

# HEROES TO

*Legionnaires and wounded soldiers find each other on a two-way street leading home.*

BY JAMES V. CARROLL  
AND STEVE BROOKS

## The H2H Connection

The American Legion's Heroes to Hometowns program establishes a support network and coordinates resources for severely injured servicemembers returning home from war. While many of the returning troops are directed to the H2H office in the Pentagon or to the nearby Military Severely Injured Center, others who qualify for help are encouraged to contact the office directly.

**(703) 908-6250**

**heroestohometowns@  
legion.org**

Forms to request assistance are available online.

**www.legion.org**

"When They Come Home" brochures, which provide Legion posts with useful information about how to develop their own H2H programs, including contact information, are available at online. **www.legion.org** Click on "promotional materials" under the Heroes to Hometowns hot link.

**N**O GENERALIZATION CAN BE MADE about today's severely wounded soldier or newly disabled combat veteran. He could be blind. He could be a she. She might suffer from any combination of medical conditions caused by a split-second, soul-jarring bomb blast – traumatic brain injury, burns, a missing arm or leg, the relentless nightmare of post-traumatic stress disorder – the collective phenomenon known as "polytrauma." He may doubt if he'll ever be able to get up in the morning, put on a smile and go to work at a gas station or a hardware store or an insurance agency, after all he's seen in Iraq. There might be kids at home. There might be creditors on the phone. Perhaps all he wants or needs, in return for the part of his life he left on the battlefield, is a welcome-home dinner, a ride to the VA clinic or someone to acknowledge his medals. He might be 47. She might be 20.

One common thread: they are not the same person who left home for basic training, and they're never going to be that person again. Each severely wounded troop – about 5,000 nationwide and growing – carries a unique set of medical, economic and emotional baggage into an uncertain future. That is why in 2006 the Department of Defense looked to The American Legion and its nearly 15,000 local posts to help returning wounded servicemembers adjust to their new lives.

The American Legion-DoD collaboration is called Heroes to Hometowns. It takes many forms, flowing through the Pentagon and the Military Severely Injured Center in Arlington, Va., where discharging wounded troops and their families can connect with Legionnaires in communities all over the country.

"There's definitely a need," says Roger Webster, immediate past commander of the Department of Michigan, who made Heroes to Hometowns the marquee project of his leadership year. "Too many people fall by the wayside when they get discharged. Unless they know all of the programs that are out there for them, they get left out hanging on their own."

To the wounded soldier, there's comfort in receiving support from a veteran. "It's no fun getting blown up and all that, but it's easier to deal with it when you know people can appreciate what you went through," says Army Spc. Kenneth D. Bosarge of Grand Bay, Ala., who lost sight in one eye, hearing in one ear and suffered severe nerve damage after a roadside-bomb attack in 2005 in Iraq.

"It's the least we can do for this young man," Fowl River, Ala., Post 250 Commander Charles Beech said after helping arrange welcome ceremonies and a medals presentation for Bosarge. "Heroes to Hometowns was developed to help local communities assist severely wounded military personnel, help with things like finding a job, educational opportunities, child care, transportation, spiritual and financial support and other activities ... It's a homecoming."

# HOMETOWNS



*Alroy Billiman of Window Rock, Ariz., goes through rehabilitation exercises after losing his right arm in a roadside-bomb attack in Iraq. He is one of many severely wounded soldiers nationwide who have received help from The American Legion-DoD Heroes to Hometowns program and from dedicated volunteers like Sunny Farrand, background.*

*Sandy Huffaker, Jr.*

**S**IXTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD Richard “Sunny” Farrand knows what it means to be a veteran in trouble. “Been there, done that,” says the former airman who pulled himself up from the bed of a homeless shelter a decade ago and today drives the streets of San Diego in an old white pickup, glued to his cell phone, trying to keep today’s newly discharged veterans from falling through the same cracks.

Between 1995 and 1997, Farrand went from resident to coordinator of La Mesa United Methodist Church homeless shelter. He later joined The American Legion and found his calling with Heroes to Hometowns. “As soon as I saw the article in *The American Legion Magazine* I dropped a dime to the H2H office in the Pentagon and asked to help,” Farrand says. “I wasn’t sure what I could do. I’m not sure they knew what I could do. It was a learning thing for all of us.”

Since then, Farrand has assisted more than 100 troops, veterans and families. He learns about

them through counselor advocates at Camp Pendleton, the Naval Hospital at Balboa, or Palo Alto, from the department adjutant, national headquarters, or by word of mouth.

“Sometimes it’s little things, like money for diapers,” the unpaid volunteer explains. “Sometimes it’s organizing a welcome-home celebration or coordinating with area organizations to find housing, furniture and other household supplies. Vehicles. Clothing. Whatever it takes, we find it.”

In the last year alone, Farrand helped a wounded Marine get furniture so he could move into base housing. He also arranged for 20 families to receive holiday gift cards, worked with an auto-repair shop to provide free labor on the vehicles of severely injured servicemembers and helped Marines assist an injured National Guardsman in his effort to disability-modify his van and make necessary changes to his home and furniture.

“Some months my phone bill is close to \$300, and I don’t even want to talk about gasoline,”

Farrand says. Community donations help cover his costs. Earlier this year, DoD presented him with a certificate of recognition, and House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner, D-Calif., personally thanked him for his service.

“Sunny Farrand is a true advocate of the wounded warrior,” says Scott Sundsvold, the Legion’s Heroes to Hometowns national coordinator. “From the first days of the Heroes to Hometowns program, he has raised awareness and rallied resources.”

**W**HEN SPRING LAKE TOWNSHIP, MICH., residents Terry and Brenda Griffin were informed that their son, Army Pvt. Tony Griffin, had been severely injured by a roadside bomb near Hawijah, Iraq, in September 2006, they did what any parent would do: they rushed to his side.



Brenda and Terry Griffin were astounded by the help they received through Heroes to Hometowns. Legionnaire Bill Kaufman, right, sees a Vietnam-era lesson in such advocacy. Steve Brooks

Pvt. Griffin was in the gun turret when his Humvee was hit. Two of his crewmembers were killed. When the turret collapsed on top of him, Griffin lost a finger, suffered nerve damage on his



### *Legion representative eases transition for those recovering at Walter Reed.*

**U**.S. MARINE CORPS COMBAT VETERAN Jerry Johnson knows the stress of medical discharge, a military career cut short and the bureaucratic gray areas one must traverse to make the transition from soldier to veteran. The American Legion’s on-base service officer at

Walter Reed Army Medical Center spent more than 13 years in uniform before a lung collapse and asthma led to a medical discharge. “I fought to stay in,” he says. But he was out.

The Columbus, Ind., native was astonished to find little guidance during his own transition out of the military and decided to make a career of veterans-benefits advocacy. He used the GI Bill to earn a degree in sociology from Indiana University in 2003 and went to work for The American Legion Department of Indiana where he honed his new profession for four years. Last spring, after national controversy over conditions of a Walter Reed Army Medical Center outpatient facility, The American Legion hired Johnson to work fulltime in transition assistance at Walter Reed, following a unique memorandum of understanding with DoD.

Johnson recently spoke with *The American Legion Magazine*.

**Q:** *What drew you to the Walter Reed assignment?*

**A:** I had heard that the servicemembers are going through a lot of the same things I did. They have a great support system here, but a lot of them are being under-rated in terms of their benefits. I give them representation, assist them to get the rating they deserve and help them file initial claims with VA. A lot of these young men and women don’t realize what they are eligible for.

**Q:** *What medical conditions are most prominent?*

**A:** The majority of the injuries here deal with amputations, mainly because of the use of improvised explosive devices in Iraq. The second most common injury has to be the TBIs – traumatic

left hand and sustained a leg wound so wide it couldn't be stapled shut without ripping back open. He's undergone over a dozen surgeries. After nearly a year at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, he wants to go home soon. When he does, local Legionnaires are ready and waiting.

Griffin's parents, both Air Force veterans, were not thinking about missed paychecks while attending to their son at Walter Reed. "When we got the call, I said, 'We've got to go,'" Brenda Griffin said. "I had to be with my son. Our employers were supportive, but you still don't get paid. We tried to keep up with the bills – especially the ones necessary for Tony – but we got behind."

The Griffins fell more than \$2,700 behind on their mortgage payments when American Legion

Post 28 in Grand Haven, Mich., stepped up. Post service officer Jim Walton – regional point of contact for Heroes to Hometowns – found out about the Griffin situation and contacted Department of Michigan H2H Chairman Eddie Brown. With the wheels in motion, Walton and Post 28 were able to present a check to catch them back up. "We want to do everything we can to help our servicemembers transition back to a normal life – or at least as normal as possible," Walton says.

Bill Kaufman, immediate past commander of Post 28, says the program is built on lessons from the past. "Look at how Vietnam War veterans were treated when they came home and how many are dealing with PTSD and homelessness. If we can take care of our guys coming home now, we can avoid future generations going through

brain injury. The next most common disorder has to be post-traumatic stress disorder. Several of these soldiers are experiencing it. At the very least, it is now being recognized. Years ago, people didn't even begin to know how to deal with it.

**Q:** *Your position was created after last winter's media exposure of conditions in Building 18. How does your job connect with that exposure?*

**A:** I think the media exposure shined light on different areas that needed to be addressed. The command here is dedicated to fixing them and giving the soldiers a better quality of life.

**Q:** *Was it an isolated incident?*

**A:** Building 18 was closed down before I started here. A lot of people don't realize that the building actually is not on the base itself. It's off post and across the street. I have talked with some soldiers who stayed there, and they all agree that the conditions there were terrible. Rats, roaches, mold, water leaks, plumbing problems were common. Many of them don't blame the Army, or the command. They seem to feel the fault lies with the civilian contractors. A work order would be put in, and it would take several days before anyone would respond to it. I think the Army should hold these people more accountable.

As a whole, Walter Reed is one of the finest military medical facilities you will ever see. There is a definite need for it, and I predict there will be a need for it for several years to come. When you visit the actual hospital, the Malone House, Fisher House or Abrams Hall where the soldiers and their families stay, you see how nice the facilities are.

They are modern, well-designed, and well-equipped. The people in charge of these facilities take pride in the services they are providing.

**Q:** *How does your position dovetail with the Heroes to Hometowns program?*

**A:** Most of these men and women are going to need a leg up when they get home. Many people don't realize it, but when you leave the military where everything has been done to help you, and go home, it can be a traumatic experience. They go from having all of the support in the world at their fingertips to just being dropped off and at the mercy of the VA and other bureaucracies. They need real answers, real help now, not six to nine months from now. If local posts and communities join together to support these people, it would be fantastic.

**Q:** *How well is the need for transition-assistance services being met now at Walter Reed?*

**A:** The need is greater than a lot of people realize. Unfortunately, many of the soldiers themselves don't realize how much they need it. We have a good crew here for the transition process, but still more could be done. We need support from employers. We need companies and individuals from the soldiers' hometowns and states to help. It may be something as simple as building a wheelchair ramp, or finding a babysitter. When these people leave the service, they are going to be faced with everyday problems most of us don't think about. They're going to be busy rebuilding their lives.

*Interview: Jeff Stoffer*

# SURROUNDED BY SUPPORT

*Soldier awed by Legion welcome.*

**A**RMY STAFF SGT. CHRIS BAIN was wounded on April 8, 2004, when insurgents attacked just as the convoy he commanded was rolling out. A mortar explosion mangled his left hand, leaving him with the ability to do little else but make a fist. A



*Chris Bain vows to keep fighting for his fellow veterans.* Pamela A. Suchy

bullet pierced his right elbow and left him with nerve damage and a permanently numb right hand. The Williamsport, Pa., resident is one of many U.S. servicemembers who received support through Heroes to Hometowns. He recently spoke with *The American Legion Magazine*:

**Q:** Describe your homecoming last winter.

**A:** There were two or three Patriot Guard riders who showed up to escort me, and there also was a police escort, all the way from my home to American Legion Post 1. I had the door opened for me, and everyone was cheering for me. They had dinner for my wife and I. Everyone treated us with the utmost respect. It was phenomenal.

**Q:** How did that evening make you feel?

**A:** Like I was the President of the United States, and my wife was the first lady. And all I ever did was put my right hand up 14 years ago and said I'd serve my country. Walking into that Legion hall, seeing all of those people who also served their country and feeling like I was a part of that community, it just felt amazing.

**Q:** What's the next step in your life?

**A:** It's hard to say, now that I am retired and only 36 years old. I've got Legionnaires coming up to me and telling I can make whatever I want out of life. I've made up my mind that I'm going to run for office in 2008. I'm going to continue fighting for my brothers and sisters coming home from the war. I can't serve in uniform, but I can serve in a suit and tie. It's still my job to step up and make a difference.

similar emotional situations 10 years from now. It will be better for our country."

**"I**T'S LIKE EVERY OTHER GUY TELLS YOU,"

says Bosarge, the Army specialist from Alabama who lay bloodied and broken by the side of a road in western Iraq on Easter Sunday 2005. "You hear a loud boom and then you start looking to see if you have all your parts. I looked and saw that my arm was blown open. Blood was spurting from my head. I couldn't see out of my right eye, and my helmet was gone."



*Kenneth Bosarge, left, was given a medals-presentation ceremony arranged by Alabama Post 250 Commander Charles Beech.*

Bosarge was manning a machine gun in a convoy through al Anbar Province when an IED wounded him and four others. He followed a well-traveled route out of theater: first a field hospital, then a larger facility in Balad, then Landstuhl, Germany, before arriving at Walter Reed. His eye, ear, back and arms required 11 surgeries.

In the flurry of saving his life, the soldier's medals were overlooked. "It's not something that I really gave a lot of thought to, but, well you know ..." the 1999 high-school graduate said.

Fowl River, Ala., American Legion Post 250 learned through Heroes to Hometowns that Bosarge was coming home soon, and Commander Charles Beech began organizing a ceremony where the soldier was presented the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star. "It meant a lot to me to be presented my medals in front of my family and friends," says Bosarge, who with strong family support at home needed little else from the program. "It made me feel really proud that so many people took time out of their busy lives to welcome me home."

MANEUVERING HIS ARMORED HUMVEE along the deadly, dusty roads of Iraq, 27-year-old Alroy Billiman believed he had a charmed life. Every vehicle – every member in his platoon – had endured an IED attack during their seven months in Iraq. Everyone, that is, except him.

Before deploying to Ramadi, Billiman's father gave his Navajo son a green bag filled with soil from sacred mountains on tribal land. Billiman believed in its power, and others took notice. "They all wanted to ride with me."

On Nov. 9, 2006, he traveled for the first time

without it. The bag had gone missing a couple of days earlier. Everything soon changed for the young man from Window Rock, Ariz. "I saw a bump in the road up ahead, and I braced myself. All of a sudden, there was a big explosion, and shrapnel came up through the floor and cut my arm off. The pain was terrible."

Field hospital. Landstuhl. Walter Reed. Surgeries.

By Thanksgiving, he was transferred to San Diego for rehabilitation. Navy housing was provided for Billiman, his wife Katara, and their baby daughter, Altaevyah, but the family had little or no furniture.

"All our stuff was back home," Billiman says. "We didn't know what we were going to do until a counselor advocate got in touch with Sunny (Farrand) from The American Legion. He got busy and made arrangements with a lot of other folks to get a crib for our baby and a bed for my wife and me. Sunny also was able to get some diapers and some gift cards for food and other stuff. Sunny even helped us put together the baby crib.

"It made me feel really good that people cared about me and my family when we needed a little help. We were far away from home and didn't know anyone."

**I**N 2006, DURING HIS YEAR as national commander, Thomas L. Bock identified the problem after meeting with Army and Navy authorities. "There was a lot of concern," Bock says. "We started to see a hole somewhere between DoD and VA. Then we started hearing horror stories from guys who came home and didn't have anyone to turn to. It was a natural fit for the Legion."

But it was – and still is – a complicated fit. "Just because we know where a severely wounded soldier is doesn't mean he wants help," Sundsvold says. "It is a delicate matter sometimes. Sometimes a veteran or family needs to be convinced this isn't a membership drive, that our members pay their dues for opportunities to perform service like this. It takes people skills. The best person to make initial contact is often the post chaplain."

Patient privacy laws and DoD security restrictions make access to the names of severely wounded servicemembers difficult. Information often comes directly from American Legion members who hear about a wounded soldier. Families themselves also contact the H2H national office, department headquarters or local posts.

"A lot of times the local post is taking the program and running with it," says Webster of Michigan. "I like the fact we're doing this for people in our own state. Sometimes when you



*Sunny Farrand, once a homeless veteran, now works tirelessly to support wounded troops in southern California.* Sandy Huffaker, Jr.

donate money, you never really know where it goes. People donate money or items for Heroes to Hometowns and see exactly where it's going."

Transition assistance, particularly for the severely wounded, remains a work in progress for the federal government and service organizations. "The military community is still trying to figure out how to react to all this," Sundsvold says. "The Legion is deeply engaged in developing with their plan."

Part of the plan is the placement of 100 new VA transition patient advocates across the country. Even that effort can't reach everyone in need. "Where we can come in is by filling in gaps, by creating our own seamless transition process," Sundsvold says.

"Posts, districts, departments – individual members – all have an obligation to reach out to these severely wounded young men and women and provide help when and where it's needed," American Legion National Commander Paul A. Morin explains. "A local Hero Transition Team can be started at any post. And every post needs an H2H coordinator."

Bock says communication is vital. "We need to shout it from the rooftops. Awareness is most important. Get on the TV, radio, newspapers ... make sure everyone knows about it."

"This is, by definition, a local program," Morin says. "Heroes to Hometowns drives at some of our most important national values. It is a privilege for Legionnaires to live up to those time-honored values and pull through for young servicemembers who face years of uncertainty because of the sacrifices they made in uniform. These men and women deserve full support when they come home. They deserve to be treated like heroes." 🌿

*Steve Brooks is senior editor and James V. Carroll is assistant editor of The American Legion Magazine.*