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Brotherhood in the Trenches

Green Beret to Speak at Convention



By Melissa Hall

The critical gunshot wounds happened in an instant.

The shots were fired in a Taliban compound in Afghanistan during a raid. In a split-second, Sean Cliton's life was blown apart and it took years to put it back together.

"That day was the perfect example of teamwork and sacrifice. Every single person on the battlefield had to execute everything perfectly for me to come home alive," he said. "The leadership, drivers, pilots, surgeons, radio operators, there were so many critical decisions made. To say that there wasn't a higher power involved would be a lie."

The Before



A lot happened in Clifton's life prior to that pivotal day. At that point, he'd already served in the army since 1994. He transitioned to the National Guard after a few years of active duty to finish his college degree in Ohio. The shocking events of 9/11 changed his plans. "I knew there was a special forces unit operating in Ohio and it just



Clifton speaking with an interpreter and local villager in Afghanistan.



Clifton with one of the bomb attack dogs on the special forces team.

called out to me," he explained. "September 11th triggered a new sense of purpose and duty in me." Within a few months, Clifton was at Fort Bragg in North Carolina going through their selection and qualification course.

During those two years of specialized training, the temptation to return home to a comforting suburban lifestyle was very real. "It was mentally and physically challenging, but it was all worth it in the end when I donned that green beret and became part of a brotherhood," he said. "Special forces training grounded me and gave me a purpose greater than myself."

The After

In 2009 Clifton was deployed in Afghanistan. His Green Beret team had just cleared a doorway in a Taliban compound when the enemy opened fire. In seconds he was hit five times. One bullet shattered his left wrist. The worst of the injuries came from a round that made its way past his body armor and critically wounded five major organs. From that moment on his life hung in the balance. The medics immediately went to work and managed to keep him alive long enough to evacuate him.

His fight for survival wasn't over yet. He spent the next six months at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington D.C. Those arduous months were filled with more than 20 surgeries and physical therapy. The thought of getting home to his wife and two young sons kept him going when things felt bleak. He also knew that working to get better was the best way he could thank the men who saved his life. "The worst thing I could have done was to come home and feel sorry for myself and take their sacrifice for granted," he said.



He and his wife had one more son together after his recovery. For Clifton, that life is a complete gift from his fellow brothers in arms. "They didn't just save my life. They saved an entire branch of my family's history. I came home and created a whole new human being. They made that possible," he said.

He returned home a little worse for wear and highly decorated. He received 21 awards, including the Bronze Star medal, Purple Heart medal, and Army Commendation medal. His struggle continued over the following four years as he endured more surgeries and rehab. As he processed all he'd been through he realized his wounds extended far below the surface. "Sometimes you have to go through deep suffering to wake up," Clifton explained. "If I can be a role model and show what it's like to be in the awakened state, that's my goal. I want to share what I've learned so I can help others."

Clifton's experience, both with his injuries and the mental fallout that followed, is all too common with those who serve our country. As the years pass, he sees more and more individuals struggling to reconcile their combat trauma with their current reality. That realization is what led him to use his experience to help others. "I used to think I could lead with the mind and the body would follow, I've always had a don't quit attitude," he explained. "Now I'm in a phase of my life where I understand things are much deeper than just physical challenges.

"Now I realize emotional stability and mental health are so important."



Clifton and his family celebrate Dublin, OH being recognized as a Purple Heart city.



Clifton's wife of 22 years, Sarah, and their three sons.

In 2016 he started his consulting company which provides specialized consulting services to first responders, law enforcement, and military personnel worldwide. His goal is to help those who return from battle to not just survive but thrive. He wants to help them deal with the trauma and be able to move forward. Clifton is deeply involved with many not-for-profit groups, but two standouts are the Purple Heart Racing Project and the Buckeye Purple Heart Foundation. "I love supporting organizations that are getting veterans engaged and active and outside. That one-day event gets them thinking about something other than their suffering. It's so very healing," he said.

As Clifton speaks to groups across the country, he's come to realize that everyone is facing their own demons. He recognizes his purpose as a facilitator for healing and has found that sharing his story with vulnerability and honesty can be helpful for others. "You don't have to travel halfway around the world into a combat zone and nearly die on a battlefield in order to experience pain," Clifton said. "Suffering is universal, and it doesn't end, but the antidote to it is practicing gratitude. This isn't a story of trauma. It's a story of teamwork, survival, perseverance, and most importantly, love." ■

Clifton will be the keynote speaker at the annual Big I Indiana convention at the Westin Hotel in November. See the full agenda on page 34 for more details.