

# After Action

WINTER 2013

R E P O R T



## THE POWER OF TWO:

FLYING SOLO IN RECOVERY IS NO LONGER AN OPTION FOR THESE AIR FORCE VETS.

PLUS:

## CAVEMAN WORKOUTS:

HOW ONE WARRIOR LOST 60 POUNDS USING SLEDGEHAMMERS AND SANDBAGS.

## WINTER BLUES:

SIX TIPS TO CONTROL HOLIDAY STRESS.

A DECADE OF SERVICE.

10  
YEARS



A LIFETIME OF COMMITMENT.

WOUNDEDWARRIORPROJECT.ORG







# HOLIDAY TRAVEL

The words “airport security” give most travelers the shivers, especially in the context of the busy holiday season. For many veterans, security presents extra obstacles, including increased anxiety in crowds, close inspections of pill bottles and CPAP machines, personal questions about service dogs, and myriad internal metal parts to set off the scanner. To relieve some of the worry and hassle, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has created an alternative screening measure called TSA Cares. TSA Cares is for travelers with disabilities and medical conditions who need help passing through security.

**Alumnus Richard Raines**, a retired Air Force staff sergeant living near Miami, Florida, uses the TSA Cares option every time he travels.

Here’s what he has to say about TSA Cares:

*“The difference between using TSA Cares and going in the regular line is like night and day. You have supervisors by your side, and I found them to be caring and understanding. While I deal with avoidance issues and physically cannot stand too long, the supervisors don’t ask too much. They just clear you.”*

TSA encourages people to call the airport at least 72 hours before traveling, and Richard echoes that suggestion. On occasion, though, he’s missed a flight or notified TSA curbside at the airport and they will still accommodate him if a supervisor is requested as soon as possible, Richard says.

Richard wholeheartedly endorses TSA Cares:

*“They’re really doing as much as they can,” Richard says.*



If you’re interested in special traveling assistance or have questions about screening policies and procedures, call TSA Cares toll free at **1.855.787.2227**. The TSA Cares help line is open Monday through Friday, 8 am – 11 pm EST, and weekends and holidays, 9 am – 8 pm EST. You can also email them at **TSA-ContactCenter@dhs.gov**. For more information, visit **tsa.gov** or scan the QR code with your smartphone.



# WINTER BLUES

Ready or not, the holiday season is upon us. The amplified stress this season brings can make enjoying the holidays a challenge for veterans and their families. Bright lights, large crowds, visiting families, and financial strains are

just some of the stressors the holiday season can bring about. However, with a little extra planning, and the use of some of the tips provided below, your holidays can be an enjoyable experience.



## 1. STRATEGIZE YOUR HOLIDAYS:

Decide in advance who you want to see, what you want to do, how much you want to spend, and where you want to go. Plan your activities, maximizing time with the people who are good for you, and try to keep a regular schedule. Decide now what you feel you can spend on the holidays, and adhere to that budget. This will help reduce the after-holiday stress as well.



## 2. BE REALISTIC:

Remember that no one has the “perfect” family, and there is no such thing as a “perfect holiday.” Enjoy the little things that make this holiday season special to you and your family, and try not to set unattainable goals.



## 3. HAVE AN ESCAPE PLAN:

You can’t always anticipate how you’re going to feel or how you might react in a situation. Make a backup plan with your closest support system so that you’re ready in case you need to make a quick getaway. Develop a code word, or an excuse to leave without creating a scene.



## 4. REMEMBER “ME” TIME:

In the hustle and bustle of the holidays, remember to carve out a little personal time to allow you to decompress and regroup. Schedule your alone time into your day, so you stick to it. Take a walk with your dog, maintain a workout regimen, try yoga or meditation, or spend a few extra minutes with your morning coffee.



## 5. MAINTAIN YOUR PRIVACY:

Managing PTSD or other injuries during the holidays doesn’t require full disclosure to everyone you know. It’s all right to decline an invitation or say no without a full explanation. The people you trust and love will know the reasons, but for others a simple “No, thank you” is enough.



## 6. PTSD AND THE HOLIDAYS:

The holiday season can be a difficult and emotional time for those dealing with PTSD, and things like anniversaries and survivors’ guilt can make it even harder to enjoy. Try to focus on the positives around you: visualize the progress you’ve made, write down your strengths, do things you enjoy with family and friends. Have someone else in your life who can also remind you of these positives. However, if you find yourself struggling with PTSD, depression, suicidal thoughts, or other symptoms, please reach out for help. The Veterans Crisis Line is available 24/7 at 800.273.8255 (press 1).

To learn more tips on handling stress and hear real warriors talk about their coping techniques, visit [restorewarriors.org](http://restorewarriors.org).



# FOOT-SKIP AND WHEELS: A TALE OF TRIUMPH

*Disabled. Crippled. Broken. These were the words that followed Chris Wolff and Keith Sekora out of medical retirement and into the loneliness of civilian life. For a while, it seemed these words would always define their lives. Then Keith met Chris and the world would never be the same.*



**W**hen you first witness Keith Sekora and Chris Wolff in public, it's OK to assume they're either heartless jerks or performers on a hidden camera show.

A couple of years ago, Chris — just out of a wheelchair and re-learning how to walk — gingerly placed one forearm crutch in front of the other as he made his way toward the cashier to pay his tab at a restaurant. Keith followed behind, dragging his foot on the paralyzed left side of his body.

And then it happened in front of everyone: Chris dropped his keys.

"I see Chris trying to bend over and pick up the keys with his crutch," remembers Keith. "So I grabbed the keys and dangled them in front of him."

"Thanks, Foot-Skip," Chris said.

"You're welcome, Wheels," Keith replied with a devious grin, right before he tossed the keys across the restaurant's floor. "Now, go pick them up with your hands. You're not a cripple! And if you try to pick them up with your crutch again, I'm going to throw them even further."

Chris, only 5-foot-6, wasn't surprised by the act or his friend's tough love ways. He hobbled over, picked up the keys with his hands, and hollered back over to the 6-foot-6 Keith: "Lucky for you I'm lower to the ground, you tall drink of water!"

Some patrons nervously laughed. Some held their breath. The tension broke when Keith dragged himself over to Chris and gave him a hug. All around them came the sound of applause.

"We've earned the right to push each other beyond our limits," Chris explains. "We both know what it's like to be told you're going to die."

**"L**adies and gentlemen, kiss your ass goodbye." That's what the pilot of the Lockheed C-130 Hercules said to Chris and the rest of the crew after a rocket-propelled grenade bounced off the wing and exploded in mid-air, shattering all the windows.

"I accepted it; I was going to die in the sky over Iraq," remembers Chris. "I was the lead technician and flying mechanic, but there was nothing I could do. Thankfully, the pilot was able to limp the aircraft back to base."



Seated volleyball is a sport in which both Keith and Chris excel.

After that near-death experience, the irony of ironies is that Chris was later almost killed by, of all things, a flu shot.

"Nineteen days after getting the live virus vaccine, I was paralyzed from the neck down. The virus infected my spinal cord and worked its way up to my brain, creating 42 dead spots."

The doctor's prognosis was blunt: "You will never breathe, eat, walk, or do anything on your own ever again."

Chris had other ideas about his fate.

"I lay there in that hospital bed for months, thinking every single moment: Move, you stupid arm, move!" Chris remembers.

Nothing happened at first, but three months later Chris's hand shifted a quarter inch. Slowly he regained movement, inch by inch, up his arm.

It was a slow process, "but I was proving to everyone and to myself that I wasn't dead," Chris says.

**K**eith says his brush with death felt more like someone hit him in the back with a baseball bat.

While on a mission with his explosive ordnance team, Keith was struck in the back, most likely by an enemy bullet. The force knocked him to the ground, along with the live warhead he was handling.

"I was certain that thing would explode in my hands," Keith recalls. The mine did not explode, however, and the medic could not find an entry or exit wound from the bullet. "He told me no blood, no foul. I was hurting, but I was good to go."

Thirty-two hours later, however, the result of the blow was finally revealed. In rapid succession, Keith had four major strokes and 18 mini-strokes. Clots were flowing to his brain like salmon upstream.

Again, doctors were bleak. Every sentence from their mouths started with "You'll never . . . you won't . . . you can't."

"I wasn't as stubborn and hopeful as Chris was," says Keith. "I went from running and gunning to not being able to stand without falling over. I was in a 'woe is me' phase, and I didn't want to live."

Keith returned home with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), memory loss, vertigo, and loss of feeling on the left side of his body.

It wasn't until Keith met Chris and experienced the power of their brotherhood that he finally started to accept his new normal.

**C**hris and Keith constantly razz one another. Spend some time with them and each one will tell you he's smarter, faster, stronger, and sexier than the other. But they're just as likely to get serious about their friendship and how it's a bond that helps them heal and progress.

"We met at an adaptive sports clinic in August 2011," says Chris. "Within days it was like we'd known each other forever. I called him Foot-Skip because that's what he did, and he called me Wheels because I was in a chair. We've been torturing each other ever since."

Keith adds: "Having someone on your side who is going through exactly what you're going through, it makes all the difference. Besides, I can't stand it when the little guy beats me in anything."

"He's just jealous because I'm the better volleyball player," Chris retorts. "I'm much better in the back of the net."

"You're just lucky my TBI keeps me from remembering all the bad shots you've made," Keith fires back. "I'm much better in the front of the net."

Truth be told, seated volleyball is a sport in which both Keith and Chris excel. Their team won a medal in the 2012 Warrior Games. Keith even competed against England's Prince Harry in a match in 2013.

"The Prince sat on his butt and battled like the rest of us," says Keith. "He's got some game, but unlike me, he can feel the left side of his body. So he's got an advantage. Regardless, I could still take him on."



**A**daptive sports have helped both Chris and Keith regain their zest for life. Each man says it helps him see past any limitations their injuries may impose.

In 2012, they participated in the Seattle Marathon Run for Remembrance, a 5K event in honor of those who died or were wounded in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“We were the only two disabled people doing it,” says Keith. “I was in my adaptive bike, and Chris was in his wheelchair. We tethered them together. I pulled him up the hills, and he coasted down on his own.”

“That kind of teamwork is stronger than each man can be alone,” adds Chris. “Keith is a warrior, a survivor, a brother, and a best friend.”

Using their individual strengths to push each other turns small efforts into big returns for Chris and Keith.

“I went from being told I’d be in a constant vegetative state to now progressing to where I can walk over 300 feet on my own,” says Chris. “I feel there is nothing I can’t do, but I didn’t always feel that way. Keith has instilled that positive attitude within me.”

**H**ealing from such traumatic injuries is not a linear process. Sometimes you take one step forward and two steps back. Yet the power of two goes a long way in fixing all the missteps.

“Seeing Keith change showed me I can change,” says Chris. “I’m not sure if I ever really believed I’d be able to send a signal from my brain to my arms, or stand on my own, or walk up stairs, much less ski down a mountain. But I’ve done them all and I’d do anything for this guy.”

That’s why Chris made it a point to do everything in his power to be at Keith’s wedding this summer.

“Keith and Andrea were married in Hawaii. It was a small wedding, but I wanted to be there. I wanted to walk on the beach with them and share the special day. So at a moment’s notice, I went there to be a part of it. I’ll never forget the look of surprise on his face when he saw me there.”

“That’s because you weren’t invited,” jokes Keith.

And with that, Chris is practically on the floor

laughing, his eyes tearing with joy at how easily his friend can lighten the mood.

Yet, just as suddenly, Keith wants to get serious.

“He won’t let me go back to being depressed and rotting on the couch,” says Keith. “And I’ll light a fire under him when he gets down. Sure, we bust on each other all the time. Through the laughter and smiles you show love and respect.”

With the chemistry of a duo who are in tune with each other’s thoughts, Foot-Skip and Wheels say they want to help their fellow injured warriors transition to a better life.

“It’s time for us to go from being that warrior on the top,” Keith starts to say in reference to the Wounded Warrior Project logo . . .

“To being that warrior on the bottom,” Chris says, finishing the sentence. “We might not be able to do it your way. But we’ll do it our way. And our way just might be better.”



**Wounded Warrior Project offers six programs under our engagement pillar, which promotes bonding between warriors and gets them active and plugged into community events.**

**Learn more here:**



“It’s time for us to go from being that warrior on top, to being that warrior on the bottom.”

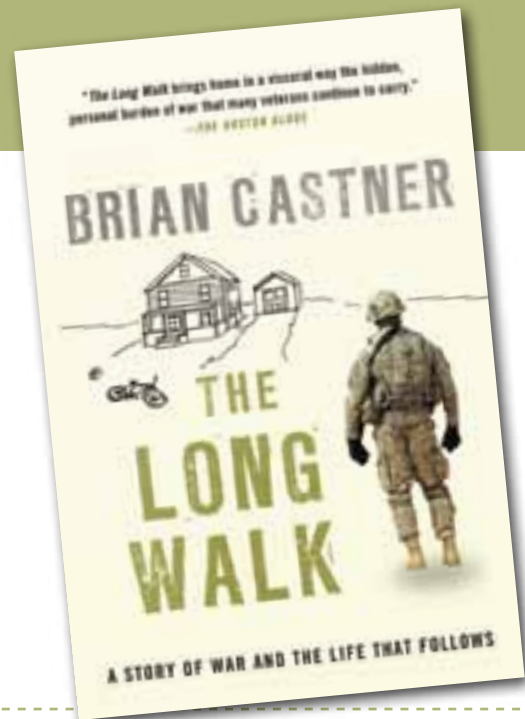








# the TRUTH of it all



**Excerpts from *The Long Walk***

*The naïve excitement of combat lasted little longer than a month. ... The exhaustion set in, and I walked through the war in a haze. ... The lunches melded into dinners that all tasted the same. The days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. They became a blur of cigarettes and explosions, situation-report deadlines and bloody pieces of children, bone-weary exhaustion and black, black coffee.*

*I'm on the road again, conducting training in another faceless city, sitting in a blank hotel room. My wife pleads with me on the phone.*

*"Please," my wife begs, sobbing between words. "Please just cheat on me while you're gone. Please, just go do it. Let me leave you with a clear conscience. Free me and the children. I can't follow you into this dark place."*

*I put the phone down without answering. I'm too scared to cheat and leave, so we endure.*

**One of the most remarkable things about this book, in my opinion, is the complete candor. These are the types of stories and graphic images (e.g., the foot in the box) that have accompanied war for centuries, but most veterans keep to themselves because most civilians just wouldn't understand. Did you start the book with the intention of revealing everything or was it a decision made during the writing process?**

It was never a conscious decision, whether to graphically describe every detail or hold something back. That part of the book was biological, something inside of me that needed to come out, and I just tried to tell the story the best way I knew how. For me, Iraq was in vivid Technicolor every day, but once I had written a war story down I finally gave myself permission to forget, to relegate it to the back of my brain instead of the front. The sections about home were a little different. I didn't want to intrude upon the privacy of my marriage and family more than I already was, and even though I revealed a lot, there are some things you just don't put in a book.

**As you read the book, there is little to no transition between your memories of Iraq and coming back home. How did you decide to employ that style?**

I was just trying to get the feeling right, and to me it made no sense to write a chronological book where everything is in order: first I went to college and then I deployed and then I came home and then I went crazy. That's not how it felt. It felt like everything was happening at once, like some part of me was still in Iraq, but when I was there I was just counting the missions to get home. I wouldn't call them flashbacks. I never thought I was actually back in Iraq, and I never confused reality, but I also couldn't go to the grocery store or travel through an airport or drive my kids to school without relating every action to the war.

**The stories from explosive ordnance disposal training illustrate how demanding the school is, but it also gives some insight into the volume of training that goes into preparing for**

**Retired Air Force officer Brian Castner served on an explosive ordnance team from 1999 to 2007 and commanded bomb disposal units in Balad and Kirkuk in 2005 and 2006. His first book, *The Long Walk*, details his experiences in Iraq and the resulting combat stress he lived with upon coming home.**



**war. Is it accurate to say that all that training kept you alive in Iraq, but also contributed to your anxiety when you couldn't turn it off at home?**

I think that's accurate, and I am far from alone in that. I think the military does a very good job of turning you "on," and you need to be on to survive combat, but we're only learning now how to turn everybody off. The point isn't to change the initial training, but to do what we can to lessen the mental shock once soldiers return home.

It's important to remember, though, what an unforgiving teacher war is itself. Grueling training or not, the misery of combat itself contributes plenty to the crazy feeling. War teaches you things about yourself and the world that are hard to learn other places, and it's a decidedly mixed bag of camaraderie and suffering.

**One of the most haunting scenes from this book for me comes toward the end when you dress your son for hockey. As I read it I couldn't understand why this was so upsetting until it ended with: "I just put my seven-year-old son in a bomb suit and sent him on the Long Walk." In many respects, this book can serve as a window into the war for families struggling to understand what's "wrong" with their loved ones after war. How has this book benefited your family and what's been the response from other veteran families?**

When I was writing it, I had no idea this book would help the families of veterans. It's a little overwhelming; I was just trying to explain the war to myself and my wife and eventually my children, when they get old enough to read it. But my wife said the book helped her understand me in a way that nothing else did, and I've had a lot of readers tell me that it provided some insight into the inner workings of their own son or daughter, or father, or spouse. Every veteran fought their own war, every veteran did or saw something different, but if some part of my book helps start a conversation in another family, helps bridge some gap, then I'm humbled that I was able to be of service.

**It's hard for many veterans to put their emotions and PTSD into words, but often a big step in their recovery is finding their own personal analogy for what they're going through. You vividly describe a spider crawling out of your head, your chest bursting, the last week of school before vacation. Has putting a name or a face to your feelings, thoughts, and memories been cathartic or therapeutic for you?**

Human beings tell stories to make sense of the world. So sure, the writing is cathartic, but no one needs to publish a book to get the same benefit. I think there is great value in anyone getting their story out of their gut and onto paper, freeing it so it doesn't have any more hold on you. I called it the Crazy feeling, with a capital C, because I couldn't find another word that accurately described everything that was happening to me, the physical and mental symptoms both. But anyone can write their tale that makes sense to them, and there are a lot of great veteran writing programs around the country that help facilitate this.

**The book ends on a semi-positive note, though, like many veterans your feelings will endure for a lifetime. What does the future hold for you?**

There's no cure for all the things you learn in wartime, and so the feeling is never fully gone. I still run plenty, do yoga, but I have put the feeling in its place, and when it comes back, I know it will eventually leave again. I have some small measure of control over it now. My shrink calls it my shadow. Your shadow is there all the time, but you don't have to look at it. That's what I was doing, staring at the Crazy feeling all day and waiting for it to go away, and of course it never would. So it still follows me, and when another close friend dies in Afghanistan it comes back, but not permanently, and not with the power it had before.

**Want to share your story? Visit [wwp10.org](http://wwp10.org) to find out how.**



Non-Profit  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit No. 1193  
Jacksonville, FL

## PARTING SHOT ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



Thousands of warriors converged on New York City this Veterans Day to participate in the annual parade.

**IN THE NEXT ISSUE:** Finding Purpose in Your New Normal