

SOLDIERS OF DARKNESS: BLINDED SOLDIERS RETURN TO ACTIVE DUTY



(This is part two of a two-part series about three Soldiers who returned to active duty after losing their sight in combat. Read about their initial injuries and blind therapy in "The day the world went black: Soldiers blinded in the line of duty.")

Close your eyes. Now try to put your uniform on. Lace up your boots. Stand in formation. Maybe try some physical training. Go for a run. Are your eyes still closed? Now go to your office. Fire up your computer. Check your email. Better yet, report for training, perhaps a captain's career course, and create a battle plan based on the local terrain. Finally, open one eye, but cross it a bit so everything is still blurry. Head out to the range and qualify expert with an M-9 pistol. Deploy to a combat zone. Come home.

Close that eye again and in your spare time, get a master's degree. Run a few marathons and the Army Ten Miler; climb a mountain; bike across the country; ski across Antarctica.

If any of that seems impossible, that's because, well, it should be. But three Soldiers – Maj. Scott Smiley, Capt. Ivan Castro and Capt. Joe Bogart – have achieved all of those things and more since being blinded by explosions in Iraq. (Smiley and Castro are completely blind with no light perception, but Bogart has some limited vision in his left eye.) They all believed that they still had something to offer the Army, that their service wasn't over yet, so they fought to avoid medical retirement and return to active duty.

Back in uniform

NEWS

15 November 2013

After 36 years in the Army, 27 as a paratrooper, former 82nd Airborne CSM bids farewell

Throughout his 36-year career, Command Sgt. Maj. Thomas Capel has left his mark on thousands of U.S. and partner-nation soldiers and leaders.

26 June 2013

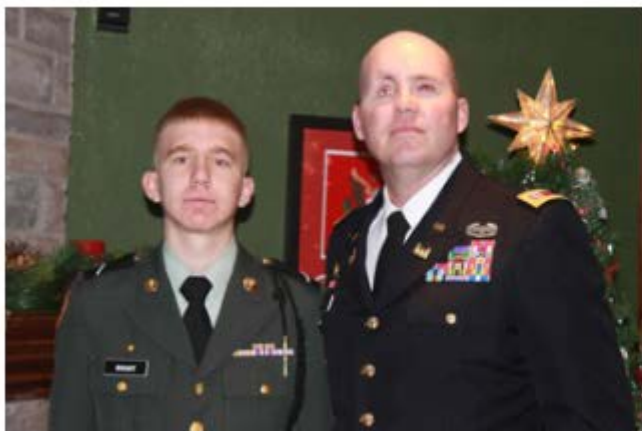
'Beetle Bailey' draws attention to post-traumatic stress

Fans of the long-running comic strip "Beetle Bailey" got a bit of a surprise when its creator, U.S. Army World War II veteran Mort Walker, set aside his usual military-inspired humor to tackle a more serious subject: post-traumatic stress.

29 May 2013

USAREUR, Danish forces wrap up annual multinational senior NCO conference

Senior NCOs from 32 European armies



Capt. Joe Bogart poses with his son, Jonathan. Jonathan, now 16, is in the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps at his high school in Missouri and wants to enlist in the Army after graduation. He first wanted to become a Soldier after Bogart was wounded in Iraq, losing his right eye and much of the sight in his left. He'll make a good Soldier, Bogart said. He understands the risks better than almost anyone. (Photo courtesy of Capt. Joe Bogart)

Special Operations Command eventually assigned Castro as the rear detachment commander for a unit that was deploying. In that role, his responsibilities included supporting the families left behind and those who lost Soldiers, and caring for wounded Soldiers sent back to the States to recover.

On his first day, he remembered, his boss told him, "I am going to hold you to the same standards as every other officer here. Just because you're blind, you're not going to get cut any slack here whatsoever. And we have to. We have to uphold the standards of the unit," Castro said, adding "I had to be at work at 6:00 in the morning. I had to do PT and stand in formation like everybody else, put a uniform on. I had to take my PT test like everyone else. My day finished whenever the job was done."

In fact, going back to his unit was something he needed to feel whole again, said Bogart. "As a wounded Soldier, I (needed) to feel like I was still a part

of the team. That was very important to me. A big part of my healing was ... still feeling like I was contributing, that and humor, making a lot of jokes, many at my own expense."

It wasn't easy. They all spent months or years in the hospital – and then Smiley and Castro spent a few more months at Department of Veterans Affairs blind rehabilitation centers – before being assigned to medical hold units or warrior transition units. Castro fought to avoid joining a WTU, even reaching out to the commander of Special Operations Command, which he had served in for years, for assistance in finding a new unit. He just knew that if he went to a WTU he would be done in the Army.

After some back and forth, U.S. Army

and the U.S. gathered in Denmark recently to share military tactics and techniques, and build relationships among allied and partner forces.

22 May 2013

'Starting Strong' gives Army prospects a taste of soldiering

"Starting Strong" gives civilians interested in the Army a chance to live and breathe a military occupational specialty for a week with an Army mentor and actual Soldiers, to determine if Army life is for them.

22 May 2013

Oklahoma Guard Soldiers aid responders in tornado's wake

Although their work is not done, the combined efforts of the Oklahoma National Guard and first responders in Moore, Okla., have resulted in more than 100 tornado survivors being rescued.

[ALL POSTS](#)

PHOTOS



Smiley, on the other hand, had been assigned to Accessions Command while he underwent the medical board process. He realized that he could still contribute, and after many discussions with his wife, knew that staying in was the right decision for both of them. His commander at Accessions wrote him a letter of recommendation and he got to remain a Soldier.

"It's freeing to know that in the Army, (saying) we won't leave a Soldier behind doesn't just mean overseas," he said. "It also means here at home, that we will still be there for you and if you want to, and you're competent and you're mentally and physically capable of doing a job, the Army is more than happy to have you on board."

All three men had to meet the requirements the Army has for captains (Smiley's rank at the time), including the captain's career course and eventually company commands. Special computer programs read or magnify everything on their screens, and friends and colleagues buddied up with them in school, making sure they got to class on time and going out to the field with them if the coursework required it. They could deliver battle plans and take tests orally and could often use raised topographical maps to understand the geography of an area for operations orders. It wasn't easy, and they had to rely on others more than they would have liked, but it could be done.

"We did do one movement outside," Castro explained. "I walked – I just have this photographic memory. So they described it. My peers described it



[ALL PHOTOS](#)

[BACK ISSUES](#)



to me and we walked the terrain. I had to set up an attack. ... And then after I walked the entire route, I told them where I had to put my support by fire, my blocking positions, where the assault would come in, where I would set up my artillery and everything."

The ability to stay in Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., terrain that Bogart already knew well and easily adjusted to with the help of his dog, Gillian, and his cane, helped him tremendously when it came to staying in the Army. His limited vision also lines up with the target for the M9 pistol, and after he determines where the bullets are hitting, he can correct for the wind and qualify as an expert. "It's very disturbing to other people who struggle to qualify with a 9 mil and a blind guy outshoots them," he said. After qualifying for the first time since being wounded, he walked into his medical board without his cane and without Gillian, and with a little convincing, the board members agreed to write him a letter endorsing his return to active duty.

Returning to combat

Bogart's next hurdle was rejoining his engineer unit, which was already back in Iraq. How much more did he have to give, his battalion commander asked. Bogart responded simple: Everything. The second his life (or anyone's life) became too valuable to risk, he explained, he no longer belonged in the Army. His wife, Christine, wasn't happy, but she knew it was something that he had to do. He only left the forward operating base three times before realizing he was putting his fellow Soldiers in danger, but he knew he could still contribute. He needed to finish his mission. He needed the closure of a real homecoming.



Lt. Col. Fredrick Dummar, commander of the Special Operations Recruiting Battalion at Fort Bragg, N.C., congratulates Capt. Ivan Castro on graduating from the Maneuver Captain's Career Course in December 2009. Castro, who was injured in a 2006 attack while serving in Yousifiyah, Iraq, was the first blind Soldier to graduate from the course. (U.S. Army photo by Kristin Molinaro)

"I agreed to let him deploy because he earned it," Col. Joe Cross, commander of the Omaha District for the Corps of Engineers and Bogart's battalion commander at the time, wrote in an email. "He proved to me he had the toughness – mental and physical – stamina and drive to still succeed in the Army. ... Yes, there were things more difficult for him to accomplish, and roles I could not expect him to fulfill, but ... I knew we could find a job suited for him. ... Having Joe on the team was a positive influence. It showed the Soldiers that the Army didn't just use you and discard you, that it did care for you and had loyalty to you. ... He was a role model for the Soldiers and Airmen in the unit."

The right assignments

In the seven or eight years since the men have been wounded, the Army has worked to find the best ways to employ their talents and experiences.



Now-Maj. Scott Smiley cradles his newborn son. All three of his boys were born after he lost his sight in Iraq in 2005. Smiley stayed on active duty and even won an ESPY award from ESPN for climbing Mount Rainier, but says being unable to see his children has been one of the hardest parts of being blind. (Photo courtesy of Maj. Scott Smiley)

Smiley, for example, commanded a warrior transition company after obtaining a master's degree from Duke University and teaching for a semester at West Point. He knew what the men and women under his command were going through, but because he had been through it, he also knew that the best thing he could do for them was treat them like Soldiers, which hadn't been the case before he took command.

"We shouldn't look at ourselves as victims," he said. "We shouldn't look at ourselves as the worst of the worst. We should pick up our bootstraps. Yes, I knew I was depressed. I knew it took me awhile to recover. At the same time, there's no time in my life in which I was giving up on life, when I just didn't want to do anything." And he wasn't going to let that happen to another Soldier either. Today, he works as an ROTC instructor at Gonzaga University, teaching combat to young cadets.

In fact, his commander, Lt. Col. David Bingham, called him a gifted leader who manages all of his responsibilities with such "perfection" that new staff members and visitors are surprised to learn that he is blind. Smiley, he emailed, inspires the cadets with his perseverance. He's living proof that "the Army has a culture of taking care of people. I think it sends the message that what we do is serious and important and that the Army will stand behind you."

After commanding a company for incoming Soldiers, Bogart is now the operations officer for the Maneuver Support Center of Excellence at Fort Leonard Wood. Castro, on the other hand, is currently working for USASOC's readiness program at Fort Bragg, N.C., talking to injured service members and their families and promoting resilience. "I get invitations to go down and do noncommissioned officer professional development or officer professional development," he said. "I say, 'We're going to do a PT test' or 'Let's do PT.' So I go out there and I do 100 push ups. I do 100 situps. I do pull ups. We'll go for a five-mile run. I'll do a block of combatives. After that, I'll sit them down. ... I'll tell them my story, how I got injured and the importance of training, and how training not only saved my life, but also the lives of others. ... We'd talk about battle focus training and then about leadership and how important that is, and not to quit, not to surrender, not to self-defeat.

"I talk about resilience and then I also incorporate a little bit about the importance of faith and family. I talk a little bit about suicide prevention. ... I really harp on that, that there is help out there. And when they think they have it bad, they just need to look to the left and right to see that someone has it worse than them. Just think about me."

"I had heard that Ivan was in transition and needed someplace to set up shop," Castro's commander, who declined to be named for security reasons, explained in an email. "Knowing Ivan's story and how much he has inspired people through his work and accomplishments, I thought it would be great to have him here at the HQ of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command. ... I quickly realized that he was a positive force around the office and has impacted everyone here. He is a living and breathing example of what resilience looks like."

Family and sports

Family and sports

In addition to their Army careers, all three men have kept moving forward in their private lives, literally conquering mountains and entire continents. Castro actually began when he was still in the hospital. Only a couple of months after he was injured, he overheard one of his nurses and a doctor talking about the Marine Corps Marathon. His head turned back and forth between them as though he was watching a pingpong match. He swore to himself that, sight or no sight, he would run in the next Marine Corps Marathon. He started working out in his hospital bed, trying to regain the 50 pounds of muscle he had lost, and would beg his physical therapist for extra time on the exercise bike.

"Exactly 13 months after my injury, I ran the Army 10-Miler and two weeks later I ran the Marine Corps Marathon," he said. "I really turned it around." Castro ran with a guide, keeping his hand on the guide's shoulder, and as he continued to recover – eventually he had more than 40 surgeries – he ran marathon after marathon. Then he tried ultra marathons (50 or more kilometers). Then he biked across the country. Then he skied across Antarctica to reach the South Pole with an expedition of other wounded veterans.

It's partly because of a promise he made to his son, Ivan, who was 12 when he was first injured. Ivan had first seen Castro when he was still on life support, hooked up to a number of scary machines, and the experience was so distressing that he fainted. So when Castro came to, he assured his son that things wouldn't change that much. "I could still give him tough love, but together we were going to overcome this. Together. And he'd be my eyes. And that we were going to move forward and not dwell on the past." The two have even traveled Europe together and worked on Ivan's car. Castro's marriage eventually ended, however. He has since remarried and has a two-year-old daughter, Catalina, who he has just realized understands that he can't see. She takes him by the hand when he gets home and will lead him around the house. Or say, "Look Daddy!" and will guide his hand to whatever she wants him to "see."

Bogart's son, Jonathan, who was eight at the time, was a bit more pragmatic about his injuries. After the news came and his mother assured him that Bogart wasn't going to die, he went back to playing. It took awhile to understand that his father couldn't see like he used to, but now, at the age of 16, Jonathan wants to be a Soldier himself.

Bogart also runs. And hunts. In fact, it was through hunting, courtesy of a nonprofit started by a Gold Star father in honor of his late son who loved the outdoors, that Bogart first started to feel like himself again. "I discovered something about myself," he said. "I had healed in a few ways I didn't realize I still needed healing. I had found peace. I had healed a part of my soul. One day, I took a deep breath and let it out and I was at peace. I was calm. I didn't realize I hadn't been feeling that."

Smiley had always been physically active, and he refused to let his injuries, which had already changed so much in his life, take anything else from him. "I wanted to continue to run, continue to lift weights, continue to be a physically fit individual," he explained, so when an acquaintance asked Smiley if he wanted to climb Mount Rainer in Smiley's native Washington in 2007, he didn't hesitate. He trained hard and he followed the person in front of him. He was grateful that he had recovered enough to make the climb.

And then he received an ESPY from ESPN as Best Outdoor Athlete the following year in recognition of his accomplishment. He still doesn't know who recommended him or why, but says it's amazing that ESPN and the American people "are not afraid to recognize, whether it's people with disabilities or people who actually put forth great work. And I by no means feel like I should have deserved it. ... But again, it's ESPN recognizing people with disabilities or people who are willing to go out and do things they're not expected to do."

His family is proud of him, almost as proud as Smiley is of his three boys, who have all been born since he was blinded. He and Castro agree that not seeing their brand-new babies has been one of the hardest things about losing their sight. Like Castro's daughter, Smiley said his sons seem to understand certain things instinctually, but they may not always get what being blind means. "Like all of my children will be, 'Look over there, Dad,' and they'll pull my face." They'll also, he said, play with things around him that they know their mother would see and take away from them.

"It's not easy," summed up Castro. "It's a tough job, to be blind, but we all have struggles. ... We all have a cross to carry. ... After all that I've been through, I'll have my bad days. I say, 'Are bullets flying? Are bombs falling? Are people dying around me? You know what? This is a good day.' When you've been through some shitty days, (ask), 'Am I on life support right now?' No? It's a good day. ... So when you live life and you've been through so much, you just – it makes you strong."

(To read about Castro's trek through the Antarctic to the South Pole, check out "[A journey of the heart: Wounded vets, service members conquer the South Pole.](#)"

