

DAVE: Hi, everybody, this is Dave Nemo along with Michael Burns and Tim Ridley. You know, it's really great to be with you again here in Trucker Territory. And we certainly thank the folks at Progressive Commercial Insurance for making our visits possible. Now today, we're going to add another voice to the mix and welcome this year's Progressive Commercial and St. Christopher Fund's Keys to Progress Winner. We'll talk about the worldwide efforts to help active servicemen and women, as well as veterans, make that transition into what we call around here the WWT, the wonderful world of trucking. So let's welcome James Rogers. James, thanks so much for joining us here in Trucker Territory.

JAMES: No problem. I'm enjoying it. I appreciate it.

DAVE: Fantastic. Well, you are, I'll say, kind of getting around out there and everything. You were part of the Shell Rotella Superrigs event in June and won the What's Inside Matters award. Tell us a little bit about that experience and what you came away from that with.

JAMES: Oh, that experience was absolutely amazing. I-- my whole intention to be at the show was to be there to support, you know, the great organization St. Christopher's Relief Fund. But they, you know, had requested that I enter my truck and stuff. So I did that and, you know, just like anybody, you know, I'm there with all these beautiful trucks, these Peterbilt 389s, Kenilworth W900s, and I'm the only Freightliner, you know, Cascadia that's there. And when the awards were being announced, they announced my name, and I honestly, I was-- I was in shock. I think my eyeballs were about as big around as saucers. It was-- it was a great honor. I was humbled by it once again, and it just kind of-- it kind of makes a statement.

DAVE: You know, making a statement with a great truck is no-- Tim Ridley is no stranger to that, are you, Tim?

TIM: No, that's for sure, not a stranger at all, and I can imagine-- you know, James, when you mentioned about your eyeballs being as big around as saucers, I can imagine that. I would be, too, but I know it was a great and pleasant surprise.

JAMES: Oh, it was. It was a very big surprise. I was happy that I, you know, had friends there with me that were able to witness it, and at first, I really didn't understand it, you know? I didn't understand the award, and, you know, as I kind of look back with what their slogan is and what the actual award is, that's why I say-- you know, once again, it humbled me. You know, it's not about the truck. It's not about the trailer. It's not-- it's about the drivers that are inside of

it. You know, each individual driver's got a story. Each individual driver's got a different, you know, path to where they are.

DAVE: You know, going to kind of pull into the 30,000-foot view here to kind of get a little bit of an overall picture, if you will, of what is going on, again, worldwide to make it possible for a soldier, sailors, Marines, airmen coming out of the military going into the trucking industry. When I got into trucking radio back in, well, 1972, I was joined by just truckloads and busloads and trainloads, planeloads of returning soldiers from Vietnam. And trucking was just-- the-- it was almost like a revolving door. Right off the bus from the-- the military post right into a truck at a terminal, and it was the Vietnam veterans who were just coming into trucking in droves at that time. One of the things there is that there were droves of people coming out of the military at that time. The military is a lot smaller. It's a much smaller percentage of our population now, and we are-- I think the-- the idea of, you know, helping the folks coming into really secure, great futures not just in trucking, but since that's where we are here in Trucker Territory, that's where we're going to zero in on. But there are some great programs such as the Hiring Our Heroes program-- that's the US Chamber of Commerce-- Fastport has put together-- that works with those folks. Everybody kind of works together on this, but they have job fairs, and I mentioned around the world, there are job fairs around the US but also at military posts and bases around the world. There are over 1,000 job fairs and then, speaking of around the world, on the worldwide web, there are online career tools and so far-- and this is a roundabout figure, it's going to change, obviously, but over 31,000 veterans and their spouses have been hired at job fairs. Over 2,000 companies are on board, and the idea is to hire over 700,000 veterans and their spouses. There are some great programs. You know, we talk about mentoring, Tim, quite a bit. You talk about mentoring on your program quite a bit, and the Trucking Track Mentoring program is a great tool for folks to use to transition, and the need is great. I mean, let's face it, they say that there are over 300,000 positions open in trucking now, not just drivers but along throughout the industry. And about 30% of the folks that are participating-- or 30% of the companies that are participating-- there-- there are companies with 30% veterans thanks to this program. Kind of stumbled over those numbers, but those are big numbers, Michael Burns, and that is really an incredible start.

MICHAEL: It is--

DAVE: [overlapping] But there is another side to this, too. There is the side that the businesses can take advantage of. The WOTC is something that is very promising.

MICHAEL: It is, and for those people who are in business who are not taking advantage of the returning veterans looking for a career in trucking, they're really missing out. First of all and most importantly, you're missing out on a great person with great experience who's been trained, who knows what loyalty and-- and hard work ethic is, but on top of that in business, you know, there are two things that-- that businesses operate with and-- and seek to achieve. One of them is tax deductions, and they're nice. I mean, they're nice. They-- they honestly-- you know basically, you get to deduct that from your gross and-- before you calculate your net, and that's what you're going to pay taxes on. However, there is a wonderful thing out there called tax credits, and they are-- they are, dollar for dollar, a payment toward your taxes due, and they're very hard to get. They-- [laughs] they come very dearly. There are a lot of tax credits-- because of the work opportunity tax credit, WOTC, which was part of the Path Act that was filed and passed in 2015-- and I am not a CPA. I am certainly not a tax attorney, but I will tell you this: as a business owner, if I were to pass this kind of an opportunity up, I would-- I would be foolish because there are incentives of up to about \$5,600 for hiring unemployed veterans. The Wounded Warrior tax credit doubles that existing tax credit for long-term unemployed veterans with service-connected disabilities up to about \$9,600. And then there are additional tax credits available for short-term employment for those people who have been on unemployment benefits for an extended period of time after returning from the service to hire them, adds even more, and of course, this is something that people need to talk over with their own tax attorneys and their own CPAs and so forth, but the tax credits are there to help transition these very, very valuable workers, which, I think you would be proud to pay the government for the opportunity to hire them after the government trained them and all the money that was put in there, and honestly, from a business standpoint, if you have an opportunity to put some of these veterans to work, you will be very, very richly rewarded for it.

DAVE: James, wanna bring you back into the conversation here. Tell us a little bit-- and I say a little bit, but you can-- I hope you'll expand out on this thing-- on this because we'd really love to hear your story, and let's start with your military service, what branch were you in? What was your specialty, MOS, and then what got you to think about trucking? And how did that kind of happen, how did the transition occur? And kind of catch us up on what you're doing now. In other words, your life story. [laughs]

JAMES: [laughs] I don't know if we got that much time. But I was-- I served in the United States Army. I came in in October of 2003. Served for 11 years, 2 days, 19 hours and, you know, I forget how many minutes at this point, but I was injured. I was injured while serving in Afghanistan on my last deployment. My military specialty was one that, really, nobody likes to ever hear about. It was

what they call 74 delta. That was my MOS specialty which was titled chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense. Basically, I-- my specialty was feeling with all the nasty stuff that can kill you and you not even see it. But did I ever do that specialty? No, just because, you know, our country didn't have a real big need for the-- you know, the-- the conflict that we were involved in, but I did have a special skill that I did come in with, which was weapons. I knew how to shoot every weapon system there was in the military and was very good and very efficient at it. You know, I left almost 10 years. After my last deployment in Afghanistan, I did-- you know, I was injured. I was injured in a rocket attack. It subsequently required me to retire a couple years later just because of the injury. I was no longer able to perform the duties physically, and also mentally, it needed to be done. In my transition out, it took a while. It was very, very hard, very, very hard. You know, I didn't want to admit it to myself, but mentally, I was struggling and was in a very bad position. And then one day, just, you know, looking in the mirror getting ready to take one of 24 medications I was taking at the time, I-- I decided something needed to change. Something needed to change my life. So that's when I decided to start, you know, looking back into trucking, and when I did so, you know, it's probably been one of the better things in my life. I was able to get back into a truck, and it-- it just opened my eyes back up to-- to the realization of why-- why I served my country. You know, soldiers serve-- military members, whether-- doesn't matter what branch, we serve, we volunteer. It's a different breed of people to allow, you know, what I would say everyday, normal civilians just to go about-- go about our lives and not know what's going on behind the scenes worldwide or what may be a threat to us. You know, it's-- it's been life-changing for me. In about December of this past year, I got a call from Shannon Courier at St. Christopher's Fund after going through a process of being nominated by-- you know, with Progressive and actually from Brad Bentley [?] at Passport for a truck giveaway. And I thought the contest was over, and Shannon had called me about the first week of December and told me I had won, and it-- it just quieted me. It silenced me. And-- and she brought me to tears when she told me that Progressive was also gonna set up-- help me set up my own authority. So, you know, like Tim was mentioning, talking about Vietnam, you know, he knows a little bit about the military and stuff, that as NCO, you're a backbone and-- you know, you're the-- you're the backbone in the mili-- the Army. You know, you-- you put in the work. So Progressive immediately changed my life to a small-business owner, which made me the backbone of the American economy.

DAVE: Speaking of NCOs, you have your-- your own four-legged NCO along with you.

JAMES: I do, I do. I have Sergeant with me. He is my service dog. He's an American Staffordshire Terrier that-- he pretty much goes everywhere I go, and if he

doesn't go with me, he gets upset and lets me know about it. But he-- he's-- you know, he's been my best friend. He's always there beside me. He rides in the seat or he sits right there on the floor, and we go down the road and do our thing together.

DAVE: Well, my sarge used to bark orders. I guess yours does the same thing.

JAMES: [laughs] Oh, he definitely does. If he doesn't go somewhere with me, I-- I usually come back, and he's got that look of, "Man, we need to talk."

DAVE: [laughs] You know, Tim, Progressive's Key to Progress program goes back about five years, but James is the first vet who was actually awarded an actual class-A tractor. They've been doing a lot of other things. So you-- even though the program wasn't-- you weren't the first in the program, you're the first in this phase of the program, so that's got to be-- got to be very cool, and again, it really sets you apart in so many-- in so many ways, not just the truck, but, I mean, you, as part of the whole-- the whole process. Tim, you have a lot more military experience than I do, and I thought maybe we might, again, kind of switch gears just a little bit here and talk about some of the-- the benefits to the industry that Michael touched on in terms of companies hiring military and some of the things that basically make the military and trucking kind of work hand-in-hand. It certainly was apparent to me back in the early '70s that trucking, the military, it was sort of like a marriage ready to happen.

TIM: Yeah, you're absolutely right, Dave, and as-- as James mentioned earlier, you know, through the St. Christopher Fund and also with Progressive, we had-- we had-- I was part of the selection committee on this, and it was tough, but the thing about it with each one-- each one of the the-- the candidates had in common was this type of training and discipline, as you just heard the story of-- of James, you know, that discipline, and he-- he-- although he didn't actually use his MOS, but he was actually skillfully trained on every type of weapon system, and he was of great value to our military, to the U.S. Army and also to the defense. So that being said, Dave, as far as companies hiring veterans, the company will have a driver who is highly disciplined. They don't have to be micromanaged. You -- all you need to do is just let the-- let that veteran, that driver know what to do in terms of, you know, where to pick up at, the time to pick up, where it's going to, and the time to deliver. Everything else is taken care of. You don't even have to worry about that. The veteran driver, the driver who is a prior veteran, Dave, is also an asset to the company because they are already accustomed to being away from home. They know how to adjust and adapt and to-- to, you know, not have to be babysat or have to be-- be stroked to say, "Look, you know--" to have to be-- to have the head rubbed to say, "You're going to have to stay out here for a week," or, "You're going to have to

stay out here for two weeks." They're already accustomed to long deployments. James just mentioned on his last deployment-- you know, you-- a lot of the veterans-- combat veterans have had many deployment-- multiple deployments. So being away from home is generally not a problem. Also, they know the importance of taking care of equipment entrusted to him or her. They-- they're-- they're accustomed to taking care of millions of dollars of equipment belonging to our US government. So taking care of the equipment, taking care of the load is not an issue. He or she has accountability, Dave. They know how to have accountability of something. You know, if the-- something goes wrong under their watch, they-- they-- they are accountable for it. They know they are accountable for it. Also, they know the importance of representing an organization in a positive manner. So that company generally will not have to worry about that veteran, that driver who was a veteran-- or who is a veteran, rather-- going out and misrepresenting the company because they carry themselves with pride, and that's something that every company needs in their driver. Also, it's an asset for that company to have this type-- these types of qualities in a driver.

DAVE: You know, Michael, to-- there's nothing more modern than today's military. All of the cutting-edge technologies that we enjoy, most of that stuff came out of military necessity, military development. Today, if you see convoys of automated trucks going down the interstates, chances are pretty good it's gonna be a convoy of Army vehicles: tanks, drones, you name it, automated. And the industry, in a sense, is holding its breath in one aspect, and then just, you know, going full force in another to make the autonomous vehicle a reality. And I know the word "autonomous" is a little dicey nowadays, but what I'm getting at is that folks who are always looking forward to the future, to the latest developments, the military really sets you up for that kind of progressive thinking. And there's that word again, but it's on purpose.

MICHAEL: Yeah, you're absolutely right, Dave, and also, generally, when you're talking about folks who have been in the military-- and they understand technology. They understand new technology. Rather than be afraid of it, it's like they will utilize that idea saying, "Okay, this technology allows me to do this. Instead of being one single truck driver with one trailer, I'm going to have three trailers now because there will be two drones following. They're to be a clone system. I will be the captain of this ship, and they need my skills. And by the way, when I get out on I-80 at 65 miles an hour and I'm on the interstate and there's nothing adverse ahead of me, then guess what? I get to lean back and enjoy it." [laughs] And-- and they're used to letting automation do its job and being an integral part of the machine as opposed to feeling, you know, the fear of being replaced by it.

DAVE: Yeah, you know, boy, you hit on a couple of very important things here. You know, having things that are automated doesn't-- the idea isn't, oh, yeah, now I don't have to do anything. I'll let the machine do the job for me. No, it's that now I can concentrate on the other important stuff that the machine won't be able to do, and I can give my full attention to that. If you're in the military, obviously, that attention is aimed at two things: preserving the lives of your fellow soldiers and/or accomplishing the mission at hand. So again, it really goes hand in glove, the idea of the new technologies coming down to make the job not so much easier but much more effective and much more satisfying, too, I think, in many ways. Want to get back to James, though. James, you mentioned that you have your own authority, and the name of your company is Spartan Direct. You didn't just watch an old sword-and-sandal movie and come-- to come up with the Spartans. Tell us where that name comes from.

JAMES: Well, that name came from the last platoon of soldiers that I served with in Afghanistan. True to its form, you know, as Spartans, we were-- we're about 36 people, and we were actually hand-selected by our battalion and brigade command sergeant major. And we were selected because each one of us had some sort of a special skill set, and it wasn't necessarily because of our, you know, primary MOS that we were trained in when we came in. Like for me, it was-- it was the weapons training. It was the ability to-- to react quickly on my feet and also to handle a lot of soldiers at one time to be able to do that. A lot of people might've been because, you know, hey, they did have truck-driving experience, you know, we had a couple guys that were really, really good with-- with trucks. They had truck-driving experience outside of the military. We had one guy that was quite effective with a wrecker. We had one female soldier, she could speak eight languages, but her primary job in the-- in the military, she was-- she was a mechanic. And that's what we did, and I wanted to be able to carry that out of the military with my company as far as the message, the fact that we were able to bond really quickly, really efficiently, and we operated very efficiently. We operated-- you know, just like Tim had mentioned, all those things, but we were also very safe about it. And I just wanted to be able to carry that with me to honor that memory, to honor that message that we pushed out, and it still continues to today. I mean, our camaraderie is ridiculous. I mean, we stay in contact via Facebook or phone calls, you know, at least once a week, you know, at a minimum, once a month, and if we don't hear from somebody, you know, somebody's getting a phone call. It's just, it was just, it was that kind of brotherhood within that.

DAVE: Tim, I have a quote here from James. He said, "We served with a passion. We served with a direction. We served with a goal. I just wanted to carry that mentality with me," when he was asked about the name Spartan Direct. That

played-- that hits every button that you pushed a little bit earlier in your section of the discussion here today.

TIM: Yes, and that is absolutely true and the way that quote sums it all up right there.

DAVE: You know, James, before we kind of run out of time, 'cause the clock is always ticking around here, we kind of know where you are now, so to speak. What are-- what are some of the dreams and the goals that you have for Spartan Direct?

JAMES: I'm actually in the process of trying to fulfill part of the first dream. My goal is-- I want to-- my overall vision is I wanna be able to hire veteran drivers. I want to give veterans the same opportunity that I was given by St. Christopher's Fund and Progressive. You know, they literally-- literally, with the chan-- flip of a coin, you know, they changed my life. You know, they breathed life back into me. They gave-- you know, I always tell people you give a veteran a new mission, you're going to see his eyes change. You're going to see his body change, and his life is just going to change, and that's what I want to do. I'm in the actual process of going through that right now of actually hiring my first driver to bring on, and it's-- it's become quite rewarding. You know, it's rewarding not so much for myself to accomplish a goal but to see-- to see that change in somebody else as we go through the process.

DAVE: There is absolutely no surprise about what you just said, James. I knew you were gonna say that. I would've-- I could've bet \$1,000 on that, no question about it. Michael, I thought maybe you might have a couple of closing thoughts on the-- on the program here today in Trucker Territory.

MICHAEL: Well, I do, and I think what we really want to get across to people, you know, as business owners and so forth: this is such a great investment. Not only is it a great program to participate in, not only can you change somebody's life, but what you're getting back is a person who understands a mission. You-- they understand that they-- there is an overriding goal that reaches over and beyond all of us, and I tell you, what I enjoy most about being surrounded by veterans is they tend not to sweat the small stuff, [laughs] which is really, really important these days. And, you know, they know what's important. They know what's worthy of being feared and what's not, and I love being around and working with people who are veterans. I love being, you know, in contact with them in the trucking industry, and I admire every one of them for doing such a great job when they were in military deployment, but they carry on a tradition that I think is very, very important to trucking.

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DAVE: Well said, and that's a perfect way to close this edition of "Got Your Years On" from Progressive Commercial Insurance here in Trucker Territory. Hey, thanks for spending some time and a few miles with us, James. Really enjoyed having you with us, and congratulations.

JAMES: Oh, thank you. It's always a pleasure to talk to you guys, and it's a complete honor. Thank you.

DAVE: James Rogers, everyone, the owner of now a small fleet. I got a feeling next time we talk to him, it's going to be a larger fleet, Spartan Direct. And Tim Ridley, as always.

TIM: My pleasure, Dave, thanks.

DAVE: Michael Burns.

MICHAEL: Thank you, Dave.

DAVE: And we're going to close out here. We'll see you next time right here in Trucker Territory

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