A Warrior, Rebuilt

One Green Beret's journey from the battlefield to becoming an ambassador for wounded veterans *By* CHRIS GAITTEN

Irrational fear limited Sean Clifton before he began CrossFit. He didn't want to hang from a bar because he was scared his hand would detach from his wrist. He also didn't want to lift heavy weights, afraid his guts would explode. His fear was unreasonable but it wasn't unfounded—it had all happened to him before.

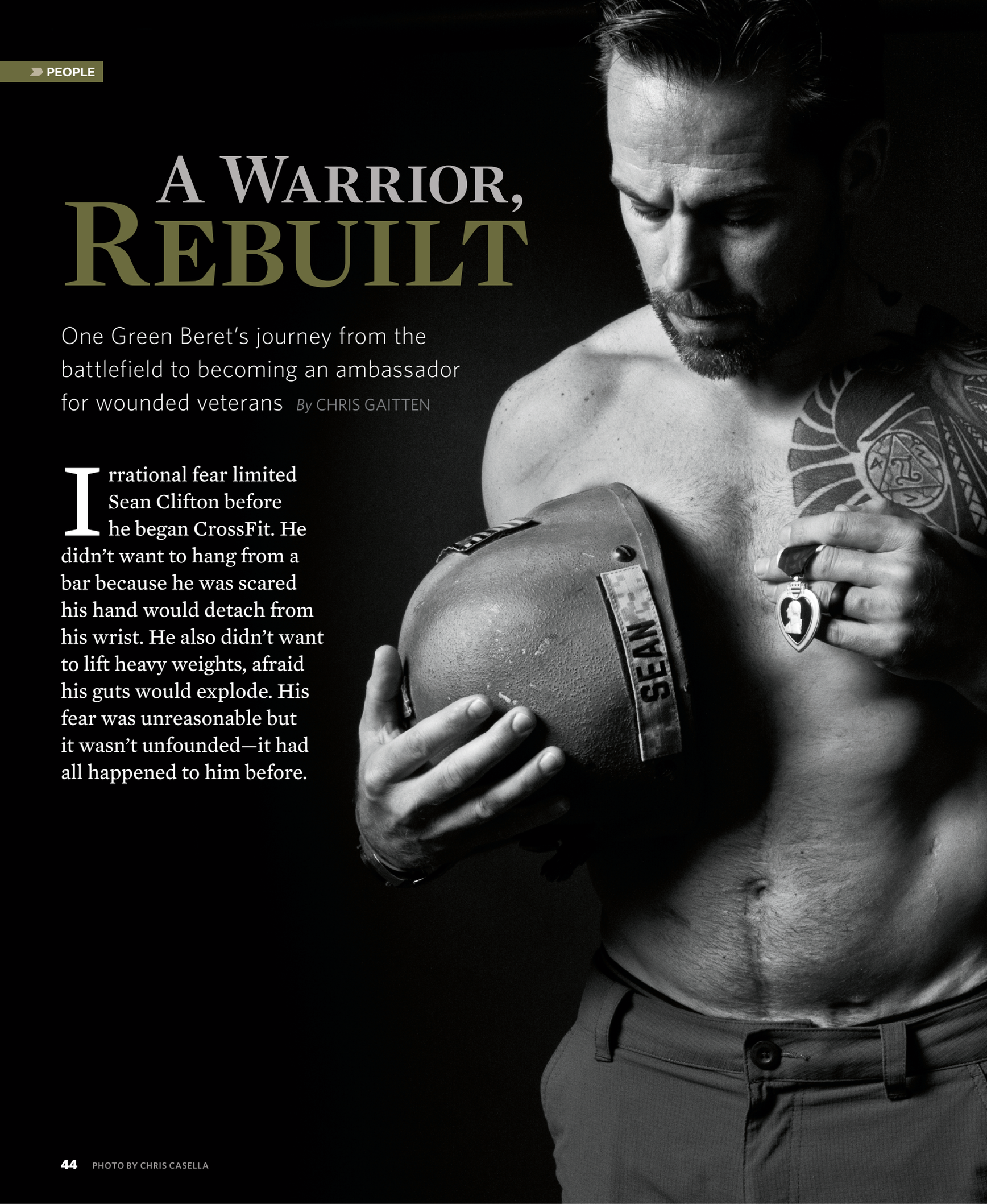

 PHOTO BY CHRIS CASELLA





Afghanistan, Ghazni Province, May 2009

The village erupted in gunfire from the moment the mission began. "A hornet's nest," as former Sergeant Mark Wanner later described it. The operation was a joint action between the Afghan National Police and a Special Forces unit from Columbus, of which Wanner and Sergeant Clifton were members. The target was a high-value Taliban commander.

The gunfight became more intense as they began clearing buildings. The third compound was Clifton's turn to take point—first through the door. He kicked it in and walked into a wall of gunfire. He took rounds off his assault vest and chest plate as they sprayed him from bottom to top. One bullet diverted under the vest and punched through his abdominal wall.

Then a round hit his left wrist, and it practically burst apart in front of him. His gun dropped to the ground and his hand folded over, hanging by tendrils of cartilage and flesh. He was left defenseless, so he grabbed his mangled wrist with his right hand and ran toward help. He encountered Wanner and Sergeant Matt Sheaffer, both of whom were medics. Clifton pled for aid and then collapsed to the ground.

Amidst continued gunfire, Sheaffer and Wanner worked to stabilize him as he began bleeding severely from the wound in his stomach. Wanner convinced a medevac pilot to land in the combat zone, and they airlifted him to the base medical center. He slipped into an induced coma as medical personnel fought to save his life.

Walter Reed Medical Center, June 2009

Clifton awoke six days later in a hospital bed in Washington D.C. He couldn't feel his left arm. He couldn't move his fingers. He couldn't walk. His right leg was numb and useless because the bullet that snuck under his vest eventually exited through his right hip and damaged his sciatic nerve. Before the bullet left him, it bounced around and eviscerated his bladder, his right kidney and both his intestines while also shredding his vascular system.

"My entire abdominal cavity was literally blown apart," he said.

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He was feeding through a tube, and he relied on the nursing staff, his wife and his parents for the smallest of creature comforts—a cool towel, a sip of ice water. Clifton languished in denial, telling himself that this couldn't possibly be reality. He was a Green Beret—in the upper echelons of physically capable warriors in the U.S military—and he was helpless.

He endured more than 20 surgeries to repair his wrist, his organs, his vessels. Rehab began with sponges; his medical team wasn't sure if the nerves in his wrist had been shot through, so they gave him sponge balls to squeeze. He couldn't even do that.

"It started out just simply laying in my bed and staring at my hand, staring at my fingers, and just willing them to wiggle," Clifton said.

Eventually his mind was able to break through those neural pathways and he began grasping the sponges, squishing a little harder each time. Then therapists provided clay and Silly Putty for him to mold. The day Clifton squeezed a tube of toothpaste for the first time was a huge victory. Rehabbing his lower body was even more demanding. His core was devastated. Just sitting up in bed under his own strength was one therapy session; wiggling his toes was another. He was wheelchair-bound for several weeks, then he progressed to a walker. He used a cane for months, and therapy consisted of walking down the hallway about 50 meters and back, returning to his room completely exhausted.

He pushed himself during rehab as a show of gratitude to the soldiers who risked their lives to save his. "In my mind, the biggest thank you I could give to them was to get back on my feet, and get back

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to the way I was before, and not sit around and feel sorry for myself or sit around and think about the things that I can't do anymore."

He gradually became more mobile and was able to walk under his own power. About six months after suffering his battlefield injuries, he returned home to Ohio.

Home, Dublin, November 2009

The first goals were small: going up a couple stairs on his own or walking the dog around the block. After a while, he began jogging. Then, a mile run.

"There was always a hope that I was going to be back to the guy that I was before the injury," Clifton said.

He had a background in running, and he began training for endurance events as he grew stronger, following additional surgeries and continued physical therapy. First, a 5K, and then a 10K and then a half-marathon. In October 2010—only 17 months after he nearly died in Afghanistan—Clifton completed the Columbus Marathon, supported by the Wounded Warrior Project and SOCOM Care Coalition. These organizations aim to serve injured service members, and they feature just a few of the many programs nationwide that use athletics to help veterans recover physically, emotionally and psychologically.

Although he was achieving every goal he set, he was used to holding himself to the higher standards of the Special Forces, and he didn't feel he was gaining strength or functional fitness. He wanted to push himself further, to build his core strength, balance, agility and endurance. But he feared that the strain would be too much for his reengineered body.

"I wasn't doing any kind of workout like that because I was—and as silly as it sounds—I was afraid if I lifted something heavy, my guts would explode," he said.

In January 2011, he underwent yet another surgery at Riverside Hospital to fully repair his abdominal wall. That spring, Clifton joined another athletic recovery program called Team Red, White and Blue to help him prepare for a triathlon. After more than a year of physical therapy and multisport training, he regained full confidence in his core and completed a triathlon in July 2012.

He was attracted to CrossFit not only for its physical gains but also because of the fitness community's appeal for veterans.

Now that he finally trusted his body again, he focused on building his core strength and functional fitness through the rigors of CrossFit.

Friendship CrossFit, Dublin, April 2015

Clifton's left hand and lower forearm still bear the pockmarks and surgical scars of his wounds, but his partially fused wrist has yet to give out in the two-plus years he's been working out at Friendship CrossFit. His wrist still doesn't allow full extension or flexion, but Jeff Binek, co-owner of the gym, said that Clifton is among the top 25 percent at the FCF box and among the top three or four men in his age group.

In early 2013, Clifton was awarded a grant to pay for a six-month membership at a local CrossFit box by Team Racing 4 Veterans, another nonprofit utilizing athletics to help wounded vets rehabilitate and reintegrate. Everything clicked into place when he found Friendship and saw that Binek was also a vet. He was attracted to CrossFit not only for its physical gains but also because of the fitness community's appeal for veterans. The CrossFit WOD (workout of the day) is often named in honor of fallen soldiers, and the individual gyms are typically tight-knit and team-oriented, just like the military.

Clifton has gained many of the physical improvements he sought, but he has also healed emotionally and psychologically thanks to the supportive social atmosphere of a CrossFit box. Grant Christman, also co-owner of Friendship, said Clifton has become a more connected part of the team the longer he's been there. "It's a place that he feels comfortable in his own skin," Christman said. "In his words, that has been tremendously valuable to him."

According to Clifton, he's not

 PHOTOS PROVIDED BY SEAN CLIFTON



alone in the benefits reaped from CrossFit, and from all wounded soldier athletic recovery programs. He said vets thrive in these programs for three reasons: it gives them a mission, which they need to feel useful; it gives them social interaction and a team, which many of them lack when they return to civilian life; and it gives them hope, a sense that they can be better today than yesterday.

Clifton was adamant, though, that civilians not look at veterans as a cause for charity. They don't need handouts, and they shouldn't make excuses, he said. The reason they often struggle with the transition after the military is because they can't always communicate the value of their military experience for business owners and the community as a whole. He hopes to help change that.

He will officially retire from the National Guard this summer, and as he transitions out of the military, Binek sees Clifton's role as being a caption for local veterans, helping them express what they bring to the table and showing them the importance of fitness-based recovery. Binek has already personally experienced the value of Clifton's presence. "Sean will tell you that everything's been [Friendship CrossFit] giving to him, but it's definitely not," Binek said. "He's given just as much or more back to us."

As the sixth anniversary of his near-fatal injury approaches, just days after Memorial Day, Clifton has already become an advocate for veterans through his work with the media and nonprofit local organizations. He has also accomplished far more physically than most people, yet still has more he wants to achieve—more mobility, more flexibility and more range of motion in his wrist.

"I could blame it on those combat injuries, but I'm getting older, too, and so I don't know which excuse to pull out of the hat," he said, smiling, flecks of gray adorning his dark beard. "Those things are just giving you excuses, and you know I don't want an excuse. I just want to be a little bit better than I was the day before." ■

To learn more about Sean Clifton, visit surviveandthrive.ws, and for more info about Friendship CrossFit, check out friendshipcrossfit.com.

