LtCol Thomas Przybelski paddles his kayak near Asheville, N.C. The kayaking aphorism, "No matter how bad it gets, keep paddling," was a constant reminder to keep moving forward in his recovery.

RESILIENCE

Story by
LtCol Thomas Przybelski, USMC
Photos courtesy of the author

I couldn't walk but I could stand, so I did when the Commandant of the Marine Corps pinned the Purple Heart onto my green sweatshirt. I was at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. It was late October of 2006 and the Marines' wing, Ward 5 East, was full of casualties from Iraq. As he stood in front of me, General Michael Hagee could have said a lot of things to me, but what he did say was, "Keep leading Marines." This was not a casual remark, as it would have been clear to him that I couldn't walk due to significant blast injuries to my legs and the loss of an eye. But I took it as an order from the Commandant and started coming back.

In recovering from injuries suffered in Fallujah in October 2006 I've learned a lot about my personal resilience. I hope Marines and Marine leaders can benefit from that experience. Family and friends were, of course, vital, but this story is about what Marines can do for each other and for themselves.

Getting evacuated from Iraq was a dark experience—literally dark—as I couldn't see anything for the first week following the blast and subsequent firefight. I remember hazy scenes involving the fear of having nowhere to go as the camp's "Big Voice" alarm system announced, "Incoming! Incoming!" while I lay naked on a stretcher, a chaplain praying over me. The pain medications—morphine I assume—kept things spotty and at a distance.

The first stop outside Iraq was a four-day layover in Germany. The best part was petting a golden retriever that was making the rounds as a comfort dog. Dogs aren't worried about what you look like or how broken you feel. Maybe I read too much into it, but there was amazing empathy in the dog's unconditional interest in me. It was going to be a long road back, but spending a few moments with that dog was the first step.

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At Bethesda, my first Marine visitor was Colonel Bob Petit. He had been my battalion commander the year prior and was then attending the Naval War College in Rhode Island. He flew down at his own expense to check on me and arrived the same day I was admitted. He walked into the room briskly, and without any attempt at small talk, asked me what I planned to do. I said I planned to get out of the Marine Corps. Given my injuries, it seemed obvious that I could not stay. Without missing a beat, he said, "No, you're not!" and I took another step.

In the hospital, I shared a room with Corporal Criddle, a feisty, funny Marine from my battalion who was wounded around the same time I was wounded. We joked easily about the war, but mostly about the food, the smell of the ward and the surgeries we were both getting wheeled out for every couple days. He had a couple of friends from home who were kind enough to spend hours each day laughing with us and treating us like we were normal. We certainly were not at the time, but their kindness and beauty—in the full sense of the word—helped carry us forward.

My favorite regular visitor was Col David Berger, my regimental commander. He would meet me in my room and together we would walk the corridors of Bethesda. Mostly, he listened to me talk, when I felt like it, about how the mission in Fallujah was going, and otherwise walked quietly beside me as I crutched along. I remember feeling valued and respected by his presence.

After about a month at Bethesda and some convalescent leave, I was back at 8th Marine Regiment headquarters at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C. It was odd being back. I realized that nothing was hard but everything was harder. Some days were better than others. Sometimes one minute was better than the last minute. I was learning a little each day and each week about what I could still do and what would need to change. I learned I could still have a driver's license.

I picked up somewhere that physical activity was both the best preventative and best cure for depression, so I started walking as much as I could. Sleep was critical, and I made sure I was getting enough, which is something I still do today. I heard at one point about research linking boating to speedier mental recovery—it was something about the need to maintain balance. Having been a long-time ocean kayaker, I started paddling again around Camp Lejeune

despite the late-season weather. Getting back on the water also reminded me of the kayaking aphorism, "No matter how bad it gets, keep paddling." In a boat, forward momentum allows for steering, improves stability and puts bad water behind you. This holds true in life: forward momentum is vital.

Throughout this period, I developed a profound respect for the value of hope. I found hope in reading about cutting-edge medical research. It seems clear to me that the techniques used to treat battlefield injuries are undergoing a significant transition. Rather than pursuing increasingly refined damage control, they are moving toward true reconstruction and regeneration. I was, unsurprisingly, most interested in research into vision recovery. That exploration led me to a retired Marine, Rich Godfrey, who worked at a vision research institute affiliated with Harvard Medical School. He spent a long time talking with me and I have been making contributions—I think of them as investments in my future—ever since. I don't think I'll have to "live with this forever," as some medical professionals seemed to feel the need to explain to me. Instead, I have considerable hope in being cured. Finding hope in the future has given me something to navigate toward during tough times.

Within my first few days back at the regiment, Col Berger asked to see me. When I went into his office, he asked me, simply, what I wanted to do. Having thought a long time about the Commandant's charge, I told him I wanted to go back to Iraq to my team. He didn't ask why. Instead, he stared into his hands for a while. I like to think that in another era, he would have been slowly packing tobacco into a pipe to give himself time to think. Finally he said, "An officer has to be able to shoot, move, and communicate. How are you doing on those?" I said, "Well, I can communicate." He sent me off with instructions to come back when I could run a first-class Physical Fitness Test and re-qualify on rifle and pistol. I left determined but uncertain if I could do either.

Although going to work at 8th Marine Regiment, I was assigned to the newly created Wounded Warrior Battalion under its first commander, Lieutenant Colonel Tim Maxwell. Prior to deployment, I had been living in the officer quarters that became the unit's first home and had been unceremoniously kicked out of the barracks when it moved in. Six months later, I was back

Przybelski, (below) on the roof of an Iraqi battalion headquarters (inset) was wounded in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2006 while serving with 8th Marines.

Prior to being wounded in Fallujah, Iraq, Przybelski trained near Taji, Iraq, in 2006.

in my old room as an official member of the battalion. The barracks was an important base for me for getting to follow-on medical appointments and had a good gym. I kept running and lifting and was able to get the Physical Fitness Test score I needed within a month.

Shooting was harder. I have one eye and the vision in that one is not quite correctable to 20/20. I could at least still shoot right-handed with the pistol and was able to shoot expert on the first range-day I could find. With a rifle, I had to learn to shoot left-handed in order to see through the optic properly. To do that, I needed to relearn weapons handling and did—methodically getting the movements to feel OK, if not natural. By the middle of December, I was able to qualify with a rifle. I wasn't the expert shot I had been, but I felt good about taking another step.

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I went back to see Col Berger and let him know I was ready. He made good on his word. Three months after being evacuated, I was on a plane back to Iraq. It was much longer before I really felt right again but getting back to Iraq, to the advisor team I had left, and the mission, was important for me.

Since then, I've tried to keep getting stronger in whatever ways I can. I ran the Marine Corps Marathon on the one-year anniversary of my injuries and the John F. Kennedy 50-miler the year after that. I've deployed again for a year in Afghanistan. I've been in other firefights and blast zones. I've done recruiting duty and earned a master's degree at Naval War College. My in-juries are a challenge every day, but I am not defined by those limitations.

During my time at Bethesda, the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his wife, Joyce, were reliable visitors to Ward 5 East. After a talk in my room one day, the Secretary had already turned to leave and his wife, pausing for a moment, said quietly to me, "Where do we find such great Americans?"

Humbled, I said, "Ma'am, I'm just an average Marine." Average Marines are great Americans. Marines can come back from incredible challenges themselves and can help each other do the same.

Author's bio: LtCol Thomas Przybelski is an infantry officer who previously served as the Inspector-Instructor for 2nd Battalion, 24th Marines, 23rd Ma-rine Regiment in Chicago, Illinois. He has deployed multiple times under both Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

Helpful Steps on the Long Road Back

There are things you can do for Marines when it's not your turn to be the casualty.

First, be there for an injured or ill Marine. It's not easy walking into hospital rooms to visit Marines without knowing what their injuries are and where distraught family members are waiting. For me, even the peculiar smell of Ward 5 East made it hard to go back there, but I pushed through it. I've held the hand of a Marine while he died. Do your part when the hand reaches out to you.

Secondly, believe in the Marine. Challenge and expect Marines to move forward, and help them rebuild a sense of belonging. Some of the most terrifying times and the times when I needed to grow the most were when I realized that my leaders had not lowered their expectations for me. Standing in high schools on recruiting duty a year after being injured was an exceptional challenge for me, but the District Commander, Colonel Brian Manthe, had made it clear that failing to make mission was not an option. So, I made mission. Many more times than I've recounted here, another Marine has believed in me more than I did in myself. Do that for each other.

For Marines, when you are the casualty, keep going! Keep paddling, keep learning, keep substituting healthy for unhealthy choices, sleep well, run as far and as fast as you can, find something to hope for, and always pet a dog when you can.

LtCol Thomas Przybelski