

# After Action

FALL 2013

REPORT



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

PLUS:

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

**PATH TO THE PARALYMPICS:**  
"WALKING BEHIND THE AMERICAN FLAG  
AGAIN WAS REALLY A DREAM COME TRUE."

A DECADE OF SERVICE.



A LIFETIME OF COMMITMENT.

WOUNDEDWARRIORPROJECT.ORG











10-YEAR ANNIVERSARY  
**TIMELINE**

**JULY 2003**  
Wounded Warrior  
Project founded with  
backpack program

**OCTOBER 2003**  
Design of WWP logo  
commissioned

**MARCH 15, 2004**  
woundedwarriorproject.org  
launches



**WOUNDED WARRIOR  
PROJECT®**

**I**

n the beginning, there was a need.

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

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

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

**A DECADE OF SERVICE.**



**A LIFETIME OF COMMITMENT.**

**AUGUST 2004**  
First Soldier Ride

**FEBRUARY 23, 2005**  
Wounded Warrior Project is officially incorporated

**APRIL 4, 2005**  
First Courage Awards & Benefit Dinner®

**MAY 11, 2005**  
TSGLI signed into law

**JULY 7-10, 2005**  
First Rockaway Adaptive Water Sports Festival (Breezy Point)

**AUGUST 25, 2005**  
Wounded Warrior Project receives 501(c)(3) status

**DECEMBER 2005**  
First After Action Report sent to Alumni

**APRIL 17-28, 2006**  
Showtime's "Home Front" premieres at Tribeca Film Festival

**JULY 2006**  
Wounded Warrior Project moves headquarters to Jacksonville, Florida

**JULY 16-20, 2007**  
Project Odyssey launches

## ENGAGING A GENERATION **AL GIORDANO**

Al Giordano and his friend Steve Nardizzi were a mile from ground zero on September 11, 2001. From watching the second plane strike the South Tower to assisting co-workers coated in ash and dust, "it was a very intense experience," Al says. "It affected us tremendously."

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

"We knew something needed to be done," says Al, now deputy executive director of Wounded Warrior Project (WWP).

Less than 18 months later, as the first severely injured warriors returned from the battlefields of Iraq, a group of volunteers took the initiative. Using their own money and resources from family and friends, they delivered dozens of backpacks containing essential care items to Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The volunteers returned with more backpacks at the hospital's request, then spent time at the bedsides meeting the needs of the wounded veterans. The passion for serving veterans is one that continues to resonate today at WWP.

For Al, it was a no-brainer. A former Marine with a family history of military service, he strongly believes the general public owes a debt to the small percentage of men and women who risk their lives for America.

"We must thank the military for all the freedoms we enjoy as a people, because they protect those freedoms," Al says. "It's the right thing to do."

Al has seen firsthand what happens when America isn't prepared for the long-term care of its veterans. In his prior advocacy work, Al heard the bitter resentment in the voices of veterans who were mistreated and forgotten when they came home from war in Korea and Vietnam. Many of these vets did not receive the services and treatment they needed and as a result did not reach their full potential in life.

"If somebody had gotten there early, right at the beginning, there might have been a different outcome," Al says. "Not just for the veteran, but their family, because there's a ripple effect."

For the early founders, WWP represented a chance to get it right the first time. Building a new service model for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan meant a lot of brainstorming and improvisation. Only a few



***"We must thank the military for all the freedoms we enjoy as a people...it's the right thing to do."***

things were set in stone: no membership dues (those dues were paid with service) and no chapters. The organization was incorporated in 2005 and by 2006 they had moved offices from Virginia to Jacksonville, Florida. The veteran-friendly city and state offered more opportunity for expansion and a bigger pool of talented, young employees.

"We saw the potential of our organization, so we prepared for growth in a place that could keep pace with what we were doing," Al explains.

At this early stage everyone had multiple responsibilities.

While exhausting, it was also the key to the early success of WWP. Constant exposure to the developing needs of warriors in transition fostered the development of new programs and even federal legislation. In 2005, advocacy from WWP led Congress to approve a disability insurance policy (TSGLI), which provides compensation to service members and their family members for traumatic injuries.

"We only had five people at the time, but when you're so close to the population you can hear their cries for help and see their needs," Al says. "That's the power of advocacy. It has a long-lasting effect on thousands of warriors and caregivers."

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

Engagement derives from the strong bonds built during military service. There's no comparable experience among the 99 percent of civilians who didn't serve, so many warriors feel no one understands them. That's why WWP creates so many opportunities to bring fellow warriors together. Time and time again, Al has witnessed a struggling warrior attend an Alumni event like a baseball game or adaptive sporting event like Soldier Ride and suddenly come alive when fellow warriors start swapping stories about military life. That turning point is realizing they are not alone, Al says.

"It's tough enough to try and readjust without some of the combat stress and other physical injuries," Al says. "Engagement is building bonds and bringing warriors back together."

## THE FIRE INSIDE **IAN LENNON**

"It's no fun to be on fire."

Ian Lennon tries to have a sense of humor about it, but the memory of March 6, 2003, in Kuwait is all too serious and real.

"I tried to stop, drop, and roll, but it didn't work," says Ian, then a lance corporal. "My fellow Marines came to my rescue and put me out. I owe my life to them."

The accident happened at night as Ian refueled a truck so it would be loaded and prepared for the next day's mission. A spark ignited and sent flames up Ian's arms and face.

"I was conscious the whole time, and I felt every moment of it. Every burn, every searing instant of pain, and all the fury the amazing power of fire can inflict," he says.

Doctors in Germany's Landstuhl Regional Medical Center placed Ian into a medically induced coma. He woke up more than two weeks later in San Antonio, Texas, at Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC).

"It took me a while to realize I wasn't still in Iraq," says Ian. "They had already done a lot of the skin grafts. I was all swollen and bandaged up, and I felt helpless. Everything had to be done for me: feed me, shower me, help me get dressed, etcetera."

BAMC would be Ian's home as an inpatient for the next five months. His was a grueling routine of physical therapy and wound care. He then spent another eight months in outpatient care.

Says Ian: "It was a shocker when I first saw myself. I didn't want to go out in public. I didn't want people to see me. I couldn't face the looks, the stares, the questions. It's always in your head — what are people going to think of me? I just wanted to lie in bed and be depressed."

But John Roberts of WWP, also a former Marine living with burn injuries, would have none of that.

"John visited me at St. John's Hospital in New York and invited me to the Yankees game that night," remembers Ian. "At first I declined, but John was persistent. The next thing I know, I'm on the field at Yankee stadium, behind second base, being honored before the game. That moment really brought me out of my shell."



That was 10 years ago in 2003. WWP was still a brand new organization, but it was already having an impact on Ian's life.

"Wounded Warrior Project helped me transform myself from this victim who was afraid to go out in public, to this empowered survivor who now speaks at schools, veteran events, and other outreach opportunities," Ian says.

***"When I share my story with others, I can see in their eyes what they're thinking: Hey, if this guy can make it, so can I."***

In 2008, Ian was a member of the inaugural WWP TRACK® class in Jacksonville, FL. TRACK is the first education center in the nation designed for injured veterans. Ian's injury destroyed his chance at a career in the Marine Corps, but TRACK gave him a second opportunity to explore a new civilian career. What's more, TRACK

provides warriors a chance to study and grow with other combat-injured veterans.

"I met a lot of cool people, and there was a military atmosphere that I liked. We know what it's like to fight for something you believe in," Ian says.

Ian isn't shy about crediting WWP with much of his emotional recovery. That's why he remained steadfast in earning a position with the organization. He now serves as area warrior outreach coordinator for WWP in San Antonio.

"Helping injured service members is my passion," says Ian. "If it wasn't for WWP, I'd still be in a hospital bed feeling sorry for myself. I know firsthand what fire can do. But thanks to WWP, I've learned the positive benefits of another kind of fire: the fire you have in your heart to help other people. That's a fire I never want to burn out."



[wwp10.org](http://wwp10.org)

**NOVEMBER 6, 2007**  
Wounded Warrior Project dedicates Sacrifice Center to tell the story of the sacrifices and triumphs of this generation's wounded service members.

**JANUARY 18, 2008**  
Warriors to Work™ launches

**MARCH 28-31, 2008**  
First Family Support Retreat

**APRIL 24, 2008**  
First Soldier Ride kickoff on the South Lawn of the White House

**JUNE 18-21, 2008**  
First Alumni Leadership Summit

**AUGUST 2008**  
TRACK opens in Jacksonville

**AUGUST 14, 2008**  
First Peer Mentor training

**SEPTEMBER 10, 2008**  
Wounded Warrior Project becomes a VA-accredited organization aiding veterans with their VA claims and benefits

**JUNE 2009**  
Resiliency program starts with poster and video series in Landstuhl, Germany

**JULY 21, 2009**  
Wounded Warrior Project Caregivers Summit held in Washington, DC

## WORKING ON SUCCESS JEREMY CHWAT

The Wounded Warrior Project team has believed since its inception that limits were made to be broken. Why else would they take warriors out of the hospital and strap skis on their feet?

"The idea came mostly from seeing firsthand the early successes of warriors testing their perceived limitations and surpassing their own self-expectations," explains Jeremy Chwat, chief program officer.

This was in 2004, when WWP was still a budding veterans services organization finding ways to expand beyond its successful backpack program. Guiding its growth was the core belief that WWP existed to empower warriors and provide them the means to help themselves. Taking warriors on ski trips was a literal and tangible way to do that.

"You're talking about a population that thrived on adrenaline in the first place," Jeremy says. "This had an impact on their rehabilitation almost immediately."

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

The four pillars and the holistic approach to recovery are really what sets WWP apart from other veteran services organizations, Jeremy explains.

It started with engagement: introducing warriors to other veterans who had been in the same places and seen the same things. Recreating that unique military camaraderie and having a safe place to let your guard down does wonders for recovery, Jeremy explains. The physical activities — like the skiing — were a close second, but it became clear that neither body nor engagement could be truly successful until programs were in place to help warriors with their



***"The next opportunity is out there and we're ready to help you find it."***

combat stress and post-traumatic stress disorder. Mental recovery could not progress until the uncertainty of unemployment and education benefits were resolved.

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

Once the four pillars were established, the programs under them began to develop and splinter into new programs. Even as WWP grew, though, the core tenant remained the same: a hand up, not a hand out. Jeremy points to the economic empowerment programs as an example. The Warriors to Work program provides veterans with résumé-building tips, interview coaching, and even a suit to wear to an interview. It's up to the warrior to take advantage of those tools, Jeremy says.

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

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

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

"The next opportunity is out there and we're ready to help you find it," Jeremy says.

## A BRAND NEW MINDSET JOHN ROBERTS

The idea was simple: Get a bunch of combat veterans together and give them a safe place to talk.

But would it work?

"On the first day the guys were nervous and I was too," John Roberts, warrior relations executive vice president, recalls about the first Project Odyssey in 2007.

The formula was quickly about to prove its worth.

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

"I don't know what we just did, but we've got to keep it going," he told Al Giordano, deputy executive director.

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

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

***"I still think there's a stigma, honestly," John says. "Anyone who's experienced something horrific, things that are not normal, they're going to be changed in some way."***

Community support was not much better. The perception was that veterans with PTSD were "crazy" and liable to violently react at the slightest provocation. John is no longer shocked by this stereotype, but prepared with an answer. As he puts it, PTSD is not limited to veterans, but anyone who has been through a traumatic event.

"I ask whether they think the first responders or any survivors of 9/11 are crazy individuals," John says. "Rape survivors, people who survived a tornado, anyone can develop PTSD."

This is the knowledge John brings to Project Odyssey, which is named after Homer's epic poem about returning home from war.

When the attending warriors perceive they are not battling their demons alone, that they are in a safe place, they begin sharing and opening up about things they've never discussed before. No one listening is untouched.

"We might dab at our eyes, but we just pretend it's the smoke from the campfire in our eyes," John says with a laugh.

Project Odyssey has evolved over the years to include women and couples. An offshoot of Project Odyssey that has grown exponentially is the Family Support retreat, which caters to caregivers. A weekend retreat filled with pampering and therapy provides welcome respite and comfort to family members vicariously living with PTSD.

"I've seen more families destroyed because of PTSD than a physical injury," John says. The retreats give caregivers "a break to share and deal with their own emotional baggage. That's very powerful, because I don't think these warriors are going to be successful without family support."

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

"I tell guys all the time that it's not a weakness to ask for help," John says. "What you're dealing with is completely normal. It takes a much stronger person to ask for help than to sit and suffer in silence."



**MAY 5, 2010**  
Caregivers and Veterans  
Omnibus Health Services  
Act signed into law

**JANUARY 17, 2011**  
Regional expansion kicks off  
with opening of San Antonio  
office (second TRACK  
location)

**MAY 9, 2011**  
Independence Program  
launches

**AUGUST 23, 2011**  
Wounded Warrior Project rededicates its  
Sacrifice Center with the addition of a piece of  
steel salvaged from the World Trade Center by  
the FDNY on 9/11/01

**SEPTEMBER 7, 2011**  
Wounded Warrior Project  
launches Believe in Heroes®

**SEPTEMBER 22, 2011**  
Wounded Warrior Project and  
American Red Cross team up  
to support wounded service  
members

**MARCH 5, 2012**  
restorewarriors.org  
goes public

**JUNE 15, 2012**  
Race Across America

**OCTOBER 21, 2012**  
First Carry Forward  
Awards®

## THE PURSUIT OF FREEDOM MELISSA STOCKWELL

The backpack was unexpected.

"Who put this here and how did they know I was coming?" Melissa Stockwell wondered as she was wheeled toward her bed in the amputee ward at Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC). The bag itself was simple: black with "Wounded Warrior Project" (WWP) stitched in white letters across the front. Inside were shirts, sweat pants, and a CD player.

"They were just little comforts of home," Melissa says, but the message was clear: someone cares about you.

Then came the visits from WWP teammates and Melissa eventually connected them to the backpack. They were easy to distinguish from the regular stream of visiting celebrities and politicians.

"They just wanted to chat," Melissa recalls. "A lot of people would come in, take a photo, and leave. But with WWP it was about what they could do for me."

Melissa arrived at WRAMC in April 2004 after a roadside bomb took her left leg. The 24-year-old first lieutenant had only been in country for a month when she became the first female to sacrifice a limb in Operation Iraqi Freedom. There were times at the hospital Melissa allowed herself to wonder whether she would ever regain her independence. More often, though, she was counting her blessings.

"All I had to do was look around and see there were men and women with much worse injuries than mine. I was only missing a leg, so I considered myself the lucky one," Melissa says. She turned to these other warriors for inspiration and they expected the same from her. "We had all gone through these life-altering injuries and all we wanted was to get back to normal."

Also helping out was WWP, which took Melissa and about 20 other injured warriors to the ski slopes of Breckenridge, Colorado. A graduate of the University of Colorado, Melissa was more than proficient at skiing — at least on two legs. Now she was trying to regain that ability on one leg. After a few shaky days, Melissa finally found freedom.

"Flying down the mountain, the wind in my hair," Melissa says, pausing to enjoy the memory. "I had never felt so free."

*"Flying down the mountain,  
the wind in my hair...I had  
never felt so free."*



Melissa returned to Walter Reed with her head held high. Through WWP, Melissa discovered if she could ski on one leg she could accomplish anything. That knowledge empowered her after retirement in 2005 as she began searching for a new career outside the Army. Melissa eventually returned to school and studied to become a prosthetist.

She also had plenty of other pursuits outside of work. In 2005, Melissa joined the WWP board of directors. The organization was only two years old at the time, but it had already made a huge impact on Melissa's life. She saw the organization's potential.

"It was a promising future and mission I wanted to be a part of," Melissa explains.

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

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

Melissa left the Paralympics without a medal or breaking any records, which was disappointing at first. She eventually realized the journey to the Paralympics and moments like carrying the American flag into the stadium were the true victory.

"It's one of those moments you want to relive over and over again," Melissa says. "It's really cool."

Today, Melissa continues to serve on the board of directors and has incorporated swimming into paratriathalons. She is the three-time world paratriathlon champion and is competing in London this fall to defend that title a fourth time. It's a long way to come from that first ski trip in Breckenridge, but the lesson for any warrior interested in getting active remains the same.

"If you're interested in something, there is a way to do it," Melissa says. "Stay positive about the things you do have instead of focusing on what you've lost."

## A NEW BODY OF WORK STEVEN NARDIZZI

"Grassroots" is an appropriate description of the origins of WWP.

The first backpacks and their contents were paid for out-of-pocket and filled in a basement. Volunteers distributed them to Walter Reed Army Medical Center with little thought the hospital would call them back asking for more — but they did.

As momentum for the effort grew, so did the demand on resources. Times were tight, but there was one thing the volunteers never lacked: passion.

"We inspired each other," explains Steve Nardizzi, now executive director of WWP. "You could see how committed the folks next to you were and it made you want to give even more."

Also fueling their mission was the ample evidence they were meeting an unfulfilled need. As a country, we were ill-prepared to help young warriors coming back with injuries to successfully transition to civilian life, Steve says. The view from the hospital bed was filled with despondency and uncertainty about what would come next for a young man with no legs or a woman with no life skills outside military service.

"What really drove us was providing an alternate vision for the future, building confidence, and showing what they were really capable of," Steve says.

The first big jump for WWP was backing up those words with actions. Warriors still in recovery were taken on adaptive ski trips and given their first opportunity to break the perceived limits of their injury. It was a milestone for many in their recovery and a breakthrough moment for the new WWP.

These were mostly private moments, though. It wasn't until the first Soldier Ride that WWP began to gain public exposure and the real benefits of physical exercise were fully understood. Today's rides are major affairs, with dozens of warriors and crowds of cheering supporters. The inaugural Soldier Ride was just one person and a civilian at that: Chris Carney. Chris was a bartender from Long Island who was determined to raise awareness and money for WWP by cycling across the country.

As Steve recalls, there were a lot of questions: Have you run a fundraiser before? No. Have you done a cycling event before? No. Do you even have experience cycling long distances? No. In spite of the negatives, Chris' passion and dedication won over the WWP team and planning began. Faith in a good idea in spite of obvious challenges remains a hallmark of

the organization today.

So Chris set out on his journey to bring awareness to WWP. Warriors joined him for segments along the way and it became an opportunity for communities to learn more about the veterans living among them.

"It was an interesting thing," Steve says.

*"There were warriors who were  
really excited about this and word  
was starting to spread about  
their needs."*



WWP teammates also discovered Soldier Ride was not only meeting warrior's physical needs, but supplying the military camaraderie warriors were so desperately missing. One of the enduring elements from the first Soldier Ride events is the peer support that develops after days on the road together and long talks at night.

Over time, it became clear that physical health and wellness had to extend beyond one-off events and become a lifestyle. Years of slow recovery and the effects of medication often produced a sedentary lifestyle that threatened long-term damage to a warrior's life. If you're not feeling good about yourself, that affects your mental health, your ability to go to work, and even how often you get out of the house to engage with other warriors, Steve explains.

The organization developed nutrition programs and cooking classes for a generation of service members accustomed to the chow hall providing all their meals. Sponsorships with local gyms and exercise classes were developed to keep warriors active throughout the week.

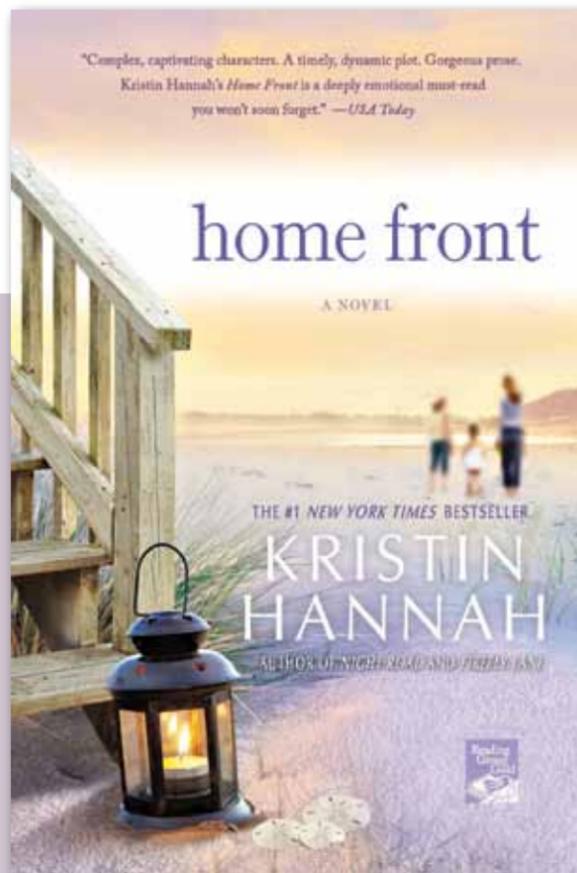
"Our goal was to create a sustainable, healthy lifestyle," Steve says.

This is WWP today, an organization that continues to break limits but also provide warriors direction on how to stay strong after reaching new heights. For the warriors still hesitant to take that first step, Steve has this to say:

"There is a way to achieve anything you set your mind to. It might be in a way that is a little different, but the only real limit is your own internal drive to try and seek support. After that, the door's wide open to all sorts of possibilities."



wwp10.org



**“...I also began to deeply understand the sacrifices our military men, women, and children, make on behalf of all of us.”**

**Tell me about the research that went into the book.**

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

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

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

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

I have been absolutely astounded and awed and humbled by how military families have embraced this novel. I literally get dozens of letters and emails a week from people thanking me for "telling it like it is." I hear that a lot — especially about PTSD and the difficulties that come with returning home from war.



Kristin Hannah is the bestselling author of 18 books, including the recent "Home Front." Don't be fooled by the soft pastels on the cover. "Home Front" is a brutally honest look at what transpires behind closed doors when veterans come home with physical and emotional injuries. Kristin explains in an interview how difficult the book was to research and some of the surprises she encountered along the way.

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

"Home Front" really began with watching the nightly news. At the time, the war was front and center in the media, and each night, as I was making dinner for my family, I saw stories about young men and women deploying, or coming home, or losing their lives. A lot of these stories centered around men and women who were my son's age, so I think it really hit home. When I realized how many mothers were going off to war and leaving their children and families behind, I knew then it was a story I wanted to pursue.

I am what you want of me

Sand is the new grass amongst all this glass and brass.  
 Death is all amongst us. This we all accept.  
 We all acknowledge this debt that is set, and try not to worry.  
 But don't you worry, we're all trained and very much worthy.  
 I try to survive and see the new sun arise; hoping we will maintain our precious lives.  
 The stakes are high every time we drive by  
 If it's the wrong day, you may be blown sky high.  
 I often hear a friend say, "Don't you let me die."  
 I know then I'll be forced to say my final goodbye.  
 There is not a day that goes by when I don't hear my buddy cry.  
 I wish it were me, so I could look down and see,  
 The life it would be if only he had only replaced me.  
 I hold the pain inside until I arrive stateside.  
 My pain is weakness and a tool for them.  
 If they only knew what happened within with the loss of him.

*"My heart filled with anger,  
 and my mind went dark.  
 I have now become a dog,  
 which so easily barks."*

The world I had in my mind was lost there on the other side.  
 I never said the proper goodbye and died there alongside.  
 It's the ugly proof, full with unmistakable truth,  
 That none of us are "bullet proof."  
 My heart filled with anger, and my mind went dark.  
 I have now become a dog, which so easily barks.  
 I'm trying to rebuild what was lost but can't forget about the cost of the loss.  
 If only they could bring me back my friend, last name Ross.  
 I've been to war on three tours, none I can say were better than ones before.  
 My mind is now my battlefield, constantly thinking of the guts, fear, and gore.  
 I swore that I wouldn't let this get the best of me.  
 Maybe I'm just using what life was extended to me.  
 My story will never be told, and I will eventually become old.  
 I believe I'll just remain cold, with a reminder I served with the bold.  
 Some people just tell me to forget, but my story is worth more than gold.  
 I have been diagnosed with PTSD, and that's the new worst part of me.  
 The Infantry is a part of me because it's what you wanted me to be.  
 For the love of my country, this I will sacrifice.

Allow me to rip, kill, hurt, slash, strangle, and tear.  
 Destroy everything with my hands I bare.  
 My eyes burn from unshed tears from what I have seen and done,  
 The flickering flame eats away the fears I hide within.  
 The pavement of war cracks underneath my boots.  
 The taste of bitterness and blood makes me grind my teeth.  
 My lungs exhale and I breathe in the thick air of world's pressures.  
 Disturbed in my simple ways I feel normal.  
 Try as you may please, you have broken my chains.  
 You pressed start and now we begin the game I trained to play,  
 My soul is burning with this wicked flame, finger holding the trigger,  
 And I'm afraid the dog within can no longer be tamed.  
 The dog I have created will be left with shame because you have  
 diagnosed me with something other than my name.

For I am the Infantry, "What you want me to BE."

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

To learn more about our combat stress recovery programs, visit: [woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/combat-stress-recovery-program.aspx](http://woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/combat-stress-recovery-program.aspx)

By Brandon Waugh,  
 Staff Sergeant  
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## PARTING SHOT ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



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

Photo Courtesy of Thomas O'Connell

**IN THE NEXT ISSUE:** The Power of Two