

**TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH
STEVE ELLIS
13 NOVEMBER 2012**

QUESTION: Why did your daughter join the Army?

STEVE: Well, Lynn and I have often asked that. I was actually down at a meeting in New Mexico and she called me on the cell phone from Bend, where she was in junior college and told me she had enlisted and I, of course, was a little surprised. You want to be very supportive of your children and I asked her, well have you talked to your mother? She said, yeah dad, I just called her and she asked me the same question, have you talked to dad? So, she said, I thought I'd give you a call. Jessie, always adventuresome, was looking for, you know, something new, where she could perhaps define herself differently than her older brother and younger sister. She wanted to be a medic from the get-go. Jessica, of course, is a very caring person. As she grew up, she cared a lot about others. Her mother, my wife, is a nurse and maybe she felt it was sort of her calling to do that. I think she had some thoughts that perhaps sometime even following in her mother's footsteps, being a nurse. I know she had talked about that.

QUESTION: What were your feelings when she decided to join?

STEVE: As a father, of a daughter, anxiety was my initial feeling. But I thought, all right, she wants to be a medic and I guess initially I didn't envision her being in combat either. For some reason I had visions of her perhaps in a military hospital in Germany. So the first time I really felt some fear, as a father was when I found out she was going in the 101st Airborne Division. She had finished her combat medic training program at Fort Sam, Houston, and I remember her calling on the phone and she said, well, they're talking to me about airborne. Because of her high fitness scores, she had very high fitness scores. She ran cross-country, track in high school and swam. Then she called us back and told us she was going to be going to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, 101st, and I thought, okay, 101st, you know, tip of the spear. I thought this is going to put her in harm's way. It didn't really register with her mother about what that unit was and how that unit goes where there's trouble. And so, as a father, then I was worried about her.

QUESTION: How many times did she deploy?

STEVE: She deployed twice. She was killed about five months into her second deployment. Her first deployment wasn't too long after she went to Fort Campbell. They were working primarily a very troubled area in Southwest Baghdad. She was assigned to a group that included combat engineers, so she would often accompany these route clearance missions. These combat engineers would go out on route clearance and look for these roadside bombs, Improvised Explosive Devices I believe they called them, and try to keep these routes clear. So, that was her primary job. Of course they had a clinic there in camp and Soldiers get sick like all of us do and she would do rotations through the clinic and other assignments, but, it's my understanding that she primarily worked with combat engineers on her first tour, and then also on her second tour.

QUESTION: Is her job a dangerous occupation?

STEVE: It was, and the more you know, it's interesting. My father, her grandfather, was in the infantry in Europe in WWII and he would write letters home and, as I understand from my grandmother when she was alive, it would take a while to get those. In this war, emails, phone

calls — when they weren't blacked out, they would get blacked out when they had a combat death in the unit, so, when they didn't — she'd stay in touch. So, we were able to follow some of what she was doing, what she could say, because they had to be careful, obviously, they couldn't say things that would result in the enemy getting information. So she was guarded, of course, what you say, but you can put the pieces together. They would go out on these missions and she would said, well we got blown up, and her mom, blown up? Well, I finally found out what that meant is when we were out on these route clearance missions, that meant something went bang before they found it. And that's the term that they used, and her buddies used that too. So, it sounds alarming but it wasn't always bombing, it meant sometimes they'd find something that went off first. So, they would ride, primarily as a medic, in this Buffalo Armored Vehicle, it's a V-bottom vehicle, it has a claw on it and it's armored with armor glass and the medic would ride in there because in their convoy I understand that that was the most survival vehicle and you want your medic to survive to treat the others. And so, that's where she was, in that Buffalo and then she would also help look for these devices as part of her job. So she earned what's called a Combat Medic Badge on her first tour of Iraq and I really didn't understand what that means. She sort of downplayed it so I Googled that, I thought, what is this, and I found out what that means. It's like a Combat Infantry Badge for a medic, essentially. So, if you're a medic, you earn that by treating wounded buddies under direct enemy fire. She's very nonchalant really about this and when I heard this and I thought, okay, she's getting shot at out there. When I confronted her on that, she said, yes dad, I've been shot at, so sure, she's on that frontline clearly. What amazed me is she didn't sound real excited about it when I talked to her, sort of like, this is my job and if I don't do this I'm letting my buddies down. I remember she was home on leave once, we were out there at our rural home in Eastern Oregon, and we were on the back deck and I approached this thing about the war, it's the first time I've done that, and she said, dad, I have to go, I'm letting my buddies down. So, it was really this threat of I'm there for my buddies, I'm their medic, I've got to take care of these guys, they need me and I'm not going to let them down. And she was pretty firm about that. I believe that she was committed to that.

QUESTION: The general we had here yesterday said that service men and women don't sacrifice for their country they sacrifice for their buddies.

STEVE: I agree with that now based on my discussions, not only with Jessica, but her actions and then our discussions with her buddies, you know, after she died, of course. When the unit came back from Iraq we went to Fort Campbell and the Army was very graciously. They allowed us to meet with her buddies that were with her that night when they got hit. It was a very emotional meeting, but I think it was very helpful to us and I'm sure it was helpful to them. They told us all the details about that night and we still stay in touch with some of them. We could tell they had a very tight bond, a company, they were very close, they did look out for her and she looked out for them. They told us, too, that she trained them, she was a medic, the doc, they called her, Doc Ellis. I realized you have to earn that title. Her buddies said, you know, really even after she as gone, her training that she had given the others saved lives. They felt bad they could not stop her bleeding that night, they told us they could not stop her bleeding, they apologized to us and more than once at that meeting. There was a bond there, you can feel it.

QUESTION: What happened on the 11th?

STEVE: It was a Mother's Day, 11th of May; the Army came to our door Mother's Day night. It was after dark, my wife had actually gone to bed. I was sitting on the couch reading a book and

there was a knock on the door and nobody comes to the door out there in the boonies where we live on a Sunday night. So I thought, well, our horses must have gotten out, sometimes our horses get loose, maybe the neighbor's coming to say gather your horses. So I turn the light on and open the door and you see those two Class A Uniforms and you know why they're there, I mean, they don't have to say a thing. I knew immediately why they were there, it was a Chaplain and an NCO. It's just a very numb feeling, they don't have to say anything, they tell you but they really don't say anything. They don't stay long, there's no need to stay long. That was Mother's Day, it will never be the same for my wife or us. Interestingly enough, the next day some flowers arrived and we thought there's some kind person that's sending flowers but it was from Jessica. What she had done, she never forgot her mother on Mother's Day, never forget. So, before she went out on her last mission, she got online and ordered these flowers for her mother and they showed up on the next day with a card. Linda still has that card and she may even have some of those dried flowers. But the mission, according to her buddies and her colonel, they were out on a route clearance mission that night, it was Mother's Day night Baghdad time, it would have been Mother's Day morning in Eastern Oregon, Pacific Time. They were out route clearance and her vehicle was struck by three projectiles, shape charges, which is, I think they called them an EFP, a formed projectile that's manually fired that struck her vehicle, the passenger side. The armor stopped one of the three and the vehicle burned and there's apparently one armored door on the back so they all had to get out the back door, get Jessica out the back door and down on the road, and she did not survive, did not survive that. But she, what happened actually the month before, in April, they were out on a route clearance mission and they got hit and we don't have all the details, except Jessica had called us after that had happened and we got on the telephone again, and Linda and I were talking with her and she told us she had gotten hit, the vehicle caught on fire and they all got out and she, her mother, said, well are you okay, and she said, well, I got my bell rung and she said she had just some scrapes and bruises and got her bell rung and her aide bag, medics have an aide bag, she said that burned up. But all five of them were able to get out. And again, she was sort of casual about the conversation and her mother was very alarmed and obviously showed it a little bit more than me, but again, I start connecting this and you think okay, she's going out on these missions, they're getting hit, they're finding these things, sometimes these things find them first. She's four months into a twelve, fifteen month tour, you're starting to think about chances and so forth, it was going through my mind, I was clearly worried. What could a father do clear on the other side of the world, come out, wrap your arms around this child and protect her? You cannot do that. So you feel this very helpless situation and you realize, well, this is what she's doing and she's got her buddies there, they'll be looking out for her. But it gave me a couple of things. One, just how brave she was, this woman who continued to go out on these missions. She went out again. The mission she died on we understand she volunteered for that mission. Sometimes I'd write some things down, or her mother has some of those things that she wrote down, and you could clearly see that she did have some concerns about safety. But, she was going out. This issue about a woman in combat, I mean, if that's in combat, I guess I don't know what it is. She was going out with these guys and they were getting shot at and things blowing up. She was going outside the wire time after time after time and other woman, other medics, other female medics she worked with. So, to me, I'm not a military person but to me that sounds like combat.

QUESTION: What are your thoughts about the price of freedom?

STEVE: Well, freedom comes with a cost. It's not free. It comes at a very high cost, lives, through the Nation's conflicts from the American Revolution through my great grandfather, you know, the Navy and WWI, my father in the Army Infantry in France and Europe and WWII. All these conflicts, the current one, come at cost, lives, mostly young people. My daughter was 24. I think when my dad was in Europe he was 19 or 20 years old. Very young people shouldered this burden for us and yes, there is a price of freedom, and we pay dearly, and Jessica and many others have paid with their lives for this land in parts of the world that are very unknown to them, far from home. Then of course, there are many families, Gold Star families, over the decades, all these conflicts that carry this for the rest of their lives. Recently, a few months ago, we had a family there in rural Baker County Oregon where our home is and they lost their son in Afghanistan, the Army. We knew this couple, and in fact, the father called me on the phone to tell me their son had been lost and he wanted to know about this journey. When I met with him, I said, you know, you don't get over this, but you can get through it, you'll get through it but you won't get over it. So, now there's another couple in Baker County that share this loss. But it's a cost to freedom, lives, families whose lives have changed forever. Out here in Section 60 [Arlington National Cemetery] where our daughter is I talk to the families out there and we all share a common bond now. And yes, we are close to our families, we are family now. Today a lot of people in this country don't know what these Gold Star families are, in WWII they knew, not as many people know now.

QUESTION: What can we as a Nation do to better recognize this kind of sacrifice?

STEVE: Well, money in these states of these Gold Star family license plates; and we have, of course, one on our vehicle and it's amazing the number of people that see that Gold Star family plate and they ask me, what does that mean. I say, that's the license plate you don't want to qualify for and that really throws them. Then when I tell them what it's about you see a very stunned look. I noticed the WWII era people, they know what it means, military people know what it means, but outside of that, they really don't and so I think people should support Gold Star families. I think what can the public do. There are many groups like TAPS [Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors] and so forth that support these families. Many of these service men and women who have paid the ultimate sacrifice, they have left not only parents but they left children, they've left spouses, and anything we can do to help support those families and those children and spouses, I think is a good thing. Understanding is important, it's important that we don't forget these fallen heroes, that we honor the sacrifice that these people made, like Jessica made and the other women and men made over the years. You know, Memorial Day is an important day in this country, as it should be, and Veteran's Day is another important day to remember and honor men and women that serve in the military. These days, it's all-volunteer, it hasn't always been that way, but these people all volunteered to do this.

QUESTION: What is the importance of a place like this?

STEVE ELLIS: Oh, this Women's Memorial, it's a wonderful very meaningful place for women and men. When we buried Jessica here at Arlington, we didn't know a whole lot about the Women's Memorial quite honestly, it wasn't something we heard about in the Pacific Northwest. We wandered in here and we thought wow. We registered Jessica, we thought this is really neat. We looked at some of the exhibits and we thought what a wonderful thing. We wandered down to the Hall of Honor at the end where the flags are and we saw a uniform in there, **Sam Huff**, from Arizona, a young woman in the Army who was killed as I recall a few years before our

daughter. I remember her father, after Jessica died, sent us a CD with some music on it. His daughter had played in the band and he sent this and I looked and I connecting the dots and I thought, that it's his daughter's uniform there. So we registered Jessica and I met one of the curators here and she was asking us about Jessie and she said maybe we could do a little exhibit. We didn't say yes immediately, we had to think about this and so we thought about it long and, you know, this might be a nice way to not only honor Jessica, but honor women who served, all of them. That's what Jessica's about. It's not about her, but it's about everybody. So we loaned them one of her ACU uniforms that came back in a personal effects, and then a helmet with a heart on it. We learned that helmet, I can tell you it's something I don't think we were supposed to have, but her buddies over at Fort Campbell, they all got around us and then this thing was pushed up to us. I remember I saw it sort of coming up through the group and then they said this is from us. So, it's out here, its part of that exhibit. I hope the Army doesn't try to take it away, I don't think they would [LAUGHS]. There's a stethoscope there. Her mother, my wife, is a nurse practitioner. When Jessica graduated from combat medic training Fort Sam Houston, that was her graduation gift from Linda and it came back in her personal effects and so we assumed she used that on both her tours in Iraq. Her Bronze Star and Purple Heart, of course, are on display too. We shared some emails and some pictures of her in Iraq, and then there's one of her when she was on first service fire crew on the Freemont National Forest, before she went in the Army, our wildlife firefighter daughter [LAUGHS] before the Army days. I think this memorial really symbolizes a couple things. One, the service that women have made to the military in this country since the American Revolution; not only the service that they made, sacrifice they made, some the ultimate sacrifice for their country. So, I'm extremely proud that Jessica is part of this, and proud of all the women, really, that have stepped up and served this great Nation. Because it is a great Nation and we need to thank all of them for their service. So, I think it's very fitting that this memorial's here where it is in Arlington, right next to the Nation's Capitol. The public, people, all over the country, they come here to Arlington, come up to the tomb and many of them come in here. This is a fitting place, I think, for it and they do a wonderful job here.

QUESTION: Thank you for sharing your story with us.

STEVE ELLIS: Well, I'm glad that someone's telling the story. When I was trying to think where I was on 9/11, I was back here in a meeting in D.C. I'd flown in on Monday and I remember seeing that column coming from the Pentagon, the Arlington Cemetery, and never at that time would I have envisioned that as a result of that, that I would someday have a daughter, yes, a daughter killed in action and buried in Arlington National Cemetery. I never would have envisioned that that day. So, one never knows what events are going to make changes in one's life. You never know what events can lead to a knock on the door, like we had, on Mother's Day night, in rural Eastern Oregon. I still think about that, to this day, how many of our lives changed for that, some of us even more so than others.

QUESTION: It's courageous of you to talk about this.

STEVE ELLIS: Two years ago I probably couldn't have, you know, time heals. I gave a talk last night that I could not have given two years ago. I don't know if you were there last night, I was really worried about getting through that. It's one thing to write that on a keyboard, a laptop. It's another thing to give that, and I was nervous. Maybe the good thing is there were so many lights there, I couldn't really see all those people out in front of me. But it was important to tell about

Jessie through her buddies' eyes. You know, not so much my eyes, as a father, raising that child, but through the eyes of people that she trained with and that were with her when she died.