

Testimonial of a Special Forces Soldier in Support of the Danish Wounded Warriors Project

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Age: 29

Occupation: Special Forces Soldier since 2003

Having survived three and a half years of an intense and ultra-rigorous training regime to qualify to be a Special Forces Soldier, I would have imagined I knew everything there was to know about physical training and body awareness. Pushing boundaries became a way of life and self-discipline an unquestioned commitment.

After six deployments to Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan, my life took a disastrous turn for the worse when I was shot. A bullet tore through my left thigh and exited through the gluteus, severing 90% of my sciatic nerve.

After surgery, the doctors were far from positive and said it was likely that my left leg would be permanently paralyzed, as the remaining 10% of the nerve was not functioning. I was given a two-year window for possible improvement of nerve regeneration. And so began my gruelling journey of rehabilitation.

As I saw those two long years draw to an end, I entered into the darkest places imaginable. Having exhausted every treatment – from physiotherapy, osteopathy, massage, acupuncture, chiropractic and hypnosis to alternative medications – walking was still a struggle. The excruciating pain of weight-bearing on my left foot was like standing on 10 razor blades. When physiotherapists suddenly diagnosed a mysterious and unexplainable leg length discrepancy of 1.5cm, I seriously considered amputation as a last form of pain relief. The realization hit me that this chronic pain, and complete disassociation with my left leg, could be my only way of existing from this day forth.

That summer I heard about the Royal Danish Ballet Foundation's initiative to train wounded soldiers in Pilates. My life as I knew it changed forever.

I was instantly drawn to the adrenaline high of the intense focus and flow of the Pilates environment. I was equally horrified at my complete and total inability to connect with my body as a 'whole unit'. I had only experienced working on isolating the training of muscles in order to obtain strength. To suddenly see my body as 'one force' stabilizing, supporting, coordinating and connecting was the most overwhelming and empowering realization. I was blown away by the instructor's ability to read my posture and gait patterns, to constantly alter my training needs and reinvent material adapted to my

personal injury as well as fine-tune the path forward, experiencing movement in the most fundamental and functional way possible.

After only one year of training, my so-called leg length discrepancy was eliminated and my compensatory patterns had subsided. My complete body awareness and motivation led me to reconnect to my left leg and learn to not only accept it, but also to work *with it, not against it*. This was a revelation on my road to recovery. I saw a new 'whole' person in the mirror looking back at me. My lower back pain had diminished and, together with the instructors, I managed to go from training in running shoes to training with bare feet. We trusted in each other to test the neurological waters, so to speak, gently introducing different textures and surfaces to stand on, initially non-weight bearing. Against all medical odds, we were able to control the 'pain volume', if you like, to reconnect the brain and the high sensitivity in the sole of my foot.

One of the key elements to my newfound self was breathing. One would expect that with my elite training in diving and swimming within the Navy, my techniques in breathing would have been an obvious resource I could put to good use during my initial rehabilitation. However, when I look back and ask myself that very question, I realize that my mind was so overpowered by the intense pain I experienced on a daily basis, not to mention the frustrations and inability to function as I once did, that it had almost gone into shut-down mode.

Four years on, I experience a total mind-body connection and can translate that into my daily activities. I have just begun studying psychology and I use breathing techniques to improve my concentration, to obtain full open-mindedness and to relieve my frustration if I am unable to do things as fast or as well as I did before my accident. My breath can quite simply tell me if I am in the most optimal position to experience movement correctly. It's as though alarm bells sound if the breathing and movement doesn't flow in a familiar way.

Pilates has given me the gift of experiencing movement as a source of pleasure and competence rather than as pain. Without it, I would be a different a person than I am today.

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