

Empowering WARRIORS

by Blythe Thimsen

The eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. That was when, during World War I, an armistice, or temporary cessation of hostilities, between the Allied nations and Germany went into effect. A Congressional Act approved on May 13, 1938, made the 11th of November in each year a legal holiday known as "Armistice Day." In June 1954, the Act of 1938 was amended, changing the name to "Veteran's Day," to honor veterans of all wars. Sometimes it takes an act of Congress to set the precedent for us to honor and care for our veterans, but sometimes it simply takes a group of people who recognize the importance of honoring and caring for those who have served our country. Such is the case with Wounded Warrior Project (WWP), a non-profit organization whose mission is to honor and empower wounded warriors.

WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT HONORS OUR VETERANS

The WWP program is available "to all those who have incurred service-connected wounds, injuries or illnesses on or after September 11, 2001." It is easy to think those being assisted by WWP are veterans with catastrophic injuries – missing limbs, paralysis, etc., – who are in military hospitals or military-dense populations in other parts of the country; however, there are veterans among us right here in Spokane who are wounded warriors, even if their wounds don't always show.

Sgt. Richard Harrison looks like any other young man in the prime of his life. Dressed stylishly in civilian clothes and meeting to talk over coffee, you would never guess he was an Iraq war veteran, nor that he is a wounded warrior.

An Army veteran for 18 years, Harrison was deployed to Iraq in 2009, where he served as a reconnaissance scout. "We would go out and get a bigger picture of the battlefield, see what type of intel we could get – like how many bad guys coming through and area, what town looked like, etc.," he says describing the work he did. While at Camp Liberty, Bagdad, his unit sustained indirect fire (mortar fire), which caused him to suffer a traumatic optic neuropathy. "I'm blind in my right eye and partially blind in my left," he says. "I call it the Big Bang Theory. With a hit on the head and vision loss, - you can't do reconnaissance when you've got one eye."

Medevac'd to Landstuhl, Germany, and then on to Ft. Lewis on Washington's west side, Harrison spent six months recovering before being allowed home to continue treatment at Fairchild.

"I expected to be there for a year, and was there for just over six months," he says of his deployment. "It was not long enough, and yet, probably too long. I went over there to do the mission, be part of the team. When everyone is still there, it is hard to come home. And it was even harder when you come from a combat situation to civilian life within a week. It made me angry for a long time. It made me resentful. They say it's PTSD, but I hate being labeled."

Harrison's wife knew he needed help with the transition and with moving forward, so she strongly encouraged him to enroll in a WWP Project Odyssey, which is a trip into the great outdoors with other wounded warriors. The Odyssey, just one of the services provided through WWP, provides a chance to experience outdoor activities, despite the effects of a wound, and also allows warriors the chance to share with others who have – or are – in the same place. All of this is provided at no charge to the veteran warrior.

Very reluctant at first, Harrison eventually relented and left for his Odyssey, to Utah, in 2010. What unfolded was a healing that set the path for his future. "It was a life changing experience for me," he says. "I was in a very bad dark place when I left, and it helped just being around a lot of other people that had, maybe not the same injuries, but the same mentality – anger, depression, just feeling alone really."

The five-day adventure included rock climbing, Paralympic-based ice hockey and snowmobile riding. Evenings spent around a campfire provide warriors a safe environment in which to talk about issues they were facing. "A lot of times, guys don't want to talk – I know I didn't," says Harrison. "To paraphrase a friend, I didn't want to listen to the space shuttle door gunner who single handedly took over Fallujah. I didn't want to hear those guys that come and have this bigger than life story, because my story's not a big story. I didn't do anything crazy."

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~Sgt. Richard Harrison

Despite not wanting to share, Harrison, through the help of both the WWP staff and the sense of camaraderie he developed with fellow warriors – something he had been missing since he came home and was no longer in a military setting – learned to open up. "It was team camaraderie, cohesion and feeling like I was part of something again, instead of being at home locked in my garage and finding every excuse in the book not to answer my phone. I had been so isolated for quite a while."

The experience showed Harrison he wasn't alone. "I wasn't the only one there going through anger, going through depression, going through what have you. It became an 'I'm not alone' moment. At the end, I was excited again, I felt good about life again."

Harrison has been on two Odysseys, one as a warrior, and the other as a peer mentor. Being able to give back to WWP is something he is passionate about. "It definitely is a lifeline for a lot of people," he says. "The Wounded Warrior Project is more than a commercial on TV. For the Wounded Warrior Project to step up as much as they do and say we are going to send you on a hunting trip or send you on a rafting trip, or sponsor your golf tournament for other warriors, that is huge for me. Before I went on that

Odyssey, I knew I had no reason to be here. None. And there are a lot of men and women that don't have a reason either. There's no reason. Why keep going?"

It is more than just Odysseys that WWP offers to wounded veterans. The organization's vision is, "To foster the most successful, well-adjusted generation of wounded service members in our nation's history." To reach that goal, they offer a variety of programs including combat stress recovery program, family support, peer mentoring, recreation and adaptive sports to

promote physical health and wellness, economic empowerment, campus services for schools and universities, and employment assistance services.

The organization currently has a stronger presence on the west side of the state, but there are local individuals who are stepping up to help foster a presence for wounded warriors on this side of the state. In 2010, local news anchor Dan Kleckner and Chris Runyan from Sun Dance Golf Course decided they wanted to do something to support the WWP in Spokane. With a great team of supporters and volunteers, the Dan Kleckner's Golf Classic was born and continues to be a great success for the organization. Continuing to support WWP is essential, so that it can continue to make a difference in the lives of local wounded warriors

Harrison believes if it hadn't been for his wife connecting with WWP, and two dear friends he made through the organization who encouraged and listened to him, "I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you. That's how close I felt I was. Would it have happened? Who's to say, but I was definitely feeling isolated, I was feeling like I didn't want to go on any more, that who would care." WWP made that much of a difference in Harrison's life, and other wounded warriors deserve the same.

"The biggest thing is that they are trying to get veterans to empower themselves to move forward in their daily walk, and to help them where needed," says Harrison. "Empowerment to me is the huge part of all this."

Empowerment for our veterans is a way to honor them for all they have done, but it needs to be done now, not at the eleventh hour. ■

For more information visit www.woundedwarriorproject.org