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Objects for Deployment

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It's getting harder to tell these stories, I'm starting to realize. It's difficult to start a conversation with a random person, and it's getting harder to remember. I want my friends and family to know the whole story. If I do have kids someday, I can share this with them. Or, my nieces, nephews and cousins. If you have any questions after you're done reading, ask me. I want you to ask.

During my junior year of high school, I decided to join the Navy.

The recruiter wouldn't take me. He said, "You're too fat. Come back when you lose thirty pounds."

This was sometime in May 2001, just before 9/11.

Instead, I joined the Marines in a pre-enlistment program. It gets recruits ready for boot camp, since I was too fat to join.



My dad was in the Navy, his brother was in the Navy, my dad's dad was in the Navy as well. My mom's dad was in the Army Air Corps (formerly the Air Force).

We had family that served in every single American war.

I WANTED TO KEEP THE FAMILY LEGACY GOING .

My family didn't want me to join at all, especially not the Marines. When my dad was in the Navy, he saw the Marines get picked on a lot more than the Navy.

My dad had a pretty rough time in the military. He lost his eye when he was in the Navy, and he would have been a riverboat driver in Vietnam if he hadn't. Then he had a hard time finding a job when he got out.

BOOT CAMP

I was in boot camp for five months instead of three because I failed PFT (physical fitness test) twice. I just kept failing the pull-ups part. Otherwise boot camp is easy, you just pretty much do what you're told. When I took the final test I was down to 180 pounds from 230. I did five pull-ups instead of three, which is the minimum. I was so excited. I'd already watched so many other graduations at boot camp, and now I finally got to do it.

I barely passed my rifle qualification, but I passed it by three points.

I WAS SO HAPPY WHEN I GRADUATED. I JUST ABOUT JUMPED FOR JOY. YIPEEE!

My brother, Tony, and my recruiter came out for graduation. That night I went to the grocery store and bought like three bags of groceries and pigged out and watched TV. It was so much fun.



COMBAT TRAINING







First, I was on disability for seven weeks because I got injured on recruiters assistance. (I crashed a moped).

While on disability, we had “liberty” every weekend, which means we were free to go out and do stuff. We would rent a hotel in Oceanside, hang out and drink. This is when I had my first beer. I was 19 years old.

After disability, I did my three-week course for combat training. There we learned how to do live fire exercises - we got to shoot the 50 cal, M240 Gulf, shoot a grenade launcher and throw a grenade.

I always failed the written tests, but as long as you got 80% on the second try it was OK. So I make them up.

I almost failed the grenade test. I was kind of nervous - I had a fear of dropping it.











TRAINING

Logistics and operations school was a three-month course, but I was at camp for five months. The school was full, enrollment was backed up, hence the wait. I think another reason why was they thought I was going to be in supply training - they got my MOS (military occupational skills) paperwork mixed up. It took some time to straighten out.

I didn't have my license before I started driving a 7-ton vehicle. I had a two-week course to drive it and the Humvee. One week for the written and reading test, another for the driving skills. I was 20-years old.





I LOVE TO COOK

When I got out of boot camp and basic training, I wanted to cook every chance I could get. Before I was deployed I got to spend a week with my older brother and his family. I cooked every meal for them. They loved it because they have two kids and it was a big help.

After that, I checked in to my unit in 29 Palms. At the front gate the MPs said, "You're going overseas in a few days so get your shit ready."

We got our stuff ready to deploy. Then they said, "you're not going..." (go have fun for the weekend).

But on Saturday, there was a recall formation to say we were going after all. Only half of us showed up, however, because the other half has gone out drinking.

It sucked to call family, and say I'm leaving, then call and say I'm not, then call back again.

WE LEFT ONE DAY LATER.

KUWAIT

We got to Kuwait when it was dark.

We arrived right before they invaded Iraq in 2003. For two weeks, we just hung out and tried to figure out what we were supposed to do.

Whenever a scud-missile was launched, we put our bio-chemical suits on, and went into the bunkers with our full gear and gas masks for an hour or so. No chemicals ever hit us, but the threat was always there, and of course the heat, the rubber suits. The gas masks were no picnic, either.

One time, I had to wear the rubber suit and the chemical trousers for three days straight. We had to be prepared at all times.





I got stuck on guard duty for two months - cleaning latrines and picking up trash. I didn't know a human could sweat that much. It was really hot so we only worked 20 hours in the heat, and then took 40-hour breaks in the shade.

With guard duty, we were in charge of checking IDs when everyone came into camp - making sure people were who they said they were. I did that for two months. I got the night shift, which was awesome because at night nobody comes through the gates.

The first time I was on guard duty, I had a night shift, and the other person I was on guard duty with asked me if I wanted to play a game of cards. I suggested the game War. We laughed.

For boredom I took up smoking Black and Milds because the shifts were 8-12 hours long. One time, there was a convoy coming through the gates. The dust was picking up while I was smoking a Black and Mild. My buddy on guard duty looked at my silhouette against the flood light, with the cherry in my mouth, and said I looked pretty bad ass.

I felt kind of cool when he said that. I kind of zoomed out of myself and saw somebody else sitting there. An image popped in my head – a silhouette of soldiers from the past. A generic picture of what I thought a soldier might look like. Just all worn down and battered.



















DO NOT FEED

L. GORDON

On the night shift, we always got our chow first. One morning, as we were getting our food, a mangy dog came scampering by and I put some chow down for the dog to eat. He only sniffed it and ran away. It was that bad.

I bought myself a Game Boy Advanced and played handheld video games all night to stay awake and sane while on guard duty.







IRAQ

"Do you guys know how to drive truck? "

"Yes."

"Do you want to go to Iraq?"

"Sure."

So they sent us to Iraq.

We became part of a logistics team that drove convoys back and forth between Iraq and Kuwait. There were five vehicles in the convoy: one Humvee in the back, one Humvee in the front and three trucks in the middle.

The drive was a good nine hours, so we did an overnight stay. In Iraq, we had the hook-up. The food was so good. Locals made it, so it was awesome.

It was pretty sweet because we got to drive through the towns and see more of the country.

On one convoy, a car in front of us was driving too slowly. The guy driving ahead of me started bumping the car to go faster, and the car wouldn't go faster, so he ended up running the car right off the road.

It was kind of funny, but it was also kind of sad. Six guys got out of the car upset.

I did three or four of these convoys. The accident was on the last one.

I had been there for two-and-a-half months.

The day before, we got all the gear together. On this convoy, we were hauling a load of lumber to build tents and latrines for people up north. We strapped it down tight.

My buddy tried to convince me that we shouldn't go on the convoy because he had an eerie feeling. We went anyway.

HE MISSED THE TURN.

I guess he was driving the truck and forgot to take a turn we needed. At the last minute, he made a sudden turn. And I guess one of the tires locked up. Because of that, the straps holding the lumber together broke loose. It made the seven-ton truck top heavy and it flipped three times.

I remember trying to grab for the steering wheel saying, "Oh, shit."

I landed on the cab of the truck. The cab was upside down; it stayed with a piece of the truck somehow.

I WAS LYING THERE AND WOKE UP
WONDERING WHAT THE CRAP
HAPPENED.

I remember praying to God, "Please don't let me die here."

The British Royal Marines were the first ones on the scene. They were trying to clean me up.

My buddy saw the whole thing happen. Some of the wounds were so deep that he could see my bones.

I broke my left femur, there was a compound fracture in my left humerus, I broke three bones in my right eye and cheek, and possibly something on the right side of my forehead. But I'm not sure because there is a metal plate there.

I cracked my right collar bone. There was pretty much no skin from my right shoulder all the way down to my forearm. I crushed my right elbow. Now a third of it is missing. I severed one of my finger tendons.

Let's see... what else happened?

The muscle on my right arm had to get reattached to the bone that was left with bolt screws. I broke three ribs and punctured a lung. I got a huge gash on the right side of my abdomen. The wound was so deep that they thought I broke my pelvic bone, but I didn't.

I had a head injury and now I have a scar across my head from ear to ear. The part of my brain that was injured was the frontal lobe. For me, it affects cognitive thinking and daily routine.

HOSPITAL

AT FIRST, THE HOSPITAL DIDN'T KNOW WHO I WAS. THEY CALLED ME "JOHN DOE"

They put me on a Naval hospital ship on the first night. That's where they did all the initial surgeries. It's where they put the metal rod in my femur, the plate and wire in my left arm, the plates in my forehead, and the bolt screws in my right arm. They also did the initial skin graft. I don't remember when the staples in my head happened, but somehow they were there. They might have had to do brain surgery, but I really don't know. Maybe they just cut my head open to relieve pressure.

THEY WAITED THREE DAYS TO CALL MY PARENTS BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T KNOW IF I WAS GOING TO LIVE.

My parents were pretty upset about it when they finally got the call. They almost had to fly out to Germany to bring me home in a box. My dad got pretty pissed because his company wouldn't give him time off at first. He pretty much left without taking vacation. They didn't fire him, though.

I remember when they took out my tracheal tube, which I had used to breathe. I remember it was so weird. I felt like I was upside down and levitating while they were taking the tracheal tube out of my throat. I remember a lot of people being around. I remember them saying, "OK, now hack a big lugey and you should be OK." That's all I remember.

I'm pretty sure I was in Germany for about a week.

I was on some pretty strong drugs to keep me stable.

I was hallucinating like crazy.



I remember thinking I was in a giant mixing bowl and thought they were making salsa underneath me.

When I started actually coming to, I was worried about not having my rifle. The Marine Corps trains you that if you ever lose your rifle, you will be severely punished for it.

THE NURSES TOLD ME THAT THEY HEAR GUYS IN THE HOSPITAL ALL THE TIME YELLING, “WHERE’S MY RIFLE?”

I was in bed. I felt a big picture of Saddam fall on top of me, crushing me. When the nurse made her round, I thought she was sabotaging the machines I was hooked up to.

I started hallucinating about the accident again. But they were totally different kinds of accidents. When other patients came in, they would tell their own stories and I would imagine myself being there with them.

In one particular story, I was in a truck of some kind. I was driving it and all of a sudden it tipped over. I started getting covered in transmission and oil fluid. It freaked me out. The next thing I knew, I was walking around in a hospital gown, with oxygen tubes in my nostrils, but I wasn't in a hospital. Then, I was sitting on a couch and heard voices in the background and three or four people were talking about me - I didn't know if I was getting in trouble for something I did... it was really weird.

Another time, when someone was telling me their story, it made me think I had stabbed someone in the head with a bayonet or a knife. I think a nurse was telling me to calm down. “Calm down, it’s not your fault.”

In another one, I was on patrol and got separated from the other guys. I had to set my rifle down for some reason, there were so many people around. When I came back, my rifle had been broken. Torn apart.



It felt weird and freaky. It's like looking back on a weird dream. A week-long dream that wouldn't stop. I generally didn't know where I was or what was going on. I knew something bad had happened to me.

I remember one time they were trying to do a cat scan or an MRI, but I had so many bandages that they could barely squeeze me in. I remember being moved around a lot from gurney to gurney.

Then, they put me on a C130 back to the U.S. with a bunch of other wounded guys, I guess. They had a bunch of equipment; I don't know if it was life support machines, or heart monitors, or what. When they put me on the plane, they had to have everything pressurized just right.

I had blood blisters on my heels - down to the bone - from pressing into the metal gurney. My heels hurt to this day.

BETHESDA

I was at Bethesda Hospital for about a month. Every day, I was poked and prodded.

At various times, they brought an X-ray machine to my room because I couldn't move yet.

They couldn't really put an IV in me because everything was broken or torn up; there was really no skin on my arm. They did, however, put a multi-tap IV in the main artery of my right leg.

They talked about doing reconstructive surgery, but they couldn't yet because I was too messed up.

The biggest thing was to see how my right eye was reacting to things. I broke a bunch of bones around it in my cheekbone and my eye socket. They had to put a plastic sponge-like square under my right eye to keep it from going into my nasal cavity.

This was the first time I saw my parents since Christmas of 2002. It was the end of June 2003. I was pretty ecstatic to see them. But also pretty out of it.

My dad was concerned about me losing my right eye. He had lost his, too, when he was on leave in the military.

Getting a shower was the worst. One day, they washed my wounds, scrubbing them with a rag. I don't know what that was about, I still don't know. It never happened again.

They had to keep the wounds clean, I guess.

They wanted to give me a salt bath, but there were too many open wounds. No one was allowed to touch my right arm except the Occupational Therapist.

They put an external fixator on my arm so it could heal, and they did a lot of surgeries to fix it as best they could.

One of my finger's tendons got severed. They had to reattach it.

My folks were there a lot. That was pretty interesting.

I'm the youngest child and my parents like to baby me. The first time my parents saw me, I was coming out of eye surgery (it was glued shut for a period of time). At Bethesda, my dad took tons of pictures in the hospital.







My dad stayed at Bethesda with me the whole time. My mom was there too, but she had to go back to work.

The Marine Corps silent drill team and Marine Corps band did a show for the 4th of July at Eight and I company. Everything was choreographed along with an awesome fire display.

The hospital wheeled me down for it, which was important to me because it was like coming back home. I didn't have the coming home ceremony like others did. It was one of the first times I got to leave the hospital and also see DC. It was pretty cool because I got to sit in the front. It was at the headquarters of the Marine Corps.

I got to meet a bunch of higher-ups. I met the assistant commandant at the ceremony again. That was pretty cool. Another guy from the hospital room next to mine sat beside me. He almost lost his foot. Someone gave him a CD and he re-gifted it to me. I don't know why he did it, but it was pretty neat.

At Bethesda, my parents stayed at the Fisher House in DC for a month. Here, families can stay for free when a loved one is receiving care at Bethesda. My mom had to go back to work, but my dad stayed there the whole time.

My mom was always super concerned about how the care was going.

It was really difficult to eat; I don't know why they bothered to bring food. I still couldn't use either of my arms. I was drugged up most of the time, so I didn't really notice.

The Morphine Drip.

I hated that frickin' thing. Especially after I found out it didn't work. There was a button that I pushed when I felt severe pain. So I pushed it over and over. It's suppose to be this psychological thing so that you feel like you can control it. But I found out later that the morphine is automatically controlled, nothing actually happened when I pushed the button.

I didn't eat breakfast for a long time. I just couldn't get up for it. I was sleeping when they brought breakfast. This was partly because I like staying up late.

Stupid blood tests, I hated them. They would come in my room at 5 A.M. to take a blood sample from my foot; it often took them about five tries before they had to call someone else in to do it .

I had an IV main line coming out of my inner thigh because they couldn't put it anywhere else from the open wounds and broken bones. Eventually they had the IV in my foot. That sucked a lot.

There were a few celebrities that came to visit me while I was at Bethesda. A wrestler came to visit. I don't remember his name, I thought that was kind of weird and kind of cool. I wasn't into wrestling. All of the sudden, a loud voice said, "attention on deck." I stiffened like a board and then the commandant of the Marine Corps came into the room. He gave me a coin and took a picture. I got to meet the director of the CIA. "When you get all healed up, come and find us and we'll find you a job." I was like, "okay..."

I don't remember this, but my mom said after he left I said, "too much brass."





They even brought a barber up to my room once and gave me a marine hair cut – a nice little high and tight.

Probably the coolest guy was the one who brought me McDonald's shakes and fries. I don't know his name, but he visited a lot of us at the hospital. He was just there getting to know us. He was just some guy who took his spare time to hang out with the guys in their rooms.



MINNEAPOLIS VA

After Bethesda, I transferred to the Minneapolis VA. My dad went with me for the trip on an air force transfer flight. Because there was a huge storm coming in from the east coast, we had to fly into Florida first, and then fly up to Minneapolis from there.



UNITED STATES AIR FORCE



At the VA, I felt like I was a guinea pig because I was one of the first to come back from Iraq with a head injury.

I was here with a bunch of old guys. They didn't really have any programs yet for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) like they do now. I did speech therapy, recreational therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. I built two model cars with one hand as part of my rec therapy.

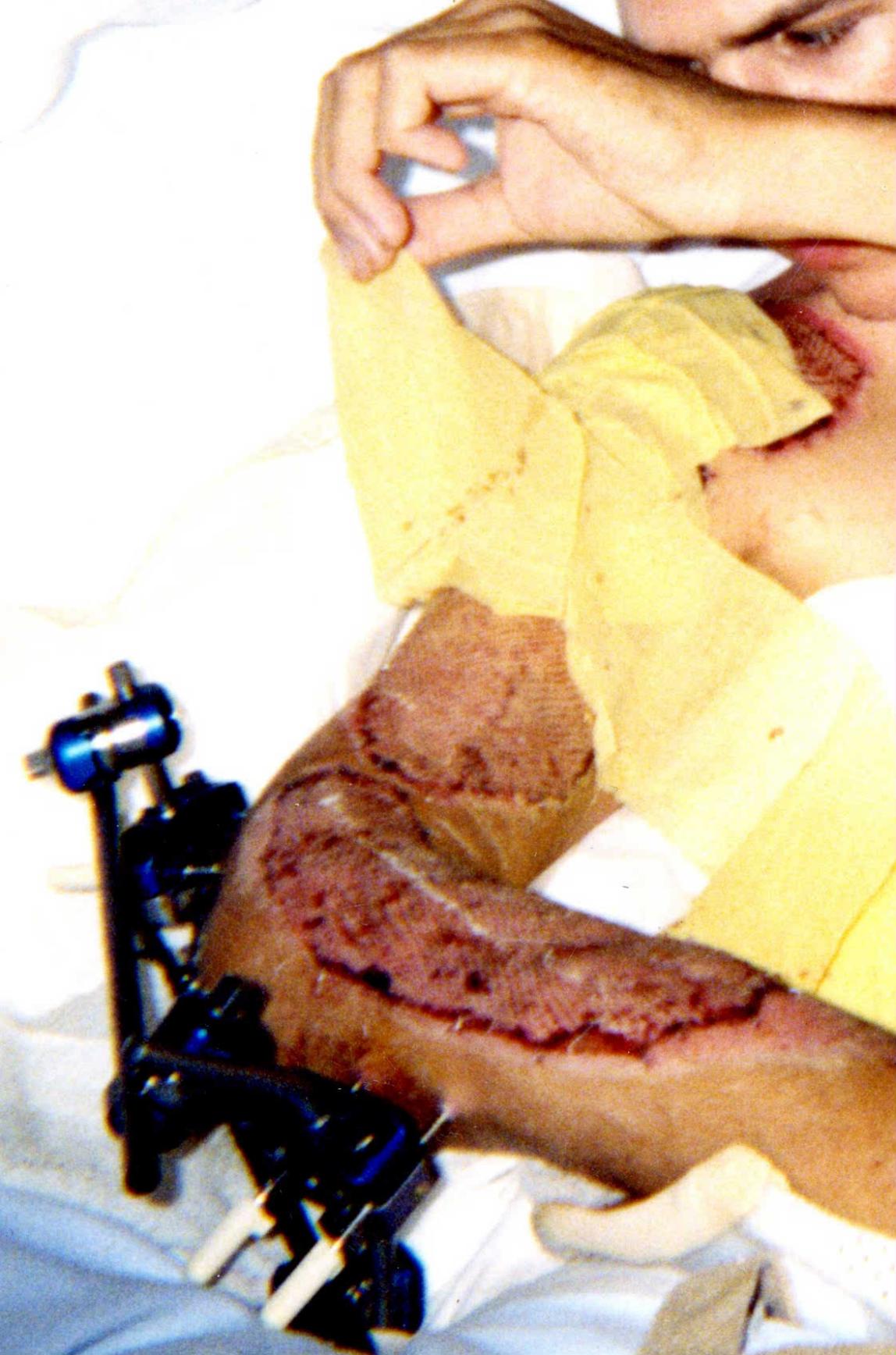
Now, for all the young guys who are coming back, there are more fun things to do. There is a whole wing with extended care where in-patients can live. They didn't have that when I was there. It would have helped a lot. But, looking back now, I kind of feel like I was a "pioneer" for the TBI program. It's pretty cool to see it improve.



PARTMENT
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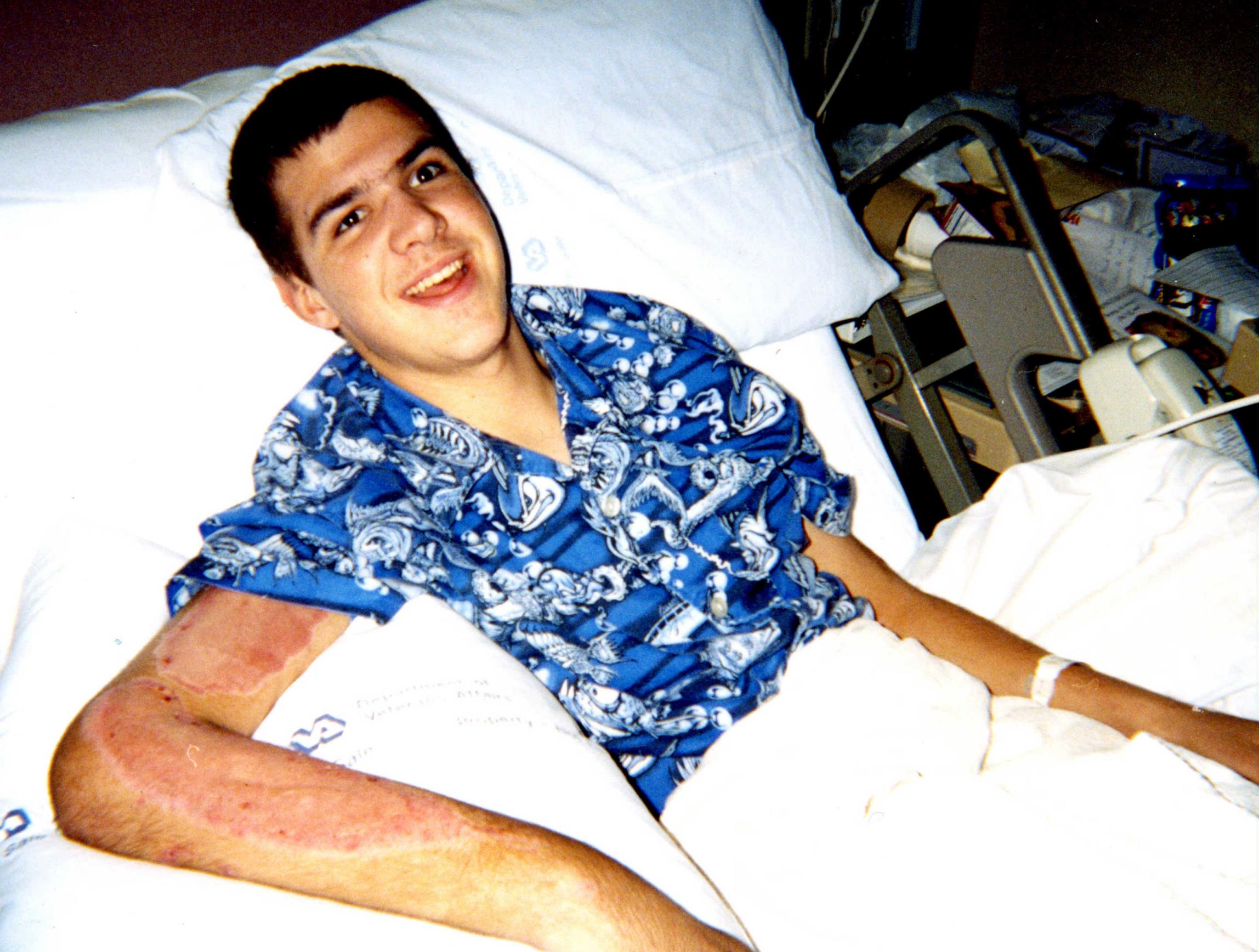
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My right arm had to stay in a fixed position for about a month. They had to clean around where the bolts were sticking in and that hurt a lot too. When the day came to take the bolts and cage off, I was a lot happier. But it felt like I was pooping out of where the bolts were being removed.

It was summer and I couldn't get out to enjoy the weather.

My brother Jake took me for a walk in the wheelchair outside of the hospital, but unbeknownst to the VA, we went to a movie instead. I think the head nurse was pretty upset about that one, but it was so nice to get out.

Jake would always bring me steaks from his job. We'd eat steak and sit and watch a movie.

I don't remember some of the people who came to visit me. I try really hard to remember, but I can't. Mostly this is because of the drugs and head injury.

When I started coming off the drugs, I was really mean. Morphine and Percocet - I was pretty nasty without them.

I've had morphine in three different forms: IV, pill, and drinkable solution.

They had to give me Prozac one time, too. It was when I left Regions Hospital after a week's stay for a skin graft. In an oversight during the transition, they didn't change the dressing for three days. On the third day, they finally changed it. It ripped the skin off while I was awake. It really hurt and I said, "This sucks. You guys just need to stop because I can't take this anymore."

The next day, the psychiatrist and the director of the VA came in and said, we heard you were feeling crappy or sad. I responded, "No, the fucking idiots just don't bandage right and they peeled my new skin off. How do you think I'm feeling?"

The next time, they put water on the gauze to soften it up so they could take it off without ripping it again. Then it was OK.

It must have not even crossed their mind to use water the first time, because they probably thought Regions did. Stuff just gets missed sometimes. And I go with it.

One time, my dad was going to help me clean the open wounds on my right leg. The nurse stopped by and then left to get the saline solution to clean it. In the meantime, my dad got the bright idea that we could substitute hand sanitizer like soap. So he mixed the hand sanitizer with water. I didn't see him do this, but as he was cleaning I was wondering, "why is this stinging so much? This shouldn't be stinging this way." So I asked what he used and he told me. I thought, dang it, Dad, it's just one more thing – one more point in the pain scale.

After the nurse came back into the room, we laughed about it.

Going to the bathroom was one of the hardest things. And the help was degrading when I couldn't do it by myself.

Once, I biffed it getting back into the wheel chair after going to the bathroom. I just tripped over the wheelchair and landed on the fixator itself. I had to pull the emergency string.

I used to chase the nurse around with my remote control car. I used to hide it under my bed and when I knew she was coming in, I would zoom at her feet. That was pretty fun. I only did this with one nurse – the one I picked on the most.

Probably one of the best parts was that I used my right leg and left arm to roll around in my wheel chair. When I went to therapy I'd get a bunch of weird looks, but it was fun. I got pretty good at it, too.

Another good thing was when I started eating at a table. If someone sat next to me, I could just switch hands. Sometimes now, I'll catch myself eating with my left hand. "How is that working?" I wonder. I now shave and brush my teeth with my left hand, too.

What I went through made me stronger; what's the point of being grumpy and angry if you get nothing out of it? I still have my fallbacks and struggles because of the TBI.

You only get one life and I came close to losing mine once already. If I'm going to be involved in something, I am going to do it and get the most out of it.

By mid-August, they discharged me from inpatient to outpatient. I still came back for physical, mental and occupational therapy. Three hours a day (one hour for each session), Monday, Wednesday, Friday for a good eighteen months.

I also got my driving license at the VA.

After I was discharged, I went through a drinking phase.

I turned 21 a few months after I got out of the hospital, so I thought, "Heck yes, let's go party." But mainly, I drank just because I had nothing else to do and was trying to figure out why this all had to happen to me. I was living with my parents. Then I moved out to live with my brother.

The therapist and the doctors didn't want me drinking, but they didn't always know about it either.

While I was still doing care at the VA, I got a call from 29 Palms.

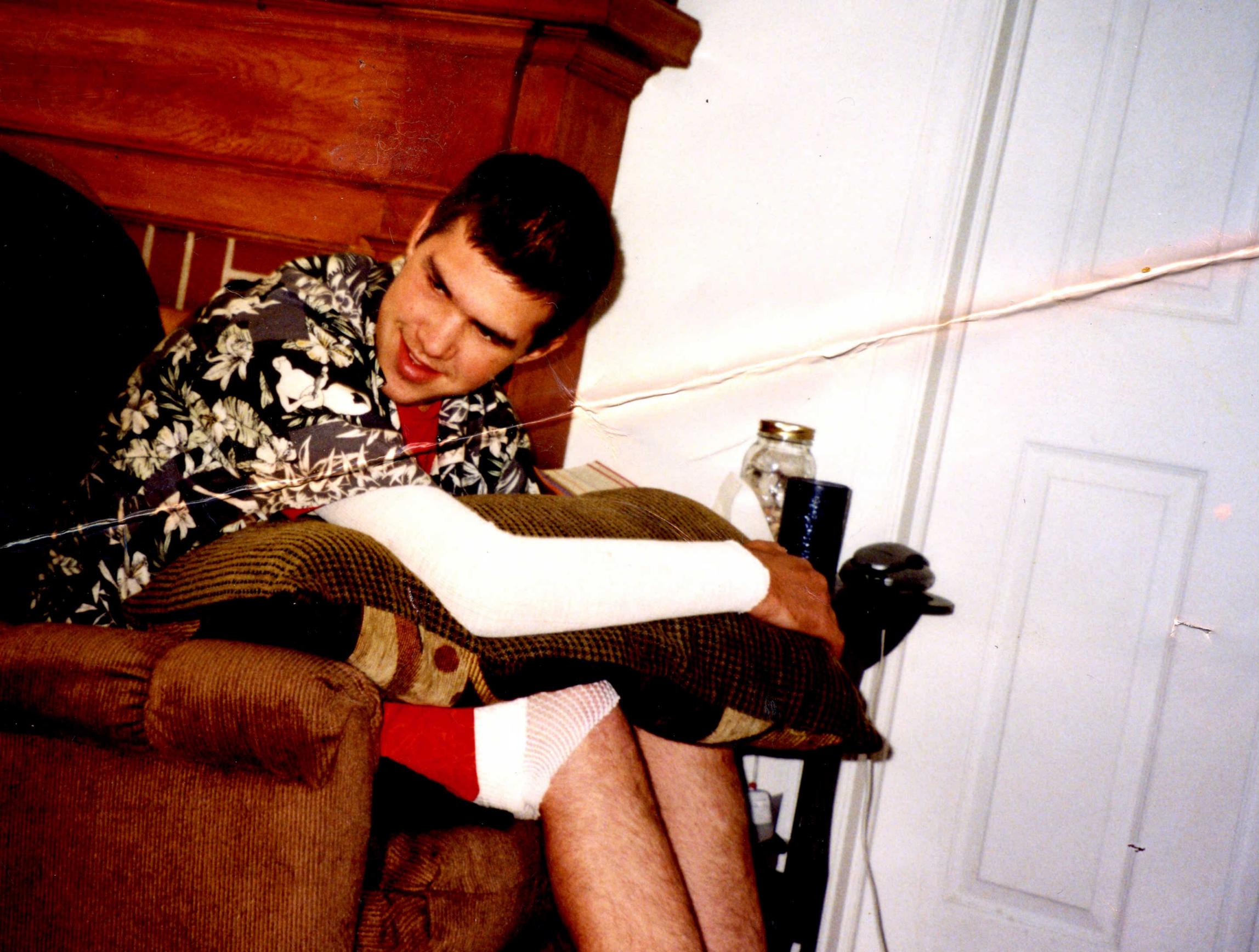
"Who is this?"

They said, "We're going to cut your pay if you can't find a duty station close to home."

That was the first time I got a call from my unit in 29 Palms since my injury. I was living at home with my my parents on medical leave. As far as I was aware, I thought they had already started the discharge process.

So I called my case manager at the VA. She got a hold of someone at Fort Snelling, the local base in Minnesota. A month later, I went and met them. He apologized for the Marine Corps dropping the ball and never getting in touch with me about what would happen next after I got injured.







FORT SNELLING

When I first arrived at Mp Co. 4th Mar. Div. First Sgt. Benson sincerely apologized on behalf of the Marines for what I had to go through and for being lost in the paperwork. He was really sincere about the apology.

He said, "Just call Monday through Friday. Call every day to let us know that you're still here."

I got a job working at a gas station for about two months while I was still on active duty. It was pretty fun. I liked the people a lot. Then, I got a call from Ft. Snelling. "Hey, we see that you're able to work again, so you need to come back and work for us."

They gave me a week's notice, and that kind of sucked, because I only had a week to quit that other job. I felt kind of bad about it, leaving my employers in that position.

I had to get new uniforms because I got fat again after being out for so long.

I worked full-time at Fort Snelling. It was laid-back duty and the guys were pretty nice and didn't pick on me too much. They teased me some, but that happens everywhere.

THEY CALLED ME "BIG MONEY GORDO."

They gave me that nickname after I got my SGLI, which is the grant the Marine Corps gives you if you get injured. They go by on what you lost and how bad your body took a beating. It's like life insurance for your body. They pay something like \$50,000 for a limb, and around \$5,000 for a finger.

Of course I blew it all.

I helped pay for my family's trip to Maui. I bought a motorcycle. I bought a car. I crashed that car. I bought another car. I crashed that car.

My first month back on active duty, I did Toys for Tots. It was cool, but I didn't see the sun at all the whole month. I worked in the warehouse and had to wake up at 5:30 am, go out to New Hope, and when I left to come back at 5:00 pm, the sun was already down.

It was pretty cool to see the mounds of toys for kids.

When I was stationed at Fort Snelling, I used to visit the other the marines who had head injuries. Some of them couldn't talk or move, but I hoped just the support was enough for them.

They deployed a group right after I got to Fort Snelling.

I helped with about three of those deployments. That was important to me because I helped get the gear ready – those kind of acts could have been life-saving for them. I never knew, but just in case.

I remember one time I decided to be smart and go over my 1st Sergeant's head. I wanted to see if I was eligible to get promoted to E-4 and would be able to qualify for the Purple Heart. Let's just say I kind of pissed him off. I didn't get anywhere with the award, but I did get the wheels turning on the promotion. I had to do a few tests and such, but I had earned enough points to make promotion. Finally, I got promoted my last month in the service .

But even on my last day, I still took the trash out.

I finally had the paper work to be medically retired from the Marine Corps. It took one and a half years to get medical discharge from the accident. It should have taken a lot less time, like six months. Luckily my dad helped me through the process. He knew all about it because he too had been medically discharged from the Navy.

The Marines wanted to give me 10% benefits at first. I was like, "No..." It took six months for the paperwork to come back, and then they said 20%. I had to go through the full appeal and testify in DC in front of a panel of three people. Instead of a getting a purple heart, they said that I wasn't a combat-wounded vet. At first, I was irritated, but the more I look back on it, the more I see that my injury wasn't in a combat situation.

Since I have 144 square inches of scar tissue on my body, I got an extra 15% for disability rating. That brought my total up to 40%.

The VA had already declared that I should have 100% disability. They was going to give 60% and the Marine Corps was going to cover 40%. But since they were giving so much more, the VA just decided to go with 100% disability through the VA.

I did the VA work program on and off for two years, but my knee was just crap. I couldn't get the hours required because I kept getting head aches and my heartbeat would go low. I don't know why.

I quit the VA work program. We had a huge meeting with doctors and family who asked, "What are you going to do now?"

I said I was going to volunteer, but I didn't do it; I kept putting it off. I bought a house in West St. Paul. "What am I going to do?" I asked myself. "I can't keep playing video games."

Along the way, I made some not well-thought-out financial decisions. (At one point, I had six credit cards and half a failing mortgage to pay).

My family and the VA helped me get back on track with my finances. My uncle is my financial advisor now, which is pretty cool because it makes me get to know that part of my family better, including my cousins.

Things have been better since.

One weekend when I was still at Fort Snelling, I was really bored and a friend told me about a Christian group. I called her up. "Hey, what are you doing?" I asked. She said, "We're sharing our testimony tonight." I went and met a bunch of friends there. That's how I started getting involved in the church.

I was looking for stuff to fill my life. I wanted to learn how to play the bass guitar, so I picked that up too. I've grown a lot through being involved in the youth program and music ministry. I play the bass once a month for our Sunday service.

I needed to straighten my life out. God gave me a second chance and I didn't want to waste it, drinking with my brothers and friends all the time.



HOME, SOUTH ST. PAUL

I have a house in South St. Paul. I will have owned it for two years in May. My parents help me out with lots of things, like the plumbing. At first, I couldn't figure out anything. I thought, "This sucks." I called my parents and they got in touch with my social worker.

I go through these little situations where I get freaked out for a bit. I get a headache and need to calm down. If I stop and relax, I know I'll eventually get it figured out.

This is probably one of the hardest things I have had to learn: to back down, and just do one thing at a time.

Before the brain injury, multi-tasking was easier. Now, if I try to do more than one thing at a time, I just lose focus and control and get pretty irritated.

The joint problems make that worse. For example, my fingers and wrist will lock up when I'm doing hands-on activities. I have to stop right there: drop the tool, or whatever I'm doing, and flex my hand until it unlocks.

Since the brain injury, I've had to keep a schedule and I can't be around large groups of people. If I'm around people, I don't know, I just shut down. Once I get to know them, it changes fast because I'm actually extroverted. It's kind of weird. There are many small things like this that have changed about me.

I take my time with pretty much everything I do.

If I go to the store, I wander around first, peruse the aisles before I find what I need to get.

I don't like being rushed or in a hurry.

If I'm going to be late for something, I might as well just not rush and deal with being late when I get there. And if I want to be someplace on time, I'll make sure to leave early.

I'm working on just trying to slow down.

Motivation to get started is really hard. I have a huge problem with that. Once I get into something, I'll accomplish it, but I have to want to start in the first place.

It's really hard to ask for help. My mom thought it was a pride thing, but it's really not. It's just hard for me to determine when I need it.

I have a sketchbook where I record my schedule. It helps a lot. I had a friend tell me before, "You are the busiest retired person I know."

I tried using electronics to keep my schedules, but it didn't work - writing them helps much more.

Muscle memory works really well for me. This is where you do an activity while thinking about something, and when you do that activity again, it recalls that thought.

This really helps me with my activities.

Now I'm a Jaycee's member. That started last March. For the year of 2011, I'm the secretary for the South St. Paul Chapter. This means I have to keep track of events, meetings and socials.

The Jaycee's are eighteen to forty-year olds. Each chapter helps out in their own communities by holding fundraisers. We also host events and donate the proceeds to a charitable foundation. If we host our own event, the proceeds will come back to us.

Each year, we choose two organizations we're going to support. This year, we chose "Can-do Canines" which trains helping dogs for the blind and hearing impaired, and "Camp Confidence" - a camp for disabled kids.

There are four conventions each year: one in the spring, another in the fall, the annual and then the national convention. Last year, I went to the fall convention. I was surprised to learn how international the Jaycees are.

My parents bought me a beer making kit for Christmas one year. Finally, I made a batch and it was pretty good, so I started brewing beer regularly.

I told our chapter members that I do home brew and they thought it would be a good idea to do a class on how to make beer. It was an Individual Development Project. Through the Jaycee's, I won two awards for my beer.

I can't wait for spring.

I got a ton of wild flowers from my mom - cosmos and amaranth. They aren't "wild flowers" per say, but they are because I just let them grow, along with the cilantro.

I have tiger lilies and irises along side the house. My parents gave me a dwarf honey crisp apple tree when I moved in. I planted a lavender plant last summer. And peas and raspberries. I really like raspberries.

I can't wait for spring to be here. I've got a hankering for gardening.









COLOPHON

A PROJECT BY
Monica Haller

BOOK BY
Noah I. Gordon

PHOTOS
Noah I. Gordon
Noah's parents
Members of his unit

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Noah I. Gordon is the youngest of four brothers. He was deployed to Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom (O.I.F) from March to June 2003.

Noah is currently medically retired from the Marine Corps and resides in South St. Paul, MN. There, he volunteers with the Jaycees and in the surrounding community. Noah's hobbies include watching movies, playing board games with friends, cooking and gardening.

