

Dan Rather Reports

Episode Number: 240

Episode Title: G.I. Gangs

Description: Reports that gang members are enlisting in the U.S. military have terrified police.

DAN RATHER (ON CAMERA)

GOOD EVENING FROM NEW YORK. IT'S NO SECRET THAT THE U.S. MILITARY FOCUSES RECRUITING EFFORTS IN POOR, OFTEN VIOLENT AND GANG-PLAGUED NEIGHBORHOODS. IT IS HERE WHERE MANY YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN WITHOUT EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES – SOME WITH TROUBLED PASTS--HAVE FOUND MILITARY SERVICE AS A NEW START, A WAY OUT. BUT POLICE ON PATROL IN THE NATION'S GANGLANDS ARE WORRIED THAT RECRUITERS AREN'T DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THOSE SEEKING JOB SKILLS, DISCIPLINE AND SERVICE TO COUNTRY FROM THOSE WHO REMAIN ENTANGLED IN CRIMINAL STREET GANGS. ESPECIALLY AS THEY RUSH TO FILL RANKS IN A TIME OF WAR. A RECENT REPORT PUBLISHED BY THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE HIGHLIGHTED LAW ENFORCEMENT FEARS. IT SAYS AN INCREASING NUMBER OF UNREFORMED GANGSTERS ARE RETURNING FROM MILITARY SERVICE TO THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS, ONLY NOW WITH ACCESS TO ARMS, LETHAL TRAINING AND COMBAT EXPERIENCE – ALL COURTESY OF THE U.S. MILITARY.

DAN RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WE'RE IN THE NATION'S GANG CAPITAL – A DENSE AND DANGEROUS 10-SQUARE MILE SWATH OF PAVEMENT, BUNKER-LIKE HOUSING PROJECTS AND FENCED IN HOMES IN SOUTH CENTRAL LOS ANGELES. IT'S A NEIGHBORHOOD GRIPPED BY NEARLY 60 STREET GANGS. MANY ARE AT WAR WITH EACH OTHER, BUT ALL SEE POLICE AS THEIR ENEMY.

SGT. SEAN COLOMEY, HEAD OF LAPD SOUTH CENTRAL GANG UNIT

A AK round, a 7.62 millimeter will go through this door, through my vest, through me, through my partner and right out the other side.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SGT. SEAN COLOMEY HEADS THE NEIGHBORHOOD'S GANG ENFORCEMENT UNIT. COLOMEY'S TEAM HAS FEWER THAN 30 OFFICERS PATROLLING AN AREA WITH 7,500 GANG MEMBERS. POLICE EXPECT DANGER, THEY REGULARLY CONFISCATE GUNS, INVESTIGATE MURDERS, BUT THEY ARE UNNERVED BY REPORTS THAT DOZENS OF YOUNG SOLDIERS HAVE RECENTLY RETURNED TO L.A.'S TOUGH NEIGHBORHOODS FROM IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN WITH MILITARY TRAINING AND ACCESS TO HEAVY ARMS.

COLOMEY

We've had gang members that were involved in shootings, turned around, were from the U.S. military, had been in Iraq and now have been arrested for murders that occurred within, within our division. One of the concerns as we as—as gang officers or even patrol officers working in the area that's gang infested is that with that type of knowledge, you're coming down the street. And you engage a suspect or a gang member with an—a shoulder weapon. And that person knows how to use that weapon. They have such a tactical advantage on you.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WE OBTAINED AN LAPD INTELLIGENCE REPORT IDENTIFYING DOZENS LA-AREA CRIMINAL GANGS WITH MEMBERS IN THE MILITARY. THE ROSTER INCLUDES TRADITIONAL BLACK GANGS, LIKE THE CRIPS AND BLOODS – ASIAN GANGS, HISPANIC GANGS, EVEN THE HELL'S ANGELES. THE DOCUMENT COUNTED 80 MILITARY-TRAINED GANG MEMBERS NOW LIVING IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY – AND 20 OTHERS IN NEARBY AREAS. COLOMEY AND HIS UNIT RECENTLY INVESTIGATED A GANG SHOOTING IN THE SPRAWLING NICKERSON GARDENS HOUSING PROJECT- A SADLY FAMILIAR PART OF HIS JOB. BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING STARTLINGLY DIFFERENT ABOUT THIS PARTICULAR SHOOTING SPREE. MULTIPLE WITNESSES REPORTED THE SHOOTER HAD BEEN CROUCHED IN A MILITARY STANCE.

COLOMEY

This individual had the rifle, we call it, in the low ready. It was down. And he was walking on the move. When he came up to a victim that he was going to kill or shoot he brought the weapon up in a controlled fire. And then he would come down, assess the situation, and then he would move to the next victim and shoot the next victim. That type of statements that we're getting from witnesses to shootings out here, obviously the first thing we're thinking, this person has some sort of type of training.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IT MAY BE HARD TO GET YOUR HEAD AROUND COLOMEY'S CONCLUSION - - BUT LAW ENFORCEMENT AROUND THE COUNTRY IS CONCERNED ABOUT THUGS HAVING THE WHEREWITHAL TO USE MILITARY TRAINING AND WEAPONS AGAINST POLICE. AND THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED HERE. THIS IS SURVEILLANCE TAPE OF MARINE ANDRES RAYA, AN IRAQ VETERAN WHO AUTHORITIES IDENTIFIED AS A GANG MEMBER. RAYA LED POLICE INTO THIS AMBUSH AT A LIQUOR STORE IN THE SMALL NORTHERN CALIFORNIA CITY OF CERES. WHEN IT WAS OVER, POLICE SGT. HOWARD STEVENSON WAS DEAD AND OFFICER SAM RYNO SERIOUSLY WOUNDED. EXPERTS SAY IT'S AN EXAMPLE OF THE VERY REAL DANGER OF ALLOWING GANG MEMBERS TO ENLIST IN THE MILITARY.

HUNTER GLASS, RETIRED FAYETTEVILLE GANG INVESTIGATOR

Now, he observes them. And what he's gonna do is, he's gonna go to the high ready position. He's gonna open fire and he's gonna move. And he's gonna continue his fire—

watch him—he continues his fire at a 45 degree angle. And then he sweeps, which is known as—as—slicing the pie, creating the cone of death. And he will pin those officers those officers have no place to go because as he is firing they can't run away.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HUNTER GLASS IS A RETIRED FAYETTEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA POLICE DEPARTMENT GANG INVESTIGATOR. HE SHOWS THIS VIDEOTAPE TO POLICE AND MILITARY OFFICIALS ACROSS THE COUNTRY TO PREPARE THEM FOR WHAT HE SAYS IS A GROWING PROBLEM- GANG MEMBERS WITH BETTER TACTICAL AND FIREARM TRAINING THEN POLICE THEMSELVES.

HUNTER GLASS

He's not doing-- Dirty Harry or, you know, Scarface, shooting off his hip. He goes straight to a true military position. He's gonna go to the high ready position. This is not something he would've learned off the streets as a-- as a gang member. This is something he actually picked up in the military. Look at him. He's takin' his time. We can see the doors open. He's not there to rob this store. The storeowner's movin' around...He's there to trap policemen. He's there to trap police officers. There's no two ways about it.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IN THE END, POLICE CORNERED AND KILLED RAYA AS HE HELD HIS POSITION AND FIRED A HAIL OF BULLETS. THE 19-YEAR-OLD MODESTO RESIDENT HAD BEEN SCHEDULED TO RETURN TO DUTY.

RATHER

At this moment, what do you think is the single most important thing for Americans to know about gangs in the military?

GLASS

That it is real. And in the long run, it is a major threat. That is my personal belief-- beliefs.

RATHER

Based on your experience and study of what, 15 years of this?

GLASS

Yes. I would-- without a doubt. Let's look at how many gang me-- how many gangrelated deaths there are in the United States on a yearly basis. And then let's see what happens when we start giving them the ability to shoot even better.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

A FORMER ARMY PARATROOPER, GLASS WORKED THE GANG DETAIL NEAR FORT BRAGG AND WAS ONE OF THE FIRST TO SPEAK OUT ABOUT GANGS IN THE MILITARY. HE HAS COLLECTED DOZENS OF PHOTOS OF GANG GRAFFITI IN IRAQ AND SERVICEMEN AND WOMEN SHOWING GANG

HAND SIGNS. HE ALSO ASSISTED THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE IN RESEARCHING ITS JANUARY REPORT, WHICH IS TITLED "GANG-RELATED ACTIVITY IN THE US ARMED FORCES INCREASING." THE REPORT RAISES THE SPECTER THAT GANG MEMBERS WOULD DELIBERATELY INFILTRATE THE MILITARY. IT SENT SHUDDERS THROUGH THE NATION'S LAW ENFORCEMENT COMMUNITY.

GLASS

I see it more of a problem for us in the streets than in the military. And what I think we're gonna see after this war is a whole new concept, a more violent. A lot more high-profile type robberies and criminal behavior.

RATHER

Is this because of training gang members receive in the military from organization to weapons?

GLASS

Without-- without a doubt. You know, you have gang members that are-- that are smart enough to go into the military intelligence fields. And they do get past some of the security clearances from time to time. You know, military training-- our soldiers are very accurate these days. They don't waste a lot of ammunition. Technique is a lot better than it was in WWII.

RATHER

Well, I certainly don't wanna be flip in any way about this, but I could hear someone, at least in their minds' ear, saying, "You know what? This is a really tough war, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. And gang members might be pretty handy to handle these tough guys who operate without rules in these two countries. So bring 'em on. Put 'em in the military. Train 'em, send 'em over there. That might be a plus." What about that argument?

GLASS

Well, you know, you can get a really mean junkyard dog. And he's really good at biting people and keeping people outta the junkyard. But if the junkyard folds, what do you do with the dog?

RATHER

I take your point.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

GLASS TELLS US ABOUT ARMY SGT. JUWAN JOHNSON. THE 25-YEAR-OLD FATHER WAS KILLED IN A GANG INITIATION RITUAL IN A PARK NEAR HIS BASE IN GERMANY. IT TOOK PLACE HERE IN WHAT IS KNOWN AS A BEAT-IN.

GLASS

The most common way to join a gang across the United States, almost any gang, whether it be Latino, whether it be black, white or other is to be jumped in. And that requires that you take a beating for so many minutes. You're not allowed to fight back. You're-- you're showing how tough you are and your manhood, so to speak. And you actually just take a severe beating, a physical beating.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE ARMY OFFERED A \$25,000 REWARD FOR TIPS IN THE CASE AND MADE SOME ARRESTS. BUT GLASS SAYS THE ARMY DIDN'T DO ENOUGH TO PROBE WHAT ROLE GANGS MAY HAVE PLAYED IN JOHNSON'S DEATH.

RATHER

What's the problem here? If the military has gangs in it, it seems to me they'd wanna do something about it.

GLASS

True. It would seem that way. But, of course, we're also in the midst of a war. And-- we need a lot of boots on the ground. And so recruitment is-- where-- well, the war's not as-- it's not as touchy-feely as it was a couple years ago. So getting people to come into the military or stay in the military is getting a little bit more difficult.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE MARINES DECLINED TO COMMENT FOR THIS STORY. THE ARMY, IN A WRITTEN STATEMENT, SAID IN PART: "THIS IS A SERIOUS ISSUE, BUT WE DON'T SEE AN INCREASING TREND." SINCE THE IRAQ WAR BEGAN, THERE'S BEEN A 65 PERCENT INCREASE OF WAIVERS GRANTED TO RECRUITS WITH CRIMINAL RECORDS, ACCORDING TO CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY. THE ARMY ALONE GRANTED MORE THAN 8,000. THE ARMY SAYS IT -QUOTE-- "...HAS A SOUND PROCESS FOR CONSIDERING AND GRANTING WAIVERS..." AND SAYS THAT IN 2006, IT INVESTIGATED ONLY 10 FELONY GANG CASES INVOLVING SOLDIERS.

WILL BEALL, GANG HOMICIDE INVESTIGATOR IN SOUTH CENTRAL LOS ANGELES

I've interviewed guys that were suspects on a murder of mine that were-- that were in the National Guard.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WILL BEALL IS A GANG HOMICIDE INVESTIGATOR IN SOUTH CENTRAL LOS ANGELES. HE TOLD US ABOUT THE FIRST TIME HE STUMBLED ACROSS ENLISTED GANG MEMBERS.

BEALL

I had the guy pull off his shirt and he had a 60 tattoo and he had some other Crip tattoo. And then he had these other tattoos that didn't look like gang tattoos. Some kind of skull

with a helmet on it and he kind of smirked when he saw my face and I said, "Hey. Hey, you're not in the military, are you, man?" And-- he said, "Yeah. I'm in-- I'm in the National Guard." And he said-- "I just got back from a border mission, you know, Homeland Security." And I was like, "Oh, man, that's--" you get a real-- a real sinking feeling that this stuff is gonna get out of control.

RATHER

Obviously-- he had served active time in the National Guard as guarding the border.

BEALL

Yeah, guarding our border.

RATHER

And he came back and resumed his gang business.

BEALL

Yeah, he came back on a leave and was doing his gang business.

RATHER

Describe for me what it's like for a young person to live in South Central. What is it like?

BEALL

They're constantly aware of the-- the stranglehold that these gangs have on the neighborhood. And-- and so I think for a kid, the decision to join a gang isn't necessarily, at least in my experience, it doesn't-- it doesn't look like a moral lapse to me. I think, in many cases, it's a-- it's a survival decision.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BEALL BROUGHT US TO SOUTH CENTRAL -- IN THE HEART OF ROLLING 60'S CRIPS TURF. NOTE THE GANG'S GRAFFITI ON THE TREE. HE SAYS OVER DECADES THERE HAVE BEEN THOUSANDS OF UNSOLVED MURDERS IN THE AREA AND THAT DOZENS OF MURDERERS WALK FREE.

RATHER

I notice, for one thing, nearly everybody here has a fence.

BEALL

Right. A lot of fences, a lot of dogs. You'll see these apartment complexes have heavy steel security gates, like the sort of portcullis in front of the apartment complex.

RATHER

Well, what happens when you remove a gang member from a gang?

BEALL

Well, that's hard. You know, you remove a 20 year old black guy that's got a couple of felonies on his record, he's got some tattoos. And-- he has an epiphany. He gets knocked

off his horse on the road to Damascus and decides he wants to change his entire life. Where does he go? What does he do? He's-- he's virtually unemployable.

RATHER

Even McDonald's or Burger King probably wouldn't employ him.

BEALL

I don't think they're gonna wanna employ somebody with a felony on their record. I think he'll have a hard time. And you know, McDonald's or Burger King is-- that's tough duty for a guy that's trying to raise a family or, you know, trying to pay off debt.

DEVAUGHN TOWNSEND, FORMER GANG MEMBER

I work at a coffee shop. It's like I-- I seen if I woulda had the right parents and the right guidance, I coulda been somebody special. You know. I coulda-- I coulda done somethin' with my life.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DEVAUGHN TOWNSEND SAYS HE IS A FORMER MEMBER OF THE BLOODS STREET GANG. HE CAME FROM THE MEAN STREETS OF LA. BUT IT'S A LIFE HE WANTS TO LEAVE BEHIND BY JOINING THE ARMY.

TOWNSEND

Being in a gang made me feel safer. It made me feel like I was lord of the land. It made me feel like I could do whatever I want to. Now I could fight whoever I want to. I was just ignorant looking for people that felt like me, you know. I didn't really have anybody telling me go to college, be somebody, you know. I seen a commercial that said, "You make them strong. But now we'll make them Army strong." I seen that commercial at 16 years old. And I was like, "You know what? I wanna be Army strong." Because I'm strong now by the things I've been to that'll go without sayin'. And the things that I've just accomplished and even though they weren't much, but, to the streets it's a lot, you know. It's like, "Yeah, I think I'll be Army strong."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DEVAUGHN IS NOW A FATHER OF TWO. HE JUST TURNED 18 AND MOVED HIS FAMILY TO A QUIET DESERT COMMUNITY EAST OF LOS ANGELES. HE'S BEEN STUDYING FOR HIS G.E.D. AND SPEAKING REGULARLY WITH AN ARMY RECRUITER.

TOWNSEND

He asked me about my past. But I always tell him nothing. I've done nothing. Because my adult record has nothin' on it. Everything I did was juvenile. You know. And I just got off of probation in September. And now I have a clean slate basically. So I tell them nothing. I don't even tell them about my past and the things I done as a minor.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MANY OTHER FORMER GANG MEMBERS ARE LINING UP TO WIPE CLEAN

ANYTHING THAT WOULD PREVENT THEM FROM ENLISTING - FROM PETITIONING TO HAVE THEIR JUVENILE RECORDS SEALED TO LITERALLY ZAPPING AWAY VIVID REMNANTS OF THEIR GANG TIES. FOUNDED BY A JESUIT PRIEST, LOS ANGELES' HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES HELPS GANG MEMBERS -- INCLUDING THOSE WHO WANT TO ENTER THE MILITARY -- LEAVE THE CRIMINAL LIFE. MANY OF THE EMPLOYEES HERE ARE FORMER GANG MEMBERS AND IT OFFERS JOB TRAINING AND JOB PLACEMENT, COUNSELING AND A FREE TATTOO REMOVAL SERVICE. THERE IS A ONE-YEAR WAITING LIST FOR TATTOO REMOVAL BECAUSE DEMAND IS SO HIGH.

MELISSA MARTINEZ, TATTOO REMOVAL CLINICIAN

We do have a priority. Our priorities are minors-- and anyone that have gang-affiliated tattoos on their face, neck and arms, as well as anything court-ordered, and anyone from placement homes.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MELISSA MARTINEZ IS A TATTOO REMOVAL CLINICIAN AT HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES. SHE SAYS THE CLINIC RECEIVES MORE THAN A DOZEN CALLS FROM MILITARY RECRUITERS EACH MONTH. THE RECRUITS ARE ALSO ALLOWED TO JUMP THE LINE.

MARTINEZ

As long as they bring a letter from their recruiter, stating that they are gonna join, and they need these tattoos removed as soon as possible. And then we will schedule them in as soon as possible. They feel relieved, and they have a better opportunity, and a clear slate to start off new.

RATHER

MANY SEE MILITARY SERVICE AS THE BEST CHANCE AT PERMANENTLY STRAIGHTENING OUT. AND FOR SOME, IT MAY BE A LAST CHANCE, LIKE DEVAUGHN TOWNSEND.

TOWNSEND

I'll risk penitentiary, you know, for-- for happiness. For financial stability, you know? I'd risk goin' to the penitentiary. Honestly. So, I mean, I don't want to. That's why I want to go to the Army. That's why I want to be something more than I am. I want to think differently than I think now, you know? They're gonna see how motivated I am. They're going to see how determined I am. And they're gonna see that I've never minding anything that they're saying. You know. Anything wrong, whether it's to-- to break me down, I'm not payin' any attention to that. And I'm standin' with my chin directly to your nose and I'm looking you directly in your eyes and nothin' that you're sayin' or doin' is bothering me. That's how I'm gonna show them. I'm gonna show them with strength. I'm gonna show them that I am Army strong. Because I've mastered the streets, now it's time to master the world.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DEVAUGHN'S RECRUITER MIGHT NOT KNOW ABOUT HIS GANG PAST, BUT IT'S NO MYSTERY THAT TEENAGERS HELD IN JUVENILE PRISONS HAVE COMMITTED CRIMES. THE LOS ANGELES DEPARTMENT OF PROBATION, WHICH RUNS THE CITY'S JUVENILE FACILITIES, ESTIMATES THAT MORE THAN 50 PERCENT OF ITS WARDS HAVE GANG TIES. STILL, IN RECENT MONTHS, REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE ARMY AND MARINES HAVE VISITED LOS ANGELES COUNTY JUVENILE CAMPS ON CAREER DAYS. BUT THE COUNTY DENIES THE VISITS WERE FOR RECRUITMENT.

REP. MIKE THOMPSON, CONGRESSMAN FROM CALIFORNIA

There is an ignorance-- on the part of the military as to how to identify and-- and-- and how to-- to screen for-- gang members.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

CONGRESSMAN MIKE THOMPSON REPRESENTS A RURAL DISTRICT IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, WHICH INCLUDES THE CITY OF CERES. IT IS HERE WHERE SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS CAUGHT THAT SHOOTOUT THAT LEFT A POLICE OFFICER DEAD. HE WORRIES THAT THE MILITARY'S NEED FOR RECRUITS ALLOWED TOO MANY GANG MEMBERS TO SLIP BY.

THOMPSON

I know that they have-- lowered their standards. And they're letting folks in now who had-- performed past actions that-- in the past, would have disallowed them to serve.

THOMPSON

This is an important amendment that is a first step...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SO THOMPSON INTRODUCED AN AMENDMENT TO THE 2008 DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION BILL THAT PROHIBITS SERVICEMEN AND WOMEN FROM JOINING GANGS AND ASSOCIATING WITH GANGSTERS.

THOMPSON

...And this is the issue of members of criminal street gangs joining the military. The military did a lot to straighten me out. And I'm sure there are other kids that-- that had that same experience, and I don't think we should shut that door. But we need to make sure that this criminal element is not taking advantage of the military and coming back home and then taking advantage of their community.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

GANG POLICE WE SPOKE TO SAY IT'S A RARE GANGSTER WHO CAN PRY HIMSELF FROM THE STREETS. HOMICIDE INVESTIGATOR WILL BEALL.

RATHER

Well, how often do gang members reform? Are you a believer in gang members

reforming?

BEALL

You know, I hope they do. I-- I think that one of the things about my line of work is that if they-- if they reform and get out of-- of the life, they don't come up on my radar. So I'm not necessarily in contact with the ones who've actually genuinely gotten out.

RATHER

Well, correct me if I'm wrong, it sounds to me like you'd like to believe but you're a bit skeptical.

BEALL

I haven't run across, in my line of work, many who-- who don't wind up in prison or dead. Once you're in, it seems to me that those are the two ways that you get out.

DAN RATHER (ON CAMERA)

THE MILITARY HAS OFTEN BEEN A REFUGE FOR THOSE LOOKING TO CHANGE THEIR LIVES. AT THE HEART OF OUR REPORT TONIGHT, THE QUESTION: CAN THAT INCLUDE HARDENED GANG MEMBERS? COMING UP, YOU'LL MEET A YOUNG MAN WHOSE REMARKABLE LIFE STORY PROVES THERE ARE NO EASY ANSWERS.

DAN RATHER (ON CAMERA)

TONIGHT, WE'VE EXAMINED THE CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE OF GANGS IN THE MILITARY. SHOULD THE MILITARY, IN A TIME OF WAR, OPEN ITSELF TO GANG MEMBERS WHO SAY THEY WANT TO REFORM? WE SAT DOWN WITH A YOUNG MAN WHOSE LIFE STORY - FROM TEENAGE GANGSTER TO IRAQI WAR HERO - PUTS A FACE ON THIS DEBATE. RETIRED U.S. MARINE

SARGENT MARCO MARTINEZ, FORMER GANG MEMBER AND MARINE

I mean, I was as far as deep as anyone else was into gang life, but look how I turned out. No, if it hadn't a been for the Marine Corps I'd be dead right now or I'd be in prison. And I know this because when I was a gang member I thought everything that I was doing was right.

RATHER

Did you commit any violent crimes while you were in the gang?

MARTINEZ

Sure. We went around-- jumping people-- shooting at people. People tried to kill me on several occasions, stab me. I mean, it's just a violent lifestyle.

RATHER

Did you get arrested?

MARTINEZ

I've been arrested a few times-- nothing major. I was always the type of person who tried to stay two steps in front of the police. And normally, I was able to-- do things without being caught.

RATHER

Did you carry a weapon?

MARTINEZ

Sure. When I was in ninth grade-- that was really the-- the time when, I guess you could say, some of the worst things were happening to me. I-- I been-- someone had tried to kill me twice in my ninth grade year, and I needed to carry a-- a pistol. And I did it on several occasions.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MARTINEZ TELLS US HE ALMOST USED THE GUN TO KILL A GANG RIVAL OVER A GIRL. HE AND A GANG FRIEND STAKED OUT THE YOUNG MAN'S HOME PLANNING AN AMBUSH.

MARTINEZ

So now, since I had to show him how my gang does things, then the thing was to do-- since he tried to kill me, now we have to try to kill him. So, we waited for two days outside his house, waiting to kill the guy, but he never showed up.

RATHER

But he never showed up?

MARTINEZ

He never showed-- I don't know if he got wind of what was happening, or just by the grace of God-- I don't know what it was, but he never showed up. But if he would've showed up that day, I would've killed him.

RATHER

You would've killed him?

MARTINEZ

Yes, 'cause I thought that was the thing to do.

RATHER

And it turned out to be lucky for you, he didn't show up.

MARTINEZ

You know, there's times when I'm laying in bed, and I'm just thinking to myself, "Why were you doing that? Why were you there". And thankfully, he just never showed up. 'Cause me and my friend were sitting there, waiting to kill him.

RATHER

Let me ask a few questions about that. Were-- were you-- well, was it an adrenaline-- rush for you? Was it the adrenaline that did it?

MARTINEZ

I think a lot of it was-- was the power and respect that I got at such a young age from being in a gang. I can remember walking down the-- the hallways in my middle school and high school, and people knew what gang I was from. And they would, you know, part the Red Sea, just because they knew my gang. And that kind of blows your ego up, and your head up, and you start to feel untouchable and things like that. And then that power trip just gets to you, and-- and-- and it just fuels your desire to create more images of you being more hardcore. And then before you know it, you're sitting in the front seat of a car, waiting to kill somebody, just to prove yourself.

RATHER

Now what, and who, got you to join the Marines?

MARTINEZ

Well, I used to have teachers tell me, "You know you're not gonna amount to anything". I mean, they would tell me to my face. And that really touched me in a way that-- I guess they thought it was gonna affect me negatively, but instead, it-- it made me motivated to say, "Hey, I don't wanna be a-- another person that they say—I remember that guy, and now he's doing, you know, what-- whatever job. And he's not amounting to anything". Anytime I walked home and said, "Mom, I gotta tell you something. Dad, I gotta tell you something", they would say, "What did you do this time?" "When's the court date?" I mean, they would already have these predisposed answers for me, for whatever I said. And I just got tired of disappointing them, 'cause I know that my-- my-- my mother and my father never intended for me to go down that route. So finally-- when I saw a Marine recruiter walk down the-- hallway of my high school. Something just washed over me. I just felt worthless when I saw him, 'cause here he was carrying that respect. He was wearing the distinguished uniform of the-- of the Marine Corps. And yet, he wasn't a gang member, but yet, he had more respect as a Marine than-- than I could ever have as a gang member. And when I saw that, I said, "You know what? I'm gonna join the Marine Corps".

RATHER

Now, did that recruiter, or anybody recruiting for the Marines, probe into your gang background?

MARTINEZ

Yeah. Well, that was one of the things. I have a gang tattoo. When he asked me, "Do you have any tattoos", as I was filling out questionnaires. And I said, "Yes". And he said, "Well, what does it say". It says, "Mi Vida Loca," which is a-- an old gangster saying from way back in the 50's and 60's. And--

RATHER

Translate that for me.

MARTINEZ

"My crazy life" And, when he saw that, he said, "This is gonna be a problem". And-- but he said, "I can tell that you actually wanna do this. You're not just, you know, coming here to try to avoid something. You wanna-- actually change your life. But the next person you talk to is above me and you have to convince him. Thankfully I was able to eke by the process. And the end result was I showed them what I was really made of. I was a true American. I wanted to be a Marine. And I did what I could to serve my country.

RATHER

You said there were several times where you just eked through? How did you do that?

MARTINEZ

Just-- I guess when they saw what I had to say-- they saw that I was sincere, and they let me go through the next phase, based off the fact of, you know, what I was telling them. "I don't-- I don't wanna be doing this anymore. I wanna change. I wanna make something of myself. I wanna show 'em that I can be more than a gang member." And I guess they saw that I was genuine, and they let me through the next phase.

RATHER

Well, anybody who's seen the movie Full Metal Jacket, or anything approaching it, knows what Marine boot camp is like. Did the DI's-- did the drill instructors give you an especially hard time, knowing that you had tattoos? Knowing you had been in a gang?

MARTINEZ

Every drill instructor I ever came across despised gangs. And they let me know that. Every time they saw my tattoo, they would always let me know, you know, "I hate gang members, and I'm gonna make sure that you don't ever do this in the Marine Corps". You know, because there's been people who get in the Marine Corps, who are gang members, and they don't drop the lifestyle. And they really, I guess you could say, disrespect the uniform, because, you know, as-- as a Marine, you're supposed to be a patriot. You're supposed to be a benefit to soc-- society, not a scourge.

RATHER

From boot camp, though Iraq, and back: did anybody in the military try to get you to join a gang?

MARTINEZ

There was a couple of guys who I remember in my unit, who were Marines, and they were still gangbanging. And most of these Marines were from LA. And we were stationed on Pendleton, so it was just a hop, skip, and a jump to LA. It's a 45 minute drive to LA, and they may have known about my tattoo, or maybe saw it when we were PT-ing, or whatever the case is. And later on, they try to, you know, offer 'em this gang,

and-- and this, and this, and this. And then it starts turning into an uncomfortable situation every time you see that person, because they're not treating you as a Marine. They're treating you as a gang member.

RATHER

how was carrying a gun in the Marines different from carrying a gun as you did, from what, junior high school up?

MARTINEZ

There's a profound difference between violence and senseless violence and violence that's done for good and violence done for evil. And I've done both. So I understand the moral difference between the two. And the main difference is-- when you carry a-- a-- a pistol or whatever you're doing, drive-by shootings for a gang, there's no purpose for it. It's over colors, girls, neighborhoods, things that don't matter, a line in the street that is different from the guy from the next block, something stupid. When you carry a-- a gun or a weapon for the-- for-- for me, for the Marine Corps, and you go around the world, you know it's to liberate people. You know it's for the right thing. You know it's-- when you carry that M16 and you have that 30 round magazine, you have it inserted, you have a round in the chamber, that round in the chamber is not to target a civilian. It's not to shoot a fellow American. It's to shoot America's enemies. And there was never a time when I was in Iraq or any other time I was in the Marine Corps where I thought oh what am I doing? I always knew what I was doing. Anytime I had my finger on the trigger and I had my eye on the rifle sites I knew what I was doing was right. As opposed to when I was a gang member and I was holding up that nine millimeter, I mean even as a gang member you have to think to yourself, okay I'm going to shoot this person, but what's if for?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IN WASHINGTON, A VETERANS' GROUP RECENTLY HONORED SGT. MARCO MARTINEZ AND OTHER WAR HEROES. HE STOOD BESIDE SOLDIERS DECORATED FOR BRAVERY IN KOREA, VIETNAM AND AFGHANISTAN. PART OF A DISTINGUISHED GROUP THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN UNIMAGINABLE TO HIM NOT LONG AGO, WHEN HE WAS STILL WITH HIS GANG.

ANNOUNCER AT VETERANS' EVENT

Marco became the first Hispanic American in the war on terror to receive the Navy Cross, the second highest award a Marine can receive for heroism during the battle of Tarimeya in Iraq in 2003.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MARTINEZ LED HIS OUTNUMBERED PLATOON TO SAFETY FROM A LETHAL AMBUSH -- RISKING HIS LIFE TO SINGLE-HANDEDLY TAKE CONTROL OF AN ENEMY OUTPOST WHILE UNDER HEAVY FIRE. HE RECOUNTS HIS TRANSITION FROM STREET THUG TO WAR HERO IN HIS RECENTLY PUBLISHED MEMOIR, "HARD CORPS."

RATHER

And you came out of it a hero.

MARTINEZ

That's what I've been called. I do have a Navy Cross. But the Navy Cross is not just a medal for me, even though it's a personal award. That-- that medal is for my whole unit. It's for my platoon, my squad. Because if I'd have been out there alone, I would've died within the first couple of minutes. You know, nothing happens by yourself. The Marine Corps is a team. And when I see that medal in my shadow box at home, it's not just for me. It's for them. And every time I see it, every-- every, single platoon member's face flashes in front of my eyes, because I know that, without them, none of that would have happened.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MARCO MARTINEZ IS NOW STUDYING BUSINESS AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE WHILE WORKING AS A SECURITY GUARD.