

**War as the  
school of life?**

**English transcript  
to the  
podcast**

# War as the school of life?

Podcast on war experience

English Transcript

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*ES: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast accompanying the METIS project, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices to be found on [www.metis.ethz.ch](http://www.metis.ethz.ch). In this edition Daniel Trusilo, our guest today, will talk about his experience as a combatant. My name is Eliane Schmid and I welcome our listeners and Daniel Trusilo here at the studio today.*

*DT: Thank you.*

*ES: So, life is a game. Life is war. Two opposing metaphors. But "life is not a game," says philosopher Raymond Geuss, because no game ends in death. But is the metaphor of life as war*

*more apt? It is meant to show us the seriousness of life. Wise people know about the shortness of life, its fleetingness, its transience. Seneca or Socrates seem to want to tell us that the key to wisdom is given to the one who faces his fear of death and learns to overcome it. So does one have to face danger or even go to war to become wise? One step away from metaphors, war is a fact. People have been trained for it all over the world for thousands of years. They are to be prepared for extreme situations that do not really seem to be simulatable. Daniel Trusilo is currently doing a PhD at the University of St. Gallen on autonomous systems evaluation and he's also a West Point graduate and Iraq war veteran with combat experience. Now I'd like to start this talk by asking a somewhat naive and ambiguous question, were you prepared for war?*

DT: I think the answer to that is very complicated because you can be prepared for certain things, but you won't necessarily be prepared for all of it. The consequences, the emotional turmoil, the stress and these are things that you can only learn through the experience.

*ES: So why did you decide to go to West Point?*

DT: That's a question that I get a lot of times from Europeans actually, because the education system is very different here than it is in the United States. In the United States it's extremely expensive and what people don't often know is that the military academies, the Naval Academy, the Air Force Academy in West Point, which is where the army trains cadets to be officers, they are very high quality academic institutions that are completely free and I was driven from a very young age to go to a military academy because I really wanted the opportunity to learn to be a leader in the US military. I had idealized notions, perhaps naïve, about what that meant and that was also prior to September 11<sup>th</sup>. So it was not a time of active conflict.

*ES: And how would you describe the school? So when you were actually there, when you started this, when you were looking for this leadership training, did you get that and how otherwise would you describe the day there, or just like a normal day?*

DT: Well, West Point, I mean it was an incredible experience. I would say that it's very different than a normal bachelor's level education because you are brought into a institution that is designed to develop leadership skills and instill values as well as a sense of purpose, which is not easily done. I think one of the most profound things about the experience at West Point is that you live by an honor code, which I think was instilled as a value, but the honor code is "A cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do." And it becomes a part of you. And I would say even to this day, it guides how I behave. I also really wanted the opportunity to serve my country, which is done at West Point. This is a chance to give back through service in the military. A lot of people don't know, but when you go to a military academy, you are obligated to five years of active duty military service. And so while I was there, September 11<sup>th</sup> happened and America was then facing war and so everything changed, which meant that my military service when I graduated would be in conflict.

*ES: Of course, everybody was surprised when 9/11 happened. But did that for you at that moment scare you, or were you excited in an odd way because you were actually being trained for that? So were you, happy is the wrong word, but were you, kind of, grateful that you could actually use the training that you got or were you like, "Oh crap, I didn't think this would happen?"*

DT: Yeah, I mean realistically, I remember when I got into West Point, my parents and I, we had a conversation because my parents were not in the military. A lot of times people that go to these military academies come from military families or have military backgrounds. My mom is an art teacher and my father was a business person and when I got in, when I was accepted, they had this conversation and my mom said, "Daniel, what are you going to do if there's actually a war?" And my father, before I could answer actually said, "Don't worry, that's not very realistic." And then a few years later, we had September 11<sup>th</sup> and everything changed. As a cadet, I think I probably had mixed emotions. I thought that the invasion of Afghanistan was

justified and I was very, again, young, very simplistic, and idealistic notions of what was right and wrong. As I was finishing as a cadet, that was 2003, that's when the US invaded Iraq and I had more doubts about that conflict even at that young age. I would say that it is also an opportunity to carry out the things that you have been doing and learning about and to put it into practice and I think for the most part I was, not, excited is not the right word, but it was a way to actually put into practice the things that I had been spending all my effort and time doing and sacrificed a lot to do.

*ES: Because the training is very intense, right? The first two years seem to be a super, I don't know if ascetic is the right word, but could you maybe describe the beginning of the training?*

DT: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's not a normal college education, that's for sure. You begin in the summertime with basic cadet military training, and then as soon as the academic year begins, it's an extremely rigorous schedule. They essentially put more demands on the cadets than you have time in any day to actually accomplish and that forces you to prioritize and to determine what you should and shouldn't do in order to actually survive. The other thing that's really surprising for a lot of people is that as a first year cadet, what we call 'plebes', you're not actually allowed to talk outside of the academic classroom and your barracks room. So all the time that you spend walking or moving about, you greet the upperclassmen in a very official way, but you don't actually talk. It's not relaxed and you're not supposed to waste any time. It's all about moving as quickly as you can from one place to another and getting the job done.

*ES: How did you cope with that? I mean, was it something you just got used to or was it difficult? Or was it kind of relaxing in a sense that you always knew what to do?*

DT: It's not relaxing at all, no. But the idea is that you lead by example and you can't understand how to be a leader until you've been a follower. So when they bring someone into West Point or any of the military academies, they really are identifying people that are showing the aptitude to take on leadership roles but inevitably you have to start from the ground. You have to start from scratch and so when you first come in, you might feel like you're on top of the world, but then they put you in a very subordinate position so that you can understand what it

feels like to be ordered round and maybe to have the ability to have a relaxed conversation on the way to class taken away. And only then do I believe you can really understand what it means to tell someone else to do something that is hard or difficult. In other words, you don't tell people or order people to do something that you're not willing to do yourself.

*ES: And what about the preparation for extreme situations? You were talking about preparation now, but were you prepared for situations as when you see other people dying, you see your comrades dying or, well, even your own death. Was there any preparation for that?*

DT: While you're there you go through lots of different military training, you talk about these things, but at the same time while I was there, this was prior to September 11<sup>th</sup>, and so there was not a lot of real world combat experience in the American military at that time. My generation are really the ones that have the most combat experience at this point. So there wasn't a lot of people that could really give us advice on those kind of things. I do recall one teacher, I remember I went through a very difficult break-up at some point while I was there and I came to class and I was probably very distracted and she pulled me out of the classroom and she said to me, "Hey, where's your head?" And I said, "Oh, I apologize. I just went through a difficult break-up." And she said, "Look, that's fine for now, but when you're out leading soldiers in combat or wherever, you need to be able to compartmentalize because people are going to be counting on you and it's their lives on the line and if you can't separate your personal drama from what you're doing in a combat scenario, people are going to get killed." And it was a big wake-up call for me and learning how to compartmentalize, I think that's when it started for me at West Point. I'm not sure that compartmentalizing to an extreme extent is healthy because at some point you have to address all the things that you are maybe burying or putting away but that was a very good lesson and it probably served me well when I was in Iraq.

*ES: And so it all seems that when you are at school there, it is very abstract, the idea that you would go to combat and everything. Did it always feel abstract for you or was it something you could actually imagine? So especially when this teacher said this to you, could you then imagine*

*yourself actually having to do that compartmentalize because you're in an extreme situation or did it remain something unimaginable?*

DT: Well, it's one of the things that was great about West Point was that when you're learning, when you're in the classroom, the majority of your professors are active duty military officers and they come to you with real world experience and describe to you what your career is going to look like. That's just a three-year assignment for them in their career path to come back and teach at West Point. So they make things very practical. And, you know, a perfect example would be a calculus problem, where instead of just using variables, you're actually trying to optimize or solve a problem for the optimization of doing maintenance on vehicles or something like this to make it practical and to make it a real world lesson, and I think I really appreciated that. It made it easier for me to digest all of the information that I was learning.

*ES: Now we've talked all about the theory. What about when you were actually deployed? Can you describe how you prepared for the deployment and what happened when you got there?*

DT: Yeah, I mean, so I deployed in November, 2005 to Iraq, and initially I went over as a platoon leader of a field artillery platoon, which was a fairly standard job, but I was towards the end of my term as a platoon leader and so I finished that position as a First Lieutenant and then I moved over to what was then a new idea or a concept that we were developing. And that was a military transition team. So it was a team that worked with an Iraqi army unit to help develop Iraqi capacity to provide security for the population and I was the operations officer for that job. That was very different from a traditional job because we were embedded with this Iraqi unit. I had no formal training in how to be an Operations Advisor for a foreign military, and I didn't speak any Arabic or very little Arabic. And so that was challenging in a lot of ways, but it was also thrilling in a lot of ways because rather than being on a US Ford operating base, I lived in an Iraqi town with Iraqis and could see tangible effects of what I was doing on a day-to-day basis.

*ES: So when you arrived, when you were in the town, what did you do at the very basics, and how did you prepare to go there? And when you arrived, how many people were waiting there*

*for you or how many people did you take along? And when did – “action” sounds very much like a movie – but when did you actually start combating?*

DT: Okay. Well, I would say when I transitioned into the position of the Operations Advisor for the Iraqi military, I was on a 15-person team and we were working with a probably 300 or 400 person Iraqi infantry battalion. And I mean, I applied everything that I had learned up until that point, whether that was as a cadet at West Point or when I graduated from West Point, I went to a combat brigade at Fort Carson, Colorado, and we went to various training. I developed my own platoon to have the skills that they needed to deploy because we knew we were going to be deploying to Iraq. And I also attended ranger school, which was one of the most profound experiences I've ever had in my life because it really pushes you to your physical and mental limits and emotional limits, and you see where those limits are and then you go past them, which is an incredible experience and very beneficial for when you're in a combat experience. When I was in Al Khalis, Iraq, in Diyala province, I took all those things that I had learned, all the ways that I had developed to teach my own soldiers in my platoon, and then tried to instill them in the Iraqi Infantry Battalion that I was working with, how to use modern military techniques to create a patrol schedule that insurgents couldn't necessarily predict but would provide security for the marketplace. Things like that. Also, just basic weapons safety. How to maintain a weapon or a vehicle and make sure that logistics work and all those things, that was all stuff that we had to start and build from scratch with the Iraqi infantry because it had all been dissolved after the initial invasion in 2003.

*ES: So, I'm wondering how did the communication then work? Did you over time learn a bit more Arabic or were there translators? So very basic question, but still I guess it's super important to lead a group of people to know how to communicate.*

DT: Well, I'm convinced that the interpreters are almost always the most powerful people in every room – after that experience. We had two, actually at the end four interpreters, that were completely embedded with my team. So they lived with us. They carried weapons because their jobs were extremely dangerous. These were Iraqis. We didn't work with any



American Arabic speakers, but Iraqis that we would hire and vet, and then they would be part of our team. And one of them essentially accompanied me to all the meetings that I had to go to. I was very fortunate because the Iraqi operations officer that I worked with predominantly was very interested in learning English and also was patient enough with my very limited Arabic that he would work with me and we would work through things together and it took a lot of time and patience and effort.

*ES: And I have this very also, maybe, naïve imagination of what war looks like simply from movies or from history books, but oftentimes it is written or it is shown that it's a lot of waiting. Did you experience a lot of waiting as well, and what was that like, if yes?*

DT: Yeah, absolutely. I spent one year in Iraq, and it was during a time of very intense conflict. That's when sectarian violence between the Sunni and the Shi'ah, the Mahdi militia that is part of Muqtada al-Sadr forces and Al-Qaeda, Iraq under Zarqawi were both quite strong and making moves against each other all the time and also against us all the time, so it was quite a lot of conflict. But the majority of the time was not necessarily waiting, but not full of these moments of actual conflict. The majority of the time was moving from place to place, meeting with various officials or police chiefs or the mayor, going to the market and making sure that patrols were actually happening the way they needed to and all of those things. There's this undercurrent of tension because at any moment there could be a roadside bomb, or a sniper, or something like that, and you just always have to be on guard and I think that that high level of insecurity causes a very high level of stress to exist at all times, even though it feels quite boring.

*ES: So, it's two very opposite extremes like boredom, where normally people are just really waiting for something to finally happen, and then this underlying fear, I guess. It must have been great fear of what could happen and you can't anticipate it. And so when you were doing stuff while waiting of course, but then also during combat, were you scared? Or what does this proximity to possible death actually mean? Or what did it feel like, if that's possible to explain?*

DT: Well, I would say that we never were waiting. We would always be ready. So it's more always being ready for something to happen or planning for something to happen if we were going on a direct action mission with the Iraqis. I personally did not experience this sense of fear or terror. It was more a sense of high vigilance, extremely high vigilance to a degree where when you're driving down the road, you're scanning the side of the road and every single thing that is out of place you identify. For me, one of my big jobs was being able to call artillery fire from an American artillery unit to back us up when we would be on missions with the Iraqis or to call in air support with helicopters and things like that. And typically use tanded grid coordinate, so five latitude, longitude, you know, that kind of thing. And what I realized towards the end of the deployment and after the deployment was that American phone numbers are also 10 digits, and someone could say a 10-digit phone number around me without me even really consciously paying attention. And I could remember that phone number because it had been so important in the day-to-day role that I had, in such a high stress level, that my brain just adapted to being able to remember these 10-digit numbers. And over time it sort of faded, but I think that indicates this high level of stress that we were under. So I wouldn't call it fear or terror. You're doing your job. But you're just extremely vigilant all the time because there is this extremely high threat level.

*ES: And now you already alluded a bit to the time after combat or the time when you were actually back in the US, did a lot of things, kind of, stick, and how long did it take for you to get out of war mode in that sense? Because it seems as if your whole body was in that very special situation. What's the transition like to normal everyday life? I mean normal in the sense of normal civilians.*

DT: For me, it was extremely difficult. I came back, I redeployed from Iraq in November, 2006, and as I said before, I think I compartmentalized a lot of my feelings or the experiences that I had while I was in Iraq just to be able to get through each day because you can't get distracted. When a terrible thing happens or something bad happens, you can't become preoccupied with that, and that means back home or in Iraq, downrange, if something bad happened at home, if I would be preoccupied with that, I wouldn't be able to maintain that high level of vigilance. So

when I came back, I had to go through all that. I had to process all of the things that I had basically boxed up and put away for that year, whether that was things that happened at home or things that happened while I was in Iraq and that took a really long time. The other experience that I went through in that process was almost like losing myself. I had a very, very clear sense of self and vision for what I wanted to do in my life prior to going to Iraq. I wanted to go to West Point, go to ranger school, serve my country and have a career in the military. And when I came back from Iraq, and this is where I have to add a caveat, I didn't necessarily believe in the reasons why we invaded Iraq, but my job was to go to Iraq. That was where I was ordered to go. And ultimately, I had learned from a very young age at West Point that it was my job to take care of the people that worked with me and for me, and we worked together to take care of each other and to keep each other to get through things. And I always thought that I could do good influence the area that I was in, whether that was that town in Iraq, Khalis, or the unit that I was in to do more good. The experience in Iraq made me question that. It made me question whether me existing, me being there, caused more harm than all the good that I could possibly do to compensate for it. And that was very difficult because it made me question everything. All the beliefs, all the values, all the things that I had built my life around and so I had to, sort of, reset and to think about how I could achieve the things that would allow me to live up to my ideals and my values while not also feeling like I, maybe, was part of something that was overall negative.

*ES: Yeah, I mean because you were trained to compartmentalize. You were trained not to think about these things, I guess, too much so you can actually function. And so I am guessing that when you came back, was it also, kind of, a relief that you actually got back? But was it also in a sense, kind of lost, because now the sense of purpose that you seemed to have before was gone?*

DT: Absolutely. And I also, I was totally disillusioned. I was also extremely frustrated because I felt like the things that we were doing, even no matter how much effort I put into it, and no matter how many good people I saw get hurt, were civilians get hurt because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, or we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. And that

whole experience, people in America weren't necessarily paying attention because they were more preoccupied with other things. Now, that's not to say that they didn't show appreciation and I want to be clear that when I came home, there was a lot of people who really made an effort to make me feel welcome. But the United States had moved on without me. I remember coming back and people saying, "Thank you for your service," which is kind of an empty statement if you don't actually have a conversation afterwards. And I remember feeling very disillusioned about that, like people saying, "Thank you for your service," but then voting for the same politicians that would continue the war that I felt had taken some friends away. And that to me was really, really difficult.

*ES: So, reintegrating into civilian life seems to have been super tough. How did you go about doing this in that sense, or how did you find a place to start over again?*

DT: Yeah, I mean, I took an assignment to NATO so that I wouldn't have to immediately redeploy back to Iraq or Afghanistan so I could work through some of these things and process it and during that time, I was assigned to Germany. I made some very close friends in Germany that helped me work through it, asked me questions and just listened. And then during that time, I realized that maybe I could continue to serve and apply the skills that I had developed by working in the humanitarian sector and so because one of the things I noticed when I was in Iraq is that in a lot of these places where I was working to try to provide security for the local communities, there were no humanitarians for various reasons. I mean, it was extremely dangerous. And so I thought, "Okay, maybe I can take the skills I developed in the military and go into humanitarian sector and help people that are in need." And so I decided to come to Switzerland and attend university in Switzerland to break into the humanitarian sector, work with the International Committee of the Red Cross, which are really the guardians of international humanitarian law and all these things and it worked out that way. So I was able to actually do that and pursue that, but it took years of processing to figure out where I belonged and how I could live up to my values in a way that would also allow me to feel like I was making a positive difference.

*ES: So now that you worked through all this, and I'm sure this is a process that will never stop, but do you feel like the things that you learned at West Point you can actually now apply in a good way, like you said, because you wanted to make good use of it? Are there actually good things that you can now use from the time at school?*

DT: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I still am extremely disciplined in my life. I still live by the same, essentially, honor code that I learned at West Point and the values that I developed there, such as to lead by example. I still do that. That's a part of who I am. I would say that I have a broader perspective on the world, and it also informs the work that I do now. So now I am doing research on the practical application of ethics to artificial intelligence and how that can be used for search and rescue or weapon systems and how we can think about these things to make them beneficial for humanity without causing unintentional harm. And so all these things that I learned and developed through the experience of going to West Point, going to Iraq, serving in the US military, they've informed my decisions in my life since then.

*ES: So I'm bringing this back to the purpose of this podcast, which is, I'm actually talking about types of wisdom. And now I wouldn't say that going to war will make you a wise person. This sounds very abstract. But still, I mean, you gained so much life experience – to use this term. So now, do you think in a sense that – you also already alluded a bit to the things that you learned and can apply – but do you feel that this life experience brought you in this case to the place you are now and helps you still navigate through life nowadays?*

DT: Yeah, I mean, I had to learn who I was all over again, and it forced me to reevaluate, to think about what is important to me and what is not important to me and to value life in a way that I don't think I probably would have had I not gone through that experience. Because life is fleeting and it's also extremely precarious in the sense of good and bad on a day-to-day basis. I had to learn that the hard way. I don't think you necessarily do. I think I was probably just naive, and I still live by those values, but maybe I'm more realistic about how to achieve them and also what other forces are at play.

*ES: I think I'll take this end statement because it's really quite beautiful to just remember that life is fleeting, but that life can actually be very nice and it is super valuable. And I would at this point actually just thank you for sharing all these experiences and explaining a bit more how these experiences were for you and what this all meant. So thank you very much for being here today.*

DT: Yeah, thank you for asking great questions and having a very nice discussion.

*ES: Thank you. So I would like to thank our listeners for joining us today, and I would also invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks as well as to curiously plunge into the multitude of texts and further podcasts that can be found on our website, [www.metis.ethz.ch](http://www.metis.ethz.ch), the internet portal for intercultural wisdom, literature and wisdom practices. You can also find more information in the show notes. Thank you very much for listening and goodbye.*

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