

# After Action

FALL/WINTER 2014

REPORT



## ALL IN THE FAMILY

Four families share how they find hope in their daily battle with PTSD.

PLUS:

## GAME CHANGER

How one warrior inspired groundbreaking legislation for veterans with service dogs.

## VICTIM TO ADVOCATE

Public speaking empowers this survivor of the 2009 Fort Hood shooting.



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# REGAINING BALANCE



Tai chi is a form of exercise built on a series of slow, deliberate movements.

**B**rad Bolden never imagined a lack of pain would keep him awake. But he was at a loss recently when the aches and pains he'd felt since Army basic training in 1988 were no longer there.

"I couldn't get comfortable," he says. "I've been trying to sleep through pain for 25 years, so when it was gone I didn't know how to handle it." That's a problem Brad is happy to accept.

The Army veteran injured his back during basic training and advanced individual training, but he pushed forward, even as the pain worsened over his career. Treatment in 2007 while deployed to South Korea created further complications. By the time Brad



Brad Bolden struggled for years to find an exercise that would not cause him pain. Tai chi is not only pain-free, but it actually reduces much of his daily pain.

was medically retired in 2012, he was an incomplete quadriplegic, barely able to walk and take care of himself.

Brad also struggled to find his purpose in a world without uniforms and regulations. He was no longer "Sergeant Bolden" and the lack of responsibilities, purpose, and structure left him feeling adrift.

"When I lost my strength and balance, I isolated from everyone and everything," Brad says. "Just driving to the store became a mission."

Brad was drawn out of his home when he heard about a tai chi class through Wounded Warrior Project. He'd witnessed older people practicing the ancient martial art while he was deployed to Asia and was curious to try it.

He completed his first class in January seated in a chair and occasionally standing with the help of a cane. The slow but deliberate movements did not trigger much pain and Brad felt refreshed afterward. It was his first glimmer of hope after so many other attempts to get active had failed.

"I had tried other low-impact activities like swimming, but they still hurt," Brad says. "I really had nothing left to do."

Brad admits he would have likely skipped over tai chi had he been able to do more fast-paced activities. But he encourages any skeptics to try it, especially if warriors living with chronic pain are looking for exercise alternatives.

Tai chi is "exercising your whole body without the hard breath of running, the strain on your feet of sports, or the pain of lifting weights," Brad says. "You'll feel like you ran a marathon without exerting yourself."

Within weeks of starting tai chi classes, Brad noticed a marked improvement in his balance and coordination. Small victories like bending over to put on socks grew into milestones like shelving his neck brace. When the lack of pain kept him awake, Brad knew he was on track to a permanent, positive change in his life.

Today, Brad is enrolled in intermediate classes and helping beginners as a volunteer. The leadership role has given him renewed purpose and contributed to his new outlook on life.

"It's something I look forward to," Brad says. "It's more than just doing something physical. You have a peaceful feeling inside."

**What is tai chi?**  
The exact origins of tai chi are subject to debate, but it's generally accepted that the martial art debuted in China several hundred years ago. Unlike other "hard" fighting methods, tai chi is a "soft" defense and turns aggressive energy back against the opponent. Over time the movements were slowed down and modified to become what some call "meditation in motion."



# FOR WARRIORS

## 1. How much should I share about my war experiences with people close to me?

The amount of detail you share with the people close to you is a personal decision. It is important to remember that you are the gatekeeper of your information, meaning you decide how much you want to discuss. Keep in mind the people close to you do not need to know all the nitty-gritty details to be supportive. It is often more helpful to talk about emotional reactions to your experiences so the people close to you have a better understanding how they can be helpful and supportive.

## 2. Are there certain techniques or methods I can try to make it easier to share?

Timing is important. Choose a time during the day when things at home are fairly quiet and you're not feeling overwhelmed. Trying to have a conversation when you're feeling upset can be difficult and unproductive. Setting boundaries around the conversation can also be helpful. For example, agreeing to take a 15-minute break from the conversation if you or your loved one begin to feel upset, angry, or overwhelmed can help ease tension and make for a more productive conversation. It is essential to finish the conversation, whether it is the same day or the next.

## 3. What are some ways I can get engaged with my family again?

Setting small goals is a great place to start. When you begin to feel motivated again, it's easy to say, "I'm going to take my kids to the zoo every single Saturday." However, a goal of that magnitude can be a trap and lead to feelings of failure and disappointment if you aren't able to follow through. Taking "smaller bites" sets you up for success. For example, committing to spending 20 minutes of quality time each day with your family is an easier way to reconnect and re-engage. It's all about setting yourself up for success.

## 4. What are some coping techniques I can use when I feel overwhelmed?

Breathe. This may seem too simple, but slowing down and focusing on your breathing is a quick and easy way to help lessen that sense of feeling overwhelmed. Taking a 10-minute break from the current situation to collect yourself is another option. Prayer, meditation, and writing in a journal are also ways to help decrease anxiety.

This information is intended for your general knowledge and is not a substitute for medical advice or treatment for specific medical conditions.

# REBUILDING RELATIONSHIPS



### Ready to rebuild?

We're here to help with a wide variety of services, from events that engage the whole family to help with finally meeting those weight-loss goals. Learn more at [woundedwarriorproject.org](http://woundedwarriorproject.org).

# FOR LOVED ONES

## 1. How do I create a safe environment for my warrior to start opening up?

Start by telling your loved one that you are interested and willing to listen. Just hearing those words can be comforting. Respecting your warrior's boundaries is very important. If they tell you they need a break from the conversation, it is important to honor that request. Return to the conversation when both of you are ready. It is hard to watch someone we love and care about struggle. However, you do not always need to have the answers. Often just listening is enough.

## 2. How should I react to an angry outburst?

Difficulty managing anger and frustration can be common to individuals living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), combat stress, and traumatic brain injury. While you can understand the reasons behind the behavior, you are not required to accept the bad behavior. In those moments, remove yourself from the situation. Do not continue to engage. After the outburst is over, talk to your loved one if you felt hurt by what they said or did. Your feelings matter too.

## 3. What should I do when my warrior experiences night terrors?

Do not try to wake them up. If you are sleeping next to them, remove yourself from the bed to avoid accidental physical injury. When they wake up, calmly help reorient them. Remind them of who you are (e.g., "John, it's me, Sarah"), where they are (e.g. "You're home. You're in your bedroom."), and that they are safe (e.g. "You had a nightmare but it's over and you're safe now."). Your warrior may have a hard time falling back to sleep, and that's okay. Encourage them to leave the bedroom and go into another room to continue to try to settle down. It is important that the bedroom is not always associated with feelings of fear and anxiety. Allow your warrior to choose if they want to share the details of the dream. If they choose not to, don't be offended. Continue to offer support and validation.

## 4. What are some non-confrontational techniques to discuss seeking professional help?

Here again, the timing of when this conversation happens is important. Avoid bringing up the topic in the midst of a heated discussion. When you bring up the idea of seeking counseling to your loved one, talk about how you want to see them begin to feel better and less overwhelmed, rather than focusing on the issues they are going through. Reinforce to your loved one that seeking help does not mean they are broken or crazy. It is helpful to emphasize how you are supportive, but there are limits to how helpful you can be. Offering to attend a session can help show your loved one you are willing to learn more about what they are going through.

# MORE THAN MUSIC



Danny Pitcher, left, leads TJ Sao and other warriors in a guitar class at the Wounded Warrior Project office in Colorado Springs.

**TJ Sao** doesn't talk much about his experiences in Iraq, but he'll tell you about the one thing that calmed his mind in the weeks after returning home: music.

His favorite was the chilled, laid-back acoustic guitar songs of Jack Johnson, which always eased his tension. Now TJ has a found way to recreate that same vibe.

TJ's new guitar skills came from a weekly class at the Wounded Warrior Project Colorado Springs office. When the Army veteran learned about the

class through the Post, a weekly e-newsletter listing local WWP events. He jumped at the chance to take part and started the beginner's class in January 2014. Even without much musical experience, TJ quickly picked up the basics.

"In the beginning, it was frustrating. I just wanted to get a Jack Johnson book and play all of his songs," TJ says. "But I only knew three notes. The classes helped me to be able to sing along and learn all the notes."

TJ stuck with it and his knowledge

quickly expanded beyond those three chords. Just as he enjoyed Jack Johnson, other warriors were bringing in their own musical passions, from country and oldies to Hawaiian music.

It soon became evident to TJ that this small class, capped at around six warriors, was so much more than a music lesson. Conversations about chords would turn to discussions about the successes and troubles of daily life; leading the discussions was resident guitar teacher Danny Pitcher.

"I feel at ease when I sit down with

the other vets and Danny. You don't have to worry about all the stress on the outside," TJ says. "It's not really a class. It's a good time."

Danny, a retired elementary school teacher, felt a calling to volunteer his time and musical talents to WWP and started the classes in August 2013.

"Music is in my soul, and that's what I want to instill in them," Danny says.

What had started as a simple instructional class evolved into an opportunity for transformation, discovery, and healing. He started with one beginner class, but when the first group reached the end of the course, they insisted on keeping the group together. An intermediate course was created, which TJ advanced into early in his study.

With direction and encouragement from Danny, TJ's practice sessions at home stretched from 15 minutes to hours. He noticed during the time he spent on guitar he was only concentrating on the music, the beat, the rhythm. Music is a refuge from the memories of Iraq that make him anxious, TJ says.

Guitar playing also serves as a bridge between the past and present. When TJ first started playing, he told Danny it was a tribute to the friends he lost in combat. Now he can also look forward to the weekly class and the opportunity to build new bonds with other warriors.

Other warriors in the class echo TJ's thoughts. The WWP Colorado Springs office plans to continue the guitar lessons and hopefully build the number of classes, while maintaining the intimate nature of the small groups. Ultimately, TJ says it's not just the guitar lessons that benefit him, but the feeling of empowerment and control.

"He is just free," he says of Danny. "I don't know if it's him or the guitar or both, but I just feel good when I come to class and am around those guys. Life is short, and you just need to enjoy it."

The camaraderie of why TJ Sao, pictured at right, enjoys the guitar class.



**We consider Wounded Warrior Project offices to be service centers, dedicated to providing you the tools you need to succeed, as well as opportunities to interact with other warriors. Find your local service center on page 25 and drop by today.**

A man and a woman are standing on a grassy hill, looking out over a vast, flat landscape. The man is wearing a dark blue polo shirt and blue jeans, and the woman is wearing a red polo shirt and blue jeans. The landscape is a mix of green and yellow grass, with a few small ponds visible in the distance. The sky is filled with large, grey clouds, with some blue visible near the horizon.

# BREAKING THE STALEMATE

Like so many others, Jona Vanata was torn when her husband, Vinny, returned from overseas. Her joy at having him home safe was quickly dimmed by the changes she saw in Vinny. He refused to share his pain; she grew frustrated with his silence.

Four families share how they started the healing process.



**“All of the wonderful traits he had before – his compassion, his energy, his leadership – they were locked away,”**

**-Jona Vanata**

**M**ourning is most commonly associated with death, but Jona Vanata knows now there are many losses that can be mourned.

She first came to this understanding shortly after she and her family returned from overseas, where her husband, Vinny, served in the Marines. Trading the beautiful Mediterranean island of Malta for the desert heat of the Marine Corps base in Twentynine Palms, California, was a difficult transition.

“After about six months it hit me that I was still mourning for Malta,” Jona says. “I had to accept it was over and begin again.”

It was an important life lesson but one Jona would not remember again until many years later during one of the most difficult periods in her life. That period started when Vinny returned home in 2003 from a six-month deployment to Iraq. All the excitement of holding her husband again quickly chilled when she first saw him. It was immediately obvious he had changed, Jona says.

“I knew from the first minute he came home that he had PTSD. But how do you tell a Marine he’s broken?” Jona says.

Her first response, as a mother and a wife, was confusion. It wasn’t fair, she says, to wait all this time for him to come home only to receive a distant and different man. But as a former Marine, Jona understood the military mindset her husband was struggling with.

“My mind and my heart wanted him to be the same man as before, but that demand is unfair,” Jona says.



Acceptance has given Vinny and Jona Vanata a new perspective on life.

Regardless, the years brought little change in Vinny and the family. If anything, the situation grew worse.

Jona and her daughter were diagnosed with secondary post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The network of support they were accustomed to from living on base dried up when they moved to a small town in rural Wyoming. Divorce was discussed on multiple occasions.

“I felt like I had to protect the children. I wanted to keep them from the hurt and harm,” Jona says. “But my vows kept coming back to me: ‘In sickness and in health.’”

The “aha” moment came for Jona when she was reading an old journal and came across entries about mourning for Malta. The more she thought about it, she came to realize she was mourning for the old Vinny.

“I had lost him. Yes, he had come home, but I was mourning for the man he was before Iraq,” Jona says. “The kids were longing for the peaceful man who was rarely distracted, the dad who could go out in public and not be hypervigilant.” That startling revelation led to a whole new mindset

and approach to her relationship with Vinny. She worked through her grief, from denial to anger and finally to acceptance that this was the new life she would live now with Vinny. Vinny began to work through his denial, especially after a Project Odyssey that introduced him to other warriors living with the same challenges. Now, a full 11 years later, Vinny and Jona are better equipped to take on the daily challenges of life while continually working on their relationship.

Jona emphasizes that acceptance is not a resigned submission to life, but a day-to-day approach, with time to appreciate the blessings. The biggest blessing, from Jona’s perspective, is to appreciate that her husband, regardless of any changes, is still with her today.

“I was longing for him when he was right before me,” Jona says. “Just one day at a time is better than no day at all.”

**“They saw I was a different person and they didn’t like what they saw. To be honest, I didn’t either.”**

**-Kevin McMahon**

**I**t took nearly seven years, but Kevin McMahon’s daughter recently said the three words he’d been longing to hear for so long: I love you.

Kevin had done everything he could to spend more time with her, from joining Facebook to learning how to text. So when the moment came, it was a reaffirmation of his purpose for living. Kevin knew he was going to be a good father for the rest of his life.

“Without my children, I wouldn’t have much of a reason to get up in the morning,” Kevin says. “They are the reason I am alive today.”

When Kevin returned home in 2005 from “14 months of hell” in Iraq, his life quickly went into a tailspin. He pushed back against the way his wife had been running their household in his absence, and he began drinking to minimize the effects of his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

There were many arguments and, unfortunately, his two children - Sean was 11 and Erin was 14 at the time - witnessed a few. In about a year, he was divorced and had lost custody of them.

“They saw I was a different person and they didn’t like what they saw. To be honest, I didn’t either,” Kevin says.

The next few years were difficult. Kevin still saw his children, but work demands took up most of his time. Meanwhile, Sean was in his junior year of high school and preparing to go to college. In one college application, he penned an essay about growing up without a father. In 835 words, Sean described his life without Kevin. He talked about the joy he felt when Kevin was home and the pain he



Kevin McMahon focuses today on growing his relationship with his children.

experienced at each deployment. He described a young man whose life was shaped by his father’s absence. Kevin wasn’t around to talk to him about girls, to teach him how to do yard work, or to provide encouragement after the loss of a soccer game, Sean wrote.

“I read that letter after I got back from Kuwait and it tore me apart,” Kevin says. “That’s when I decided it was pretty much time to leave the Army.”

Without the demands of his career, Kevin could begin healing the back pain from an injury sustained in Iraq. He also addressed the pain from his invisible wounds by attending weekly sessions at a veterans center. Talking with other warriors changed the way Kevin looked at his life, and helped him move forward with putting the pieces of his life together.

Healing also allowed Kevin to begin repairing his relationships with Sean and Erin. He found ways to interact with Erin and got his hands dirty under the hood of a Mustang with Sean.

“You’ll never get yesterday back,” Kevin says about the time he lost on deployment. “But you do have control over today, so take advantage of that.”

In the winter, he teaches skiing to injured veterans and disabled individuals on New York’s Windham Mountain for the Adaptive Sports Foundation. Sean and Erin even joined him for a weekend of skiing on his birthday last year. Kevin also teaches scuba diving to injured veterans he meets through Wounded Warrior Project.

“The more you give, the more you get,” Kevin says. “That holds true not just for volunteering but taking care of your family, too.”

**“Once I told him I had PTSD and what it entailed, it was like a light bulb shined ... over his head.”**

**-Mary McGriff**

**M**ary McGriff was certain her Air Force career would be over if she told her superiors about the anxiety and depression she felt after returning from Iraq.

She was even more certain if she revealed her feelings to her husband, Tony, it would break up the happy bond of their marriage.

So she kept quiet.

“I just became obsessed with work to make myself look normal, like nothing was wrong,” Mary says. “Tony didn’t know I would get depressed if I wasn’t busy.”

Mary deployed to Iraq for four months in 2004 to serve as an administrative executive officer. She also volunteered at the base hospital, where she saw traumatic injuries from explosions and gunfire.

“While I worked there, I didn’t have time to feel pity or sadness, it was just go, go, go,” Mary says. “There was no time for feelings. So when I left there and stopped and thought about it, it just all hit me hard.”

The weight of it all hit Mary as she headed home to North Carolina. It was then she began worrying about how her trauma would impact her family. She was soon diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and immediately began working to conceal it.

“I had no clue what was going on but I didn’t press her,” Tony says. “Yes, she was different. She was jumpy and not sleeping, but I just supported her.”

Tony said he was blind to the warning signs of PTSD, especially because Mary did not come home with a drinking or drug problem, which he always



Mary McGriff found a good listener in her husband, Tony, when she finally opened up about her PTSD.

thought were the main symptoms. Mary was clearly different, but he kept quiet because he was afraid he couldn’t help or relate as a civilian.

To fill spare time at home and mask her anxiety, Mary took up a second job selling real estate with Tony. In 2011, it became too difficult to keep up the act. The stress of concealing her pain became almost as difficult as the trauma itself.

At the advice of her therapist, Mary began telling Tony small pieces of her experiences in Iraq. Finally, she sat down and shared an entire trauma statement with Tony and their two teenage children, covering everything from the death she saw at the hospital to the depression she still felt at home.

“Once I told him I had PTSD and what it entailed, it was like a light bulb that shined pretty brightly over his head; it explained why I could not get rest and why I was so different,” Mary says. Tony encouraged her to drop the real estate job and dive into treatment. By 2013 Mary retired from the military to

focus on recovery. Even though he couldn’t relate to Mary’s experiences, Tony took on the role of an active listener and comforted Mary when she grew anxious.

“That’s what I think really saved our marriage,” Mary says. “His acceptance of my effort to stay silent for so long, and his communication when I finally was able to talk about it.”

Today Tony supports Mary’s Wounded Warrior Project activities, which have included Project Odyssey, cycling events, and networking.

“It has taken time and therapy, but I would tell any other couple to be patient like we were,” Mary says. “It’s about communication, patience, and love.”

**“The hardest thing, especially coming back with injuries, is that you have to restart your marriage.”**

**-Nick Bennett**

**N**ick Bennett physically returned home from Iraq in 2005, but his mind was still on the battlefield.

Crowds made him edgy and he drove aggressively to avoid the imagined danger. At home, he would fly into a rage when his kids complained about taking out the garbage. Nick saw little difference between them and his Marines in Iraq, where obeying orders could mean the difference between life and death.

Under that kind of pressure, it didn’t take long for his marriage of 16 years to shatter.

“The hardest thing, especially coming back with injuries, is that you have to restart your marriage. It doesn’t matter how long you were married before,” Nick says.

But what broke apart his first marriage has turned into an advantage with his second marriage, to Rachel.

Rachel did not meet Nick until after he was medically retired from the Marine Corps. Their relationship succeeds because all of the pain and frailty was on the table from the beginning. In fact, their first date was when Rachel came to see Nick speak at a dinner for veterans.

“I was also healing from stuff in the past,” Rachel says. “We connected and healed together.”

But it didn’t come without challenges. While she’d read online about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and brain injuries, Rachel was caught off guard by the fierceness of Nick’s mood swings.

This holds true especially toward the end of the year, a period that reminds Nick of all the firefights and injuries he witnessed up until the rocket blast



Family plays a big role in Nick’s recovery, including his wife, Rachel, and son, Eli.

that nearly killed him in November 2004. In contrast, Rachel associates the time between Halloween and the New Year as a chance to see family and celebrate being alive. They get through it, she says, because they are open and honest and they do it together.

“It was rough for a few years, but we’ve learned to talk to each other about how we’re feeling,” Rachel says. “Sometimes it’s not easy and sometimes we hurt each other’s feelings when we do that, but we at least get a better understanding of how we can work through things.”

The couple also finds comfort in sharing their challenges with friends, and they rely on their faith for strength.

“I take my problems to God because I don’t have the strength to do this on my own,” Rachel says.

Nick finds joy in his children and speaking publicly about veterans’ issues. He’s also found support through Wounded Warrior Project, where he’s met other

veterans through fishing trips and football games.

As he’s healed, Nick says he has a new understanding of how to be a loving partner and father. There was a time he believed the best solution was to isolate himself and push everyone away. Now he understands that creates more harm than good.

“If you truly love somebody unconditionally, the why or how [they are in pain] doesn’t matter. All that matters is that they’re hurting, and you’ve got to love them and get them through it,” Nick says.

**1. I am struggling with my marriage due to mental health issues. Is there any counseling available from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)?**

Yes, the VA offers marriage counseling and couples services.

**2. How will this counseling help?**

It could be beneficial in several ways. The counseling educates your loved ones about treatment options, identifies symptoms, and reinforces recovery for mental health issues.

**3. What if I suffered a military sexual trauma? Will the VA offer me a gender-specific counselor to help with my recovery and relationship issues?**

VA healthcare providers are trained in multiple facets of gender and ethnic differences, as well as military culture. They will make every effort to provide you with a same-sex or opposite-sex counselor if needed.

**4. Is there a service available from the VA if I feel overwhelmed and need to talk with someone after hours?**

Yes, the VA offers emergency mental health care after hours (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) at VA medical centers that have emergency rooms. If the VA medical facility closest to you does not have emergency room services, you may call the VA crisis line at 1.800.273.8255 and press 1, which is also available 24/7.

**5. I got married recently and I now have stepchildren. Am I eligible to add them to my VA benefits?**

Yes, you are eligible to add your stepchildren if you have a service-connected evaluation of 30 percent or higher or you hold a non-service-connected pension from the VA. You may complete the application through eBenefits at [www.ebenefits.va.gov](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov).

Want more After Action Report? You can find prior issues online at [woundedwarriorproject.org/after-action-report-magazine](http://woundedwarriorproject.org/after-action-report-magazine).

## WWP IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

Innovation is a driving force at the Fayetteville Wounded Warrior Project office. They recently hosted a surfing weekend, but it wasn't just limited to an Alumni or Physical Health & Wellness event. Warriors and caregivers also had the opportunity to talk to combat stress and warriors to work specialists. Collaboration is key to offering warriors and their family members all the tools they need to keep moving forward in recovery, teammates say.

**Location:** 4200 Morganton Road, Suite 300  
Fayetteville, NC, 28314

**Phone:** 212.629.8881

**Fax:** 910.860.0036



Sweet potatoes are an excellent choice for people who are picky about their vegetables. In addition to a delicious flavor, sweet potatoes are low in sodium, low in calories, and an excellent source of vitamin A. Pair them with apples in this recipe.

### Spice-Roasted Sweet Potatoes & Apples

Serves Six

Prep Time: 10 Minutes

Cook Time: 35 Minutes

**Directions:**

- 1)** Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Combine Country Crock® Pumpkin Spice Spread with pepper in small bowl; set aside.
- 2)** Toss apples with 1 tablespoon spread mixture in medium bowl; set aside.
- 3)** Toss potatoes with remaining spread mixture on baking sheet; arrange in single layer. Bake 10 minutes. Stir in apple mixture and bake an additional 25 minutes - stirring once halfway through - or until potatoes and apples are tender. Gently toss before serving.

- 1/4 cup Country Crock® Pumpkin Spice Spread
- 1/4 tsp. ground black pepper
- 3 medium Granny Smith apples, peeled, cored, and cut into 1-inch wedges
- 3 sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch wedges

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## MISSION: RESOLUTION KEEPER OPERATION ORDER

**1. Situation:** We always have the best intentions for New Year resolutions, whether it's lifestyle changes like losing weight or learning a new skill such as playing guitar. Best intentions are a poor defense, though, against a mouthwatering plate of nachos and the lure of video games. Often we find ourselves looking in the mirror on March 1 filled with guilt and wondering, "What happened?"

**2. Mission:** Make those resolutions stick.

**3. Execution:** Here's how you're going to get started.

- Write down specific goals and deadlines. Set a broad goal (i.e., lose 10 pounds in six weeks), but also focus on the steps to get you there. "Go to the gym three times this week" gives you a short-term goal and an immediate sense of accomplishment.
- Reward yourself when you meet a goal. One brownie isn't going to completely unravel your diet. (Eating an entire pizza will, however, so be smart.)
- Chart your progress. Record your first day of playing guitar so you can laugh and feel encouraged when you get stuck on a song, or keep a running page count on that unfinished novel.
- Avoid absolutes. When you swear off potato chips forever or commit to performing a new habit every single day, it sets you up for failure and a dangerous guilt trap. Forgive missteps, and commit to better effort.

**4. Service Support:**

- Enlist the help of others working towards the same goal. It'll give you encouragement on tough days, and they will give you accountability.
- Find an expert who can help you get over a hump. Wounded Warrior Project has dozens of teammates who can give you advice on eating healthy and proper exercise techniques, along with ways to engage with your family, start a career and go back to school.

**5. Command/Signal:** How are you going to recognize success?

Focusing on your immediate goals is a great way to start, but you also need a big picture to keep you motivated. Here are some examples:

- Tuck away a picture of that cruise in your wallet so you can stick to your savings plan.
- Keep your weight loss goal on the refrigerator as a reminder each time you head for that bowl of ice cream.

# CHALLENGE RIDE



**S**oldier Ride® is best known as the four-day event that brings dozens of warriors together for long bicycle rides and fun activities. But there are two other lesser-known facets of Soldier Ride that are just as fun.

In 2011, Challenge Rides gave warriors who wanted something beyond Soldier Ride an opportunity to challenge their limits on a bike. The Challenge Ride comes in two formats.

The first type of Challenge Ride is a Basecamp model. Under this format, the Basecamp provides both technical knowledge as well as on-the-bike coaching during the event. The goal is to provide warriors enough experience to be successful participating in cycling events in their local communities. This experience allows them to be ready to enjoy more time on their bicycles, whether riding with their family or

doing community bike rides, and possibly more advanced opportunities down the road.

The second format of the Challenge Ride program builds around a community bike ride, such as the Summit Challenge in Park City, Utah, or the Trek 100 in Waterloo, Wisconsin. At these community-structured rides, warriors who have their own bikes and who have been actively riding can test themselves with various distances while riding with their fellow warriors.

In 2014, Soldier Ride added the Off-Road program, giving warriors the Soldier Ride experience in the mountains of Park City, Utah. Over five days, warriors tackle a variety of terrains and experiences from cross-country riding to downhill. This program is a great opportunity for warriors who have been riding mountain bikes for years, as well as

for the new rider. Day one of these events provides fitting and instruction on riding over obstacles on the bikes. On day two, warriors are taken to a skills course to practice their new abilities in a controlled setting. When they feel comfortable, riders are taken out on a variety of cross-country and downhill courses to put what they have learned to the test. Both the new and experienced riders are provided an amazing experience as the mountains of Utah are like no other in the country.

The Challenge Ride and Off-Road programs were developed from warrior feedback and received great reviews. To learn more about these exciting opportunities, warriors can reach out to the Resource Center (877-832-6997) to be put in contact with their regional Soldier Ride coordinator.





# RIDING MY WAY BACK

**A**aron Helliker was at rock bottom when he first met Fred.

At the time he couldn't explain what it was about Fred that made him special. But days after they met, the thought of Fred kept Aaron from ending his life. It's just one of many debts Aaron owes the horse.

Aaron's introduction to equine therapy came at a desperate time in his life. He deployed five times with the Air Force to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Korea. With each deployment, Aaron found himself increasingly more comfortable with the adrenaline rush outside the wire than life back in the states.

"I hated being back here in the U.S. because I was always laughed at for how I would react to stuff like loud noises," Aaron says. "I'd jump, and people around me would think it was funny."

Repeated exposure to explosions from improvised explosive devices and rocket-propelled grenades led Aaron to be diagnosed with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). His treatment at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in 2010 included 43 pills a day.

When the pills took effect, "I'd be drooling all over myself," he says. "I was like a zombie."

He transferred to Fort Lewis, Washington, where it didn't get much better. The stupor caused by all the medication continued. His doctor gave up and told Aaron he would be dead in



Warrior Aaron Helliker and Fred the horse star in a documentary about equine therapy. (Photo courtesy of Purposeful Productions)

six months. With no one left to trust, Aaron went home and began writing a suicide note.

Simultaneously, Aaron had been introduced to Rainier Therapeutic Riding, where veterans work with horses as a form of therapy. That's where he connected with Fred, one of the horses in the program. It was a perfect fit for Aaron, who grew up on a farm.

"I'd lost trust in people, especially my leaders," Aaron says. "Learning to trust Fred, I began to trust people again."

Two of those people were Robin Fryday and Peter Rosenbaum, documentary filmmakers doing research for a film on equine therapy. They met Aaron through Debbi Fisher, who runs the program near Tacoma, Washington. Trust issues with strangers made it slow going at first, but over time Aaron grew more comfortable sharing his story. Robin didn't doubt the impact it could make on the public and other veterans.

"We interviewed all kinds of experts: military, medical, politicians. But in the end we decided to just focus

on Aaron's story because it was so powerful," Robin says.

The collaboration culminated in the creation of "Riding My Way Back," a 30-minute documentary that premiered in May 2014 at the GI Film Festival and won the Founder's Choice Award.

The filmmakers scheduled 100 screenings of the film nationwide for the week of Veterans Day, November 8-16. To view upcoming screening locations and search a database of certified equine therapy programs, visit their website: [ridingmywayback.com](http://ridingmywayback.com).

Aaron is now speaking out about the benefits of equine therapy, including at Wounded Warrior Project retreats and expects Fred to join him for some of those talks in the future.

"I'm sharing my story to save the life of someone like me," Aaron says.

# T.S.A. CARES

**A**irport security can raise anyone's blood pressure, but it holds special challenges for some veterans. This can include the extra anxiety of being in a crowd, intrusive questions about service dogs, difficulty standing for long periods, close inspection of CPAP machines and the internal metal parts sure to set off alarms. To make the process a little easier, the Transportation Security Administration developed TSA Cares.

TSA Cares is a helpline that alerts TSA personnel of your arrival at the airport. With about 72 hours advance notice, a representative can provide you with personal assistance through security.

The helpline hours are Monday through Friday, 8 am until 11 pm EST, and weekends and holidays, 9 am until 8 pm EST. You can also email: [TSA-ContactCenter@tsa.dhs.gov](mailto:TSA-ContactCenter@tsa.dhs.gov)



# THEIR TURN TO SERVE

**T**housands of people want you to know they appreciate your service and sacrifices. Their outpouring of thanks was collected this year by the H.J. Heinz Company through its "Our Turn to Serve" campaign. Heinz has supported Wounded

Warrior Project for several years through donation and awareness campaigns. The company's ongoing commitment to the military goes back to World War II when Heinz helped feed hungry Allied troops.

To read all the "thank-you" notes, visit: [heinzketchup.com/OurTurnToServe/GalleryofGratitude](http://heinzketchup.com/OurTurnToServe/GalleryofGratitude)



**“Instead of isolating myself, I actually want to take control of my life and not let it control me. WWP Talk gave me the small steps and goals to do that.”**

WWP Alumnus Mason Bagwell

**Need to talk?  
We're ready to listen.**

WWP Talk is a safe, free outlet for Alumni, family members and caregivers to talk about their mental health challenges. The nonclinical helpline is especially valuable for those who are withdrawn or isolated because of combat stress or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

When you sign up for WWP Talk, you'll be assigned a teammate who will call you at the same scheduled time each week. A friendly, listening ear is just a call away.

**If you're interested or know a WWP Alumnus who may benefit from WWP Talk, please call 855.WWP.4YOU, Monday-Friday, 9 am-5 pm EST.**

**» Why did you try WWP Talk?**

I was at rock bottom when I met a WWP teammate. She pointed me to the Resource Center, which connected me with WWP Talk. I really didn't have anywhere else to go, so I'm happy I gave it a try.

**» How did it help?**

I was going through a divorce at the time, along with a lot of PTSD issues. WWP Talk gave me some strategies and goals to try for the week, which really got my stress level down. Besides that, it was nice to talk about your successes and have someone there to root for you. That coaching led me to take more chances, and today I'm enrolled in school through TRACK™.

**» Why would you recommend WWP Talk?**

Just having someone to listen to you took a lot of stress off my shoulders. It's an easy first step to putting your life back together.

# GAME CHANGER



Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal makes a friend in Leyna, warrior Dozer Reed's service dog. (Photo courtesy of the Shreveport Times)

**L**ouisiana set a precedent this summer when it established clear and specific protections for people with service dogs. WWP Alumnus Dozer Reed was one of several advocates for the changes and had the opportunity to witness Governor Bobby Jindal sign the bill into the law.

“I don't do this for personal accolades,” Dozer says. “I do this for the warriors who sit on their couch and are afraid to go out. This helped a lot of people.”

Gov. Jindal visited Dozer's hometown of Shreveport to sign a bill that updates state code Title 46. Previously, state law offered general protection to anyone entering a business with a service animal. That was limited, though, to “physically disabled” individuals who were “visually handicapped,” such as the blind and deaf. The new law now lists “mental impairments,” including “military veterans with traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).”

In a prepared statement, the governor said, “This bill builds on our efforts to support individuals with disabilities,

including our veterans who have fought fearlessly to protect our freedom.” The historic day was a year in the making, and it started with a chance meeting between Dozer and state Senator Sherri Buffington. Dozer, a Marine Corps and Army veteran, received a service dog for balance issues and PTSD after a deployment to Iraq. His dog, a German shepherd named Leyna, was trained at the same place as the senator's three Labrador retrievers.

Senator Buffington says she was initially impressed by the “seamless partnership” between the dogs and veterans. Conversations with Dozer showed her how deeply veterans love their service dogs and how much the animals improve their quality of life.

“You have to understand that a service dog is not a pet,” Dozer says. “It's an essential part of surviving – the same as a walker, cane, or wheelchair. My dog is a disability device in a sense.”

Sen. Buffington was inspired to action after hearing the challenges Dozer and other veterans had accessing places with their dogs. As she started the legislative process to revamp the law, Dozer and other veterans worked with state legislators to educate them on

the benefits of writing new guidelines.

Dozer testified before various committees and won their hearts.

“I've never seen anyone work a room as well as Dozer can,” Sen. Buffington says. “He never meets a stranger. He has taken something extremely difficult and made it a new mission in life.”

Now that the mission in Louisiana has been accomplished, Dozer and others are hoping the change will spread to other states.

“Federal law and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) cover this, but it needs to be clarified in state laws as other states go back into their own statutes,” Sen. Buffington says. “It's going to help the community to understand, for businesses to understand, and to give these veterans a great deal of comfort.”





# NO WAY OUT



# BUT THROUGH

## Q&A WITH ALUMNUS DAVID BERLING

**O**n April 29, 2007, David Berling's Beechcraft Bonanza crashed short of a Los Angeles airfield. David survived the plane crash — barely — but his injuries ultimately resulted in the amputation of both legs, ending his promising Air Force career. David knew from the outset he had a choice to

make: Succumb to the role of a victim or stay positive and goal oriented. He chose the latter and adopted a mantra that's carried him and his wife through to this new season in life: "No way out but through."

That's also the subtitle of his new book, "Just Living the Dream," ([theberlingdream.com](http://theberlingdream.com)), which details the highs and lows of his recovery. In an interview with After Action Report, David shared the story of his recovery and why he chose to write his book.



Learning to walk again was a huge step forward for David Berling.

What are your first memories from the hospital?

"I have fuzzy memories of the day I woke up after nine days in a coma. I knew something was incredibly wrong because all of my family was there, including my parents, who had flown from Wisconsin. For the first time in my life, the high expectations I had set for myself felt threatened, and that really scared me. I felt I had to show everyone I was strong in order to make it easier for them—especially my wife and mother. I could lean on my dad for emotional and moral support, but I refused to let others know I was hurting."

You maintained a positive attitude from the get-go. Where did that come from?

"I believe my positive attitude was due to a combination of factors. I was raised to never quit or use the word 'can't.' And how could I, in good conscience, be negative when I had my family supporting me? Getting down or being negative wouldn't have done

any good. I knew I couldn't change the events of that fateful night in Los Angeles, but I could control how I reacted to the changes in my life and use my personal skills to get on with my life as best I could."

Where did the phrase "No way out but through" come from?

"'No way out but through' is a phrase we heard after my plane crash, and we thought it captured exactly how we felt. There wasn't any way to reverse our situation; nothing would bring my legs back. There wasn't a 'way out,' only 'through.'"



'Why did you decide to write a book about your experiences?

"Going through the process of recovery and rehabilitation provides precious learning experiences. From my initial time at (Navy Medical Center) until the present, others ask me about the how and when of my journey as they, too, face a similar path in their lives. The specific amputee lessons I learned needed to be shared to benefit others."

The book paints a very honest and intimate picture of your recovery, sometimes painfully so. Why keep those details in there?

"The book represents my true story without sidestepping the reality of what occurred. If it happened to me, then it's possible it will also happen to the next amputee. Including the details raises the reader's awareness to that possibility."

You've started the process of gaining recertification to fly again. What is your message for warriors hesitant to chase a dream because of injury?

"The injury doesn't mean it is impossible to achieve a realistic goal, only that it will take you more hard work and time to accomplish what the uninjured take for granted. Look to others for inspiration; see what can be achieved. In the physical arena, find a new way to accomplish what you could do before. Don't frustrate or demean yourself by comparing yourself to how you were before injury. Recognize you're not the same as you were before, and work to find a new way that fits your new normal."

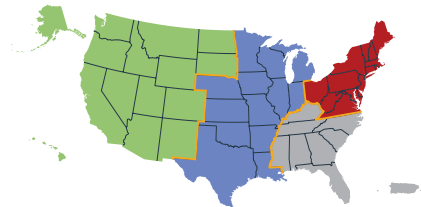
Part of David's physical therapy includes a recreational side.

# 2014 ALUMNI SURVEY

The annual Alumni survey is a unique window into the warrior population served by Wounded Warrior Project. This year, 21,120 warriors responded to questions ranging from their physical well-being to their outlook on the future. Curious about where you fit in? View the full results at: [woundedwarriorproject.org/mission/what-our-alumni-say](http://woundedwarriorproject.org/mission/what-our-alumni-say).

## DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The 2014 demographic profile of Alumni is mostly similar to the 2013 and 2012 profiles, but includes a higher percentage of wounded service members younger than 35 years old:



**49.0%** LIVE IN THE SOUTH

**24.3%** LIVE IN THE WEST

**13.5%** LIVE IN THE MIDWEST

**13.3%** LIVE IN THE NORTHEAST



**55.2%**  
ARE YOUNGER THAN 35 YEARS OLD



**64.9%**  
ARE CURRENTLY MARRIED

### THE TOP 5 MOST COMMONLY EXPERIENCED INJURIES & HEALTH PROBLEMS

**75.8%** have experienced sleep problems

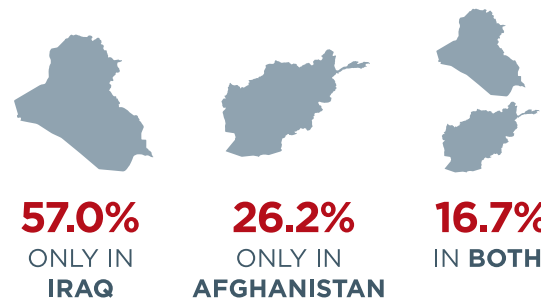
**75.2%** have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

**72.3%** report back, neck or shoulder problems

**67.1%** report depression

**64.2%** report experiencing anxiety

### WHERE DEPLOYED ALUMNI SUSTAINED THEIR INJURIES & HEALTH PROBLEMS



These percentages reflect the shift in military operations to Afghanistan in recent years.

## 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 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.ALUM (997.2586) or [resourcecenter@woundedwarriorproject.org](mailto:resourcecenter@woundedwarriorproject.org).



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**PARTING SHOT**

Warriors and their family members recently enjoyed a hike around Tipsoo Lake in Washington that included breathtaking views of Mount Rainier. Picture here, from left, is warrior Adeline Prince, her brother, Andrew Prince, and warriors Scott Schneider and Harry Gonzalez.

Done with this issue? Pass it on to someone you feel could benefit from Wounded Warrior Project programs and encourage them to register at [woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/alumni](http://woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/alumni).