

After Action

SUMMER 2014

REPORT



STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Liz McLean found peace in fitness after the war, but it wasn't until she shared her secrets with another warrior that the incredible happened.

PLUS:

WARRIOR SPIRIT

How one warrior is using his double amputation as an advantage in Brazilian jiu-jitsu.

RUN TO SOMEWHERE

All the tools you need to successfully complete a marathon.

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RUN TO SOMEWHERE

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Still not sold? Here's what one Army vet has to say about Run 2 Somewhere:

Jarrad Turner is upfront about the negatives of running a marathon.

"There's going to be some pain, some cursing, some 'why the hell am I doing this?' moments," he says. "It was a challenge, but it was also a relief to know I had other warriors with me."

The former combat medic finished his service with multiple life-changing injuries from a mortar attack, including double vision, vertigo, and damage to his arms. Regardless, Jarrad couldn't turn his back on years of daily exercise, so he began endurance training and entered triathlons. Training for a marathon was a natural next step.

"I was already in shape, I just had to get into better shape," he says.

Jarrad took three mornings each week over three months to build up strength for the marathon. Throughout it all, a Wounded Warrior Project teammate kept him accountable, provided encouragement, and offered nutritional advice.

While he was physically ready by race day, there was one element he didn't discover until he arrived in Savannah, Georgia, for the marathon: camaraderie.

"I met a retired Marine that first day and he agreed to run with me to the

store to pick up an iPod." Jarrad pauses his story to laugh. "You can imagine what happened when you put a soldier and Marine together to run two miles. It wound up being a six-mile run."

The next day Jarrad and his new friend ran side-by-side for the duration of the race. They spurred each other on whenever someone threatened to stop and ended up yelling cadences the last couple of miles.

"You can't put a price on that level of camaraderie," Jarrad says. "I still get tears in my eyes thinking about it."



Jarrad Turner, right, celebrates the successful completion of his first marathon with fellow warrior Donal Humphries.

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STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

The friendship began with an offer. "Please contact if interested. Ironman athlete willing to teach any Wounded Warrior how to train for triathlon."

Marine Corps veteran Aaron Autler, 28, was intrigued when he saw Liz McLean's offer on the Wounded Warrior Project Facebook page. He had finally quit the destructive habits that held the last three years of his life hostage and replaced it with a new high: cycling. The sport was introduced to him by a counselor at the Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital in Menlo Park, California, as a way to eat up the hours once occupied by other vices. When he saw Liz's post in October 2013, Aaron had already paid the entry fee to his first ever half Ironman race. He considered the sign-up fee a down payment toward his goal, so there could be no turning back. But there was a problem.

"I was kind of clueless," he says. "I didn't have any idea what amount to train, in what order, or about the

nutrition I needed to get ready. I was just kind of going for it."

Enter Liz.

An Air Force veteran working as a human resources manager for Hewlett Packard in California's Bay Area, Liz, 30, has been running marathons since elementary school. In addition to training on her own, she also works with Joe Santos, owner of Davis Wheelworks in Davis, California, and a bike fit specialist for the U.S. triathlon team.

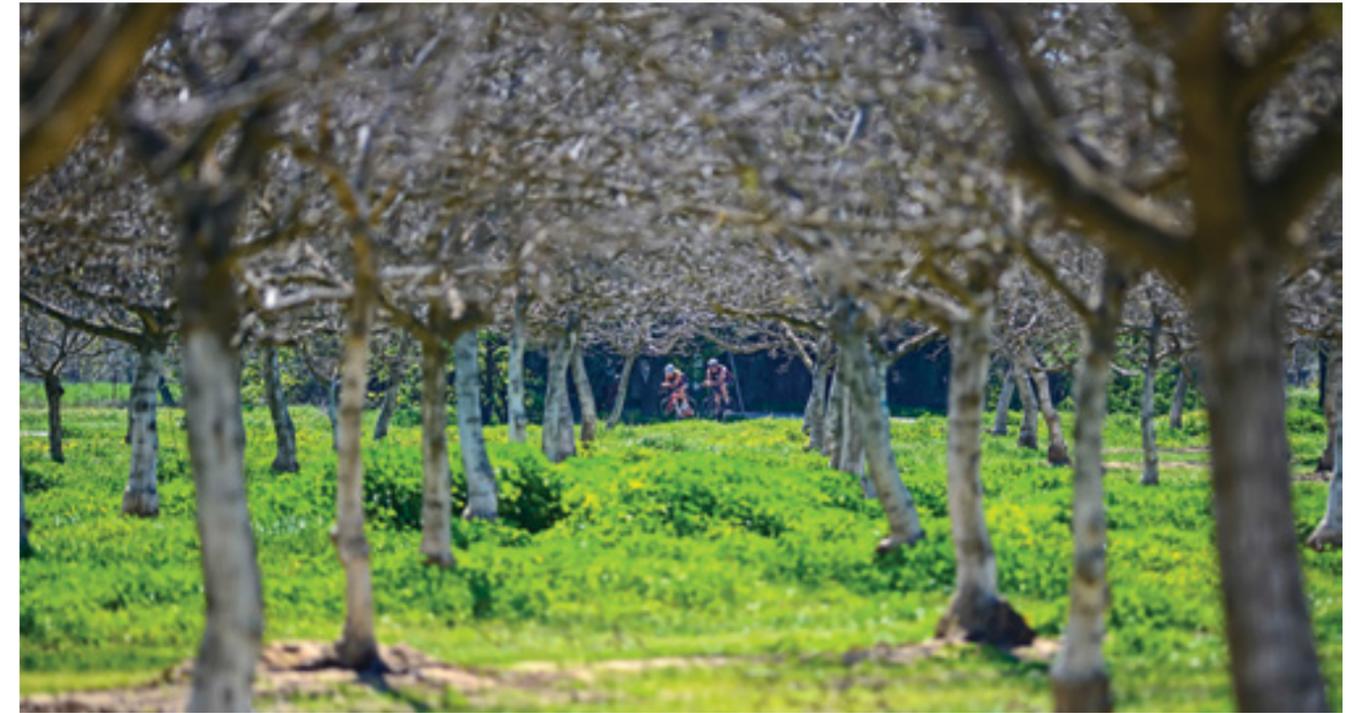
More importantly, Liz knows firsthand what an effective weapon exercise can be against battling the demons of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). After separating from the military in 2010, she was left disheartened. Like Aaron, the

experience of working in a warzone followed her home, but her pain manifested in a different way.

"I had a hard time dealing with the day-to-day things," Liz says. "I felt people as a whole weren't grateful and I couldn't stand the triviality. I remember sitting on the beach and bursting into tears because I saw people out there drinking. It made me sick, because they were wasting their lives."

Through her years in the military, Liz witnessed other service members come home and cope with similar feelings through drinking binges, drugs, food dependence, and other vices. Liz used exercise and discipline to temper her anxiety and bring comfort during troubling times. "People turn to something to quiet the

Joe Santos, a professional bike fitter for the U.S. triathlon team, was instrumental in preparing Aaron for success.



Aaron and Liz train with long rides through rural California.

voices or quiet their stressors," she says. "They do whatever they can to make their internal struggles go away. Fitness is just another means of doing that. If you can't control anything else, you can control your body."

Liz grew up in Sonoma, California, and was always active in track, cross country, and marathons from a young age. She was accepted into the U.S. Air Force Academy after high school, where she found others who shared her devotion to discipline and accomplishment. In 2006 she was stationed at Eglin Air Force Base near Pensacola, Florida, and served as a logistics readiness officer, leading the fuel flight team of 120 service members. Her leadership skills were put to the test a few years later when she was deployed to Kuwait's Al Mubarak Air Base in 2009.

There, as an executive officer, she led logistics for all entry into and out of the port. She also oversaw the mortuary service, which received bodies of service members coming from Afghanistan and Iraq, cleaned them for presentation, collected their belongings for families, and transported

caskets into planes to be flown to the states. During her tenure, Liz saw death by improvised explosive device and gunfire.

"It really makes you think about the value of life," Liz says.

As the bodies came in, Liz became an expert at compartmentalizing her feelings so she could continue her work. She couldn't ignore her emotions, though, when she realized one of the service members was an old classmate, Sally*, who was killed while convoying from Kabul to Bagram in Afghanistan. It was 110 degrees when Liz and her team loaded Sally's casket into the plane. Liz recited lyrics from the Beatles' "In My Life," her face soaked in tears. At that point, something changed.

"I just became a little bit more somber," Liz says. "I didn't know if I wanted to come home. I felt like I was making a difference, and I was scared I would come home and not be able to make a difference in anything."

After her deployment, Liz was stationed at McGuire Air Force Base

in New Jersey until she separated from service at the end of 2010. At home, Liz struggled to adjust. She was diagnosed with PTSD after mandatory testing, but she brushed off her pain, assuring counselors: "I'm fine, it's no big deal." While there seemed to be little value in therapy, Liz knew one thing that would work.

"At that point I had enough," Liz says. "I decided I was going to continue to use fitness as my therapy. I didn't want to be 'Oh woe is me.'"

Along with working as a recruiter for various companies after her service, Liz delved into her fitness, working out twice a day and competing in races like Ironmans and the Northface Endurance Challenge 50K Championships. She also made friends through a local racing team, Viva Pink. In 2013, she contacted Wounded Warrior Project to help her find other veterans dealing with similar post-war anxieties and searching for a way to cope.

"I had this dream, this desire to help others deal with their struggles through fitness," she says.

*Name has been changed

For Aaron, Liz's offer came at the perfect time. After two deployments to Iraq, one in 2004 and another in 2007, Aaron couldn't shake the constant anxiety and tension he had as a rifleman with the Marines.

"You're fearing for your life on a daily basis," he says. "You don't know if you walk around this corner or that corner if you're going to get shot."

That anxiety, paired with the pain resulting from a vehicle accident in 2007, resulted in a series of bad choices that eventually led to homelessness. His greatest challenge was finding a direction that matched the sense of accomplishment and purpose the Marine Corps gave him.

"It was hard to adjust to normal life," Aaron says.

In 2013, Aaron decided he needed something positive in his life. Liz's offer was his opportunity. Liz and Aaron began emailing almost daily. She provided him detailed workout plans and sent nutritional advice, and he followed it religiously. Once he started triathlon training, he found a goal to work towards every day, and his confidence grew as he met milestones.

"When I was new to sobriety, it helped me to start with a small goal every day," he says. "Whether it's working out at the gym or running a mile, it builds my confidence."

The emails from Liz kept coming. Even when Aaron wouldn't reply or send just an "okay" to her 300-word lesson plan, Liz stayed on him. For all her pestering, he was soon affectionately calling her "Mom." In January of 2014, the two met for the first time when Liz took Aaron to have his bike refitted. They met again in March when Liz competed alongside Aaron in his first race at the International Desert Triathlon. Crossing the finish line only made Aaron want more. Liz taught him how to train and use fitness as a tool for recovery, but also set realistic goals. Even healthy habits like working out can become an addiction, Liz says. The key is to remember "it's not a substitution for the rest of your life. It is a valuable addition and outlet," she says.

Aaron's true sense of pride came during his second race in April, when he finished a half-Olympic distance race. Soon the questions turned from bike advice to career advice. For the first time since leaving the Marine Corps, Aaron was beginning to think about what he wanted to accomplish in life.

Liz proposed job fairs and career options. Joe, the bike fit specialist for the U.S. triathlon team, noticed Aaron begin to ask more questions about his training and, slowly, where he was going in life.

"He no longer second guesses his abilities," Joe says. "One of our goals is to make him more inquisitive and look more to the future. The idea is to develop critical thinking skills and give him confidence in his personal life and professional life."

For Liz, the experience of helping Aaron has helped her stay focused on her own athletic goals. While she still uses fitness as a means of recovery, she's also found value in opening up and sharing her struggles with people she trusts. In April she traveled to Spain to compete in the International Triathlon in Sevilla and won the women's division with a time of 4:42, breaking the finish line tape as local children cheered and waved her on to victory.

"Helping others makes me happier than anything in the world," she says. "People can always make excuses but look at where you can go. Aaron was on the streets and look where he is now. It fuels me to continue to have faith in humanity."



Liz McLean's deployment to Kuwait took a serious turn when she escorted a casket holding the body of a close friend. Liz keeps the flag draped over that casket as a tribute to her friend.





WARRIOR SPIRIT

When Rick Cicero walks onto the blue gym mat, his confidence is so blinding it's almost possible to miss his bionic right leg and empty right sleeve.

About 10 barefoot men scattered on the mat watch him with respect, not pity. After a brief introduction, they break out into pairs and begin to spar using Brazilian jiu-jitsu. This martial art is primarily based in ground combat and grappling and relies on chokeholds and pressure points to gain submission.

As one of the younger men lays his body across Rick's and pushes his forearm against Rick's throat, the double

amputee groans. Then Rick flips his opponent around and gives him pointers, using the knowledge he's gained from gym owner and coach, Rob Kahn, a legend in his own right in this sport.

Rick and Rob connected through Wounded Warrior Project less than a year ago and have worked together ever since. Rick had tried other martial arts in the past, but could not technically execute certain moves because of his amputations. Brazilian jiu-jitsu was different.

"It's more fluid. It's more flexible. You can get to so many positions, which is great for a guy like me," he says.

A former civilian K-9 unit police officer, paratrooper and National Guard member, Rick's transformation to the man he is now began the morning of August 4, 2010 when he was employed as a contractor in Afghanistan. Rick was on foot patrol with the Canadian military when his bomb detection dog, Nancy, alerted. Before he could react, Rick was in the middle of the explosion.

Rick doesn't remember much from that moment except for waking up with Nancy, a German shepherd, lying on his chest in guard position. He spent months in hospitals, first in Kabul, then Germany and finally James A. Haley Veterans'

Hospital in Tampa, Florida, about 40 miles south of his home in Weeki Wachee. Rick got a holiday pass out of the hospital four months after the blast. He was rolled out in a wheelchair, but returned two weeks later walking.

Rick credits doctors, peers, friends, and his family for inspiring his recovery. Over time he moved beyond a basic routine of "eat, exercise, sleep" to experiencing life again through bike riding, weight lifting, and even sky diving. Still, he was convinced something was missing.

"When this life change occurred, you go from the guy who runs into the fire to the guy who watches and waits for someone to become a victim," he says, adding that he often worried about being the victim himself.

But that all changed when he met Rob.

"The past three years I've been told, 'You can't do it. You won't do it. You'll never do that again,'" says Rick, who sports a horseshoe mustache and crew cut. "But when I come in here and get on the mat, Rob says, 'There's nothing I can't teach you.'"

Rob never doubted he could help Rick. "The first thing I saw was his drive. Rick doesn't look at the obstacles in front of him. He looks over them," Rob says. "He has that combination of warrior spirit and patience. I said, 'It might take a little longer, we might run into a few roadblocks, but we'll get it.'"

And they have, and continue to learn from each other.

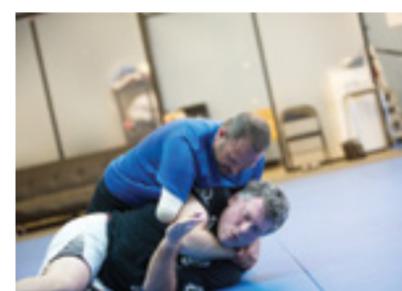
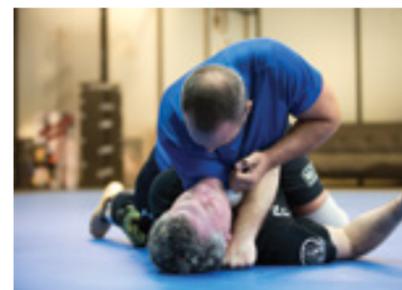
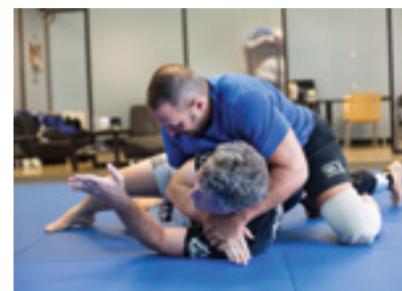
"Rob lit a fire under me that I can't seem to put out and I don't want to," Rick says, half smiling, half shaking his head in disbelief.

When Rick started with Rob, it took him several minutes to get up off the mat; now he pops up in about seven seconds. He's also gained back his confidence.

Now that Rob and Rick know the necessary adaptations, they're bringing Brazilian jiu-jitsu to other wounded soldiers and amputees. Rick wants others like him to experience the same successes at the sport.

"I'm not at a point where I can make guys roll, but I'm getting there," he says. "Right now you might beat me, but I'm going to make you work for it."

"Rick doesn't look at the obstacles in front of him. He looks over them," says Rick's instructor, Rob Kahn.





Kelly's first priority is making sure Steven is comfortable. That means a lot of late nights to make sure everything is in place not just for Steven's immediate needs, but his future needs as well.

his hair, and gives him a shave. At 10 a.m. she has him on a stationary bike for exercise. Off the bike at 11 a.m. Lunch at noon. And that's just the first part of the day.

"Everything is scheduled, even friendships," says Kelly. "I sometimes feel like we're being selfish because if friends want to see us, they have to do it on our time."

She credits Wounded Warrior Project for helping her realize there must be care for the caregivers.

"WWP has embraced us," says Kelly. "I'd feel guilty for any moment of happiness I had away from him, but WWP showed us how to better care for ourselves, so we're able to better care for Steven."

When Kelly sees the man her son has grown to be — how he sacrificed for his country and how he continues to bring joy to his family — she is reminded of that little boy who befriended the mailman.

"Steven's children are just like he is," says Kelly. "And there's power in that. I first noticed it in the hospital, three weeks after the accident. We got doctors' permission to allow Steven's three-year-old daughter Sienna to visit him. Until that moment, the only reaction to anything Steven had shown was to occasionally squeeze my hand."

Sienna said "Hi, daddy," and to everyone's amazement, he turned his head, opened his eyes, and looked at her. There she was, arms stretched out, wanting a hug — just like Steven used to do.

"The power of genuine love was at work that day," says Kelly. "It reminded us to never give up."

Kelly finds peace and understanding in caregiver events sponsored by WWP. "They have a lot of the same emotions, the advocacy problems. It's a time to sit and visit and not have to worry about what you're saying."



FLYING HIGH

Noe "Lito" Santos has done a lot with one leg.

Since his injury in Iraq nine years ago, he's successfully set himself up as a freelance recording studio engineer. When he's not working, he attends Wounded Warrior Project events such as skiing and hunting and he's also a certified Peer Mentor.

"My amputation isn't much of an obstacle anymore," Lito says. "Sometimes my friends and I even forget that I need crutches to ambulate. That's in part due to how active I stay."

Of everything Lito does to keep active, one thing holds the biggest appeal: flying.

Serving as a pilot was Lito's dream when he began a career in the Army infantry in 2003. He planned to apply to flight school when he made the appropriate rank, but an improvised explosive device brought that dream to an abrupt halt.

"I lost my left leg along with a bunch of other injuries," Lito says about the events of September 6, 2005, in Taji, Iraq. "The loss of my friends was far worse, though."

Years of rehabilitation finally freed Lito of the hospital and he dove straight into making a new post-service life for himself. The thought of flying never quite went away, though.

Knowing this, a teammate from Wounded Warrior Project recently called Lito and invited him to take a biplane ride over the city of St. Augustine in northeast Florida. He immediately jumped at the chance to sit in the open cockpit.

"Flying still has a mystery to it," Lito says. "I'm sure it's not just a childish dream."

On the day of the scheduled flight, the skies were clear, the air warm as bathwater, with only a gentle coastal breeze to nudge the windsock on the edge of the airfield. Waiting on the tarmac was a midnight blue biplane, diligently reconstructed in 2011 to replicate the original WACO model YMF-5C built in 1935. Lito's jaw dropped when he first spotted his ride.

"Seeing the biplane for the first time was intense. It looked great," he recalls. With a cough and a sputter, the propeller roared to life and the

pilot guided the plane out onto the runway for takeoff. A small yellow sun cast brilliant light onto the ground below, but the extra wing overhead kept the cabin in a cool, comfortable shade. Within minutes the plane had cleared the marshland surrounding the outskirts of St. Augustine and was banking over one of North America's oldest cities. Lito observed narrow streets jammed with tourists and the bright orange tile roofs of Flagler College. The battlements of the centuries-old Castillo de San Marcos next passed beneath the wing.

In what seemed the fastest 45 minutes of his life, the flight was suddenly finished. Lito tugged the leather flight cap off his head and hopped out back onto the tarmac. He had a three-hour drive home waiting for him, but he lingered to enjoy the moment. While his amputation might make it hard to realize his dream of flying helicopters, Dave, the pilot, encouraged him to look into flying airplanes. The Federal Aviation Administration is willing to work with a lot of different disabilities, he said. The advice sat well with Lito.

"I could always use one more way to stay busy," he said with a laugh.

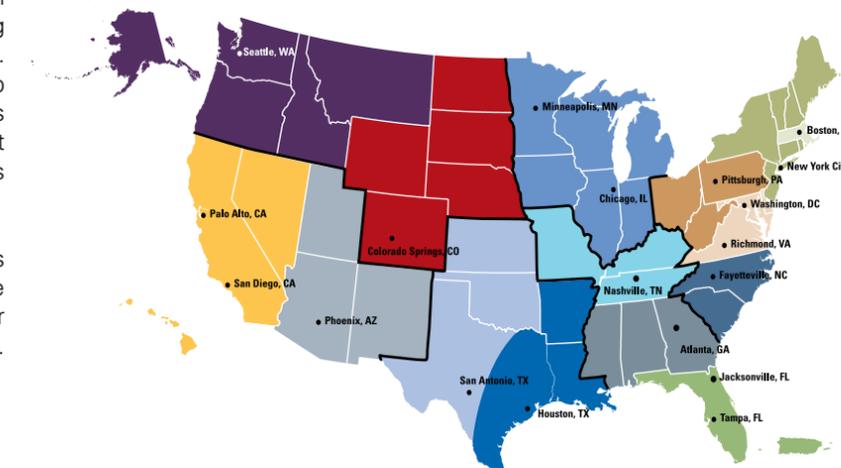
10 TEN-FOR-TEN

In recognition of our 10-year anniversary, here are 10 things you might not know about Wounded Warrior Project.

- 1 Need help preparing for a job interview or polishing your resume? The Warriors to Work™ team is here to help. Learn more at woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/warriors-to-work.
- 2 Early in our development and expansion, we made a conscious decision to keep a uniform look and feel to our offices. From New York to San Diego, you'll find the same colors and photos on the walls and even the same table decorations. These are not just offices but "service centers" dedicated to meeting your needs; feel free to drop by and visit any time.
- 3 We recently partnered with The Mission Continues, which gives veterans opportunities to tackle issues like hunger, homelessness, and at-risk youth in their communities. Learn how to give back to your community at missioncontinues.org.
- 4 **WWP10.org** is a website that charts WWP milestones from the past 10 years. Learn more and share your story as part of WWP history by visiting today.
- 5 The Family Support program was recently integrated into the Alumni program to offer more seamless service. All the activities you are familiar with, including retreats, family fun days, and exercise classes are still offered.
- 6 Looking for tips to stay in shape? Check out our Physical Health & Wellness webpage for regular updates: woundedwarriorproject.org/phw.
- 7 As of April, we are officially halfway to our goal of serving 100,000 Alumni by 2017. Thank you for your loyalty and trust in our mission.
- 8 "Wounded: The Battle Back Home" is an exclusive documentary series that tells the story of your fellow Alumni facing and conquering challenges to their recovery. Tune in to MSNBC's "Taking the Hill" every fourth Sunday of the month to watch the next installment and catch up on past episodes at WWP10.org.
- 9 WWP offers several programs that promote healing for the mental wounds of war, including the Combat Stress Recovery Program. Learn more at woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/combats-stress-recovery-program.aspx
- 10 The Resource Center is your gateway to all things WWP. If it's not a service we provide through our existing 20 programs, we can put you in touch with the right people and organizations. Reach out to them today at: resourcecenter@woundedwarriorproject.org or **1.888.WWP.ALUM (997.2586)**.



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 or resourcecenter@woundedwarriorproject.org.

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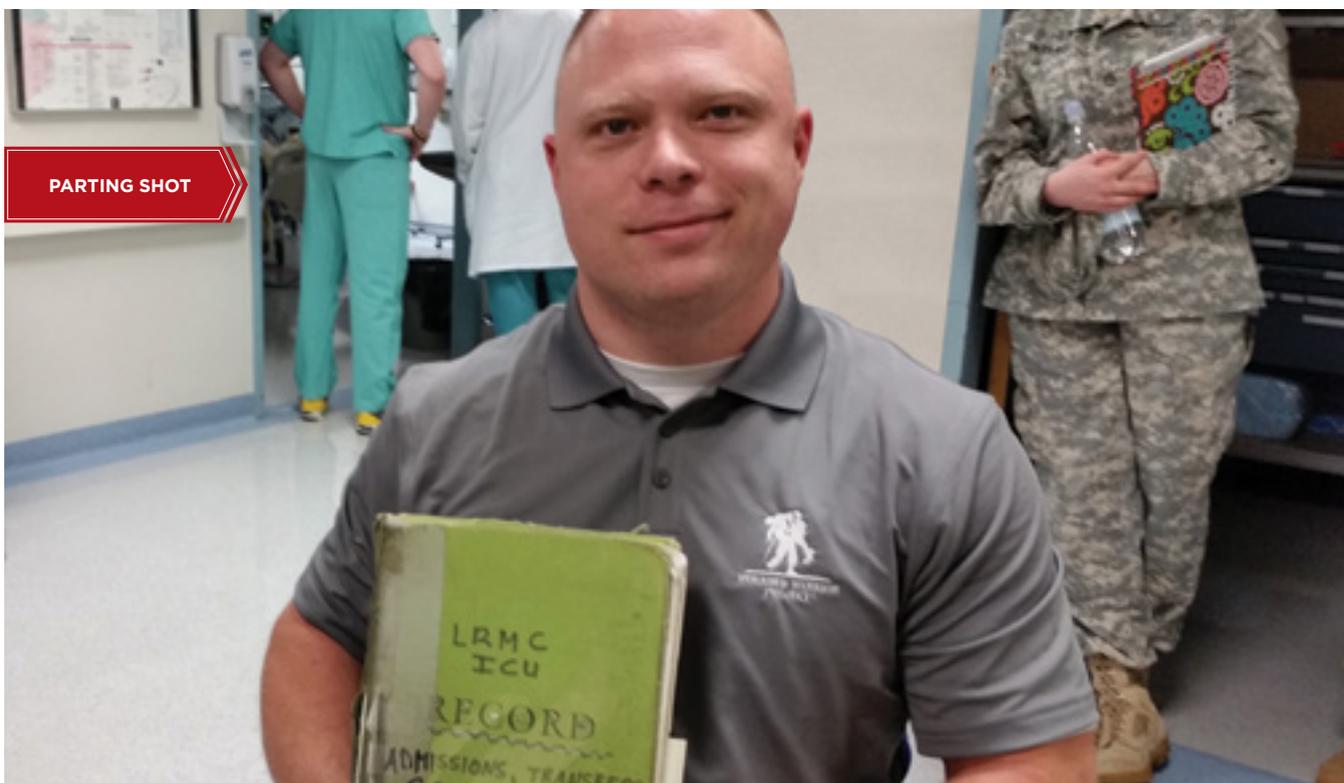
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Travis Strong recently traveled back to Germany's Landstuhl Regional Medical Center (LRMC) as a part of a VWP resiliency trip. He was surprised to find the original record book from the intensive care unit that held his name and thanked the staff for saving his life.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE: Family Ties

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