A DECADE OF SERVICE:
THE WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT
STORY AS TOLD BY THE PEOPLE
WHO WERE THERE.

PLUS:

RAP BATTLE:
HIP-HOP ARTIST SOLDIER HARD IS
CONQUERING PTSD ONE LYRIC AT A TIME.

PATH TO THE PARALYMPICS:
“WALKING BEHIND THE AMERICAN FLAG
AGAIN WAS REALLY A DREAM COME TRUE.”
Dear Alumnus:

Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) has always been about taking action. It’s how we got started 10 years ago when a handful of concerned citizens took the initiative to fill backpacks with basic essentials and deliver them to Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Their actions brought us to 2013 and the WWP we know today that delivers 19 programs and services to tens of thousands of warriors and their families across the nation. But we’re not close to finished. Even now we are identifying new issues our warriors will face in the coming decade and developing programs to meet those needs so we can serve them for a lifetime.

We’ve paused this year to look at 10 years of service and what we’ve accomplished in just a short decade with help from our supporters. From a basement in Roanoke, Virginia, we’ve built 16 offices from Seattle to New York and placed an international team in Germany; developed a holistic approach to warrior recovery and complementary programs; and enrolled almost 40,000 warriors in our services.

How that all happened is the focus of our cover story this issue, which features interviews with some of the early founders and Alumni who empowered themselves with the first tools we developed. For Melissa Stockwell, now a WWP board director, it was a ski trip to Colorado that showed her the new possibilities of life after injury. Other times it was new, untested ideas like Project Odyssey® in 2007. As John Roberts, warrior relations executive vice president, tells it, the outcome of bringing combat veterans together at an outdoor retreat for therapy was far from certain. But he definitely remembers calling the home office afterward to say: “I don’t know what we just did, but we’ve got to keep it going.”

That passion is still alive as we head into the next decade and beyond. Years of work wait for us as we move toward our end goal of creating the most successful, well-adjusted generation of injured service members in our nation’s history. We couldn’t be more excited.

Sincerely,

Steven Nardozzi
amazing outdoor adventures that included brown bear sightings and extensive fishing.

Baltimore

workout this summer hosted by More than 50 warriors, staff, and family members participated in a challenge.

Neil Bush as part of the former president's W100 cycling challenge. The mountain biking trip with Bush takes veterans

through the deserts of George founded veteran Manny

with Bush takes veterans

h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h h

It takes equal parts personal resolve, daring, and careful planning to try adaptive surfing, Peter Cabral says. But the feeling of freedom that comes with “riding the bronco” is incomparable.

"It acts as a distraction and that’s really important to allow us to heal,” Peter says. Peter, an Air Force and Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, recently hit the waves with other warriors during the Breazy Point/Rockaway Beach weekend. The marquee event for WWP brings the New York community and warriors together for four days of good food and adaptive sports, including surfing.

A car accident in 2008 left Peter with partial paralysis and a severe traumatic brain injury. The wreck forced him out of his beloved Air Force and paralyzed and a severe traumatic brain injury. The wreck forced him out of his beloved Air Force and

paralysis and a severe traumatic brain injury. The wreck forced him out of his beloved Air Force and

opportunity. After graduating from high school, Peter enlisted as an armor crewman and was deployed three times. In Iraq, he led convoys from Point A to Point B, often engaging the enemy along the way. I decided to separate so I could be the father I always wanted to be.

Where does “Soldier Hard” come from?

My platoon sergeant when I was a young private would always underline “soldier hard” on the bottom of his monthly counsel statements. Later in my career I decided that would be my stage name.

Why is the military life your musical inspiration?

I felt no one was telling our stories right. The media wasn’t the enemy along the way. I

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It plays a huge part. I just go to my recording studio by myself, listen to a beat, and just get lost. I nicknamed my microphone “Dr. Mic” because he’s my therapist, and he is who I speak to, and tell how I am feeling. By the time I am done, I am so relaxed, and I totally forget about anything I am going through.

What advice do you have for warriors who see no future with PTSD and combat stress?

Stop asking the question that haunts every single one of us: “Why?” It will eat at you, and suck you dry. Never mind

music and brought peace. That motivated me to really feel and know that music is powerful.

Tell me about writing and recording a CD in Iraq and the challenges that went along with that.

I spent the time I wasn’t on missions in my area of operations at Camp Taji, Iraq, writing and recording. It took me away from the loneliness of being away from my family and children and the challenges of combat. My only challenge was leaving in the middle of a song for 14-to-30-day missions, so many times I wasn’t able to finish a song in one recording.

What role has your music played in coping with PTSD?

I’m crossing you out like tic-tac-toe

I’m crossing you out like tic-tac-toe

I really don’t want you around anymore

I’m crossing you out like tic-tac-toe

If you let me

Want to get involved on page 25. Wounded Warrior Project has dozens of events going on around the country.

Wounded veteran Manny Colon recently spent some time with George W. Bush as part of the former president’s W100 cycling challenge. The mountain biking trip with Bush takes veterans through the deserts of Texas.

More than 50 warriors, staff, and family members participated in a workout this summer hosted by Under Armour and members of the Baltimore Orioles.

Ten warriors recently took a trip to Kodiak, Alaska, and experienced amazing outdoor adventures that included brown bear sightings and extensive fishing.
Patriotism runs deep in every Olympian and Paralympian. That was certainly the case for Steven Peace, who realized his dream of representing the United States on the world’s biggest athletic stage last year in London. Unlike many other Paralympians, however, this wasn’t the first time Steven put on a uniform for the U.S. The pride that swelled in his chest during the opening ceremony of the 2012 Paralympics was a feeling Steven thought he had sacrificed seven years earlier.

“Walking behind the American flag again was really a dream come true,” Steven says.

Steven competed as a paracyclist in the Paralympics, placing fifth in the road race and seventh in the time trial. This year he has traveled across the globe as a member of the 2013 Paralympic World Cup cycling team and is pedaling hard toward making the team for the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It’s a remarkable accomplishment for someone who just seven years ago wasn’t able to speak and was completely paralyzed on the right side of his body.

A native of Albion, Michigan, Steven joined the Navy out of high school and eventually graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy with a degree in Naval Architecture in 1998. He earned a postgraduate degree in Systems Engineering and was picked for the elite Strategic Studies Group in Newport, Rhode Island. He spent five years stationed in Japan, and sailed on missions throughout the Pacific and Indian oceans, Australia, and twice to the Persian Gulf; eventually he rose to the rank of lieutenant commander after 14 years of service.

Steven’s plans to make a career of the Navy ended on October 16, 2006. Steven was alone at home when a massive stroke hit him. A friend found him on the floor 14 hours later, a time period far beyond the normal three-hour window doctors can normally render aid to stroke victims. The resulting paralysis and loss of speech from the stroke effectively ended his Navy career. To this day, doctors cannot pinpoint why this occurred to a healthy man with no history of strokes.

Steven took on rehab with the same passion as he did the Navy and was always looking for a fresh challenge. He found it in cycling on a three-wheeled recumbent “trike.” As his confidence and his balance grew, Steven tested the limits of the trike and searched for something that would propel him faster. A custom-made upright trike adaptation from England gave him what he needed to compete and Steven’s “second life” was launched.

“I had a choice to make,” Steven says. “Put everything into the trike or sit on my butt and watch TV. For six to eight months, I worked at it as hard as I could. In only my second race at a World Cup in Sydney, Australia, I finished third. I was amazed. My coach was amazed. I’d found a new career.” While his own personal goals continue to be set and exceeded, Steven feels strongly about sharing the same energy and hope with other disabled veterans. His non-combat injury is a platform he uses to encourage other warriors who will never get a Purple Heart, but still served honorably. Soldier Ride® (Steven has ridden in 14 of them) offers that opportunity, but Steven also hosts weekly rides and clinics for veterans, acts as a peer mentor, and makes himself available as a resource in the San Diego area for warriors interested in cycling.

“Whoever you talk to, whether they’re riding that bike for the first time or the 100th time, every minute, every second feels good,” Steven says. “It’s awesome to feel that way and it makes me feel good when my competitors or the people I’m riding with feel that way.”
ADAPTIVE EXERCISES

There’s more to walking than putting one leg in front of another — especially when one leg is missing. Bryan Wagner discovered this in 2007 at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where he was recovering from injuries sustained in a roadside bomb explosion. “There’s a steep learning curve with physical therapy,” Bryan says. “You go from running 13 to 14 miles to baby steps.” A key element to recovery from amputation is building core strength through adaptive exercises. “The core is everything. Think of it like the trunk of a tree. Everything else stems from that.”

Exercises demonstrated by Alumnus Bryan Wagner

1 KNEE TO ELBOW PLANK

The knee-to-elbow exercise is an alternative to the standard plank. One motion consists of extending the opposing arm and leg, then swapping sides. Make sure the arms and legs are fully extended and the back is flat.

2 SIDE PLANK

The side plank is another method of engaging the core, but without motion. Your goal, instead, is making sure the knee, the hip, and the shoulder are in a straight line. Start out with sets of 20 seconds and alternate sides.

3 SHOULDER TAPS

Here’s a way to work out both the core and develop upper body strength. This alternative form of the standard push up involves tapping your shoulder instead of dipping down to the floor. Each tap counts as a rep.

4 GLUTE BRIDGE

The bridge is one exercise that requires no adaptation. Raise your hips and one leg simultaneously, then drop and repeat with the other leg. Try it out in sets of 10.

5 T-BALANCE

Core strength and balance are developed in this T-balance exercise. Start by raising one leg, with the other leg slightly bent. Bend toward the floor, keeping the abdominal muscles engaged, then bring it back up and return to the starting position.
Project Odyssey is a unique five-day event designed to help warriors overcome combat stress by connecting them with peers and trained counselors in an exciting, outdoor setting. Recreational activities are tailored to build warriors’ inner strength and courage as they tackle challenges such as high ropes courses, kayaking, rock climbing, and skiing. The camaraderie developed among veterans also provides a safe setting to share experiences and begin healing from the mental wounds of war. There are three ways to experience Project Odyssey:

**PROJECT ODYSSEY: REGIONAL** — Take the first steps toward recovery during this five-day event with fellow warriors in your area.

**PROJECT ODYSSEY: INTERNATIONAL** — Start your healing process while still on active duty and recovering at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center (LRMC) in Germany. WWP plans to offer this event to Warrior Transition Units (WTUs) throughout Europe as well.

**COUPLES PROJECT ODYSSEY** — Learn to rebuild trust and relationships affected by your combat experiences during a five-day couples retreat.

If you’re interested in attending a Project Odyssey, contact the Resource Center at resourcecenter@woundedwarriorproject.org or call 888.WWP.ALUM (997.2586).

**Wounded Warrior Project** is foremost about providing warriors opportunities to empower themselves. Many warriors find that first opportunity at a Project Odyssey, including Harold “Butch” Freeman.

Butch kept himself isolated after returning home from Iraq. It was tough, he says, to live both with the physical injuries and the mental struggles after he survived a suicide bomber’s blast in 2004. Family pushed him into attending a Project Odyssey, however, and for the first time since his retirement, Butch connected with warriors undergoing similar trials. He returned home with a new sense of worth and committed to mentoring other warriors.

Today he travels around the Northeast as a Project Odyssey Peer Mentor, providing the same encouragement that pulled him out of his rut.

Among those he mentored is Jesse Atkinson, who now sees goats and chickens in his future, along with a college degree in agriculture. But he had no plans for life after returning home from Iraq with post-traumatic stress disorder and a traumatic brain injury. A Project Odyssey and a roommate named Butch Freeman changed all that.

“I look at him as an example because he’s always out there trying to do something,” Jesse says. Jesse credits Wounded Warrior Project and Butch for inspiring him to enroll in school and make plans for a small farm in upstate New York.
In the beginning, there was a need.

Dozens of injured men and woman were coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan every day. There was no victorious ticker tape parade waiting for them, just months of pain and therapy in a cold hospital and the certainty their life was never going to be the same.

Their need was felt by a handful of volunteers who would later become Wounded Warrior Project. They started with the most immediate, human needs: socks, shirts, underwear, a stick of deodorant. The positive response almost immediately outpaced the available resources. So they passed the hat again and returned with more gear, but also some advocates to help warriors navigate the retirement process and support the families at their bedside. What started as a goodwill gesture quickly morphed into an organized campaign to help injured service members transition into their civilian life.

Here is the story of how bedside visits became a national nonprofit.
ENGLISH A GENERATION

AL GIORDANO

Al Giordano and his friend Steve Nardelli were one of a million people who walked from ground zero on September 11, 2001. From watching the second plane strike the South Tower to assisting co-workers coated in ash and dust, “it was a very intense experience,” Al says. “It affected us tremendously.”

It was obvious that day war was coming. Less clear was what would become of the inevitable casualties of that future war. Both Steve and Al were working with well-established veteran service organizations at the time and they knew the existing infrastructure was insufficient for a new generation of veterans.

“We knew something needed to be done,” says Al, now deputy executive director of Wounded Warrior Project (WWP). “Less than 18 months later, the severely injured warriors returned from the battlefields of Iraq, a group of volunteers took the initiative. Using their own money and resources from family and friends, they delivered dozens of backpacks containing essential care items to Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The veterans returned with more backpacks to the hospital’s request, then spent time at the bedside meeting the needs of the wounded veterans. The passion for serving veterans is one that continues to resonate today in WWP.

For Al, it was a no-brainer. A former Marine with a family history of military service, it strongly believes the general public owes a debt to the small percentage of men and women who risk their lives for America. “We must thank the military for all the freedoms we enjoy as a people...it’s the right thing to do.”

The holistic approach to recovery also emerged in these early years and the four program pillars: engagement, mind, body, economic empowerment. While mind and body may seem the most obvious pillars for wounded service members, engagement and economic empowerment carry equal weight.

Engagement derives from the strong bonds built during military service. There’s no comparable experience among the 99 percent of civilians who have never served. Al has witnessed a struggling warrior attend an Alumni event like a baseball game or adaptive sporting event like Soldier Field. Suddenly come alive when fellow warriors start swapping stories about military life. That turning point is realizing they are not alone, Al says. “It’s tough enough to try and readjust without some of the combat stress and other physical injuries,” Al says. “Engagement is building bonds and bringing warriors back together.”

THE FIRE INSIDE

IAN LENNON

“It’s no fun to be in fire,”

Ian Lennon tries to have a sense of humor about it, but the memory of March 8, 2003, in Kuwait is all too serious and real.

“I tried to stop, deep, and roll, but it didn’t work,” says Ian, then a lance corporal. “My fellow Marines came to my rescue and put me out. I owe my life to them. The accident happened at night as Ian refueled a truck so it would be loaded and prepared for the next day’s mission. A spark ignited and sent flames up in Ian’s face. “I was conscious the whole time, and I felt everything of it. Every burn, every searing instant of pain, and all the fury the amazing power of fire can inflict,” he says. “Doctors in Germany’s Landstuhl Regional Medical Center placed Ian in a medically induced coma. He woke up more than two weeks later in San Antonio, Texas, at Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC).

“It took me a while to realize I wasn’t still in Iraq,” says Ian. “They had already done a lot of the skin grafts. I was all swollen and bandaged up, and I felt helpless. Everything had to be done for me: feed me, shower me, cut my hair.”

BAMC would be Ian’s home as an inpatient for the next five months. His war included a constellation of physical trauma and wound care. He then spent another eight months in outpatient care.

“ar was a shocker when I first saw myself. I didn’t want to go out in public,” Ian declined, but John Roberts of WWP, who was still be in a hospital bed feeling sorry for myself. I knew for a fact that I could do. But thanks to WWP I’ve learned the positive benefits of another kind of fire: the fire you have in your heart to help other people. That’s a fire I never want to burn out.”

www.wwp.org
The Wounded Warrior Project team has believed since its inception that limits that were made to be broken. Why else would they take warriors out of the hospital and strap skis on their feet? The idea came mostly from seeing firsthand the early successes of warriors testing their perceived limitations and surpassing their own self-expectations,” explains Jeremy Chwat, chief program officer.

This was in 2004, when WWP was still a budding veterans services organization finding ways to expand beyond its successful backpack program. Guiding its growth was the core belief that WWP existed to empower warriors and provide them the means to help themselves. Taking warriors on ski trips was a literal and tangible way to do that. “You’re taking a population that thrived on adrenaline in the first place,” Jeremy says. “This had an impact on their rehabilitation almost immediately.”

Over time, however, it became clear that successfully empowering warriors was going to take more than meeting physical needs. Once warriors were discharged from the hospital and the military, they faced a whole new set of problems: creating a new identity in an often alien civilian world; building a new career; and living with the weight of combat stress. WWP met those needs with new, innovative programs grouped under four pillars: engagement, mind, body, and economic empowerment.

The four pillars and the holistic approach to recovery that characterized WWP apart from other veterans services organizations, Jeremy explains, “started with engagement—introducing warriors to other veterans who had been in the same places and seen the same things. Recruiting that unique military camaraderie and having a safe place to let your guard down does wonders for recovery, Jeremy explains. The physical activities—like the skiing—were a close second, but it became clear that neither body nor engagement could be truly successful until programs were in place to help warriors with their combat stress and post-traumatic stress disorder. Mental recovery could not progress until the uncertainty of unemployment and education benefits were resolved.

“All really built on the other,” Jeremy says. “We recognized early on that all four aspects need to be in place for a warrior to thrive.”

Once the four pillars were established, the programs under them began to develop and splinter into new programs. Even as WWP grew, though, the core tenant remained the same: a hand up, not a hand out. “If we’re going to challenge our warriors to be successful, they need to believe that limits were made to be broken.”

Jeremy points to the economic empowerment programs as an example. “As the scope of the programs grew, so did the number of teammates at Wounded Warrior Project. Leadership recognized cohesion among the programs was vital to guarantee the quality and consistency of program results. Brainstorming sessions were held to define the culture of WWP. The result was five core values: fun, integrity, loyalty, innovation, service, or TILLS for short. From that point on, every decision, big or small, hinged on those core values and the mission of WWP: To honor and empower Wounded Warriors.”

“The core values are about the only thing that cannot change within the organization,” Jeremy says.

One of the biggest challenges waiting for the organization in the next decade will be maintaining the “high-touch” relationships WWP prizes. But no matter how large the Alumni base grows, WWP remains committed to personally reaching out to warriors often. The high-touch approach allows teammates to recognize where a warrior is in his or her recovery and recommend the appropriate program.

“The next opportunity is out there and we’re ready to help you find it,” Jeremy says.

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A BRAND NEW MINDSET

JOHN ROBERTS

The idea was simple: Get a bunch of combat veterans together and give them a safe place to talk. But would it work? “On the first day the guys were nervous and I was too,” John Roberts, warrior relations executive vice president, recalls about the first Project Odyssey in 2007. The formula was quickly about to prove its worth.

A full day of outdoor activities got the warriors moving and engaged with each other. At night, they bonded around a campfire and shared the painful memories and guilt they had shouldered for years after returning home from war. The mental relief paired with the physical exertion to create a rare good night’s sleep for the warriors involved. The warriors went home from the event with a fresh outlook on their burdens and a new network of peer support.

But would it work? “I don’t know what we just did, but we’ve got to keep it going,” he told Al Giordano, deputy executive director.

The momentum from that initial Project Odyssey grew into a recurring program for Wounded Warrior Project, one that addresses a signature wound from the past decade’s wars. PTSD. It’s a personal issue for John, a former Marine who lives with PTSD today after a helicopter crash in Somalia in 1992.

There was very little knowledge about PTSD when the first service members began entering home from Iraq and Afghanistan. Military leadership was not prepared to address mental health needs and service members lived in a warrior culture that viewed asking for help as a sign of weakness. John explains.

“But the perception was that the First Family was too,” John says. “Anyone who’s seen Homer’s epic poem about returning home from war. When the attending warriors perceive they are not settling their demons alone, that they are in a safe place, they begin sharing and opening up about things they’ve never discussed before. No one listening is uncovered. “We might dab at our eyes, but we just pretend it’s the smoke from the campfire in our eyes,” John says with a laugh.

Project Odyssey has evolved over the years to include women and couples. An affiliate of Project Odyssey that has grown exponentially is that Family Support retreat, which caters to caregivers.

A weekend retreat filled with pampering and therapy provides welcome respite and comfort to family members vicariously living with PTSD. “We’ve seen more families destroyed because of PTSD than a physical injury,” John says. The retreats give caregivers “a break to share and deal with their own emotional baggage. That’s very powerful, because I don’t think these warriors are going to be successful without family support.”

John points to many success stories out of Project Odyssey, in large part because WWP builds and maintains relationships with warriors long after the retreat has ended. That follow-up care ensures that warriors stay actively engaged and on the road to recovery. John and his team are committed to building on those successes and reaching more warriors who are still facing their battle alone.

“I tell them all the time, it’s simply what we do for help,” John says. “What you’re dealing with is completely normal. It takes a much stronger person to ask for help than to sit and suffer in silence.”
The Pursuit of Freedom

Melissa Stockwell

The backpack was unexpected. “Who put this here and how did they know I was coming?” Melissa Stockwell wondered as she was wheeled toward her bed in the amputee ward at Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC). The bag itself was simple: black with “Wounded Warrior Project” (WWP) stitched in white letters across the front. Inside were shirts, sweatpants, and a CD player. “They were just little comforts of home,” Melissa says, but the message was clear: someone cares about you.

Then came the visits from WWP teammates and Melissa eventually connected them to the backpack. They were easy to distinguish from the regular stream of visiting celebrities and politicians. “They just wanted to chat,” Melissa recalls. “A lot of people would come in, take a photo, and leave. But with WWP it was about what they could do for me.”

Melissa arrived at WRAMC in April 2004 after a roadside bomb took her left leg. The 24-year-old first lieutenant had only been in country for a month when she became the first female to sacrifice a limb in Operation Iraqi Freedom. There were times at the hospital Melissa allowed herself to wonder whether she would ever regain her independence. More often, though, she was counting her blessings. “I had it all to do was look around and see there were men and women with much worse injuries than me. I only realized a limb, so I considered myself the lucky one,” Melissa says. She turned to these other warriors for inspiration and they expected the same from her. “We had all gone through these life-altering injuries and all we wanted was to go back to normal,” Melissa says. Also helping out was WWP, which took Melissa and about 20 other injured warriors to the ski slopes of Breckenridge, Colorado. A graduate of the University of Colorado, Melissa was more than proficient at skiing—at least on two legs. Now she was trying to regain that ability on one leg. After a few shaky days, Melissa finally found freedom. “Flying down the mountain, the wind in my hair...I had never felt so free.”

The backpack contained a new message: someone cares about you. Melissa returned to Walter Reed with her head held high. Through WWP, Melissa discovered she could ski on one leg she could accomplish anything. That knowledge empowered her after retirement in 2006 as she began searching for a new career outside the Army. Melissa eventually returned to school and studied to become a prosthetist. “It was a promising future and mission I wanted to be a part of,” Melissa explains.

Melissa was also pursuing another passion: swimming. She swam thousands of laps as part of her rehab and learned to love the water. Small competitions led to larger races and eventually led her to representing the United States at the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing, China. It was a dream come true for a woman who joined the Army to fight for her country.

“It was unbelievable,” Melissa says. “I’m so passionate about the U.S. and to represent a country I defended in Iraq and gave a leg for was such an honor.”

Melissa left the Paralympics without a medal or breaking any records, which was disappointing at first. But eventually Melissa saw the journey to the Paralympics and moments like carrying the American flag into the stadium were the most important of all.

“It’s one of those moments you want to relive over and over again,” Melissa says. “It’s really cool.”

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WWP teammates also discovered Soldier Ride was not only meeting warrior’s physical needs, but supplying the military camaraderie warriors were so desperately missing. One of the enduring elements from the first Soldier Ride events is the peer support that develops after days on the road together and long nights at rest. Over time, it became clear that physical health and wellness had to extend beyond one-off events and become a lifestyle. For slow recovery and the effects of medication often produced a sedentary lifestyle that threatened long-term damage to a warrior’s life. If you’re not feeling good about yourself, that affects your mental health, your ability to go to work, and even how often you get out of the house to engage with other warriors, Steve explains.

The organization developed nutrition programs and cooking classes for a generation of service members accustomed to the chow hall providing all their meals. Sponsorships with local gyms and exercise classes were developed to keep warriors active throughout the week. “Our goal was to create a ‘mentally healthy lifestyle,’” Steve says. This is WWP today, an organization that continues to break limits but also provide warriors direction on how to stay strong after reaching new heights. For the warriors still hesitant to take that first step, Steve has this to say: “There is a way to achieve anything you set your mind to. It might be in a way that is a little different, but the only real limit is your own internal drive to try and seek support. After that, the door is wide open to all sorts of possibilities.”
“...I also began to deeply understand the sacrifices our military men, women, and children, make on behalf of all of us.”

Tell me about the research that went into the book.

I was a lawyer before I began writing, and I’ve written several historical novels in my career, so I am no stranger to research. Even so, I don’t think I realized going in what a difficult project I had undertaken. Quite simply, this was the most difficult novel I’ve ever researched. Beyond just understanding military culture and language, I also began to deeply understand the sacrifices our military men, women, and children, make on behalf of all of us. I felt a profound need to tell this story in a way that would be honest but would also make them proud. What they do for their fellow Americans is something that should never be taken for granted.

What were some of the surprises you encountered in your research? What was your personal response to gaining a deeper understanding of PTSD and survivor’s guilt?

I have researched PTSD before, so I had a pretty good working understanding of it before I began the novel. Also, I grew up in the Vietnam era, so PTSD is something I have been aware of for most of my life. That being said, with all our collective knowledge about PTSD, I would have thought we would have better practices in place to help our military men and women upon their return to “ordinary” life. We have to take care of our military troops and their families, get them whatever help they need, whenever they need it. We have to have their backs when they get home. Period.

What’s been the response from the military community to your book? Have you heard back from male and female caregivers who have been in Michael’s shoes?

I have been diagnosed with PTSD, and that’s the new worst part of me. Some people just tell me to forget, but my story is worth more than gold.

I’ve been to war on three tours, none I can say were better than ones before.

If only they could bring me back my friend, last name Ross.

I have now become a dog, which so easily barks.

My heart filled with anger, and my mind went dark.

Allow me to rip, kill, hurt, slash, strangle, and tear.

For the love of my country, this I will sacrifice.

The Infantry is a part of me because it’s what you wanted me to be.

I’ve been to war on three tours, none I can say were better than ones before.

I don’t think my story will ever be told, and I will eventually become old.

I believe I’ll just remain cold, with a reminder I served with the bold.

For the love of my country, this I will sacrifice.

Allow me to rip, kill, hurt, slash, strangle, and tear.

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Army Staff Sergeant Brandon Waugh, currently attached to the Warrior Transition Unit in Vilseck, Germany, wrote this as part of his recovery “to see if what I have written could make a difference or explain what soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder feel.”

To learn more about our combat stress recovery programs, visit: woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/combat-stress-recovery-program.aspx

I wish it were me, so I could look down and see,

There is not a day that goes by when I don’t hear my buddy cry.

I often hear a friend say, “Don’t you let me die.”

If I try to scream and see the new star arise, helping we will maintain our precious lives.

The stars are high every time we drive by.

If it’s the wrong day, you may be blown sky high.

Kristin explains in an interview how difficult the book was to research and some of the surprises she encountered along the way.

Let’s start with the military inspiration for “Home Front.” You’d written several books before around the theme of women and relationships, but this was the first exclusively centered around military. What sparked this story?

“The Home Front” really began with watching the nightly news. At the time, the war was front and center in the media, and “Home Front” really began with watching the nightly news. ‘What sparked this story?’

I realized how many mothers were making dinner for my family, and I wanted to pursue.

I knew then it was a story I knew. I was making dinner for my family, and I wanted to pursue.

Kristin Hannah is the bestselling author of 18 books, including the recent “Home Front.” Don’t be fooled by the soft pastels on the cover. “Home Front” is a brutally honest look at what transpires behind closed doors when people thanking me for “telling letters and emails a week from period.

The dog I have created will be left with shame because you have diagnosed me with something other than my name.

My soul is burning with this wicked flame, finger holding the trigger,

Disturbed in my simple ways I feel normal.

My lungs exhale and I breathe in the thick air of world’s pressures.

The pavement of war cracks underneath my boots.

The flickering flame eats away the fears I hide within.

My eyes burn from unshed tears from what I have seen and done,

Allow me to rip, kill, hurt, slash, strangle, and tear.

Army Staff Sergeant Brandon Waugh,
he had made it to Iraq, Jessica had news of her own: their little family was about to grow by one.
“IT brought tears to my eyes,” Brian recalls. “It was one of the greatest feelings in my life.” While he was about to embark on months of dangerous combat, in some ways this news was the inspiration he needed most: “I knew what I was doing was for my child and wife. I was preserving their future.”

Brian keeps the memories of his two deployments to Iraq private, but the things he saw changed him profoundly. Those memories weighed heavily on his mind as he came home to two life-changing events: the birth of daughter Samantha and, just months later, the death of his father. It was a turbulent time, made that much more complicated by the flashbacks Brian was now experiencing from his time in Iraq. He finished his enlistment with the Marine Corps Reserves on heavy medication and a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“I started going downhill some more after that,” Brian says. “I lost a lot of purpose and meaning in life.” Adds Jessica: “It changed the entire family unit.”

From a wife’s perspective, Jessica didn’t understand the changes in her husband. His mood swings placed the family on edge. He reacted violently to hallucinations of Iraqis coming through windows and doors. What’s more, their oldest daughter, even at just 18 months old, began mimicking her father and following him on perimeter checks around the house. Loud noises startled her; she was jumpy and paranoid.

To minimize her exposure to PTSD, Brian would find excuses to leave the house such as walking his service dog. They searched for simple ways to explain her father’s behavior.

“We tell her ‘Daddy has a booboo on his brain and that makes him get more mad than mommy and Sammy get sometimes,’” Jessica says. “That’s about all the detail we get into.”

The confusion extended outside the home, too. Friends didn’t understand the significance of invisible injuries and the Warrens were left feeling isolated and alone. At this juncture, Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) came into their lives. Family events such as ski outings introduced the Warrens to a whole new world of veterans and other families who were living with the same challenges and frustrations. Jessica was suddenly surrounded by other wives who not only understood their situation but sincerely cared.

“Every time we go on one of the retreats we find that we are at home,” Jessica says.

That network of support extends outside the retreats to close friends Jessica connects with in person, through the phone, and online. Having other wives to turn to relieves some of the stress and provides balance and perspective, Jessica explains.

Over time Brian has continued to reach certain milestones, though he still struggles with memory loss due to his traumatic brain injury and PTSD. Jessica has learned when to prod him into action and when to let him figure things out on his own.

“I try not to be the wife who does all this stuff for him. It makes him feel really proud when he remembers things and you don’t want to take their pride,” Jessica says.

Sometimes those moments have to be created.

Jessica learned about Tough Mudder through WWP and signed up Brian without his knowledge. She knew he wouldn’t go on his own and it seemed like a good idea to get him active. Brian was mad when he found out, but went anyway. He returned home with a proud look on his face and that moment propelled his recovery forward by a few months. Those moments are what Jessica clings to as she looks forward to the future with Brian and their two children. The existing challenges are taken on a day-by-day basis. Jessica knows there are other unknown challenges waiting for them in the future, but she faces them now with hope.

“He’s never going to be the same Brian that I married,” Jessica says. “There are times he’s a handful; there’s no two ways around it. But there’s also a new Brian, and that is really great.”
1. Who is eligible for dependents educational benefits?
   Chapter 35 educational benefits are for eligible dependents of a veteran compensated at 100 percent permanent and total disability by the Department of Veterans Affairs. This provides eligible dependents 45 months of educational assistance to earn a certificate or degree, and attend on-the-job training programs. Some correspondence courses are also covered under this benefit.

2. Do VA educational benefits allow me to attend a vocational flight school?
   Yes, you can attend a vocational flight school under the Post-9/11 GI Bill as long as the course does not exceed the yearly academic amount of $10,330.

3. Am I able to change schools or training programs while using my Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits?
   Yes, you are able to change your schools and training programs under your Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits. You must submit a VA Form 22-1955 requesting this change.

4. Can I transfer my Post-9/11 benefits to my family members?
   Yes, if you are approved you can transfer some of the benefits to your spouse or unmarried children between the ages of 18 and 23. Children between the ages of 18 and 24 are eligible if they are already attending school for higher education.

Dave Smith didn’t want to kill himself — not really. Sure, he toyed with the idea after coming back from Iraq in 2004 and 2005. He chose to participate in high-risk, self-sabotaging behavior, such as drunken mountain biking and surfing alone at night. Dave justified his actions in his mind as replacing the adrenaline rush from the fierce fighting in Najaf.

“In combat, adrenaline replaces fear. It’s a strong drug. So back home I became an adrenaline junkie. It’s not that death was a viable alternative to living life with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I simply didn’t care about anything anymore,” Dave says.

Dave’s emotional detachment hit new lows, however, when his friend Josh* killed himself in 2011. Josh was a fellow Marine and combat veteran Dave met when they were both civilians. They quickly forged a bond through common memories.

“He offered a mirror of shared experiences that I easily saw in myself,” Dave explains.

Besides the combat memories, Dave also recognized his depression and his desire to escape the past living inside Josh. When Josh committed suicide, Dave was forced to confront his own demons.

“I fell apart when I learned Josh had shot himself,” Dave says. “He had talked with me about things he dared not share with anyone else, including suicide. I didn’t know how to help him.”

The guilt of Josh’s death and the weight of his combat stress grew inside Dave. He found himself one night drinking heavily, fooling around with his shotgun, and thinking hard about suicide. Something stopped him.

“I did what I wish Josh would have done,” Dave says, so he locked his shotgun in his roommate’s room and stuck a note on the door: “I’m only 67.9 percent serious.” Considering the battle Josh lost, Dave knew it was serious enough.

“I had to preemptively cut off those thoughts before they got worse — even though I never had a real desire to pull the trigger.”

Warriors living with PTSD are often hesitant to move forward with their lives. Many feel they dishonor the memory of those killed in action by doing so. It’s an unnecessary burden Dave doesn’t want his fellow warriors to learn the hard way.

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MINESTRONE

Minestrone, literally “big soup,” is an Italian classic packed with vegetables, pasta, and beans. A bowl of minestrone can be a meal all by itself. There is no one right way to make minestrone. Recipes vary from cook to cook according to individual preferences, so feel free to improvise with other vegetables, beans, or pasta shapes to suit your taste. Pancetta is a type of Italian bacon. It can usually be found in delis and butcher shops, but if it is unavailable in your area, you can omit it or substitute regular bacon.

Makes 8 servings
2 tbsp olive oil
1 ounce pancetta, chopped (5 to 6 thin slices)
1½ cups chopped green cabbage
1 cup chopped onions
1 cup sliced carrots
¼ cup chopped celery
2 garlic cloves, minced
2 quarts chicken broth
¾ cup freshly grated garlic cloves, minced
½ cup peeled, diced potato
1 piece Parmesan cheese rind (about 3 inches square)
3/4 cup vermicelli or angel hair pasta (broken into 2-inch pieces)
1 cup chopped plum tomatoes (peeled and seeded)
4 cup cooked chickpeas (drained and rinsed if canned)
½ cup cooked kidney beans (drained and rinsed if canned)
½ cup prepared pesto
1 tsp salt, or as needed
1 tsp freshly ground black pepper, or as needed
Freshly grated Parmesan cheese as needed

1. Heat the oil in a soup pot over medium heat. Add the pancetta and cook until the fat melts, 3 to 5 minutes. Do not allow the pancetta to brown.
2. Add the cabbage, onions, carrots, celery, and garlic. Cook until the onions are translucent, 4 to 8 minutes.
3. Add the broth, potatoes, and Parmesan cheese rind. Bring to a simmer and cook until the vegetables are tender, about 30 minutes. Do not overcook them.
4. Meanwhile, cook the vermicelli according to package directions until tender. Drain.
5. When the vegetables in the soup are tender, add the cooked vermicelli, tomatoes, chickpeas, and kidney beans. Remove and discard the Parmesan rind.
6. Season the soup to taste with the pesto, salt, and pepper. Serve in heated bowls, sprinkled with the grated Parmesan cheese.

This recipe is from The Culinary Institute of America’s “The New Book of Sauces” cookbook, which is available for purchase online or at Connolly’s European Foods. For more information on the CIA, visit cia.edu.

Looking for opportunities to engage with veterans in your area? Check your inbox for the weekly issue of “The Post,” an interactive email from Wounded Warrior Project highlighting events specifically in your region. Not only does “The Post” keep you up to date on events, but it also lists job opportunities and direct contact information for the WWP teammates in your area.

If you’re not registered as an Alumnus or receiving “The Post,” contact the Resource Center at 888.WWP.ALUUM or resourcecenter@woundedwarriorproject.org.
PARTING SHOT ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Warriors tackle white water rapids on the Wenatchee River in Washington.

Photo Courtesy of Thomas O’Connell

IN THE NEXT ISSUE: The Power of Two