

WOUNDED, ILL AND INJURED SOLDIERS

STILL IN THE

STORIES AND PHOTOS BY CLIFFORD KYLE JONES



Spc. Brian Johnson, of Joint Base Lewis-McCord in Fort Lewis, Wash., won a silver medal in the seated discus competition at the Warrior Games, which took place May 16-21 at the U.S. Olympic Training Facility in Colorado Springs, Colo.



FIGHT





Members of the Army team make their way down the Olympic walkway during the opening ceremony for the 2011 Warrior Games.

BEFORE the first ball was tossed, before the first bow was drawn, before the first pedal turned, the athletes at **Warrior Games 2011** had already proven they were champions.

The approximately 200 athletes who competed at the second annual event, organized by the Department of Defense and the U.S. Olympic Committee, had already faced debilitating hardships — traumatic injuries to their brains, combat wounds that left them missing limbs, post-traumatic stress disorder and illnesses requiring years of care — and found a way not only to survive, but to excel.

“I am so honored to be here with you,” Navy Adm. James Winnenfeld said during the opening ceremonies May 16 at the U.S. Olympic Training Facility in Colorado Springs, Colo. “It is truly humbling to be among so many young men and women who have given so much while wearing the cloth of our nation. These

games and those of you who participate in them combine the best of our nation’s warrior spirit and our attitude that we cannot be defeated — either as a nation, or as a military, or as a unit or as a person.”

Winnenfeld, the commander of the North American Aerospace Defense Command and U.S. Northern Command at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, as well as President Barack Obama’s nominee to be the next vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, represented the Department of Defense as the games opened. He told the hundreds of wounded warriors and their families, friends and supporters that the games were about much more than the athletes.

“The benefits to our military members,



Medal of Honor recipient Staff Sgt. Salvatore Giunta was the honorary torchbearer at the Warrior Games. He said being able to take part in the event was one of the highlights of his career.

physically and mentally, are unbelievable and immeasurable,” he said. “But sometimes, I think the biggest winners at these games are those lucky enough to see you,

to meet you and to be inspired by your example of service and determination.”

Count the first living Medal of Honor recipient since the Vietnam War, Staff Sgt. Salvatore Giunta, among those inspired. Although since receiving the nation’s highest military award, he has been an honored guest at the Super Bowl, helped ring in the new year at New York’s Times Square, appeared on television with Stephen Colbert and David Letterman, and personally received high praise from the nation’s commander in chief, Giunta counted his role as honorary torchbearer at the games among the highpoints in his life.

“In the last six months, I’ve gotten to do so many amazing, incredible things. But, to be able to stand up there in front of all the men and women from all the different branches, and to just be part of this, it gives me goosebumps,” he said. “To be able to salute them, to receive the torch from them and to see the spirit and the will behind all these men and women who are competing, it just blows my mind. ... There are people with no disabilities at all who spend the whole day sitting on the couch, and you have these people out here with some severe disabilities, and they’re just attacking the world for all it’s worth and living to the best of their ability. Thank you for showing us that, because we need to see that. That motivates the heck out of me.”

None of the athletes did it alone, though. Capt. Elizabeth Merwin, a former NCO who won a gold medal in the women’s cycling event and competed in the 50-meter freestyle swim, was serving as a quartermaster officer in the 101st Aviation Brigade in Kandahar, Afghanistan, when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. In addition to the “awesome” medical care she received at all points of her treatment — from her unit’s medics, who sent her to Landstuhl, Germany, for initial treatment, to the Warrior Transition Battalion at Fort Campbell, Ky., where her mastectomy and recovery took place — she also received inspiration from the WTB’s commander.

When she first arrived back at Fort Campbell, she had noticed a flyer for a bike race. During her deployment, she spent much of her free time working out on a stationary bicycle.

“While I was in Afghanistan, I did



Retired Sgt. Margaux Vair returns the volleyball during the gold-medal sitting volleyball match between the Army and the Marine Corps. The Army team members won silver medals.

spin class all the time; I was just a crazy, avid spinner,” she said. “That was my mental break and my mental salvation. ... So I thought, ‘All right, I don’t know when my surgery is going to be, but if I can do this bike ride, I’ll do it.’”

Her surgery took place about a week later. The day after her surgery, she was lying in a hospital bed in recovery when the WTB commander paid her a visit. She

said, he “introduces himself and he says, ‘Well, Lt. Merwin, do you think you’re going to want to do that bike ride?’”

She thought, “I’m in a hospital gown, sir. I’m in a hospital bed. It’s like two weeks away. Do you really think I’m going to be ready to ride a bike in two weeks?”

That’s what she *thought*.

“Of course to him, my answer was, ‘Yes, sir! I’ll do it.’ And sure enough,

WARRIOR STORIES: SGT. KENNETH HARKER



'Soldiers need to know about this'

One of the great things about the Warrior Games is that athletes often discover abilities they didn't know they had.

Sgt. Kenneth Harker, for instance, had hardly touched a bow or arrow before being selected to attend about three months before the competition. Now he has a silver medal in compound archery. He also earned

a bronze medal in the sitting discus event.

"I can't wait for next year," he said. "Hopefully, we get to train a little more this time."

Harker, whose legs were amputated after an explosively formed penetrator hit his vehicle June 2008 in Baghdad, is a patient at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Harker said he asked many Soldiers at Walter Reed about the Warrior Games.

"They were like, 'What are you talking about?' I think Soldiers need to know about this. Even though they might see it on a calendar or a poster, they should know this is awesome for warriors, for wounded Soldiers."

14 days later, after having a mastectomy, I was on a bicycle for a multiday ride."

Merwin had a similar pace for her recovery — and her career. "While I was at the WTB, my transition plan was pretty aggressive to get me back to duty," she said. "I wanted my career to be moving forward."

She first entered the Army as an enlisted Soldier and spent eight years serving

as a linguist. She took a 13-year break from duty before rejoining the Army, this time as an officer. She was commissioned in 2008.

"I come from a military family, so it's in my blood. Although I was in the Army in the first (Iraq) war in the '90s, I never really deployed. So, I wanted to get what I consider the real Army, the real Soldier experience to actually deploy."

Now, she's on her way to the Captain's Career Course, and then she'll be heading to civil affairs training.

"My goal is to make it as far as lieutenant colonel," she said. "I don't have a whole lot of time left (in the Army), but I'm going to do everything I can to get there as fast as possible."

Brig. Gen. Darryl Williams, com-

WARRIOR STORIES: SGT. KINGA KISS-JOHNSON

‘These are just baby steps ... for every one of us’

A little more than a year ago, retired Sgt. Kinga Kiss-Johnson was barely able to leave her home.

Kiss-Johnson, who was medically retired from the Fort Gordon, Ga., Warrior Transition Battalion in November 2010, suffered from several combat-related injuries, including a traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, left and right hip injuries and a spinal cord injury.

However, with the help of her family and friends, a service dog (her “puppy,” Balto) and a new-found passion for adaptive sports, she not only made the trip to the Warrior Games in Colorado Springs, Colo., by herself, she helped her wheelchair basketball team earn gold.

“I really have got my life back, because I hadn’t left my house for a really long time,” Kiss-Johnson said. “My husband had to leave his job to support me, and just now, little by little ... I started to get back and start to walk with [my dog] and get out in the community with him.”

The 6-foot-7 Kiss-Johnson was born in Romania and played college basketball for Missouri State from 2000 to 2002. She took the U.S. oath of citizenship in November 2007 while stationed in Afghanistan.

As part of her therapy, she was introduced to archery and wheelchair basketball. Now she plays for the Augusta, Ga., Bulldogs in the National Wheelchair Basketball Association. But, her Warrior Games team



was something special.

“The group’s diversity is so incredible on my team. Everybody has their own stories and struggles. But, at the end of the day, all of us come together as a whole team,” she said. “Everybody pretty much in

their own way has the same experiences — and life — after war. ... These are just little baby steps, one foot in front of the other, for every one of us, and it’s just pushing each other and encouraging each other that there is life after injury.”

mander of the Army’s Warrior Transition Command, said, “She’s an example of the Comprehensive Transition Plan — how we move folks through the process to meet their life goals.”

Soldiers in the Army’s 29 Warrior Transition Units work with their squad leaders, doctors and nurses to develop a personalized plan, the CTP, for recovery

that encompasses all aspects of life: physical, social, spiritual, emotional, family and career.

“The warrior is responsible for his or her way ahead — the success of this program,” Williams said. “They make the decision whether they continue on active duty or retire.”

Army participants in the Warrior

Games came from a Warrior Transition Unit, which is for Soldiers who require at least six months of rehabilitative care and complex medical management, or from the Army Wounded Warrior, or AW2, Program, which assists and advocates for more severely wounded, ill and injured Soldiers and veterans. AW2 is also under the Warrior Transition Command.

WARRIOR STORIES: STAFF SGT. SEYWARD MCKINNEY



'We're still out there; we're still fighting'

This was retired Staff Sgt. Seyward McKinney's second trip to the Warrior Games, and she got even more out of it this year.

"I'm having a lot of fun, especially this year. Last year, I came with my dad because I couldn't really walk around well," she said. "This year, I came by myself and ... I got to meet a whole group of people I didn't get to

hang out with last year, and it was fun getting to know them, ... just being able to get that camaraderie."

McKinney competed in high-school athletics in Salem, Ore., and served as an operating room technician in the Army. She suffered a stroke in March 2009 and was at Walter Reed Army Medical Center until she

was medically retired in April. At the Warrior Games, she competed in recumbent cycling and women's shot put.

"Just because we got injured due to war or whatever happened to us, we're still out there; we're still fighting," she said. "We're still carrying out the fight, just in a different way."

"The Warrior Games is a manifestation of what these athletes do every single day," Williams said. "They compete every single day, either on active duty, in one of our Warrior Transition Units or as they retire as veterans. So, you're going to get to see this week an example of their great resilience and strength."

This was Sgt. 1st Class Landon

Ranker's second year at the Warrior Games. Last year, he competed in swimming and track events and earned three medals — two gold and one silver. This year, he took part in the Ultimate Champion competition, in which 10 athletes competed to be the top finishers in five events — swimming, shooting, track, shot put and cycling. (Marine Capt. Jonathan

Disbro took the title.)

During his 19 years in the Army, Ranker deployed four times as a light infantryman, the first time to Iraq during Desert Storm, then once more to Iraq and twice to Afghanistan in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom.

"In the course of some training and then on three of those tours, I was injured

WARRIOR STORIES: SPC. ANDY KINGSLEY

'People who think that they have limits learned that there are no limits'

Spc. Andy Kingsley knows how to use the encouragement of his fellow Soldiers and his family — and he knows how to provide it.

Kingsley lost his right leg when an 88 mm recoilless rifle round came into his bunker in July 2010 in Afghanistan. He also suffered burns on his right side, received a brain injury, lost vision in his right eye and lost his left big toe and right middle finger.

"I ended up at the Warrior Games because ... I'm pretty much done with my recovery, and I needed ways to burn the excess weight that I was getting," he said. "You know, when you get injured you gain a lot of weight."

He tried out for the swim team, "and when I came out here I was one of the fastest amputees on the team." And he wasn't just fast; he was a leader.

"Even though I'm a junior enlisted, they voted me to be captain. I went out there, did a good job. I got everyone hyped up, and I'm proud. On our team, 14 out of 20 Soldiers made it to the finals, and we brought home 15 medals today."

Kingsley himself won two bronze medals in individual events and a silver medal as part of the Army's relay team.

But it wasn't just the swim team that supported him. Several members of the 82nd Airborne Division carried signs and whooped when Kingsley competed.



"Having my division out here, it's a dramatic boost of morale and confidence in myself. ... It made me feel like the paratrooper and the 82nd Soldier that I am. So, to know that, that camaraderie and that moral support was here, it definitely helped me in my races today."

Like any good leader, he has some lessons from this experience: "People who think that they have limits learned this week that there are no limits," he said. "I learned that I can do anything that anyone can do despite the injuries that I have, and being at the Warrior Games has proven that to me."

four times — head injuries. I'm a 'good' example of the buildup of sustained concussions and moderate head injuries."

Ranker compares his traumatic brain injury to dropping a laptop. If you turn it on again, it might at first appear to be working OK. "But, you have those errors and malfunctions for the rest of the life of that device," Ranker said. Likewise, he

said, the effects of his TBI are often not apparent when people first meet him. But, once they've gotten to know him, they notice "little things."

"All that stuff you hear in the press about the effects adding up or building up, it's all true," Ranker said. "Normal, everyday activities of driving a car or trying to send an email out on your com-

puter, putting a key in a lock — they're extremely difficult when you start dealing with this. ... I'm a big coffee drinker, and when I was still going through the early parts of my rehab, I don't know how many times I brewed coffee with no water, with no coffee for the grounds or I brewed coffee without the pot underneath the coffee maker."



From left, Brandon Norris, from the Navy/Coast Guard team; Staff Sgt. Kenny Griffith; Staff Sgt. Robert Laux; and Sgt. 1st Class Landon Ranker cross the finish line together at the 2011 Warrior Games cycling event at the U.S. Air Force Academy's Falcon Stadium in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Ranker said the Army has really “stepped it up” in treating TBIs in the past several years. After returning from his 2008 deployment to Afghanistan with his fourth injury, Ranker was treated at one of the military’s premiere TBI treatment centers at Fort Campbell.

“I went through about 15 months of rehab and therapy there, and learned how to walk properly again, how to go to a grocery store and shop, how to deal with the multiprocessing stuff — like when you’re in a big public setting and there’s people talking and several conversations going and people walking all over the place. A traumatic brain injury [patient] can get overloaded by that. But, they teach you how to deal with that and how to expose yourself to it step by step. I could go on and on about it, but the point is, we really stepped it up. And if it were not for that program, I would not be here competing, without a doubt.”

Because of his injuries, Ranker couldn’t return to duty in the infantry.

But, through the Army’s Continuation On Active Duty program, he has found a new role in the Army. COAD allows Soldiers who have special skills or experience to remain on active duty. Ranker is now in charge of adaptive sports and fitness at the Fort Campbell Warrior Transition Unit.

“I’ll stay in the Army as long as they let me. I’m still a Soldier at heart. Like I said, I was a light infantry guy and that was my passion. I thought I’d always do that,” he said. “Now, I’ve found a new purpose in working with adaptive sports and fitness at the Fort Campbell WTU, helping brand-new (wounded) warriors start with adaptive sports and fitness. That’s helped me with a new purpose, and I’d like to demonstrate to them and set an example for them: Look, you can do something that you didn’t think you could do anymore.”

But, the lessons of the Warrior Games aren’t just for wounded warriors. Command Sgt. Maj. Benjamin Scott, the WTC’s command sergeant major, called

witnessing the games “life-changing.”

“As I say often about these games, they’re a display of the indomitable human spirit,” he said. “The human spirit cannot be conquered by physical limitations. It’s just extraordinary. People’s lives were changed in those few days in Colorado Springs.”

Scott hopes that Soldiers exposed to the Warrior Games’ athletes drive, determination and willpower will realize something: “Whatever you want to accomplish in life — and not just only for a noncommissioned officer, but for every young private who’s in the Army now who has those aspirations to be the sergeant major of the Army (because you know he or she is in our formation right now) — if that’s what you want, you too can accomplish it. If you don’t believe me, ask Sgt. 1st Class Ranker or Capt. Merwin.” **J**

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