Dear Alumni:

I’ve been with Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) for a little more than six months now, and I’ve met hundreds of amazing warriors. You inspire our team and me to work hard to continue improving our programs and services to help you overcome the wounds of war.

One of our primary goals for 2017 is to increase investments in mental health for the signature wounds of our recent conflicts – post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI). This increased focus will allow us to continue to help you, regardless of your stage of recovery. Not only can we help with your current mental health challenges, but we will also stay with you as you progress, meeting your needs for a lifetime.

An example of this commitment is Warrior Care Network®, which you will learn all about in this edition of After Action Report. Wounded warrior Bill Geiger went through the program and says he learned more in two weeks than he had in 12 years of prior treatment. Warrior Care Network is also an example of how WWP partners with other nonprofits, for-profit businesses, and government agencies to expand the resources available to you. We know impact increases when organizations work together for common good, and this concept extends to you and your fellow warriors as well. The more you help one another, the stronger the veterans’ community becomes. Many of the stories featured in this issue share that spirit of service, and I’m always inspired and humbled to hear tales of how you’ve lived the WWP logo and given back to fellow veterans.

My hope for 2017 is that you will find ways to overcome whatever challenges are presented to you – both large and small – enjoy life, and find ways to give back to your community. Build resilience through physical activity, spending time with friends and family, and simply enjoying the things you like to do. Try out a new skill or take a class with a friend; spend time at the lake, or take a walk in the woods. Conquer the odds, and when you are at the right place on your journey to recovery, find a way to extend your hand, and help others do the same.

Sincerely and with eternal gratitude for your service,

Michael Linnington
CEO, Wounded Warrior Project
Lieutenant General, U.S. Army, Retired
Brett Miller has always found fishing therapeutic. That therapy is intensified when Brett treks into the wilderness with other warriors. Not only does the calm of nature provide serenity, the rediscovery of pre-military hobbies like hunting and fishing helps Brett and his fellow warriors reconnect with their former selves. When a community service component is added, the experience is even more profound, as warriors find a renewed sense of purpose.

Brett first realized the healing power of outdoor activities when he took a fishing trip with a former Army commander who was struggling with PTSD. The experience opened Brett’s eyes to the fact that he wasn’t the only one who could benefit from being immersed in the great outdoors.

“When he came on the trip, he was near death from kidney and liver failure, because he’d been drinking to cover up his PTSD,” says Brett. “That trip saved his life.”

Brett understands the struggles of warriors like his former commander because he, too, lives with PTSD. So in 2013, Brett decided to put his expertise to good use by forming Warfighter Outfitters, a nonprofit organization that takes veterans on hunting, fishing, and community service trips.

“At first, it didn’t really feel like it was going anywhere, but I was having fun and enjoying it,” says Brett. “I could see the change in some of these guys, and it really sank in for me – I’m doing something good, no matter how big it gets.”

Brett has always felt his purpose was to give back. When his military service and 17-year career as a firefighter ended, helping fellow warriors reignited that sense of purpose.

“I had the time; I had the ability; I had the experience for outfitting,” he says. “I decided I would be a part of it or I would watch it happen. I couldn’t sleep at night knowing there were guys and girls who needed a weekend to get themselves out there.”

Warfighter Outfitters has grown to serve more than 2,000 warriors each year, and veterans impacted by Brett’s events are the first to praise the impact these trips have on their recovery.

“I feel more alive, and I feel like I can still run a team. I feel like Sergeant Perez again,” said wounded warrior Joe Perez after attending a Warfighter Outfitters service trip to Yellowstone National Park. “All these things bring out my self-worth and pride. For a disabled veteran, that is everything you need in order to heal and enjoy life.”

Though fishing, hunting, and service projects are excellent opportunities for fun and healing, Brett says the real difference is usually made before the fun begins.

“The biggest thing, ironically, is the two-to-six-hour ride to the [activity] with eight people in a truck,” he says. “They are complete strangers, have never met each other before, yet all have the same common ground. Being a warrior, there’s no elephant in the room. By the time the project begins, you’d swear those veterans had been friends their whole lives. These warriors come home with a lot more than just a hunting, fishing, or service trip; they come home with friends.”

For many veterans, finding a common connection and realizing you’re not alone is the first step toward a comprehensive, meaningful recovery, and that connection is just what Brett aims to provide. Fishing, hunting, and service projects are just the incentives to draw veterans out of their homes and help them form the life-altering social connections that change and save lives.

If you’re interested in attending hunting, fishing, and service events through WWP, please check The Post, your weekly WWP event email, for opportunities in your area.
Each year, wounded warrior Brett Miller takes a group of veterans to Yellowstone National Park to help with community service projects. Their goal is to help improve Yellowstone’s infrastructure, yet the warriors end up improving their own well-being even more than the park’s. Spending a week in nature, breathing fresh mountain air, all the while surrounded by the beauty of Yellowstone, puts warriors’ minds at ease. Though they’re hard at work, they’re also forging friendships and finding new ways to serve their communities.

This year, the group spent five days building a bison corral that will help Yellowstone staff sort bison, draw blood, and ensure a strong herd by quarantining animals that test positive for disease.

Each day begins with a safety briefing. Here, Brett Miller (far left) explains the day’s duties to some of the warrior workers.

Warriors Paul Delacerda, Joey Hooker, and Bobby Woods (left to right) drive posts into the ground. The volunteers learned to use most of this equipment — including the machine Bobby is piloting — on the first day of the trip. No prior construction experience was necessary.

Warrior Joe Perez cuts posts to the proper length. These posts are the foundation of the bison corral, so attention to detail is crucial.

Joe Perez makes sure everything is level. Just because they’re volunteers doesn’t mean these guys are cutting corners. They’re dedicated to perfection.

These veterans left Yellowstone with a new group of friends and a renewed sense of purpose. They were given the chance to serve again, and they loved it. Here’s what a few of the participants had to say after their trip:

“Anytime I am in the wilderness, it puts my mind at ease and helps me relax.” – Bobby Woods

“The best part was being able to work as a team again.” – Joey Hooker

“The Yellowstone trip made me feel at peace. I got to work with my brothers and sisters, feel camaraderie, enjoy our shared military humor, smile, and know we did something positive that will be there for a lifetime. The sense of accomplishment and satisfaction is huge. It’s like planting a seed and watching it grow.” – David Guzman

Warfighter Outfitters will return to Yellowstone next year to build a sorting facility for the bison, which is the final stage of the refurbishment project. There are fewer than 30 spots for warriors on each service trip, and fishing and hunting trips generally serve 2-6 warriors each; so space is extremely limited.

To learn more about Warfighter Outfitters, find them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/warfighteroutfitters.

Visit https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/share-your-story to create a video testimonial telling the world why you’re living proof that WWP helps veterans thrive. Be sure to speak to the specific WWP programs and services you’ve enjoyed and how they’ve helped in your recovery.

Remember, every story you share gives another warrior an opportunity to learn about the life-changing support offered by WWP. Your story could literally save lives!
WOUNDED WARRIOR CARLOS DE LEÓN GRILLS

“In a Peer Support Group, warriors use their stories as a starting point to better our lives.”

Veterans often feel alone until they realize others have similar thoughts, feelings, problems, and experiences. WWP Peer Support Groups provide a first step in helping these warriors connect with one another.

“In a Peer Support Group, warriors can relate, regardless of which branch of the military they are from, where they served, or what their injuries are,” says wounded warrior Carlos De León. “We all share a common ground, and we can use it as a starting point to better our lives.”

The goal of any form of peer support is to improve warriors’ resiliency and psychological well-being. In an effort to provide opportunities for warriors to connect with one another, WWP has increased its focus on group support to better serve wounded veterans and service members.

“We’re always looking at ways to improve how we serve our warriors,” says John Roberts, WWP National Service Director. “We are confident shifting to a group support model will ultimately strengthen our veteran communities, aid more people, and have a deeper impact in their recoveries.”

A complete recovery looks different for everyone, and finding an approach that works specifically for you is crucial. In a group setting, warriors can hear many unique stories of resilience, making it more likely each warrior will connect with at least one other person in the room.

“Everybody’s collectively giving something,” says Claude, “whether they’re talking about their recovery or they’re talking about something they used in their recovery that helped them.”

Not only does everyone give a little something of themselves, everyone gets a little something back, too, including the leaders.

“I facilitate these groups, and I get just as much out of it as the participants do,” says Daniel Dumas. “The face-to-face interaction can really pick you up. The familiarity is there. Whether you are comfortable or not, you know you are safe in that environment with the warriors, because everyone in the group has a little bit of what you’ve got.”

Group settings allow warriors to make connections, develop the confidence to share their own stories, and find the healing power of opening up. Additionally, Peer Support Group Leaders become leaders in their local veteran communities, helping them grow and thrive.

For more information about Peer Support Groups, please visit woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/peer-support.
Bill Geiger’s battle against the invisible wounds of war is not new.

“Unfortunately, I’ve been at this since 2003 with different therapies and cocktails of medicine,” says Bill, who is living with PTSD and TBI following his time in the U.S. Army Reserve.

He’s not alone in his quest to thrive in the face of PTSD and TBI. Each year, WWP surveys* our Alumni to learn more about their struggles in order to develop programming to best meet those needs. In 2016, more than 76 percent of respondents reported coping with PTSD. Roughly 35 percent reported having difficulty getting mental health care, putting off mental health care, and/or not getting the care they needed.

Bill, for instance, remembers a therapist he saw for some time who told him she didn’t know what else she could do to help him. “I don’t know if she considered me a hopeless case or if her training wasn’t equipped to deal with me or with severe PTSD,” says Bill.

(continued on next page)

*If you’d like to read the results of the 2016 Wounded Warrior Project Annual Warrior Survey in their entirety, visit woundedwarriorproject.org/media/2641/2016-wwp-annual-warrior-survey.pdf.

“WARRIOR CARE NETWORK TEACHES A PROCESS YOU CAN WORK THROUGH TO OVERCOME YOUR WORST FEARS, WHATEVER THEY MIGHT BE.”
— WOUNDED WARRIOR BILL GEIGER
The New Approach

“It was something I had not experienced before,” says Bill. “It was so much more information and so many different tools that I had never seen.”

Bill learned skills to help him cope with PTSD, including breathing techniques to help him keep a steady mindset and methods to help deal with the facts of a situation rather than the emotion. He didn’t just learn what to do, but how he could successfully apply those lessons to his life.

“Warrior Care Network teaches a process you can work through to overcome your worst fears, whatever they might be,” Bill says. “It was something I had not experienced before,” says Bill. “It was so much more information and so many different tools that I had never seen.”

The result is that those closest to Bill have seen a return to the fun, outgoing man they knew and loved from before his time in the military.

“I am actually impressed at how different he is,” says Bill’s wife Sara. “It’s like he really is aware of not just how he’s coming across, but what he needs to do [to improve]. I have seen him take initiative with the kids and with me, saying, ‘Hey, I know what I did, and I’m sorry.’ I’ve hardly ever seen that before.”

A Lasting Impact

Though Bill already sees a clear difference in how he reacts to minor occurrences in everyday life, he’s still getting better at dealing with those events because of the continued support he receives from Warrior Care Network.

“Every other treatment, you go home with a stack of paperwork,” says Bill. “But the biggest thing that was different — not just the yoga, tai chi, and family support — you don’t just go home with a binder full of stuff... They really teach you to use the things they give you.”

During the outpatient mental health treatment, Bill also found strength in being around his fellow veterans. That connection gave him confidence that the change he felt was enduring. “Engaging with other wounded service members who understood how I felt without saying a word, who could relate to the struggles I was facing, and who struggled with similar demons was comforting and enlightening,” says Bill. “I realized if other warriors can learn to live with and control their PTSD, or at least learn to accept their ‘new me,’ then so can I.”

Coming Together to Serve Veterans

Warrior Care Network is a collaboration between WWP, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and four leading academic medical centers: Emory Healthcare’s Veterans Program; the Road Home Program at Rush University Medical Center; Operation Mend at UCLA Health; and Home Base, a Red Sox Foundation and Massachusetts General Hospital program. Through this partnership, warriors can seamlessly transition from previous treatment to one of the four academic medical centers. To further ensure continuity of support, upon completion, warriors may be referred to additional WWP programs and services, other community resources, and/or the VA.

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Learning More or Sign Up at warriorcarenetwork.org
Pam Estes
A Letter To My Fellow Caregivers

As we passed the 10th anniversary of my son’s “Alive Day,” I realized two things: First, I can’t believe 10 years have gone by; second, I’m amazed how much we have learned during this journey.

When Jason was injured by an improvised explosive device (IED) blast in Iraq 13 months after enlisting in the U.S. Army, we were novices at navigating both the military and medical systems. Jason sustained burns to 60 percent of his body, a leg amputation, and a TBI. He was 19 years old.

Jason was hospitalized for 10 months, including three months in the intensive care unit at Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) and seven at the Polytrauma System of Care at the VA hospital in Richmond, Virginia.

Either my husband Mike or I was with Jason every day of his 10-month stay in the hospital. There, we learned that every patient needs an advocate. They need a person who can question the medical team and challenge them to push the boundaries of treatment. We established relationships with medical staff and were fortunate to have doctors who told us not to accept textbook guidelines.

When asked what our goals for Jason were, we said, “to be independent.” Why would we settle for less?

As Jason reached the two-year mark of his recovery, he continued to improve, which proved he was still benefiting. But, since many textbooks suggest therapy yields the most results in the first two years following injury, we began to have difficulty getting payments processed by our benefits provider. To prevent any regression in Jason’s advances, we began paying for his therapies out of pocket so there wasn’t a break in service.

Then WWP stepped in and supplemented the cost of Jason’s services, relieving us of a huge burden.

Meanwhile, my first year as a caregiver was a blur. We had taken Jason home from the hospital instead of placing him in a long-term care facility, so I became trained to handle all of his wound care. Eventually we found a full-time person to come in and assist with daily living, allowing us to follow some sort of normal routine.

The most important self-help moment came when I went on a mothers’ caregiver retreat through WWP. I thought I was handling everything just fine. Getting things ready at home so I could go on the retreat was stressful, and I felt guilty about leaving. However, once I got away and connected with other caregivers who were dealing with the same issues, my outlook really changed. I didn’t realize we had become so isolated and consumed with Jason’s care.

Getting together and connecting with others who shared similar stories relaxed and refreshed me. We also found that changing Jason’s routines gave him a cognitive boost. My husband and I now take vacations each year – one with Jason and one without. I still feel a tinge of guilt when we go away, but I know the break benefits all of us.

My advice to other caregivers is push yourself to stay involved with others, remember to take care of yourself and, as a result, everyone will benefit.

- Pam Estes
  CAREGIVER TO HER SON, WOUNDED WARRIOR JASON EHRIHART

“WWP Talk has really made a difference to me ... It has helped me get to the heart of things — set goals, challenge myself, and find my own solutions.”

— WOUNDED WARRIOR ANGIE PEACOCK

WWP Talk is a helpline for Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) Alumni, family members, and caregivers that provides emotional support over the telephone. Participants speak with the same helpline support member each week, developing an ongoing relationship and a safe, non-judgmental outlet to share thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

WWP TALK PROVIDES SUPPORT TO:
- Warriors living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or other mental health challenges
- Family members and caregivers adjusting to life while supporting a wounded service member or veteran

HOW WWP TALK WORKS:
- Talk once a week at the same pre-established day and time
- Acquire new tools and coping skills to help you face your challenges
- Learn to set and achieve goals
- Keep in touch until you’re ready for the next stage of your recovery process

For more information or to sign up, please call 888.WWP.ALUM (997.2586) or 904.405.1213 (International) Monday – Friday, 9 am – 7 pm EST.

WWP Talk is not a crisis line. If you need immediate assistance, please contact: 1-800-273-8255 PRESS 4
Luke Murphy feels a duty to share his story.

When the U.S. Army Staff Sergeant was at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center recovering from an IED blast that cost him his right leg and severely damaged his left, he met other warriors who didn’t know how they’d ended up in the hospital.

"Often times, in the heat of battle, you’re throwing a guy up there. You don’t know how he is, you don’t know what happens," says Luke. "I was very curious; I wanted to stay awake to see what was going on. When I got to Walter Reed, I was amazed how many people didn’t know what happened. They just woke up there."

Hearing those stories served as inspiration to share his experiences. He started talking in front of audiences around the country, and though he considered writing a book, in Luke’s own words, he’s "a storyteller, not a writer."

"We didn’t do it to get rich," says Luke, who published the book, "Blasted by Adversity," in May 2015. "The purpose was to shine a light on his experiences and, by doing so, hopefully motivate others to find emotional healing by sharing their stories. From that perspective, it’s been a success."

The next step toward making his newfound dream a reality was getting his book into people’s hands. Luke worked with a San Francisco publisher, Inkshares, which organizes crowdfunding for book projects.

"My guys [from the Army] have gotten a lot out of it," says Luke. "It’s hard telling that story, but everybody told me to do it. I finally found a way to tell it, and I felt like I honored those who aren’t here anymore."

Luke continues to tell his story regularly and encourages his fellow veterans to do the same.

"The healing process starts by talking about it, and our stories need to be told. We gotta tell our stories for those who aren’t here to tell them. We talk about how the greatest casualty is being forgotten; well if we don’t tell our stories, they’re going to be forgotten."
AFTER ACTION REPORT

In the heart of the nation’s capital, the WWP team in Washington, DC, continues to provide life-saving and impactful support. Here is a snapshot of the work they’ve been doing on behalf of warriors in their area:

- **Warriors help fix picnic tables and pick up trash**
- **Warriors work their core muscles by throwing a weighted ball at the Under Armour workout facility in Baltimore.**
- **Warriors participated in the Washington, DC, Theatre Lab’s Life Stories program**, which teaches acting, storytelling, screenwriting, and directing. Self-expression of one’s experiences can provide a positive outlet, especially for combat veterans.
- **Eighteen warriors and family support members enjoyed an introduction to beekeeping workshop hosted by the University of Maryland’s Institute of Applied Agriculture.** Guests left with new skills and knowledge about beekeeping and will be able to use that knowledge toward a new hobby or starting a small business.
- **Warriors and their families made posters to greet the first-ever all-female Honor Flight**, which brings veterans to Washington, DC, to visit memorials and monuments dedicated to them and their fellow warriors. A group of female warriors greeted the flight at Ronald Reagan Washington International Airport and joined the WWII veterans from the Honor Flight for a ceremony at the Women in Military Service for America Memorial.

Wounded Warrior Project offers similar opportunities across the country. To find out what’s happening in your area, be sure to check your weekly event email or the Post. If you’re registered with WWP and are not receiving the Post, please call the WWP resource center at 888.WWP.ALUUM.

GET CONNECTED

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 local job opportunities. If you’d like to connect with a teammate in your area, register as an Alumna or Alumnus, or are not receiving the Post, contact the WWP Resource Center at 888.WWP.ALUM or resourcecenter@woundedwarriorproject.org.

PUZZLE ANSWERS

1. Advice
2. Crossfire
3. Sitting on top of the world
4. Center of attention
5. I understand
6. Get in touch

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Warriors in Tampa, Florida, placed wreaths on veterans’ graves as part of Wreaths Across America — an annual, nationwide event honoring fallen service members.

Enjoyed this issue? Pass it on to someone you feel could benefit from Wounded Warrior Project programs, and encourage him or her to register at alumni.woundedwarriorproject.org. You can also share After Action Report electronically at woundedwarriorproject.org/AAR.

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