

# Testimonials for Warrior Weekend 2017



These are the testimonials of Purple Hearts and Gold Stars from Team Fastrax Warrior Weekend 2017. They are raw and heart felt based on 4 days of bonding, healing and life enriching activities with other people just like them. During the Weekend to Remember they are surrounded by the unconditional love and kindness of hundreds of sponsors and volunteers. The formula is very simple, create the environment for healing and for bonding, then get out of the way and let it happen. All honored guests leave part of a new family they can carry forward for the rest of their life. Not all honored guests are represented here, every year we target a max number of 30 Purple Hearts and 15 Gold Star Families, some have a hard time putting their feelings into words, but rest assured, they are all profoundly impacted by the weekend.

## Gold Star Mother, Gretchen Catherwood

So, I still don't think I can fully express how much last weekend means to me. In all honesty, I was not looking forward to our time in Ohio. I did tell Kirk that in the very least, maybe we would meet some good people. Wow, was I by about that! Since Alec was killed, Kirk and I talk often about the gifts that he left behind for us. Of all the people in my life, a full 95% of them I know because of Alec. Because he lived or because he died. That number grew exponentially last weekend. I don't have to tell any of you the impact that this time together has on a person. Yes, we got to jump out of an airplane. Yes, we got to stay seated in other ones. We got to bow fish and shoot some pretty cool weapons. Though

all of that is super special and bucket list kind of stuff and we are more than grateful for the opportunity, it's all of you who had the most profound effect on me. I was sad to leave and sad to get home. I hope you will allow us to be there next year as ambassadors. I cannot wait to see someone else experience it for the first time. I cannot possibly list everyone individually but I thank John and David Hart, Team Fastrax, Blue Skies for the Good Guys and Gals, the sportsmen's club, the Hilton hotel, the owners/drivers/pilots of the planes cars, jeeps and boats and every volunteer who worked so hard to make it an amazing experience. From the folks who drove us to those who served food and cleaned up to the sponsors who made it possible for me to be there. Thank you all. Thank



you, Alec Ross for inviting us. We wouldn't have been there at all if it weren't for you. We had the time of our lives with people who get it. That's priceless!

## Gold Star Father, Paul Zanowick

Warriors, Gold Star Families, Sponsors and Volunteers, I have spent the last couple of days decompressing and trying to process this year's Warrior Weekend to Remember!! It is emotionally overwhelming as I played back in my mind all of what occurred over this very special weekend! There are literally hundreds, maybe thousands of stories from this weekend. Some will be told and/or shared...many will not! There have been so many photographs taken and many of those pictures shared. If pictures are worth a thousand words, there is not a book big enough to tell all the stories of this Weekend to Remember and what it meant to everyone that touched it in some way! On Wednesday, getting



back together with old friends...no, rather family, was awesome as the Ambassadors arrived. The reunion and time for bonding as we prepared for the arrival of this year's participants was incredible. Thursday morning was so special and allowed the ambassadors to connect and become a team ready and prepared to assist the new Warriors and Gold Star Families. Then on Thursday afternoon as the weekend began to unfold there was an energy present and a sense of peace and love enveloping us! This feeling grew as the events this weekend and this special group of people continued to interact and connect with each other. So many wonderful people, so much love was lifting my usually heavy heart! I without any doubt have to say that there was more gratification for me personally, as a Gold Star Ambassador than as a participant. There is no way to describe the uplifting feeling, or the joyous flashback of how I felt as a participant as I watched the transformation of the new Purple Heart recipients and Gold Star families as they experienced the activities of this weekend. And, it is a transformation! Sharing each other's stories, thoughts and feelings in a safe, caring environment with other Warriors and Gold Star families that truly understand each other is so healing and cements the bonds that are made. For one weekend the barriers and walls we have up so much of the time can be let down. To witness the change, from Thursday to Saturday evening is so moving. The looks of nervousness, anxiousness and uncertainty changed to smiles and laughter as connections are made and fun activities are experienced. For me to witness this is incredibly liberating and calming for my soul. As a father of a Warrior killed in combat, I think one of the biggest issues for me and our family, beyond the grief and deep sense of loss, is an unfathomable sensation of feeling alone. We feel alone with our grief, alone with our demons, alone with the physical and/or mental pain and anguish. There are times that we can be in groups or gatherings of people with activities going on all around us that we feel alone. Standing in a crowded room in the midst of many people we can feel detached or disconnected with everyone around us. Then there are times that we feel alone because people will avoid us. It may be because they don't want to say something or bring up something that may cause us to become upset, so they don't approach us. Sometimes we even feel toxic as friends, even family actively avoid contact with us. This sense of being alone is one of the facets of our life on this journey...our "new normal" However, for this one weekend we do NOT feel alone! We feel like part of something...something special. Connected...like family, and, in some ways that are difficult to articulate, closer than family. So, please know that I consider you all as "Family" This certainly may not be normal! But, it sort of fits the theme for this year's Warrior Weekend to Remember. As Mrs. Gump said to Forrest: "What's Normal Anyway"? All of my love to you all, Paul



# Gold Star Mother, Nanette Zanowick

As the mother of a Marine killed in action I have to say that the Warrior Weekend To Remember (WWTR) is a most healing event. I have gained comfort in the presence of all of the participants, both Purple Hearts and Gold Stars, as well as the Volunteers, et al. I heard this saying a while back: Live your life in such a way that you are always involved in something bigger than you. WWTR is just that!! It is bigger than life and it is bolstering to the soul!! I call it my carrot (picture the old mare with the stick with the carrot hanging from it, and the old mare keeps going for that carrot) – that old mare is me and one of my carrots is this WWTR event! It affords me the opportunity to distract me from my devastated reality and fill me with new memories, new family, smiles, tears, laughs, and hugs to lift me up and help carry me through this life. It has a Rubber Cement effect, the cushy glue, to help hold us together, to help bind our brokenness. Whenever I ask my son's friend, Fitz, how he is doing he responds "Livin' the Dream!" When I hear that I am somewhat envious of that statement. Please don't get me wrong...I am so very happy that he is living the dream! Truly I am! Whereas, on the other hand, my life is the opposite...I am "livin' the nightmare". BUT, for this special weekend, WWTR, I can excitedly say, that for THIS weekend..."I AM livin' a dream!" I believe that this weekend is a Blessing to all who touch it! Just being around, from the beginning of the event to the end, one can definitely notice the positive affect it has on everyone! It eases the weight of the burdens that we carry with us every day. Even with all of the good food we get to enjoy over the weekend I think we all leave the event lighter than when we arrived! I hope and pray that this healing event will continue on always and forever so that more and more people will be able to be consoled and strengthened by its healing power!! Thank you one and all for making this possible!! I am forever grateful!! Peace, Love, and (((Hugs))) to All, Nanette Zanowick, Proud American Gold Star Mother, CPL Paul (Rocky) W. Zanowick II, USMC, KIA: 06/03/11 – Helmand Province, Afghanistan



# Purple Heart, Kevin Wallace

Friends, like many, I was prepared to lay down my life for my country each time I shipped off to war. There were a few times when I genuinely believed the cost would be my life, but, sadly it has turned out to be much more. The sacrifices paid in combat cannot be quantified in dollars or time, but are counted in tears shed by those who love and support us while we're downrange or healing back home. The injuries of some Wounded Warriors are obvious and perceptible. Meanwhile some warrior's wounds bear scars masked by clothing, sunglasses, a hat or shoes. Finally, the wounds of some warriors and most Gold Star families are completely invisible to the eye, but like a spitting cobra, have tremendous venomous effects to the mind and soul. Some of that poison is delivered upon the bite; some of it stays around for months, years or life, slowly decaying the guise of humanity, leaving its victims something far different than they once were. How do you resolve that; is





reconciliation even possible? I can't speak for all of us at WWTR, but by the 20-some veterans in the U.S. that choose to end their own lives daily, I'm convinced the path to reconciliation is steep and hard to tread. I can tell you that on the outside, I look just like any other man, and relish in that. However, something nearly always feels different. I'm typically withdrawn and often emotionally numb. For the most part I've adapted and am learning to live like that, but the thoughts of ending the struggle aren't elusive to me. Merely four years ago, I attempted to end my struggle in a way that would both shield my wife and children from the verbal and emotional abuse I was inflicting on them, and at the same time still ensure they got the \$400,000 in SGLI life insurance. I thought long and hard about the perfect plan but being the coward I am, I had to get good and drunk before I had the genitals to complete it. Luckily for me and possibly through divine intervention, at the moment of execution, two young British boys wrecked their bicycles right in front of me, prompting me to rush out to check on them and snapping me back to reality. Those two little dudes from across the pond unknowingly saved my life. I carry demons; we all carry demons. It's a profoundly ironic thing that 95 percent of the service members I know start off truly good men and women, but sometimes morph into something else in and after war. Though we join one of five branches for one of a million reasons, we typically all find a higher purpose in service, and that purpose is exponentially focused while downrange. The satire of combat is that while I rightly believe we were killing truly evil bastards ... that we were ridding the world of monsters, in some ways we were becoming monsters in the process. I'm certain the sins of war are necessary, but the idea of carrying those demons into my living room sicken me to this day and will haunt me until my last breath. There are few places where I really ever feel "normal," whatever that really means. I can tell you I've attended other non-profit and DOD-sponsored Wounded Warrior events, and often find myself among non-combat wounded, malingerers, people only looking to fulfill their selfish narcissistic intentions, or flat-out liars. It sickens me and in a few cases, has actually made me worse. Imagine trying to get emotional help by leaving the safety of your mind and exposing yourself to other warriors, only to learn they're not warriors at all! It makes me want to explode, especially when I think of those battlefields where I saw human resilience and valor in ways most cannot imagine. I'll never be able to free my mind of the death I've inflicted and seen inflicted on my brothers. I'll never forget the victims of evil ... the bacha bazi children's eyes that plea for help ... the smells that still linger on the women who burn themselves fully to stop the incest and rape ... the girl I saw flogged and executed for reporting her uncle's sexual crimes against her ... the brutality of a land that makes the worst parts of Chicago look like Disney World. Those memories intrude daily and metaphorically live in my pillow, as they slither in my ears and out my eyes nightly. That fucking venom never stops eating away! But for one week a year I know there's a little place in Ohio where I can go. I can run, ride, jump, slide, fly, shoot, drink, laugh, laugh, laugh and laugh with brothers and sisters who have humped similar trails and cried the same tasting tears as mine. I don't how to thank the Hart brothers, Blue Skies for the Good Guys and Gals, Team Fastrax and the dozens of other patriotic donors enough. Rather than shunning America's bravest children, or looking down for fear of staring at the scars of patriots like Shilo, Joel and others, the good people who put on Warrior Weekend to Remember plainly say they accept us for who we are. When Ryan's vivid explicates seep out while we're traveling on the church busses, there's no judgement passed on him or any of us. There's a safe place at WWTR, and as a Purple Heart and Bronze Star with Valor recipient, I've earned a small but motivated voice to tell anyone who will listen about the good work WWTR volunteers do to better the lives of hundreds of Purple Heart recipients and Gold Star families. For fear of being too long winded, I'm going to close now but will leave you with this: I'm certain you are saving lives! I'm confident the anti-venom your WWTR provides helps us warriors counteract that venom we carry deep within. I'll never shy away from being a part of this event, because unlike so many others, this event is hosted by real patriots for real warriors ... finally, an event that is just and true to the cause. –With Love! Kevin P. Wallace



# Purple Heart, Nick Siewert

After I got home from my first trip to the Warrior Weekend to Remember I honestly processed the whole event over the next few months and honestly started to become encompassed with the idea of coming back to be an Ambassador not for the fact that I could return the following year for myself but to have the opportunity for the Purple Heart Veterans and Gold Star Families to feel the same way that I did over the weekend. I personally was only able to attend one of the fundraising opportunities with wrestling, school and family but even that one opportunity to help spread the word about the organization was a great event situation. Coming into the weekend as an Ambassador I knew walking into the hotel that I was there to serve others and from



the first day of the families arriving it did take a lot for me to come out of my shell and start introducing myself to others and making them feel welcome to the new family. Throughout the weekend, I stopped to talk with families and other veterans and help introduce the veterans and families that I had meet to other families new to the event. There are times throughout the weekend that individuals, mother's and father's let their guards down and just want an empathic ear to listen to them and the more one is actively listening the more these individuals will talk about their families members, their situations, and their feelings and that's when the true healing comes forth you just never know when that moment will be but by embracing yourself in the activities you will have a better chance of being present for the moments! My job was not to just be there for assistance but to do everything in my power to make the families and veterans feel accepted, comfortable and empowered. The last thing we want is for these families to travel hundreds of miles and be surrounded by individuals of the same nature and feel isolated. You will get and give more hugs in 5 days then most get in an entire year, embrace the feelings and be excited to be a part of the moment. One comment I heard a multitude of times over the weekend was " I see my son living through other veterans" and to these families this means the world to them knowing their loved one will not be forgotten and is still present in others minds. Being present in the moment and serving selflessly will be more amazing then you could ever imagine and while the weekend is not about the ambassadors they will get healing of a completely different kind and it is truly amazing!! I am beyond blessed to have been able to participate in the Warrior Weekend as an Ambassador and to have been able to meet such amazing families and veterans!! What you guys do for Purple Heart Veterans and Gold Star Families is truly unbelievable. John thank you again for inviting me last year as it truly is a life-changing experience , we love spending time with you and Carol ,I was honestly sad when Sunday morning came and it was time to go home!!!



# Gold Star Mother, Christie Ayscue

I don't know about everyone else but being told to attend grief support groups is not as easy as it sounds. There are things you cannot say as a GS parent in front of just anyone that is grieving. There is no way in the world I would belittle the pain another parent feels after the loss of a child but to sit in a group with parents talking about losing their kid after a prolonged illness or a suicide will never in a million years bring me a sense of peace or create a bonding moment. How do I explain the loss that accompanies being thousands of miles away while your child dies in a war zone for crying out loud? How do I not sound like a complete jackass if I dare announce that the anger/loss that accompanies my child's life being stolen from him is not anywhere in the realm of another parent's whose child made the choice to no longer be here? Where in the entire world but with all of you at WWTR can others understand without a word being said that we each feel these losses deep within the convoluted mess that now fills our souls. I have never once looked at a returning vet and thought why did you come home and my son did not? I admittedly may have felt like saying on occasion at least you came home, now stop being such an ass. ;) But I have looked at plenty of civilian thugs, drug addicts, criminals, and deadbeats and felt a murderous outrage that they still breathe air when my son does not. I spent my last night on this earth with my son planning his funeral while he sat smoking in my garage because he knew he would not be returning from Ramadi. What an absolutely shit night that was... and what a privilege I felt that he trusted me to carry out his wishes no matter how many would disagree. That he got to express those fears in a safe environment. He made me promise to remember when those men came to my door that their job was the absolute worst of any in the world. I swore to make it as easy as possible for them and to this day I think of things I may have done more for them but was so gobsmacked by shock & grief that I know I failed to keep that promise in its entirety. What he did not prepare me for was the ineptness and duality I would feel as a Gold Star parent. He did not know how invisible I would feel now or realize the amazingly cruel/stupid/thoughtless things people can say when your loved one is killed in action. He also did not tell me that in the process of losing my only son I would gain dozens, nay hundreds, more sons & daughters. That I would feel such an overwhelming need to love, nurture, support and on occasion rage with the PH vets who did return. That no matter where I go they are forever embedded in my heart and soul for with each of them a piece of him did return home. You see I told him he did not have to return home to me but he did have to return home. I often wondered this weekend if each one of the PH vets in attendance knew they were carrying a part of him around forever. I heard his laugh across the lobby... glimpsed his smile up in that plane Sat morning... felt his sadness, grief & pain in a hug or a handshake... heard him say I love you, Mom! in each and every introduction. The Gold Star club sucks monkey balls but it is hands down composed of the most surprisingly humane group of people I have ever met. Only another Gold Star member understands me when all I know to offer is a face to punch when you're at your worst and a hug when you feel your lowest. This is not the post I started out making. Not the way I had intended to express my gratitude for this weekend. I have rambled and cried and found relief in finally knowing I am not alone on this path any longer. And neither are any of you. My gratitude to the Hart family, the PH & GS Ambassadors, Blue Skies, the sponsors and volunteers is only surpassed by my gratitude to my fellow GS families and PH recipients who took the leap, figuratively and in some cases literally LOL, this weekend onto a new path of healing and unity. Please know you are never alone. That I now know I am never alone after meeting all of you. That I do not have to feel like a leper in a country I once served and for which my son gave his life. I felt more alive this past weekend than I have in 11 years. Henry's angelversary is tomorrow and I clearly heard him this weekend telling



me it damn well took me long enough to get here. Thank you all for the journey and all my love to Ryan Meadows especially for never leaving me behind to flounder alone without my boy.

## Purple Heart, Halsey Hinson

This weekend was amazing! Thank you all for the love and support. It was just as powerful to watch all the new PH & GS families go through what I was able to experience last year. Genuine was a word I heard many times this weekend. And I couldn't describe Blue Skies Foundation any better! The love I feel amongst this family is genuine. My favorite thing about being a part of these events is knowing I am with my people. Sure, we all come from different branches but where else can a foul mouth, dirty minded woman really find acceptance? I can be me and for that I am thankful! I also love the ability to let my guard down. I don't mean the walls I place around me. I mean the fear



of crowds and all the other things that make us uncomfortable. I found myself sitting at a spot of the dinner table I wouldn't normally sit and I think it's because I knew my 6 was covered. The day after is as always hard for me. I'm physically exhausted, emotionally exhausted, and I know I have to go back to a job that I hate tomorrow. I didn't think I should come this year because I thought I had failed my promise I made to myself and to you all. After last year, I was asked if I would be interested to come back as an ambassador. I said I would but I had to come back a better person. I wanted to feel better physically. I wanted to lose weight. I wanted to get through some of my anxiety and anger and so many other emotions I don't have under control. I did none of this. In fact, I found new demons to throw into the mix. But I am changed. I know it because I felt like a different person than I was last year. Thank you for giving me strength. Enough blubbering... glad you can't see all my tears! I absolutely love you all and am so thankful for our paths crossing. I love y'all!

## Gold Star Mother, Teresa Dillinger

It was such a blessing to be asked back this year as Ambassadors. We attended several meetings at JD Legends and was honored to be there and be a part of the "team". For me, getting to know other Gold Star families and (especially) Purple Hearts, and be able to share time and fellowship is emotionally healing and great therapy. I love to listen to the warriors tell their stories and see the excitement on every face as we are shuttled from one stimulating event to the next. The enthusiasm and excitement is deep and palpable! Spending a weekend with this group and getting to know them – we walk away with many new friends who will probably stay in touch, at least via Face Book for years to come.





# Gold Star Mother, Frances Maddox

On 7/20/2013, we received notice that Anthony was injured in a Petroleum accident in Afghanistan. Through the weekend, we prayed and patiently waited for each update until the updates stopped and we received the knock on the door on 7/22/2013. The weekend we will never forget. Every year, we do re-live the emotions, the timestamp of events that took place... remembering the prayers, waiting for status updates, next steps, while managing our fears, hopes, and heart ache. We will always continue to love, miss, honor and remember Anthony. It is through our Faith, Hope and God's Love that we see and can move on to tomorrow. But even though it has been 4 years since



Anthony passed away, the same feelings are still present...I call them dormant. They come back from their hiding place, especially on key days and situations. I believe, we store and hide them to survive, but there are days, moments and events which will bring them rolling back like a tidal wave, or an unforeseen storm or rainfall. But because of Faith, hope, and most of all love, God's wonderful promise will keep us so that we can see and experience a brighter day. This year we received the opportunity to celebrate, remember, & honor Anthony very differently. We were invited to attend a Warrior Weekend To Remember event. We are with other Gold Star Families and Purple Heart recipients. This has been such a blessing for our family. We have experienced new things, challenged ourselves, built new friendships, & shared stories of our loved ones. So much love support, & camaraderie has been shared in the last 24 hours. And it is not over yet!! Thank you, Springdale Nazarene church, for praying for our family, and for all the beautiful notes & cards; Shiloh Harris, the ambassadors, and volunteers for inviting us and organizing this weekend. Honor, remembrance and respect was shown as we all were escorted in 50 jeeps, closing off I75 during rush hour on Thursday evening (7/20). Then paraded on the baseball field in the jeeps to be recognized at the Dayton Dragon and Peoria Chiefs baseball game. The parachute jumpers were awesome, then later experiencing bow fishing at night on Lake Caesar. More updates to come on our events for the remainder of the weekend. We continue to heal through Faith, Hope, and Love. #ForeverLoveandMissAnthony #TheWeekendWeWillNeverForget and #ThewarriorWeekendToRemember





# Purple Heart, Zac Ruttman

Being a typical combat-wounded veteran, being a little beat up, both physically and emotionally, tad bit rough around the edges, and served, cautious, and so on. The real battle begins when I survive what we all thought I shouldn't have. The struggle to continue to survive begins. The more prevalent struggle with the inner scars of combat, is isolation. The big "i" word can be a rapidly moving downward spiral. Being alone with nothing but the thoughts I try so diligently to distract. But, isolating sets those many distractions aside. And I am faced with the 'what if's' and 'if only of the actions and consequences on the battlefield. Did I do everything in my power necessary to keep my teammates from perishing? That fight, for me, lasted almost an entire decade! Living in the middle of nowhere Oklahoma, I had a small house on 80 acres, and was giving in to the temptation of living the easy life. Simply letting everything and everyone around me just pass on by. But this truly wasn't who I was. I was a people person. A Christian who longed for community and a sense of purpose. And as I was being pulled back and forth from extreme isolation and helping with a few small nonprofits, I get invited to the 2016 Warrior Weekend to Remember! For almost ten years I hid myself from any potential harm or threat. But little did I know, that threat was not even close to reality. It was the very thing I fought against in those war-torn Countries. I fought there, so it wouldn't come here. America is the greatest Country in the World, and I had forgotten that upon my return. When I showed up to my hotel room, I walked in to a room stuffed with gifts from, what seemed to be, the entire State of Ohio! There were dozens of hand-written letters by adults, children, and even a dog! Yes, a note from a service dog who I would later meet. There were piles of snacks, water, several random nick-knacks, and on and on. WOW. What an incredible sense of comfort. It was that feeling of community and purpose I had been longing for all these years! It would be easy to spend hours talking about the many experiences and stories and people from that weekend, but I could sum it all up in one underlying theme; love. I felt like I was best friends with everyone. That is the best way to describe it. The Gold Star families warmed my hearts. Their absolute joy being around Wounded Warriors made me feel such comfort that I never thought a Gold Star family would give. And, now, I couldn't picture it any different. And my fellow Warriors were more than I could ever ask for. We had no desire to talk war. Our desire was to have a great time, and our unspoken similarities were the foundation of our eternal bond. The outpouring of the hundreds, if not thousands, of volunteers and supporters was beyond words. No one treated me like a stranger. And no one made me feel like I was different. We are all Americans. And we all love to love. What else do you need! After my incredible 2016 WWTR trip as a first-time attendee, I didn't waste any time. Days after I got back, I began making phone calls. Within weeks I was on the road with the Air Force Wounded Warrior Program (AFW2) getting my DoD mentor certification. Within that first year after WWTR 2016, I flew all over the country as a mentor for new Wounded Warriors. I traveled to Randolph AFB, Texas. Travis AFB, California. Nellis AFB, Nevada. Andrews AFB, Maryland and Washington DC. I have also begun an ambassadorship with the Fold of Honor and I've done some work with about a half-dozen nonprofits. I have also competed in the Adaptive Sports Program, and made all the way to the finals in the Air Force Trials for the Warrior Games in Chicago. All of this...every bit of this was because of the love and support I felt at the 2016 WWTR in Dayton, Ohio. When David Hart invited me back to the WWTR



as an Ambassador, I was absolutely thrilled. God has given me a big heart for serving, and this was like the Super Bowl of warrior events. The only difficult thing about being asked back as an ambassador, is that my level of excitement could not be contained. I couldn't wait! And when the weekend finally arrived, it could not have gone any better! The Hart Family and the entire event team do an absolutely fantastic job with the logistics of the entire thing start to finish. And now I was able to finally fulfill my purpose as an ambassador. I was able to take those experiences, good and bad, and serve others. I had so many great conversations with so many people. The amount of close connections I make with people in four days is astounding. I truly feel that God has used me to speak to those that are in need. Because that was me just over a year ago...in need. And I just can't even imagine life before WWTR. My inspiration. My new beginning. Thank you, Zac Ruttman, USAF Purple Heart 3

## Gold Star Wife Katie Luff

I haven't yet taken the time to express my joy and gratitude about this past weekend. Particularly because I was exhausted and then playing catch up on my home life. This past weekend, Aiden Luff and I were part of the most amazing weekend. We were invited to be a part of the Warrior Weekend to Remember. I wasn't exactly sure what to expect beforehand, since it was so new to me. On Thursday, we checked into a hotel to see the most amazing group of wounded warriors and gold star families. Throughout the weekend, we met so many families like ours, and families that had struggled through the life that comes with having a Purple Heart/ wounded warrior. We met men and



women that were injured in war in some painful and life altering ways. They have all overcome their injuries in the best ways possible- extensive medical care, love and support from family and friends and also their faith in higher powers. We met families that lost their spouse/ child/parent/ sibling. These families have been grieving so hard and experienced some comfort this weekend with others in the same position. I was moved deeply by all their stories and I was able to relate to gold star families in a way I didn't expect. Shellie Smith shared some of her battle as a gold star wife with me, and I related so much and only wish I had more time to with her to commiserate. Our battles are so similar and I'm grateful to have met someone I can relate to in such a similar way. However, the weekend was about FUN, and that was always clear! All of these people have gone through hell and back, but this amazing organization is able to hold an event year after year that takes all of our families out of dark places and give us so much fun! This weekend Aiden and I were given so many opportunities for fun! We got to see a Dayton Dragons game with a wonderful welcome with the help of the Muddy Buddy's. We go to experience the \*suite\* life at a baseball game. We were treated at an awesome experience out shooting guns with an unlimited number of professionals to ensure our safety and good technique. We were a part of a stellar car show along with sweet jeeps that led us to a one of a kind part with a band, bagpipers, amazing food, rock climbers, great beer on tap, and so many good people! Aiden and I got to ride together on an observation helicopter, a HUEY(!!! Best thing ever) and a Bomber. We did so many amazing things this past weekend and I'm beyond grateful for the people I met. I have done nothing but rave to my family since I got home. Everyone was so kind, caring and funny. If it weren't for my sister Michele Halcomb and our dear friend Jamie Weber, Aiden and I never would have met Perry Davis and David Hart. Perry, and David introduced us to some of the best of our military family. Thank you so much for this weekend.



# Purple Heart, Steve Thompson

Thank you for considering me. I must admit I have tried typing this letter 20 times to find the right words. Being an Ambassador is much more than simply reaching out to new Gold Star families or Purple Hearts to join in the fun. To me it was a duty, the same type of duty we have all felt when we raised our right hands to defend this great country. It was a duty to our fallen brothers that we lost fighting the good fight, to care and look after their families and to make sure their son's names and actions are remembered for generations to come. Being an Ambassador for me meant closure. It took me 11 years to see The Lucas' face to face once again. The previous time was in October 2006 at our battalion memorial once



we got back from Ramadi, Iraq. Closure for both me and for Mr. and Mrs. Lucas. Sitting down with Mr. Lucas was something that I hadn't had the courage to do for some time and this was the perfect opportunity. Being an Ambassador means you must provide that ear to listen, that shoulder to cry on, and that heart to love the very people you will meet at Warrior Weekend to Remember. Being an Ambassador is an honor. Last year getting to participate in all the events was great, although at first had it not been for John Prazynski I would have never of made it. He got me to be a part of something and awaken me to something that has truly meant the world to me. Being an Ambassador means you have the responsibility of making sure that Gold Star family or Purple Heart has an incredible weekend, to have some fun, drink some beer, shoot some guns, and enjoy some brotherhood with men that served with their son. To me, that was incredible. It served me more than anything I have ever done to fight my demons. Mr. Lucas even said to me that he could feel his son's presence there. Having them hold my newborn son is something that I will always cherish. Being an Ambassador was a wonderful experience and I will always hold Team Fastrax, Blue Skies, and Kroger very close to my heart for letting me take part and bring some happiness to a Gold Star family's weekend. Out of the 2017 Warriors I can say every one of them is capable of taking up that flag. Every one of them is capable of being that outlet. Ingrid Underwood stands out to me, John Fleegel because he has already contacted a few Gold Stars and Purple Hearts about this weekend, and Kevin Lombardo was great also. They were always willing to do whatever was needed in helping others. Thanks again for all that you do. You and your family are remarkable people and we are all blessed to have you guys in our lives. Rangers Lead the Way. Semper Fi, Steve



# Gold Star Sister, Janine Sijan Rozina, (sister of MOH Capt. Lance P. Sijan, USAF)

I didn't want too much more time to lapse before I expressed how impressive your Warrior Weekend to Remember was! I have been maintaining and raising awareness to the legacy of Capt. Lance Sijan for decades. It is often met with bittersweet results. Revisiting scars that are most often invisible is always a challenge when you are trying to do it alone. Each and every participant of the WTR 2017 to include Purple Heart Veterans, Gold Star Families, and ambassadors could feel the wave of caring and sharing that was palpable throughout the group.

You, my friends, have created a life experience that takes those who are often misunderstood and place them in an incubator of love that can accelerate the healing process. Language, in and of itself, often falls short of expression and understanding. In this specific group, no words needed to be spoken to feel the connections. And yet at the same time, if indeed you wanted to talk, the safety in the strength of the group was there to guide you, encourage you, and honor you. Inspiration was everywhere! Each participant had a personal story, and yet we were all woven into a similar fabric. Your efforts to recognize, heal, and expand awareness of those who serve is extraordinary. I would love to see this happening nationwide. The bar has been set....and it's a high one. One can only imagine what is yet to come when more support and partnerships are formed. You will want to be sure to encourage those who support your efforts by attending one of the events. I can guarantee, that in degrees small, medium, and large, their lives will be forever changed.



## Purple Heart, Sam Deeds

This year event was not like the past three years. I think the main reason was how the team honors our nations fallen service members. I was able to assign this year's Gold Star Families to an event that we were performing at. To have the families of their loved ones on the ground with the team to honor their son, father, etc. to take the before photo, after photo or both was extremely moving and meaningful. The families got to see firsthand that their loved one was not nor will not be forgotten. To have the Alsfelder's attend just 16 months after their loss. To have the Maddox's attend on their sons Angelversary and share that moment with us, a bunch of complete strangers, was extremely unselfish. To see the Gold Star Families interacting with each other, and with the veterans while smiling and laughing is what WWTR is and should be about. Like our mission statement says. Providing fun, enriching, life changing experiences that facilitate new friendships and emotional healing. During this short 3-4 days we become more than friends. We become family. We all have a common bond. We all understand that freedom comes with a price. Rather we served with their loved one or not we as Purple Heart recipients as veterans understand their loss. Us veterans spend more time with our troops than we do our own





families. We become family rather we choose to or not. It just happens. On March 20 2005 I was involved in my second of two IED blasts. For years, I questioned WHY? Why did I walk away with "minimal damage"? Why did I live? Why? Just why. Since that date, I've had to endure 42 surgeries and procedures, some major, some minor but all because of the March 20 event. Later I would learn that I suffered a Grade 2 concussion, a traumatic brain injury and Post traumatic stress. For years, I let these things control my life and lost my purpose. Team Fastrax and the WWTR has given me purpose again. The healing power of WWTR is amazing. To watch people, arrive being timid and shy and leave a completely different person. A person knowing that their family has grown. That their network has grown. That they have grown. I am grateful to be a small part of this great organization and I am excited for what the future brings. The things that happen during this weekend once the events are over, the ones that happen around a table back at the hotel at 11, 12, 1 or even 3 o'clock in the morning. That's where the healing begins. That's where the friendships begin. That's what WWTR is all about. Samuel D. Deeds GySgt USMC (Ret)

## Gold Star Father Terry A. Burgess

I am the Gold Star Dad of Army Staff Sgt. Bryan A. Burgess. When my wife, Elisabeth, and I were first invited to the Warrior Weekend To Remember we immediately thought "We're not worthy." Our ambassador for the weekend, Seana Arrechaga who is a Gold Star widow and a good friend, convinced us to go to Ohio and just enjoy ourselves. We did. From the moment we stepped off the plane we were greeted and treated as family. Total strangers hugged us, welcomed us, and introduced us to other attendees, all of them Veterans or Gold Star Families. In just a matter of minutes we went from being uncomfortable strangers to being a



part of a unique and wonderful family. That family has become near and dear to us. John and David Hart have created an environment where broken hearts, broken spirits, and yes, broken bodies can all come together in one place at the same time and feel united, loved, honored, and respected. Respect. I guess that's what Beth and I noticed and felt the most during the weekend. At times, it seemed like the entire city of Dayton had rallied and come together to celebrate our Service Members and Gold Star Families. A local jeep club, The Muddy Buddies, showed up to escort us to a Dayton Dragon's baseball game. The jeeps just kept coming! Beth and I selected a particularly rugged looking blue jeep to ride in, and were amazed to find out the driver was a Gold Star widow from Dayton! Again, instant family. We visited on the way to the stadium, learning more about her and her husband and their children, admiring the mile-long stretch of open-top, open-door jeeps hauling these warriors and families to a ball game. Then it was time for us to ride out onto the field. As the jeeps pulled onto the field we saw hundreds of spectators in the stands waving, standing, and saluting as we drove by. We could barely hear the announcer over the cheering, clapping crowd. Our thoughts immediately went to Bryan, thinking "Bryan should be the one riding in this jeep. He should be getting the cheers." Later, back at the hotel, I mentioned to Seana how we felt, and she said, "Bryan *is* here. He's in your heart, so he's right here with all of us." That cinched it for us. Seana, like the rest of the Ambassadors, wounded warriors, and families all carry a loved one with them. We shared Bryan's story every chance we got. I sky-dived for Bryan with the Blue Skies team and I knew he was there with me wearing that crooked half-smile of his. We rode in WWII planes and a Vietnam Era Huey knowing Bryan was riding right along with us. Being presented a beautiful Honor and Remember Flag with Bryan's name



on it just highlighted the day for us. During one of the ceremonies, I presented the Harts with one of Bryan's Challenge Coins. David had tears in his eyes as he hugged me. I also gave a coin to the Blue Skies team and they honored Bryan by having me place his coin in their beautiful display in the team room. Hugs all around. That's what Warrior Weekend To Remember did for us. All these humble, amazing people, doing incredible things for the families of fallen warriors they never met but will now never forget; working with wounded warriors to heal broken spirits; creating a bond stronger than blood or steel. This is how we get out of bed each day – knowing Bryan will not be forgotten; knowing we now have a new family who truly understands the struggles of our "new normal." That was our first Warrior Weekend to Remember. We're going back as Alumni Ambassadors. And we can't wait! Terry A Burgess, Gold Star Dad of U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Bryan A. Burgess

