

Wounded Airmen Recover ON AND OFF THE FIELD



It's incredibly humbling, inspiring, and moving to stand in the presence of wounded airmen and witness the passion and resilience they display while courageously dealing with their realities.

The people I've met through my work with the Air Force Association's Wounded Airman Program do not lead easy lives, but they live with honor, respect their colleagues, and value teamwork. They always end up teaching me something along the way.

Over the course of the year, wounded airmen around the country are encouraged to take the first step—sometimes a leap, a roll, or a hobble—to help heal themselves. After they've been through the medical system, and sometimes the Department of Veterans Affairs, they are left to navigate the next steps of their careers and lives.

*Here, everyone is—and
had—a wingman.*

Enter the Air Force Wounded Warrior, or AFW2, program. Its mission is to "Care Beyond Duty" by delivering a network of regionally focused non-medical recovery care coordinators to help wounded airmen fight for benefits, entitlements, back pay, and promotion, when possible. Airmen under its care come from all walks of life. They're enlisted personnel and officers; they have parents, spouses, and friends who are their caregivers.

AFW2's team of trained, empathetic professionals, most with military backgrounds, works tirelessly to raise public awareness of the challenges in being classified as "wounded." Caring for airmen is its top priority. Nonprofit partners, like AFA through the Wounded Airman Program, step in where Defense Department budgets cannot, ensuring as many wounded airmen, whether on Active Duty or veterans, have every opportunity to thrive.



An airman tries out an adaptive cycle during an adaptive sports camp at Nellis AFB, Nev., in summer 2013.

For example, two AFA chapters in the Washington, D.C., area, the Nation's Capital Chapter and the Donald W. Steele Sr. Memorial Chapter, teamed up to purchase a sports wheelchair for Christopher Aguilera to use in the 2012 Warrior Games in Colorado Springs, Colo., and for his training at home. One of the first airmen WAP reached, Aguilera has since become one of program's mentors, giving back to others in the same way he received help.

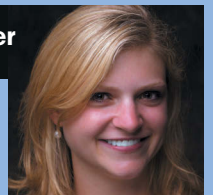
So, what does thriving look like for wounded airmen? They are brutally honest with each other. Some days success means just getting out of bed. Other days, it's getting in a pool for the first time since an injury or opening up and sharing a personal story with someone.

Over three short but powerful days in late February, I witnessed much success.

Recently injured or diagnosed airmen, and those who had never interacted with a large group since their injury, came to Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas to participate in an Introductory Adaptive Sports Camp. Adaptive sporting events, like the Warrior Games and this camp, feature athletic activities modified in some way, such as with the use of specialized equipment, to allow for airmen with all types of injuries to participate.

These camps are held all over the country throughout the year, reaching as many wounded airmen as are willing to take part. At each camp, there are airmen missing limbs, in wheelchairs, some traveling with family, and many with no visible wounds. Some injuries are combat-related; others are unfortunate accidents.

By Caitie Craumer



"The nature of my injury ... is not combat-related," Mark Johnson told me in February at Nellis. He lost his right leg in an accident. "We've had people tell me and tell [my wife Kayla] that I don't deserve all these benefits that other wounded warriors are getting because of the way I got hurt," he said.

Privacy requests and legal issues prevent me from going into detail on the injuries of many airmen with whom I spoke.

"All the other amputees or wounded warriors, they don't judge me," contin-



Air Force photo by SRA Christopher Tam



ued Johnson. “I’m the same as someone who got hurt downrange. ... There’s quite a few [airmen] here [whose injuries] aren’t combat related. They’re just one thing or another, whether it’s cancer, or some kind of motor accident. ... It’s nice not to be the only one.”

Welcome to Camp

Having attended a few of these camps in the past, including the 2013 Warrior Games, I was familiar with the structure. I saw it with fresh eyes when 40 wounded airmen arrived at the opening event, many openly admitting to me that they were nervous to be there.

Camp opened with testimonials of airmen who have been down this road

and are living with their injuries or illnesses and are returning to give back and help mentor others. Air Force leadership from the local base welcomed everyone to participate, volunteer, and watch the events of the week. AFA members lent their support by volunteering and through monetary donations, and AFW2 officials shared their program’s tenet: empowering individual airmen to take responsibility for their own recovery.

It was on this first day I witnessed hesitation, skepticism, and a bit of mistrust. Some veterans had been away from their service for an extended amount of time, while other airmen had been focused on getting from one day to the next.

The adaptive sports each airman rotated through over the next few days were tailored to each individual’s need. For Jabrier Lee, an airman gradually losing his eyesight, I helped a camp coach fashion vision-impairing goggles to teach him to run with and trust a partner in preparation for the day when his sight is gone. Mentor and 2013 Warrior Games Ultimate Champion Mitch Kieffer stepped in to lead Lee on the track through verbal cues and physical connection. Mentors are a crucial part of AFW2.

For Tatiana Perkins, having only one fully functioning arm didn’t stop her from trying out archery. In fact, she learned how to hold the bow with one hand and pull the string and arrow with her teeth. It turned out she had great aim!

For others, adaptations were beyond equipment. Many tossed a discus for the first time since their injuries; others with use of both legs strapped into wheelchairs to try out wheelchair basketball.

The week of camp was often painful, but also joyous, with the airmen confronting new scars and old scars, those seen and unseen. Their participation was an admittance that activities like walking, running—even speaking—are a daily struggle.

At home, wherever that is, these airmen’s lives aren’t “normal,” but here, no one questioned the scars, or the limbs, or the wheelchair, or the service dogs. Airmen were in this space to herald in healing and to build teams, units, and squadrons of brotherhood and sisterhood that may have been lost through their injury or illness. Here, everyone was—and had—a wingman.

WOUNDED AIRMAN PROGRAM

AFA operates and administers the Wounded Airman Program. We’re proud to say 100 percent of the donations made by individuals specifically for WAP goes directly to supporting wounded airmen. AFA’s general fund covers WAP overhead and staff time. We need support for both, and you can rest assured that we’re serving our wounded airmen with integrity. Using our network of chapters and members and our resources through the restricted fund-raising, we are able to fulfill needs for equipment, care, and quality-of-life items for wounded airmen. For more information on the Wounded Airman Program, or to donate, visit www.afa.org/WAP.

WHO IS A WOUNDED WARRIOR?

An Air Force wounded warrior is any seriously or very seriously wounded, ill, or injured airman identified on a casualty report or recommended by the medical community as having highly complex medical conditions. Also included are airmen with post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and/or other mental health conditions, or those retained for more than six months on medical Title 10 orders, or returned to Title 10 orders for medical conditions related to deployment. To learn more about the Air Force Wounded Warrior program, visit www.woundedwarrior.af.mil.



Air Force photo by TSgt. Sarayuth Pinthong



Staff photo by Caitie Craumer

Particularly Striking Observation

By the last day of each camp, all airmen, caretakers, and coaches had forged lasting bonds to carry them home and through their next steps. The airmen were exhausted, exhilarated, and encouraged to keep moving forward. The motivation was contagious.

I return from each of these camps with a renewed faith in the Air Force and the work it's doing to care for its own. If I can see an attitude shift in just days, imagine the possibilities that lie ahead for those who take charge of their circumstances and continue to embody the Air Force mantra of integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do.

At the camp, I was able to talk with many of the wounded airmen, while continuing to look at ways that AFA could further serve them. One particularly striking observation was the effect of the activities on the caregivers. While Johnson got to experience and try out different sports, wife Kayla cheered

111 Vincent Pacely prepares to throw a discus during the Air Force Wounded Warrior Adaptive Sports Camp at Nellis AFB, Nev., Feb. 26, 2014. 121 Airmen stretch before running during an adaptive sports camp at JBSA-Randolph, Texas, Sept. 17, 2013. 131 Tatiana Perkins learns how to use archery equipment with one arm during the Air Force Wounded Warrior Adaptive Sports Camp at Nellis, Feb. 27, 2014. 141 Jabrier Lee (left), who is losing his eyesight, and Mitch Kieffer jog around the track at Nellis during camp.



Air Force photo by SrA. Christopher Tam

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Photo by Roger L. Wollenberg

111 AFA's Caitie Craumer photographs Ken Gestring, an adaptive sports camp participant, in the Thunderbird Hangar at Nellis in summer 2013. 121 Wounded airman Mark Johnson and his wife, Kayla, photographed during the Air Force Wounded Warrior Adaptive Sports Camp at Nellis in February 2014.

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Photo by Robert Davis

the burden when things aren't as cheery. It's our responsibility—AFA's and the overall Air Force family's—to make sure the caregivers are cared for, too, and that they are part of the healing process.

It also makes a difference to have others who have worn the Air Force uniform working together to learn, adapt, and recover. While he was under the care of AFW2, Mark Johnson found his community. "Being with his own brothers and sisters in the same branch, that's been a huge mental boost that [Mark] hasn't had before," said Kayla. However, he is one of many who will continue to need support.

The theme of connection, teamwork, and banding together despite differences, physical or otherwise, is the core of recovery and resiliency during adaptive sports. Whatever the end goal may be, whether it's being active again at home, representing the Air Force at the annual Warrior Games, or even the Paralympics, the real value is in the journey that brings each individual airman there.

The Air Force is taking care of its own, no matter the injury or situation. AFA's Wounded Airman Program will continue to support AFW2 and individual airmen as they work through recovery, transition, and whatever else lies ahead.

It's an honor to serve them. But the job's not finished. It's a long road for wounded airmen, and more are returning home and trying to cope every day. It is our turn to take care of them. ■

Caitie Craumer is AFA's senior manager for Airmen and Family Programs.

him on from the sidelines teary-eyed, sharing that in some ways his injury has been harder on her. But here, she said, "I can't describe how exciting it is to see him coming back out of his shell a little bit. ... If we could get involved in something, you know, fun and different from what he's used to, that would make the difference."

One of those fun and different experiences was on the track. Mark first tried running on his prosthetic leg, but when that wasn't comfortable, the coach encouraged him to try the racing wheelchair. Kayla was surprised by Mark's willingness to participate and compete in this way. "The wheelchair made such a difference, especially in his attitude," she observed. "Those guys can really move in those chairs."

The caregivers were such a huge part of the support system, and it was rewarding for them to see their husbands, wives, and children thriving. They celebrate the success of their loved ones and carry

CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS

June 7-8, 2014

Air Force Association Cycling Classic, Arlington, Va.

Sept. 10-14, 2014

Invictus Games, London

Sept. 27-Oct. 5, 2014

Warrior Games, Colorado Springs, Colo.