â€œBin Ladenâ€™s dead.â€ And I just thought, â€œWowâ€”ten years. Incredible.â€ And no one thoughtâ€”no one thought it would take this long. And then I thought, â€œItâ€™s a great symbolic victory and catharsis,â€ and I hope that that, along with the Arab Spring, really brings about real change in the Arab world, because as bad as 9/11 was, the bloody cost of extremism, of religious extremism, has primarily been borne by other Muslims.

Interviewer

And I really hope that our world is coming out of that era with these two twinâ€”you know, the death of bin Laden and whatâ€™s going on in those countries now, I hope weâ€™re coming out of that era.Â

Interviewer

Goodâ€”letâ€™s stop here.