Episode 742: Show Listener Resigns from the Military

Guest: Jason Stopper

WOODS: I have received emails like yours in the past, and only this time did it occur to me, why don't I talk to this guy. I bet it would be an interesting story. So here we are talking about it. And you know, for most of these conversations I have I brief myself and I read the guest's book and I do whatever, I do my background research. In this case I know a little bit about you, but I thought it would be more interesting if I just asked you questions as somebody who doesn't know your experience and just let you tell it fresh. So let's start with your background. Are you actually from Kansas? Because I see you went to KU.

STOPPER: I grew up in Virginia, and my dad, when I was 16, we moved all the way out to the western part of Kansas, which is even worse than Topeka, out near Dodge City.

WOODS: (laughing) Okay.

STOPPER: So your discussions about Topeka, I understand completely. Lawrence is likely the only jewel of Kansas.

WOODS: Yeah, I always liked Lawrence, yeah. Okay, so you spent some time there. At what time did you enter the military? Did you go to school first, or did you enter the military in order to get to school?

STOPPER: I'd always wanted to be in the military for some reason, ever since I can remember. And I joined the ROTC department at the University of Kansas, and they helped pay for my school. And I graduated from Kansas in 2002 and immediately went into active duty as a field artillery officer.

WOODS: Okay, so how long then, how many years — this will date you, I suppose, but how many years did you spend in the military? And I mean, you're still there, so you may want to make your statement.

STOPPER: Oh, that's right. I just want to let everybody know that this is my own personally held beliefs, and I am not a spokesman of the Department of Defense, nor am I being paid by the Department of Defense today as why we're doing the interview.

WOODS: All right, fair enough. I think everybody assumed that, but I know you have to say it, so I'm glad you did.

STOPPER: What was your question again, Tom?

WOODS: How many years have you been in the military?

STOPPER: I have 12 years. I had a little break in service for about 3 years. I did 5 years of active duty; I did 18 months in Korea, and I did 13 months in Afghanistan in 2005 and 2006 while I was a member of the active duty. And then I went into the National Guard in Virginia for two- and two and a half years, left the Army, came back in in 2012, and now I'm in the process of resigning my commission.

WOODS: Okay. Let's go through those. What is it like being in Korea in the US military? There isn't a whole lot going on, presumably.

STOPPER: In Korea? No, mainly it's just go there and train — limited training time, but because the Koreans do have a set limit on where the Americans can train, and they don't want us interfering with their population, and so we mainly spend time on the base, and we can leave during the day if we want to if we have some free time, but we were expected to be back in the evening. So we had a curfew.

WOODS: Okay, so when you look back on your experiences in Korea, these were not — this was not a time that formed you ideologically or anything.

STOPPER: No, I enjoyed myself over there. I had a really good time. I really enjoyed meeting the Korean people and thought that they're awesome.

WOODS: But Afghanistan I suspect might have been somewhat different. What were your experiences like there?

STOPPER: I was a field artillery officer, and I was attached to a Special Forces unit, so I got to see some action, I guess if you want to put it that way. And then eight months into my tour I got promoted to captain, so they stuck me in Kandahar, and I got to see the innards of the Army, I guess, and that's when I started to, not necessarily change the way I think, but think about this isn't something I want to do for the rest of my life. And that was the catalyst for my conversion, I believe, just because I'd spent so much time over there; I'd spent time away from home; I'd spent time away from my family. My dad had a mini-stroke because of the stress of me being over there, which I didn't find out about until later, and that just started my — that was the catalyst that got me thinking that the Army isn't everything that I wanted for my life. Does that make sense?

WOODS: Yeah. Do you feel comfortable telling us the kinds of things that you saw that made you a little uncomfortable?

STOPPER: It wasn't — at that time I wasn't uncomfortable with anything I had done; it was more of I started being selfish with my time. I didn't want to continually have my time and my life dictated to me like the Army does. The Army's very structured. I knew that there were going to be more and more deployments coming up, because this is in 2005 and 2006 when Iraq was starting to get even more violent, and I just made a decision — and I met my wife. Meeting my wife was probably the catalyst that

changed everything for me. I met my wife when I came home, and they told me that there were going to be more deployments, and I'd spent 31-odd months outside of the United States, and I hadn't had time to form a relationship, and that was just missing in my life, so I wanted to make sure that relationship grew and blossomed. I knew I had to make a choice: either stay in the Army and let that be my wife, or meet my wife, Emily, and let her be my wife. And I chose Emily.

WOODS: So let's go back to the beginning, then. Your motivations in terms of entering the military were probably similar to a lot of people your age. You thought that this was the honorable thing to do, that you're defending the country and there are people out there posing threats to the US, so what else could someone do? Is that a fair summary of your thought at the time?

STOPPER: That's exactly, you know — and plus, it's exciting, especially to an 18 or 22-year-old male. I was in the 82nd Airborne, so I got to jump out of airplanes and get paid to do it, and you just get to shoot big guns and ride around on tanks, and just, you know, where else can you do that as an 18-year-old male? It's very visceral and very exciting thing to do.

WOODS: Now, my impression so far is that if I were to ask you did you encounter a lot of people in the military who had some doubts about any of it, the answer would be no.

STOPPER: That's accurate, and even to this day, still no. Now most of the people that I know — because I am a major in the US Army part time — I still see most of the people, "Oh, I'm just going to ride it out to the retirement." Now it's more based off of the benefits they get, not off the exciting things they do.

WOODS: Right, right. All right, so obviously at some point something happens to you. You start thinking differently. When is that and what is that catalyst?

STOPPER: Well, Tom, I grew up in a Catholic household, and when I went to college I strayed away from it, so I had a grounding in some Christian understanding — limited Christian understanding. But my wife, we moved to Virginia, and she wanted to join a church, and I went to a church with her, and I said, sweetie, I can't go to this church with you. But I wanted to spend time with my wife, so I said, why don't we try to find a church that we can both go to. I was just trying to please her. And we found a nondenominational church in the Virginia Beach area, and it just resonated with me, and I became a Christian — but I was still, in my belief, a typical American Christian these days, where they believe in Jesus, but they still believe in the military and foreign interventions, and they're pro-life, except if it's anybody else but Americans. We can harm 18-year-olds or 16-year-olds that live in the Middle East or Africa or the Ukraine or Russia or wherever.

So becoming a Christian was a catalyst. And then I became a police officer, and I started seeing that side of America, because being a police officer is the next natural step for someone in the Army, supposedly. It's, oh, if you get out of the Army and go become a police officer, you get to have the same action you have in the military but at home. And that was something; I started seeing the militarization and just the interaction that a lot of police officers have with people. And I was a revenue-

generator. And that started getting me thinking, and I met another friend of mine who liked Ron Paul, so I started talking to him and then I started researching more and more about Ron Paul, and then I found Lew Rockwell, and then I found you, and I read your books. And that was the catalyst that got me thinking about reevaluating my whole viewpoint as a Christian and as an American and what is the right role for us in the world and the violence that we're committing.

WOODS: Wow, that's quite interesting. Now, can you try to explain to me — and treat me like I'm seven years old on this, because I don't know anything about this. But I had a couple people on here, a husband and wife team, actually, and they came on the show to talk about conscientious objection and how they were getting out of the military using the standard steps that you follow. There are forms that need to be filled out, testimonials and stuff of that nature, and they were following that procedure to get out of the military. Why do they have to follow that procedure and you don't?

STOPPER: I've been blessed. I have enough time in the military — I have 13 years in. So when you first enter the Army, I had a — and a lot of other officers — see, I'm an officer. I don't sign a contract ever four, five, or six years like the enlisted and noncommissioned officers do. But I joined the Army; I had a four-year commitment because they paid for my school, and then I had an additional four-year commitment of what's called the Individual Ready Reserve. It's where they just stick you in there, and then if a war starts they can call you up out of it. And you retain your rank in there; you can even get promoted in the Individual Ready Reserve, though you really don't have anything to do with it. So it's a total of eight years commitment, and you can do any combination of it. So I did five years, so I had three years left in the Individual Ready Reserve. So now that I've done 13 years, I have no contractual obligations left with the United States Army.

So with that being said, I can tender my unqualified resignation. It's just like going into a regular civilian job and saying "I quit," except it takes a heck of a lot longer because everybody six or seven levels above me have to approve my getting out. And they can disapprove it, and if they do disapprove it then we'll take the next step, which I don't know what that'll be, but I'm 100% positive I'm getting out, so I will take another step. But that's the reason why — I've listened to that episode, and it was an awesome episode, and that was the catalyst that really got me going to getting out. And I actually was supposed to go on a deployment with another unit that I got out of luckily because I transferred units, but I was going to reach out to them — if they weren't going to approve my transfer, I was going to reach out to them and get help with becoming a conscientious objector.

WOODS: In your current capacity, does the public ever see you in uniform?

STOPPER: They do.

WOODS: Do people ever come up and say "Thank you for your service"?

STOPPER: Yes, and it's very embarrassing to me, because I want to turn the question on them and say, "What do you do? Are you a small business owner? Are you a janitor? Thank you for what you do." Because they're even more important. What I do doesn't

create anything; it just destroys. I don't create anything in my job other than paperwork and memos.

WOODS: Well, that itself is an interesting response, because it means that of course what you're going through now is extremely disorienting. You've gone through a process of thinking that's taken you 180 degrees from where you expected to be, in terms of what you're doing for a living and your overall thinking about the world. It's completely different now, and I can't imagine what it would be like to, as I'm a young man, imagine that I'm going to do such and such thing for a living, hold that thing in very high esteem, and then get to a point where I say I really just want to wash my hands of it. Can you share what that experience has been like?

STOPPER: It's been really empowering, and that's what I reached out to you, Tom, because I just wanted to say thank you. I also reached out to Lew Rockwell and sent him a thank you email, and Scott Horton, just because you guys have helped organize the thoughts in my head, and I just have come to the realization that there are more important things in life than what you do. And so the Army was my life at one time, but now it's just something that I do, and I don't want to do it anymore. My family's the most important thing to me now, and that's the most important thing. And so understanding that it's just a job — it's not who I am; it's what I've done, and I can change what I do. And so I can't change my family, nor would I want to, but that's just been the grounding thought that's run through my head, that it's just something that I do and I can quit it. I want to quit it, especially if it doesn't equate with my morals and viewpoint on the world anymore.

WOODS: You said that going into domestic law enforcement is often a logical next step for people who are no longer in the military, but you don't want to do that. That's the impression I get. So what is it that you'd like to do? What does the future hold for you?

STOPPER: Well actually, in 2011 I quit being a police officer, just because I started seeing that I was hurting people fro voluntary transactions, you know, like we talk about, like you've talked to many people about. Just the voluntary transactions. Like, I would stop people and smell marijuana, and they'd want me to arrest them, and I was like, they're not hurting anybody, it's their decision.

And the biggest catalyst was I stopped a family of four alongside the road one day for speeding, and the speeding ticket was going to be $200, and I saw that family, and I saw the husband and the wife and they had their two kids in the back. And they weren't well-to-do, but they weren't poor, they weren't well off. They were a typical middle class family. And I just realized if I wrote this person a $200 ticket, it's going to be revenue for the state, but what's it going to do to those kids? Are they going to go without shoes or new clothes or food? Because $200 is a lot of money to a lot of people. And that point I decided I was going to go back to school, and I started working with my wife and my father-in-law, who are small business owners, and I became the business manager for them.

And now I'm currently training to be a paramedic, because I've always felt called to help people. And I thought the military was the way to do it, and obviously it is not. I thought law enforcement was the way to do it, and I didn't feel like I was helping anybody there. And I found medicine to be a way to actually help people and actually

see the results of your help. You know, you help somebody, especially as a paramedic, in their worst times where they need the most help, and you show up and intervene and help them see another day.

WOODS: You know, thinking about health and thinking of it in opposition to the military, that's exactly Ron Paul's way of thinking. Of course we all know about his career in medicine, and he often contrasts the two things, so it's interesting that you make that connection. You have a blog that you're starting. Is it premature for me to mention that?

STOPPER: No, I'm actually going to try to document the process of an unqualified resignation, or my resignation in the Army for others too. So I know you've had the conscientious objectors, and they're an awesome resource. I've been to their website. Like I said, I was going to reach out to them and use them as a resource, and my thought for my blog is to blog about the other viewpoints that I see; you know, the whole "thank you," thanking a veteran concept. You know, that's in the future. And a little bit more about my conversion, and also about how to resign from the Army. I don't see a lot of information out there, and it's not a top secret thing; it's just I don't know if a lot of people have ever put it out there, so maybe it can help another libertarian or just someone else that wants to leave the military.

WOODS: Do you want to tell people the name of the blog — and then when you have more material I'll give it another shout out later. But do you want to tell them?

STOPPER: It's called TheAppalachianLibertarian.com.

WOODS: All right, so I'll link to your blog also. What did I leave out that you want to tell as part of your story?

STOPPER: I would just say my biggest thought is I just want people to question how they see the world. I saw the world in a very neocon, conservative way for a long time, and by listening to someone else I started investigating, because I questioned what I was doing. And what I did and what I became is a way better person, and that's why, once again, Dr. Woods, I reached out to you just because I was so thankful, because without your show and without Ron Paul and Lew Rockwell, I would probably have become a bitter man, and now I feel free and like I'm going to do something to make a change and help people rather than hurt people. And just question your viewpoints and try to find the truth.

WOODS: What's been the response among your colleagues in the military?

STOPPER: I actually had a surprising response. My battalion commander, when I told him I was resigning, he sort of said he had an epiphany of what he wanted to do with his life, and I have another friend there that, he wants to get out, but he's captured by the thought of a retirement. So my thought was I'm not going to sacrifice any more of my time, which I can't buy more of. I'm not going to sacrifice time with my family; I'm not going to leave — the fear of another deployment. I got back in because I thought we were going to end the wars, but the wars have just kept going, and I have a feeling that not only are the wars going to keep going, but they're going to get worse. And I

can't sacrifice a year of my life away from my two young daughters and my young son and my wife for something that I don't believe in. I don't believe we should be interfering with other people's lives in other countries and hurting them. I can't abide by the fact that we may kill one terrorist in a drone strike, but 15 civilians are hurt or killed. That's not a pro-life message, and I just can't abide by that anymore. And some people understand it, but for the majority of them they're like, oh, well, you're giving up your retirement and healthcare and all this other stuff. And I tell them I'm not going to sell myself and my time for something that's temporary in this world.

WOODS: Well, I'm grateful for your willingness to share your story. The show notes page is TomWoods.com/742. I'll link to your blog; I'm also going to link to the episode where we talked to the conscientious objectors, and I'll link to the episode with Jim Hale, who was a guy who had a transformation very similar to yours, and he had been involved in the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq with Bill Kristol and some of those folks, and he just this year just wiped his hands of it, turned around, and promotes the exact opposite of what it used to. So good resources to be found at TomWoods.com/742. Jason, thanks so much and best of luck.

STOPPER: Thank you, Tom.