

Opening comments

I spent an afternoon in mid-January in the cold and wet town of Wolverhampton, England. It was my birthday! And I decided to spend it on a train to go and meet someone I had never met before. Craig Williams. I am glad I did!

Craig Williams is many things — a former Royal Marine Commando and sniper with 15 years of service across Iraq, Afghanistan and Arctic operations, a convicted felon who served two and a half years in prison, an ultra-marathon runner who has raced across the Sahara, the Namibian desert, the Peruvian Andes and the Swedish Arctic, and the founder of Urban Flex, what he proudly calls the only custom-built podcast studio in Wolverhampton.

He is, in the most unvarnished sense of the phrase, a man who has been to the edge and come back with something to say. And I listened.

I have 6 reflections on my conversation with 2 experiments I have been playing with since meeting Craig.

1: The Gift of Structure — Forging Character, Not Just Compliance

Craig talks about the word 'institution' with unusual nuance. In modern parlance, the word has been corrupted — we associate it with prisons, with mental health wards, with rigid bureaucracies that crush rather than cultivate. But Craig points to its Latin root: a word meaning 'how you stand, how you conduct yourself.' An institution, in its original sense, was a forge. It was a place of formation.

This resonates deeply with the work of developmental psychologist Robert Kegan, whose research on adult development identifies what he calls 'holding environments' — structures that simultaneously hold us and let us grow. The Royal Marines didn't just give Craig rules to follow; they gave him a self to inhabit. The distinction matters enormously, particularly for men in midlife who have left behind the scaffolding of careers, families or institutions that once defined them.

We also explored this theme with Matt Bunker in an earlier episode, where Matt described how the military gave structure to a young man whose domestic life

had been anything but ordered. The common thread is not obedience — it is formation. And the question Craig's story forces us to ask is this: without external structure, how do we deliberately build our own?

Experiment

For the next 30 days, design and commit to a personal 'daily operating rhythm' — a structured sequence of morning and evening anchors (movement, learning, reflection, service) that you treat as non-negotiable regardless of what the day throws at you. Don't just choose behaviours you already do. Choose ones that stretch you.

At the end of 30 days, journal what changed — not just in your productivity, but in your sense of self.

2: Comparison as Thief — and as Compass

One of the most memorable exchanges in this conversation is Craig's reframing of comparison. He acknowledges the familiar wisdom — comparison is the thief of joy — but adds a crucial caveat: when you are in the depths of despair, comparison can be a lifeline. Seeing that others have it worse does not diminish your pain; it contextualises it, and momentarily lifts you out of the gravity well of self-pity.

Research in social psychology supports this. Leon Festinger's original social comparison theory, later expanded by Thomas Wills in his work on 'downward comparison,' suggests that we naturally seek comparisons that restore our sense of adequacy when our self-esteem is threatened. Craig discovered this instinctively when, awaiting sentencing and stripped of his military career, he was assigned as a Volunteer Visiting Officer — notifying families of casualties. Suddenly, his own catastrophe felt manageable.

The deeper wisdom here is about perspective as a practice, not just a platitude. We tend to deploy perspective only in retrospect — 'I can see now how lucky I was.' Craig is suggesting something more deliberate: that we can cultivate perspective in real time, as a tool, even when it is uncomfortable to do so.



Experiment

Identify one area of your life where you currently feel stuck, resentful or hard done by. Now actively seek out someone — through conversation, through reading, through volunteering — who is navigating something genuinely harder. This is not about minimising your experience. It is about expanding your frame of reference. Spend at least two hours over the next fortnight in direct service or witness to someone whose challenges dwarf your own.

Notice what shifts.

3: Movement as Medicine — The Body as the First Responder

Craig's running career began in a prison yard, in flip-flops, bleeding. He ran not because it was healthy, not because he was training for anything, but because movement gave him a sliver of sovereignty in a world that had stripped everything else away. He couldn't control the other prisoners. He couldn't control the courts. He couldn't control what came through the door. But he could run. And when he ran, something shifted — in his body, in his mind, in his relationship with despair.

This is not metaphor. The neuroscience is unambiguous. Research by John Ratey, author of *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*, demonstrates that aerobic exercise increases levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) — essentially Miracle-Gro for the brain — while simultaneously regulating cortisol and activating the prefrontal cortex, the seat of rational thought and emotional regulation. When Craig says 'if you want to change your psychology, first change your physiology,' he is not quoting a motivational poster. He is describing a biological mechanism.

In this podcast, we have returned to this theme again and again — from our conversation with Dr. Peter Attia's principles on longevity to the work of Bessel van der Kolk, whose seminal book *The Body Keeps the Score* reminds us that trauma, stress and identity are stored somatically. The body is not a vehicle for the brain. For many men, it is the first and most direct portal back to themselves.



4: The Difference Between a Choice and a Decision

Craig makes a distinction that is easy to miss but profound in its implications. He talks about the moment in prison when he 'made a decision' — not a choice — to wring every opportunity the system had to offer. He did every course available. He ran every day. He worked in the gym. He built a CV from scratch. Choices, in his framing, are passive and reactive. Decisions are active and binding. A decision, once made, is not revisited every morning.

This maps almost precisely onto what psychologist Roy Baumeister calls 'decision fatigue' — the depletion of willpower that comes from repeatedly relitigating the same choices. When you make a genuine decision, you remove a category of future choices from your daily mental ledger. You are not deciding each morning whether to exercise, whether to learn, whether to show up. You have already decided. The only question is how.

Quote Carl and the habit formation

For men in midlife — particularly those navigating career transitions, relationship recalibrations or identity shifts — this distinction is operationally important. Many of us live in a state of perpetual optionality, never quite closing the door on alternatives, never fully committing. Craig's story is a case study in the liberating power of commitment. Paradoxically, reducing your options can expand your life.



5: The Unprocessed Soldier — Military-to-Civilian Transition and the Danger of Decompression Neglect

One of the most striking observations Craig makes is about military deconditioning — or rather, the near-total absence of it. After years, sometimes decades, of psychological and physiological preparation for combat, the transition process offered to soldiers is, in Craig's words, 'two weeks in Cyprus on the piss.' The mismatch is almost comical in its inadequacy, and yet its consequences are anything but funny.

Craig's own descent into the events that led to his imprisonment was not the behaviour of a bad man. It was the behaviour of a good man who had been trained to operate in a very specific environment — one defined by threat, hierarchy, loyalty and action — and had been deposited without adequate support into a civilian world that shared none of those coordinates. The skills that kept him alive in Helmand Province were precisely the skills that got him into trouble in the West Midlands.

We have touched on this before in our conversation with Matt Bunker, and it remains one of the most urgent and under-addressed mental health issues facing veterans and, more broadly, anyone navigating a significant identity transition. Whether you are leaving the military, exiting a long career, ending a marriage or retiring, the question is the same: what is the deliberate decompression process? Who is helping you reconstitute a self in a new context?

Research by Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who worked extensively with Vietnam veterans and author of *Achilles in Vietnam*, traces the psychological damage of combat not only to the violence itself, but to what he calls the 'betrayal of what's right' — the moment when the moral framework that underpinned a man's sense of purpose collapses. For Craig, the withdrawal from Afghanistan — all that cost, all that sacrifice, suddenly appearing to amount to nothing — was exactly that moment.

One area of conversation I have had with clients over the years with clients when they have been through — or are currently navigating — a significant identity transition (military, career, relationship, retirement), is to help them to map their 'decompression process' honestly.

Ask them.... what deliberate rituals, practices, conversations or professional support have they put in place to support this transition? If the answer is 'not much,' I get them to identify one specific resource — a therapist, a GP, an old friend, a men's group, a structured retreat, a mentor — and make contact this week. Transition without structure is just drift. Don't drift.

6: Service as Self-Reconstruction — The Paradox of Helping Others to Heal Yourself

At the lowest point in Craig's story — facing a five-year sentence, stripped of his career, his identity and his sense of future — he was given the role of Volunteer Visiting Officer, delivering the news of casualties to bereaved families. He describes this as 'the privilege of my life.' Not despite his circumstances. Because of them.

There is something counterintuitive and profoundly important here. In our culture of self-optimisation, we tend to treat service as something we do once we have sorted ourselves out — once we are resourced, recovered, ready. Craig's experience suggests the opposite: that service is itself a mechanism of recovery. That in the act of steadying someone else's ship, you find your own equilibrium. That meaning, as Viktor Frankl argued in *Man's Search for Meaning*, is not something you find — it is something you do.

This is supported by a growing body of research on what psychologists call 'helper's high' — the neurological reward associated with prosocial behaviour. Studies published in journals including *Psychological Science* and *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* consistently show that acts of service activate the brain's reward circuitry in ways that are more durable and more protective against depression and anxiety than comparable self-directed activities. Service is not charity. For many men, it is survival.

This theme connects directly to a recurring insight across our conversations — from Dr. Gordon Livingston's work on the necessity of meaning, to our episode on men's mental health and masculine conditioning, where the inability to ask for help and the absence of purposeful contribution emerge as twin predictors of midlife decline. Craig's story offers an antidote to both.

Final Words

A sniper is an extreme role in society, Running in a prison yard to escape being attacked is another extreme moment akin to Shawshank Redemption. None the less the lessons are so applicable. I came away from Wolverhampton after spending the afternoon with Craig in awe at how we men can take a lot of punishment, make some silly mistakes and yet, with awareness, then also take a path that allows us to build from there.

Craig did that several times in his life and still does.

So can you.

Thanks for listening and whatever you do....



DLTOMI is a podcast brought to you by Pod O'Sullivan, where he has real and candid conversations with experts, celebrities and ordinary men about navigating midlife. The ups, the downs, the surprises, the opportunities, the secrets and how to do it on your terms, gracefully or even disgracefully!



DON'T LET THE OLD MAN IN

WITH
POD O'SULLIVAN

LISTEN ON YOUR FAVOURITE PLATFORM

