experience



CULTURE

This veteran found healing through driving a Porsche — fast

Why a Green Beret badly injured in Afghanistan wants to change our conversation about PTSD.

By Matt Crossman
Photos by Jared Wickerham

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Sean Clifton gripped the wheel as his Porsche 911 barreled into a turn. The tires chattered underneath him, the tell-tale sign that he was going too fast and turning too hard. On a racetrack like this, one or the other had to give. He let the car drift wide coming out of the turn, scrubbing off speed, and the chattering stopped.

Clifton, a highly decorated retired Green Beret, spun the wheel back to center and pushed hard on the accelerator. The car headed into the straightaway and soon hit 100 miles per hour and more.

His left hand held the wheel delicately at the 10 o'clock position. He calls that hand The Hoof because it's about as effective as one, an ever-present reminder of wounds he suffered when he was shot four times and almost died in Afghanistan.

I know I shouldn't stare at a veteran's wounds. But we were going fast enough that my life was in that hand, so I studied The Hoof as we zipped along at Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course near Lexington, Ohio, during an open track day, one of more than a dozen such excursions at which Clifton has honed his high-performance driving skills.

Doctors reconstructed his forearm, wrist, and hand using bone from his hip. The Hoof used to be the size of a football. Now it looks like a sculptor's first draft — slightly misshapen and too big by 5 percent or so relative to the rest of his body. The Hoof can hold the steering wheel, but that's about as complex a maneuver as Clifton can manage

with it. He wears shoes without laces and shirts without buttons and avoids ties when he can.

As Clifton sailed into the next turn, he wasn't thinking about the injury to his hand or the scars he wears from a bullet that tore through five internal organs and nearly killed him. He could not think of any of that, or anything else, as the engine roared beneath him and his heart roared in delight. All he could think of was where his next braking and turning points were … and *damn, this is fun*.

We had something close to a normal conversation amid that controlled chaos. I asked where he looked in order to hit his marks. He said he usually looks not at the track but at landmarks in the distance. To show me what he meant, Clifton narrated a lap, as calm as a yoga instructor even at lightning speed while he danced with the gas, brake, clutch, stick shift, and steering wheel … *"Now I'm going to point the nose of the car at that opening in the trees … see that yellow box? I'm headed straight at that … when the tires hit that seam, I'll turn the wheel and follow it."*



Sean Clifton calls his left hand The Hoof because it's about as effective as one.

He lives his life in the same way, always focused on where he is and where he's going, to avoid being trapped in the aftermath of his war trauma. "It will forever be a part of me. It's something that I think about a lot. But it's not keeping me from doing things that I want to do," he says. "If anything, it motivates me to do things that I may not have tried to do before. Life means more than it did before that traumatic event."

This is the purpose of the car, the reason Clifton finds meaning in the racetrack, even beyond the bounds of his own recovery. He wants to reframe the national conversation about post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, for soldiers and others who suffer with the aftermath of trauma. He wants to change the common narrative away from what people with trauma can't do to what they can. What if, he says, we — society, media, experts, veterans themselves — talked less about the

stress and disorder and more about the growth that can come afterward? That, he argues, would change PTSD into PTG: post-traumatic growth.

Clifton, a retired master sergeant whose 22 years in the Army yielded 21 awards, 30 surgeries, and numerous scars, inside and out, will never be completely over the damage war left behind — nobody ever is. But the stress, anxiety, depression, and haunting what-if questions disappear when he puts his race helmet on. He has found peace in his Porsche, feathering the razor's edge between control and chaos. This is medicine via motor, healing at high speed, therapy by throttle.

"Driving my car near my own limit, nearly 150 mph, takes me to a place of pure in-the-moment satisfaction. The noise of the world, and the noise in my own head, shuts down," he says. "The noise of the car takes over, and I'm simply enjoying the moment, truly living."

Clifton, 46, grew up in Ohio. He enlisted in the Army in 1994 and transitioned to the Ohio National Guard in 1997. After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, he devoted his life more completely to service. He became a Green Beret and trained in Special Operations. He deployed to Iraq from 2005 to 2006 and to Afghanistan twice, in 2008 and 2009. His experience in Iraq was formative for his work in Afghanistan. His job was to identify enemies, forge a plan to take them out, and then help execute that plan. He did that dozens of times in

central and southern Iraq. He built a reputation for grace under pressure.



Sean Clifton (center) became a Green Beret and trained in Special Operations after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Photo courtesy of Sean Clifton.

On May 31, 2009, Clifton and fellow soldiers in the 19th Special Forces Group (Airborne) were part of a caravan with Afghan National Police motoring through a roadless desert in Afghanistan. Their target was a Taliban commander who had orchestrated ambushes and IED attacks and was using a building in a village as a hideout.

As Clifton and fellow soldiers exited their vehicles at the village's edge, they heard enemy gunfire. But it was "ineffective fire" — meaning they could hear the shots fired but couldn't see them hit anything near them, so they concluded they were in no imminent danger. The target building sat on the north end of the village with desert behind it.

Clifton ran into the courtyard to join the Afghan National Police as they breached a door. He kicked the door and it groaned. He kicked it again, and it flew open.

Before he could go in, bullets came out. The first hit Clifton in the pelvis just below his body armor. The second shattered his left wrist. The third struck the American flag emblem on his chest, which was covered by body armor. The fourth deflected off his helmet. Clifton's night vision goggles flew off. His rifle dropped to the ground.

His left hand dangled uselessly.

He fell down. He saw bone, muscle, and blood where his wrist used to be and wondered how long it would take for him to bleed to death. He flashed forward to the life he would miss. He saw in his mind's eye his then-two sons graduating from high school, getting married, living full lives without him. The intolerable weight of immeasurable loss lifted him off the ground. His mind burned with a singular thought: *I'm not dying in this country*.

He got up and ran for his life.

He crashed into Sergeant First Class Matt Sheaffer and SFC Mark Wanner, both Green Berets and medics. "Save me!" Clifton pleaded with them. "Save me!" Sheaffer put a tourniquet on his arm. Clifton's eyes grew wide and he fell over.

Sheaffer and Wanner dragged Clifton across the courtyard and huddled close to the building. They cut off his blood-soaked pants and removed his body armor so they could look for bullet holes. They found an entry wound at his belt line on his front and an exit wound on his back. Clifton took a deep breath and dark red blood gushed out. Wanner crammed gauze into the entry wound, and Sheaffer did the same on the exit wound, sealing a severed blood vessel.

Clifton floated on the edge of terror. Each second he lay there cut into "the golden hour," the time between when a soldier is shot and when he must get to surgery or die.

A distant *woosh*, *woosh* signaled the approach of a helicopter. The chopper barely touched down before Clifton was loaded on board amid heavy fire. Wanner and Staff Sergeant Matt Maxwell jumped on, too. Sheaffer stayed behind to keep fighting.

He said if I wanted to bail out of the Porsche I should smash the "FIRE MISSILE" button. He hollered when we hit 120 mph.

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After landing at a base outside the Afghan city of Orgun, Clifton was taken into surgery. The medical team began infusing Clifton with O positive blood, the universal donor type. Maxwell stormed the hallway, worried his friend would die. He wanted to do something, anything, to help. Someone suggested he go find blood donors.

Still in battle gear, with the red light on his helmet casting a haunting glow, Maxwell ran into the dark. He didn't know the base's layout, and one of the first buildings he found was an officers' barracks, where a staff sergeant normally wouldn't tread uninvited. *Screw protocol*, Maxwell thought to himself. *My friend is dying*. At that barracks and others, he asked for blood.

Then Maxwell ran back to the hospital and filled the first 500-cc bag himself.

After surgery, Clifton's color was pale, his vital signs still off, so the medical team pushed him back into the operating room and opened him back up. They found he was still bleeding internally. They discovered his blood type, A positive. Maxwell's pleas for blood paid off: 19 A-positive soldiers, one after the other, sat down in a room next to the operating room and gave blood.

The fresh blood proved crucial. Previously donated blood doesn't have the same clotting ability. "It's like mother's milk to get that warm, whole blood," said the nurse anesthetist, U.S. Army Col. Brant Monson. Clifton would have bled to death without it. The blood bags were coming to Monson full to bursting. He estimates Clifton received 14,000 ccs of blood, the rough equivalent of being transfused completely three times.

After that second surgery, the medical personnel talked about what had just happened. They could not believe the series of events — the

frenzied recruitment of blood donors, the unlikely help with transfusions from an experienced lab tech, the presence of highly skilled and experienced medical professionals who were only there due to quirks in their schedules.

“We felt the presence of an unseen being,” said Monson, who joined the Army in 1969 and served for 42 years. “All of us felt that. If you see a miracle, look for the hand of God.”

Clifton was flown to Bagram, the largest base in Afghanistan, then to Germany, Walter Reed National Medical Center in Maryland, and eventually home to Ohio. Doctors determined that the bullet that entered at Clifton’s waistline damaged five organs. He underwent 30 surgeries in two years. Doctors removed his appendix, half of his small intestine and a third of his large intestine, and repaired his kidney and bladder. They put The Hoof back together, too. “If you do an X-ray, it looks like they dumped a box of staples in my guts,” Clifton says.

After dozens of interactions with Clifton via phone, email, and text, I was eager to meet him. I’ve written hundreds of stories about racing and dozens about soldiers, but zero about a racing soldier. He agreed to let me ride shotgun for a day of high-speed driving.

Before I met him, I had seen him in pictures; most showed him in battle gear with a grizzly beard and a chest like a Buick. Based on his life story, I expected him to be eight feet tall. When he climbed out of

his Porsche on a calm July morning in my Columbus, Ohio hotel parking lot, he was 5'9", wearing athletic clothes, with a neatly trimmed, grey-flecked beard … and a chest like a Buick.

With joking earnestness, he said, "I'm supposed to meet a journalist here," as if someone else would be standing outside at 5:30 a.m. I climbed into the passenger seat. The first thing I noticed was a red button on top of the car's cigarette lighter that says, "FIRE MISSILE." He said it was a gift from his sons.



Clifton prepares to drive his 2006 Porsche 911.

On the way to the track, he drove like a perfectly normal person, though I would not swear in court that he followed the speed limit. He was so deft working through the gear box that I didn't realize the Porsche had a manual transmission until we stopped at a gas station an hour into the trip.

Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course, which runs 2.4 miles and has 15 turns, hosts races for NASCAR and other circuits. On this day, it was open to hobbyists looking to improve their driving skills. The cars ranged from Clifton's used Porsche to mid-six-figure supercars to beaters that made me wonder why their drivers had bothered.

Drivers were separated into first timer, novice, intermediate, and advanced groups. Clifton was in intermediate. Drivers weren't racing each other, but they were on the track at the same time.

His instructor, Eduardo Collazo, told me Clifton has the rare ability to drive, listen, and apply instruction at the same time. He credited that to Clifton's intense military training. Using a textbook analogy, Collazo said most students start on Chapter 1, but Clifton reached Chapter 6 on the first day and had improved consistently since then.

As we waited in line before the first of five 20-minute sessions, I was nervous. I wasn't afraid about his driving, or at least not very much. I was more worried about ralphing in the Porsche. He said if I wanted to bail out I should smash the "FIRE MISSILE" button.

He hollered when we hit 120. I looked out the windshield. The cars in front of us grew bigger as they slowed for a turn and we kept accelerating. Clifton waited for his braking point … the cars got bigger still … waited … now they were HUGE … my heart yelled BRAKE, DAMMIT, BRAKE … my mouth kept quiet … finally he mashed the brake. The car shook and squealed as we slowed into the right-hander.

By lap 5 of the second session, my stomach believed we were on lap 105, and I asked Clifton to drop me off. He drove the rest of the session and then joined me at his parking spot, where we had lawn chairs, drinks, and snacks. I had to look into the distance to keep my equilibrium. I was still woozy when I stood up an hour later.



Clifton with his wife, Sarah, and their sons, Scotty, Stone, and Seth.

As he drove another session, I talked with his wife, Sarah. Their three boys, Stone, 12, Seth, 10, and Scotty, 8, played on bleachers. They cheered as he sped by in his silver Porsche with a magnet placard

reading “531” on the side — a reference to the date he was injured, May 31. The Porsche’s license plate spells APREC8 — *appreciate* — a reference to everything that has happened since.

I asked Sarah if Sean’s high-speed driving made her nervous, and she politely laughed. She took that horrible phone call after he got shot. She put her life on hold to put his life back together. Her identity was absorbed into his as she nursed him back to health with small children in the house, toggling between changing diapers and changing his ostomy bag. She lived through him being at war three times … so, no, watching him drive fast is not a big deal.

And anyway, she said, it beats the hell out of the motorcycle he used to ride, which he sold to buy the Porsche. “I always tell Sean he’s a different breed,” she said. “These types of guys, they need that adrenaline rush every day. He doesn’t get it in his life anymore. He’s back in the action, in a way.”

Always an active person, Clifton used sports to drive his physical recovery in the early years after he was wounded. He didn’t want to just survive and scratch out a meager existence. He wanted to create a new future for himself, Sarah, and the boys — that future he saw as he lay dying on the battlefield, only better. He wanted to live a life worthy of the efforts to save him.

He competed in CrossFit events and triathlons. He treated training for those events like training for a mission. He sets up almost everything

he does like a mission, from cutting the grass to cleaning out the garage to spending a day at the racetrack, because the structured approach comforts him. Goal-oriented preparation appealed to him; it wasn't just exercise to get in shape, it was a task to be completed. He knew CrossFit and triathlons would help him get better physically and that his improvements would be measurable. He had to re-learn to walk, then run, then run far.

There was no such intention with the Porsche. The healing he found in it caught him completely by surprise. He had no idea that driving fast would bring him such powerful relief from his stress and anxiety.

I want to be careful about labeling that stress and anxiety. PTSD is a common diagnosis for soldiers who have been through what Clifton has been through. When I ask him directly if he has it, he hedges. He says maybe his stress and anxiety are just common complaints of a man in his 40s with a house, wife, three kids, and a crazy work schedule.

He acknowledges that the "the noise in my head" — stress, anxiety, depression, anger — is triggered by events commonly cited as triggers by people with PTSD. Elevators, big crowds, boxed-in traffic, and other situations in which he has no control all turn that noise on and then up.

Is that PTSD? He doesn't know, and he's more interested in changing the national conversation about PTSD, which he sees as an unhealthy

label. He would rather use his struggles and recovery as a connection point with others who are suffering, soldier or not, than be put in an "ex-soldier with PTSD" box.

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While the symptoms of PTSD have been evident for thousands of years, the term "post-traumatic stress disorder" is relatively new. It was added to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980.

After years of ignoring PTSD, leaving soldiers to suffer in silence as their lives fell apart, the medical establishment and veterans' infrastructure finally focused in recent decades on the physical and psychological effects of trauma. They identified PTSD as a condition that needed to be addressed. That's a good thing. But Clifton contends that course-correction went too far, with too much focus on the problem and not enough on fixing it. Clifton feels PTSD has become a label, a trap even, one that leads people to assume its victims' suffering never goes away.

His hope in telling his story is to help create what he calls PTG: a post-PTSD mindset centered on growth. He wants his recovery to prove

there is life after trauma, joyful life, full of energy and passion. He chooses his words carefully. He doesn't minimize the struggles he or anybody else goes through. He instead says those struggles are part of the story, not the end. He's re-writing his own end, in part with the benefits he gets by driving fast.

"Everybody, at some point in their lives, has witnessed, or been part of, or shared a traumatic experience that they reflect on to some degree. It's nothing that's ever going to go away," Clifton says. "But it shouldn't be detrimental. That trauma, be it combat or sexual trauma, near-death experience, auto accident or surviving cancer, should not keep you from moving forward." That, he says, is why he tries to "change the narrative a bit on post-traumatic stress, to get people to focus on post-traumatic growth."

I interviewed three experts in trauma to try to understand what's happening in Clifton's brain as he drives the Porsche. How does this healing work?

One symptom of PTSD is unrelenting hyper-awareness; it fades when the brain has something else to do. The fact that Clifton finds solace in a racecar lines up with what other ex-soldiers have found while surfing, mixed-martial-arts fighting, even fly fishing and painting: activities that require complete focus. If the brain is concentrating on riding a wave, throwing a punch, or getting a fly or sunset just right, experts say it can't concentrate on reliving trauma.

The experts I spoke to would not discuss Clifton specifically because they had not examined him. But speaking broadly, they said surges of adrenaline and norepinephrine (the chemical behind the fight-or-flight response) are likely a big part of why ex-soldiers enjoy such activities, particularly the ones that involve intense physical action.



"Everybody, at some point in their lives, has witnessed, or been part of, or shared a traumatic experience that they reflect on to some degree. It's nothing that's ever going to go away," Clifton says. "That trauma, be it combat or sexual trauma, near-death experience, auto accident or surviving cancer, should not keep you from moving forward."

But those surges can be dangerous. Some people develop a need to push the risk-taking farther to get the relief they crave. Doug Bremner, M.D., a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Emory University School of Medicine, and Sonya Norman, Ph.D., director of the PTSD Consultation Program at the National Center for PTSD, independently brought up the trend of soldiers risking their lives on

motorcycles. Norman described a man she met who said he found peace only while driving 100 mph in the dark without a helmet.

No doubt, one reason Clifton loves driving his Porsche is that he gets an adrenaline jolt like he used to get in the Army. Does he know when enough is enough? I pushed him on this: Is he worried he'd have to go faster and faster to get the same health benefits?

He said no, and that he was content to remain an intermediate-level driver, with no desire to become advanced. He pointed out that he sold his motorcycle because he thought it was too dangerous. "Am I going to jump out of an airplane again? No way. Am I going to go bungee jumping? No."

Says his wife, Sarah: "I think this is the perfect amount of rush for him."

Perhaps the best explanation for the healing Clifton feels while driving the Porsche is also the simplest: Doing so brings him joy. Norman, who's also a psychiatry professor at the University of California, San Diego, pointed to the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, whose work centers on what he calls the "flow state."

The flow state is colloquially known as "the zone." It is characterized by concentration, action, awareness, and agency in an intrinsically rewarding experience. To experience life in the flow state is euphoric

for anyone, Norman said, and “for that person [with trauma], you would just want to repeat it and repeat it and repeat it.”

Clifton doesn’t remember when, exactly, he became a Porsche guy. He had posters of sports cars on his bedroom walls when he was a boy, and he has vague memories of being enthralled by the show “Miami Vice.” Maybe one of the high-speed chase scenes involved a Porsche and planted a seed his imagination that has fertilized ever since.

The love remained unconsummated until he left the Ohio National Guard in 2014. He bought a Porsche as a retirement present for himself. It sounds like a cliché, and Sarah teased him about it: A man in his mid-40s who loves adrenaline buys a sports car. But this was no impulse decision, no midlife crisis.

As an intelligence specialist in the Army, Clifton’s job was to identify enemy targets and figure out ways to take them out. He planned the purchase of his Porsche the same way. He researched years, models, colors, styles. He opted for a light-colored 911, manual transmission, from the mid-2000s, used enough so everything that would go wrong with it already had and had been fixed. He bought a convertible so he and Sarah could cruise around with the top down on date nights.



It is not a coincidence that the Porsche is a 911 and not some other model. Clifton sees a mystical connection between the number used as shorthand for the terrorist attacks in 2001 and the number used as shorthand for the cars. One brought him great pain. The other brings him great joy. “One of the reasons I got that Porsche 911 was to change that definition just a bit,” he said. “Now when I talk about 911, it’s got a couple different meanings. Of course, it’s the events of that day. But it’s also got that beautiful, full-circle, healing-recovery definition.”

He wants to share the full-circle healing he has found on the racetrack. He has become an ambassador for the charity VET Motorsports, which offers veterans track days at facilities across the country, whether they work on a pit crew, ride shotgun, or get behind the wheel. In August, Clifton conducted a “mission” he called “five tracks

in five weeks," in which he drove his Porsche at two tracks in Ohio and one each in West Virginia, Indiana, and Pennsylvania to raise awareness and money for VET Motorsports.

Clifton works as a consultant, training special operations soldiers. He wrestles with a tendency to keep himself extremely busy so he doesn't have to think about what he has been through. He has to force himself to take time off or he'll miss what's going on around him. He got up and ran after he got shot so he wouldn't miss his wife's and kids' lives. He doesn't want to miss their lives for work.

Sarah said that when Clifton gets home from a day at the track, he exudes "clarity" that he didn't have before he went. Going fast in his car has taught him, and is still teaching him, that the beauty in life comes from slowing down to absorb its details.

One day during a driving session, his instructor, Collazo, asked him, "What color shirt was the flag man wearing?" Clifton had seen the flagman, one of a handful stationed around the track, but had no idea what he was wearing. The next time by, he called out the color. That proved to be a transformative moment on and off the track. Tunnel vision is deadly, in racing, on the battlefield, in life. Clifton leads a richer life by absorbing details. "If this has taught me anything," Clifton said, "it's to slow down and embrace the day. Embrace the now. We're always living in the future. We're never living in the now."

Clifton doesn't want to let a minute of his second chance slip away. What a waste it would be, he says, for all of those people to have gone to all that effort to save him, only for him to lead a boring, timid life.

His motto is, "survive and thrive." And thriving, for him, means more than just tearing around racetracks. It's also about applying the lesson of the flagman to the rest of his life.

A few hours after we left the track, I met all five Cliftons — Sean, Sarah, Stone, Seth, and Scotty — for pizza near their home in suburban Columbus. They call Scotty "the miracle child." He was born 23 months after Clifton was injured, on the same day Osama bin Laden, the terrorist leader behind the Sept. 11 attacks, was killed. Sean and Sarah scheduled a baptism for Scotty and Seth on the first date their church had available: the 10th anniversary of Sept. 11.

At a basketball camp this summer, Scotty won an epic game of shootaround on the last shot. He sprinted out of the gym in triumph, big-time joy in a pint-sized body. It was a tiny moment that happens a thousand times in a kid's life. But whenever something like that happens with any of his sons, Clifton said, he is immediately transported to the battlefield in Afghanistan.

"But that's a good event," I said. "Why does it take you back there?"

Sitting at the head of the table, a beer and a slice in front of him, the Green Beret who almost died 10 years ago looked at his three boys

sitting to his right. He reminded me that right after he got shot, as he lay on the ground, blood pouring out of him, his mind played for him images of the future he would miss. Scotty wasn't in any of them because he didn't exist yet.

At this pizza joint in suburban Columbus, his Porsche clean and in his garage, his lawn freshly mowed, his minivan parked outside, Clifton watched as Scotty bounced from Stone to Seth to Sarah, boundless energy under a mop of blonde hair and a watch-me-go-crush-life smile.

The future that saved his life is here, and it's better than Clifton could have guessed. He leaned back, took a sip of beer, and smiled a smile that looked remarkably like Scotty's.

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