

Federal Judicial Center  
In Session: Leading the Judiciary - 31  
Interview with D.J. Vanas

Craig Bowden: Coming up --

D.J. Vanas: We all stumble. We make mistakes. You know, I think the best things we can teach other people in a leadership role sometimes is not just how to win but how to stumble gracefully.

Craig Bowden: Today on *In Session: Leading the Judiciary* we talk with author D.J. Vanas, a former U.S. Air Force officer and member of the Ottawa [Odawa] Tribe of Michigan, about his book *The Warrior Within: Own Your Power to Serve, Fight, Protect, and Heal*.

D.J. explains that being a warrior leader is not about demonstrating steely-eyed individual toughness. Rather it's about practicing aggressive self-care, openness, and collaboration so that you're emotionally, mentally, and physically prepared to serve and support your tribe.

D.J. has inspired thousands of public sector and Fortune 500 company leaders to find courage and lead with their inner warrior. He hosted the 2021 PBS television special *Discovering Your Warrior Spirit* and delivered the closing keynote at the FJC's National Leadership Conference for Circuit and Court Unit Executives in Oklahoma City in October of 2022.

Special thanks to today's guest host, Ken Gardner. Ken is a clerk of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court in the District of Colorado. Ken, take it away.

Ken Gardner: Hello everyone. We are here with D.J. Vanas, the author of *The Warrior Within* book and actually several other books. First of all, welcome to our podcast.

D.J. Vanas: Thank you very much, Ken. Happy to be here.

Ken Gardner: And it's great to see you. As I told you, I saw you in Oklahoma City. You were excellent and inspired me to not only read the book but to also do a podcast with you. So I'm thrilled to be able to do this.

But let's talk about the book. Let's get into the book and let's get into why you wrote the book and what the book is all about. So let's start with kind of what I would phrase the personal journey, becoming a warrior and living like one.

You kind of open your book with a really good introduction about this and in several chapters that follow about what a warrior actually is, but maybe more importantly what a warrior is not. So could you elaborate on that please.

D.J. Vanas: Whenever I talk about the warrior concept, I come from a tribal-centric viewpoint. Not the stereotypical Hollywood image that we see all too often. The sweaty and chiseled figure who walks down the street, shoots bazookas, and knocks down buildings. It doesn't require combat boots or a

uniform. I did that for 14 years of my life. It goes back to somebody who's willing to fight for something bigger than their own personal welfare. Somebody who has committed their lives to developing their talent and ability so they could become an asset or a benefit to the tribe that they served.

And today whether that tribe is your family, your team, your company, your community, we all have a tribe to serve. That burning question that we should have on our minds, on this warrior path is: What am I doing today to develop myself to be a deeper and more positive impact with those that I serve? It's something I get really excited about sharing because this archetype in our tribal communities is a beautiful and benevolent role all dedicated to service. It's not about them. It's about who they're serving that really matters the most.

Ken Gardner: You talk about how you can kind of get that warrior spirit in the book and what you need to do. One of the things that, of course, stood out to me was that one of the things you did was like a vision quest. So my question to you about that is: Must warriors seek ways to test their strength in order to grow, such as a vision quest, or is confronting challenges or other things that happen in your life, is it enough to get that vision you're going to need in order to become a warrior?

D.J. Vanas: Well, it's a complicated question in the fact that those ceremonies were there for a reason. It was to kind of strip us down to the core of who we are, our essence or that spiritual strength that we all have. But the good news is we don't have to necessarily go through a ceremony to figure out what that looks like for us or what it feels like. We get opportunities to bring out the best versions of ourselves every day. It's the way that we go through trials and tribulations. It's the way that we confront fear or the way that we rise to the challenges in our personal and professional lives.

All those things are testing moments. Those ceremonies were transformative for me. You don't have to go through that. There's plenty of opportunity to test ourselves and develop ourselves through trial and tribulation.

Ken Gardner: The challenges are what really makes you become a warrior. I think is kind of what I got out of the book.

D.J. Vanas: There's a quote by Mildred Witte Stouven. I'm terrible with quotes, but I remember this one. It left a mark on my soul. But she said a clay pot sitting in the sun will always be a clay pot. It has to go through the white heat of a furnace to become porcelain. There are two ideas on that.

Number one, the challenges are already shown up in our lives. The tough stuff that we have to go through, the tough

conversations, the big projects, the leadership roles that we have as a parent and as a team leader - embrace those things. That's the first thing, is embrace them as an opportunity to say this is going to make me a better person.

Number two, push ourselves to challenge that growth as well by taking up that next book, having that next conversation, going to that next training, going into the gym and getting that next good and hard workout, or setting a goal for ourselves. We call our warriors *Ogichidaa* in my tribe. That has nothing to do with what we see on TV and in movies. It is a servant leader and it is somebody who has dedicated themselves to doing what they can to impact others. So it's important we keep developing.

Ken Gardner: How does one find that balance between strengthening oneself and serving others? Do you have an example of that?

D.J. Vanas: Yes, that is a fantastic question. I'm glad you asked it because we get in trouble with this so fast. You know, I've done this work for two-and-a-half decades. There are so many goodhearted people out there trying to do good work, but they run themselves into the rocks. Then they stand back until they can't do it anymore and look at the debris field left and say how the heck did I get here.

Self-care has got to come first. Our warriors traditionally took really good care of themselves. They didn't abuse themselves. They didn't neglect themselves because they knew the stakes were high. The responsibility level was high. Yeah, we're sometimes waiting for somebody to come over a hill and save us from ourselves and to say, hey, Ken, take a break, take some time, get enough rest, you don't have to do it all today. But we wait and wait and those people never show up and we just go until we burn out. So we've got to take care of ourselves first. It's the best form of care we can provide others and it's the best way to get the best version of ourselves on a daily basis.

Ken Gardner: You talk a lot about values in the book. I find that people get easily distracted from the most important things.

D.J. Vanas: Values are critical in navigating our journey forward. Absolutely critical, because when you know what your values are, you've got a guidepost in any kind of weather. Through any storm that you go through in life, you know it's most important to you. I always recommend people know their top five or six. When you have your top five or six values, you have clarity. You know what to say yes to and you know what to say no to.

Ken Gardner: Do you find purpose first or do you find values first? Which one should you define first or is there may be a different way to approach that?

D.J. Vanas: I think they feed off of each other. I mean I don't know what -- you know, the chicken or the egg, I think they're kind of grown at the same time. The critical point here is knowing what matters to us.

Ken Gardner: In your book you say something about you can have a lot of arrows and you can shoot them all over the place or you can be very focused about where you want to shoot them. I kind of love that analogy. That if you're just shooting them all over the place, you might hit something. But if you're targeted at something, you have a lot better chance.

D.J. Vanas: At the end of the day you can't do it all today. You can't do it all this week. You can't do everything this planet has to offer in a lifetime. You have to focus those arrows, put them on targets that you choose or else it doesn't get done. The worst recipe you can concoct is to feel stuck or to feel ineffective. I'm a big believer do today's work today, do tomorrow's work tomorrow, don't start stacking things up.

The other thing I found as the older I get I realize this power of quiet, of reflection, of just letting the dirt settle, the better my days go. The slower I move in pursuit of those things, the more effective I am. So it seems paradoxical, but

we're all running so fast with our hair on fire. If we don't stop and actually figure out what's going on and what's most important, sometimes we never get to the answer.

Ken Gardner: There's one other thing you talked about in the book that I really found amazing. That was this question of the difference between surrendering and quitting.

D.J. Vanas: What I explain in the book is even traditionally our warriors who were the icons. You have Chief Joseph, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Pontiac. I mean they are these great leaders - Osceola. It wasn't a matter of quitting. They would have gone until the bitter end. But the issue is they were facing the decimation of their people.

Surrender is where we come to the end of our power, where what we're doing anymore isn't working. We're not getting results. And sometimes we're actually doing damage. There's a point where you have to get to a place where you just let go. You know, you have to say I need help. I need some outside resources, some outside expertise, and some guidance to help me through this. That's not quitting. It's finding another way forward.

Ken Gardner: Let's talk a little bit about the professional journey of inspiring others and organizations. As leaders, we're trying to instill the warrior spirit - if you will - into our employees. They each have an ability and the



opportunity, quite frankly, to do that on their own if we give them maybe the right roadmap or the right things to do.

What would be the first thing you would do in an organization to start them on a warrior journey?

D.J. Vanas: Well, I think the first thing is to get crystal clear on the purpose of doing the work that we do. When we get crystal clear on why we're here, why the work that we do matters, and why it's important. We remind ourselves about that every day. We're having ongoing conversations about this. It helps keep everybody on track and we strengthen each other in that pursuit.

I also think it's critical to lead by example in everything that we do. With our attitude, with our goals and directions, with our standards of behavior or expectations, that we are leading by example. Not perfect example. We all stumble. We make mistakes. I think the best thing we can teach other people in a leadership role sometimes is not just how to win but how to stumble gracefully.

I'm very adamant in the book, warriors never fought alone. Why? Because that's goofy. It doesn't work. You're only ever going to get so much done as one person, lone wolf out there. Our warriors were very collaborative. They fought in the company of other warriors towards a goal or towards an end.

Ken Gardner: After the pandemic, I'm wondering how do I really instill this engagement and work back into my staff and kind of gain a warrior spirit doing that.

D.J. Vanas: You know delivering great service on a daily basis has nothing to do with limited resources - time, budget, or personnel. I think the biggest threat to delivering great service every day is apathy. We get so burned out, so overwhelmed, so depleted that we just don't care as much anymore or just not fighting as hard.

The pandemic messed a lot of folks up. I mean it was challenging for everybody. I put myself squarely in that boat as well. It was a tough road because it was unique. It was unprecedented. Most of us had never lived through anything like this. Then the next thing you know, yeah, you're trying to fulfill your leadership responsibilities with a remote team. You're now the homeroom teacher for your kids doing homeschool. I mean it's like it just became chaos.

So now that we're through that, getting people re-engaged is really critically important. The reason why is it goes back to human nature and that tribal concept of a sense of belonging, a sense of actually being part of a team. But that's what good leaders do, is they keep people engaged. They keep the conversation going and make sure that everybody knows that they have a role to play in the team.

Ken Gardner: I agree with you this connectedness issue is important.

D.J. Vanas: And it just speaks to our humanity. That's like one of our most sacred endeavors as human beings. It's the connection we have to other human beings. I was taught traditionally by my elders that we're a lot more like bees and ants than we are like eagles. You know we need each other. We're better when we're with each other.

Being isolated from each other causes a lot of issues for folks. Depression, anxiety, that feeling of just kind of being disconnected from the world. There is no substitute for human-to-human interaction. That's the point I'm trying to make. The more often we can do that, the better we feel. The more engaged we are, it affects our mental wellness or stability.

Motivation is simply a reason to do the stuff that we do. Celebrating the victories, this is something we don't do nearly enough. We won't pat each other on the back or have these debriefs about what went really right. You know celebrating the victories that we have is critically important to keep our motivation up and to keep our confidence level high to remind ourselves that we got this and we can do this. If we're not creating that on a daily basis, it has a tendency to just kind of melt away.

Ken Gardner: You talk about how every warrior has a medicine bag and they have these, if you will, tools or things in their medicine bag that help not only heal themselves but perhaps heal people around them as well because of the things that they can bring out of that bag.

D.J. Vanas: Yeah. Medicine bags were carried traditionally by folks in our tribes. They either carried them or wore them around their neck. It was something that was special to them and carried special sacred items, things that gave them strength. Things that gave them courage. Actual literal medicines too. Herbs and things like that. But it was basically a bag that had their good stuff in it. That when they needed it, that moment of fear showed up, they had that bag with them to give them strength and protection.

We have that in our own lives, too, and that bag is made up of all the stuff that makes us uniquely and powerfully us in the world that we live in. It can be our work ethic, our attitude, our education, our experience, our values. We can unpack that when we need it. The first thing is to identify what we have in there. You know that's critically important.

We are always good at focusing on what we don't have, but I'm a big believer that strength-based approach is focused on what you've got. We kind of relegate ourselves to the corners of life instead of just opening that medicine bag and saying

I've got great stuff in here and I've earned this stuff. That's the other important thing to remember. It's whether you were born with it or developed it out of just through sheer hard work and grit, either way, it's in there and it's yours to do with as you see fit.

Ken Gardner: What I really like about the concept of the medicine bag is it's very individualistic. It's you and it's what you have. Your life experiences, what you have gained. Your knowledge, your skills, your natural talents and abilities. But being able to identify those things not only for yourself for that self-care, but also so you can pull out the medicine bag and help others when that need arises. If you don't know what's in the bag, you don't know what to pull out.

D.J. Vanas: Exactly. Well, and this is a great point. One of the best things we can put in that medicine bag, and we can store it for future use, is the courage that we exercise on a daily basis. Those moments where we show bravery. We show grit and we exercise courage in the moment where we needed it.

The cool part about this is the next time we run into that scary hard thing that we're going to face, we can look in that medicine bag and say with great confidence I can do this. I've been here before, I know what it feels like, I know how to respond. It's great to be able to look in that medicine bag and

base our courage on evidence that we have shown in the past where we can do this.

Ken Gardner: We got to recognize what we can bring to the table before we can really give that to everybody else.

D.J. Vanas: This is a great point. It's a super cool point, too, because this is where we really become powerful in who we are as people. Here's the dynamic. We go through a hard thing and we kind of stumble through it. Then we go, oh my gosh, thank God I got through that. Then we go off to the next thing. Right?

And that's why I said take a moment to reflect on that. Don't let that pass you by. We can get through stuff or we can grow through stuff. We grow through things when we actually recognize what it took for us character-wise to get through that moment. Once we store that away, we exercise it. And when we're exercising it in the future, we're influencing other people around us and inspiring them to do the same thing.

There's something that I talked about in the book. It was a term that a friend of mine that I interviewed -- he's the Wildland's firefighter named Shane Coyne. He talked about a term he called borrowed courage. This is about being scared to death, but being around other people who've been there and done that and kind of borrowing their courage until yours gets built up a little bit. We can be those people for the people around

us. If we are recognizing our strength and courage in those moments of bravery and then using them going forward, we inspire other people to do the same thing.

Ken Gardner: In your introduction you described keeping these principles that you talked about in the book in a broad kind of general sense. You're very careful to say it because, when I get very specific about things, I don't want to offend other tribes.

D.J. Vanas: Yeah.

Ken Gardner: Or I don't want to offend other organizations. Right? So how do we do that? How can we bring different tribes together around a shared purpose while valuing our tribal differences and providing space for them to exist?

D.J. Vanas: Yeah, a great question. That's an ongoing challenge. I mentioned that in the book because, especially working across Indian country, I worked with over 500 tribal nations including my own. I think the important part is to focus on the commonalities, the things that you have in common - the common goals, common directions - but respect the differences.

Know that we're going to be bringing different approaches, different backgrounds, experience basis, education levels to the table. But as long as what's on the table is something that we all hold in common, we can navigate that. We don't all have to

be alike to get along. We just have to be able to respect the differences and not get all in a kerfuffle. I love saying that word. I just wanted to throw it in there at some point.

Even nature teaches us diversity within a biosphere is what makes it powerful. I can tell you from personal experience. In my time in the military with the teams that I led, some of the best stuff we ever created as a team came out of some of the most heated arguments we ever had. Innovation and creativity sometimes are messy, sometimes get a little scary and a little chaotic. But as long as we know to keep it professional, to stay respectful with each other, there's always going to be great things that we can come up with as a group even if we don't agree on what that's going to look like when we start off the conversation.

Ken Gardner: First of all, how can we open ourselves up to that? Then how can we make sure we're learning the right things from the examples of other warriors?

D.J. Vanas: Wow. That's a great one. Yeah. I mean that's the key, staying open-minded is critical. Having that mindset to say that the way that you're doing it is a way to do it. It doesn't mean that the way that you're doing it is the best way to do it. When we stay open-minded, we're willing to learn from other people and including younger people.



I talked about circular mentorship in the book. It's sometimes not just learning from our elders, but also learning from people younger than us that have crazy skills and abilities and insights. There are always ways to improve. There's always a better model out there. And if we stay open to that learning, we tend to find it.

I'll just put it this way. There are two ways to look at this. It wasn't my quote, but I love this. "We're either green and growing or ripe and rotting." The best part of that is we get to choose which side of that fence we're on. Green and growing means we're constantly looking for that next idea to incorporate into our skillset. We're willing to have that next conversation or read that next book. It makes life and our careers not only so much more fun and so much richer, but it keeps things exciting. I mean there's no better feeling than constantly being engaged in the pursuit of something better. It lets other people know, too, that we don't have to have all the answers. We just have to keep trying to find better ones.

Ken Gardner: Let me throw this question out at you. Is it enough to model the warrior mindset and the warrior path or should we be proactive about creating it in others and in our organization?

D.J. Vanas: Yes to both. Yeah. No. No to the first one, yes to the second. Meaning that, when we create that path for

ourselves, we understand what that role and responsibility is and how we can bring it out in ourselves. Once we do that, then of course we can lead by example and influence and impact others to do the same thing. It comes through those constant conversations. It comes through building culture.

The word culture comes from the Latin word, I think it is Latin, *colere* which actually means to work the earth. To till the earth. So culture at the end of the day isn't what we believe is important. It's what we do. When we're exercising our agency and role-modeling these examples to the best of our ability, it's not about putting ourselves on a pedestal. But it's about setting an example that's worthy of respect and is done consistently. It's going to inspire other people to do the same thing too. That's how you build a culture. The Gandhi quote, "Be the change you want to see in the world." It's got to start somewhere, so why can't it start with us.

Ken Gardner: And hopefully it will. You talk in the book about change and about how obviously the one thing we can't ever get away from in our lives is change. You have these six stays that you talk about in the book. Can you share examples of individuals or organizations and bring out those, the six stays?

D.J. Vanas: The first one is to stay calm. That's the one thing about change. It freaks us out to our core because, man,

we don't like it. We like to be comfortable. The scariest thing is fear of the unknown which change necessarily brings into the fold. So we freak out a little bit. We panic. I mean look at the beginning of the pandemic. I think we're all probably deeply scarred right now and even having a fear of do I have enough toilet paper. That's on everybody's mind now.

I tell a story in the book about Apollo 13. You know we almost lost three astronauts halfway between the earth and the moon. We would have. If everybody lost their cool, they wouldn't be able to solve the problems that they did. They put something together with cardboard, rubber tubing, and duct tape that we were able to get these three astronauts home safely. It's the miracle of letting our brain do what it was designed to do, which is taking a piece of information, process it, and solve the problem. We do not do that when we're in a panic mode.

The second one is to stay grounded. Stay grounded. It's when we know what our values are, when we know what our purpose is, we have clarity even in the midst of a storm. That's the first step in every traditional ceremony across Indian Country. Before we step into a ceremonial circle, we have to get ourselves right. We have to cleanse and purify. We burn sage or sweet grass. The reason why we do that is to kind of eliminate all that negativity, all those distractions, and get

back to a place of groundedness so we can get the most out of that experience. When we stay grounded in our values, we have a stable spot to stand on regardless of what's going on.

Staying philosophical about change, this is one that I know can be a tough sell. But if you don't have a philosophy about change, I highly recommend that you get one because you're going to need it for the rest of your life. I love our philosophy in our tribal communities about changes. Change was not part of life. It was life. It was integrated and interwoven into everything. There was no getting out of it. Changes in the seasons, the cycle and circle of life integrated into everything.

The other one I've carried with me for almost 30 years now is one that I stole from Lennon. Not the one from Russia, but the one from music. He's a member of the Beatles who had a great quote. He said, "There are no problems, only solutions." So when you can keep that mindset and stay philosophical about change, it's going to keep coming so we can either fight it or embrace it.

Stay focused. Like we talked about earlier, focus on the right things and you get the right result. Focus on everything; you lose the ship. You can't get anything done when you're running in a million different directions in panic mode. So especially during times of change, stay focused on what matters

and what's important, what your goals are, where you're going and what it's going to look like when you get there. Keep that crystal clear in your mind.

Stay flexible just because our goals may not change. But the way that we get there sometimes not only can change but sometimes has to change. Think about how much we had to pivot, repivot, pivot again in the work that we all did during the pandemic. Whatever our service was focused on, we all had to make a lot of changes and staying flexible.

We can either lament, and complain, and put a lot of time and energy into the things that aren't what they used to be. Which I heard a lot of those arguments in conversations. Or we can just take that same time and energy and say, things have changed, what can I do with what I've got right now?

Then the last one is staying connected. We need each other. I know we live in a society where individualism counts for everything, but I come from a society where our tribes came before the individual person because we knew we were better in that environment.

Ken Gardner: With all this change that's going to happen, we also know there's going to be a setback. Right? We also know that something's not going to go that great. I think what you talk about is what do you do when the wolf comes. How do

you overcome those setbacks, and then also how about when the wolf comes to your door.

D.J. Vanas: Yeah. There's a great quote from the ex-heavyweight champ of the world and part-time philosopher Mike Tyson who said that everybody's got a plan until they get punched in the mouth. I mean how many times have we gone through that the last couple of years. You can have the best laid plans and there are always going to be challenges, but sometimes they get really big and really hard. It comes from losing people that we love, going through an illness, going through a divorce, getting laid off. When that wolf comes, that's when we really feel stripped down to the bone.

Self-care becomes critical in those moments. When you are feeling like you're hanging on by the end of your rope, that's probably not the best time to just try to out-hustle what's going on. It's a great time and it's a hard time to just sit there and process what's actually happening.

There's a thing that you know. We all know about post-traumatic stress disorder. But there's also a thing called post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth is when we're stronger after going through a hellacious experience than we were before we went through it. Because sometimes something terrible will happen to somebody and they will say: This is it,

it's all over. Life will never be the same. I'm never going to get this back again.

The same thing can happen to another person and that person will say: You know what, I can find a way to get through this. I will grow through this, this isn't going to stop me. I can do hard things, I've done them in the past. Not only am I going to learn some valuable lessons about life and myself through this process as bad as it is, but I'm going to learn things that I'll be able to help other people with, too. I'll be able to share this story and maybe help somebody else in their life as well.

That's powerful and that's a decision we get to make.

Ken Gardner: You talk a little bit about loss in the book and dealing with loss. I love just what you said now. I really related to the book on this which is why I wanted to share the story. So I lost my father when I was 21 years old. He died unexpectedly. It had come quite frankly after my mother in two-week increments she lost her sister, her father, and her mother, and then her husband.

You talk in the book about how you have to acknowledge the pain and face the wolf; otherwise, it will consume you. It's a quote from your book.

D.J. Vanas: Yeah.

Ken Gardner: What I found for me, when that happened to me, I almost felt like a responsibility to not go down the "poor

me" path but to be able to fortify my mom. The thing about it is I made a choice then. I made a choice to say: I'm going to learn from this. I'm going to be challenged by this and I'm going to become a better person. But maybe more importantly I'm going to make sure that my brother, my sister, and my mom get through this point in time.

That was almost 40 years ago and I carry that with me today when I get challenged by things. I carry the fact that things were bad. They were dark then. But I was able to climb into the light because of the choice I made. Not even knowing it back then that I chose the light, quite frankly, has been a very powerful factor in my life.

D.J. Vanas: I've seen countless examples in the people I've interacted with through the decades as well as my own personal experiences. We don't get to choose the circumstances we go through. For instance, going through a loss like that, an unexpected loss. We don't choose those circumstances. But we always get to choose who we are and how we are as we walk through any patch of our journey.

That's still in our power. That's our agency to exercise. It's difficult. We can cry our eyes out as we do it. We don't have to do it alone. But we always get to choose who we are and how we are in those moments because in not doing, as you said, we get consumed by the pain, by the grief, by the



loss if we don't stand and face it. As hard as it is, it's we are better for it when we do it that way than when we just try to compartmentalize, shove it in our backpack, and carry on with a stiff upper lip.

Ken Gardner: Well, let me just say what a pleasure it was to read your book. Your book was fantastic. It inspired me. It re-inspired me. It refocused my ability. I hope to become a better leader in my organization. I hope that by sharing your individual thoughts, and especially your expertise and experience over the past really 30 years from your military career to the people, and your vision about how you can help and impact other people. I want to thank you for that because you've certainly inspired me. I think you inspire a lot of people by what you do, so thank you very much. And thank you for participating today in our podcast.

D.J. Vanas I sincerely appreciate it, Ken. I'll just finish by saying, [indiscernible], thank you very much, my friend, for having me on today.

Ken Gardner: Thank you very much.

Craig Bowden: Thanks, Ken, and thanks to our listeners. To hear more episodes of this podcast, visit the Executive Education page on [fjc.dcn](http://fjc.dcn) and click or tap podcast. You can also search for and subscribe to this podcast on your mobile device.

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