

Veterans Find Healing In Paradise

For some, not even life in the sunniest state in America is reason enough to get out of bed and seize the day, but one Army veteran is changing that, one soldier at a time.

Most mornings and some evenings you can find Matt Blasquez, former Army infantryman and founder of Battle Tested Wellness, leading groups of discharged veterans in exercise under the hot Honolulu sun. The workouts are equal-parts vigorous and restorative. Kettlebell swings tax the whole body: muscles, heart, and mind. The yoga that follows is slow and steady, opening the body and inviting each veteran to reconnect to himself and *feel*. The result is plenty of release in the form of sweat and heavy spirits.

“It’s all about building positive momentum instead of stagnation, and honestly, it only takes a few days of being on your game to get that edge back,” says Matt, “and it’s easy because anyone who has served in the military craves being at their best and feeling unstoppable.”

The classes are free to veterans and include workouts, nutritional advice, and most importantly, a place where new friends feel like old friends.

But it wasn’t always this way.

Rewind three years and find Specialist Blasquez, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team stationed out of Colorado Springs. He is always on the move. From

human versus tank combat games in undisclosed desert locations, to getting hit by rocket launcher shrapnel, to blowing out his back and knees from 100-mile gear hikes at midnight and falls from high places. Or that that icy night way up in the Rocky mountains during alpine training when, while sleeping, he rolled onto a cactus and medic John Mercer had to use long tweezers to remove big spines from unspeakable places.

Injuries turned to disabilities--some of them permanent--as the reality of an infantry lifestyle took its toll. As did the funerals.

Matt was geared up with combat orders for Kosovo but was one of the few made to stay behind at base. While his family was grateful he was left out of the fighting, Matt wasn't. Soon after, he volunteered to serve in Syria, was selected, further trained, then received new orders to hang back.

When training for Afghanistan began. The soldiers were told to expect heavy losses, which had a sort of freedom to it. They would literally be fighting for their lives. This is what the gladiators of the 2nd Infantry Brigade had signed up for. Weeks before deployment, Matt and a handful of others were again ordered to stay back as a skeleton crew for the idyllic Colorado military base. A year later when his unit returned from war, the funerals were numerous enough to be held as a group service. Matthew remained upbeat as usual on the surface but he had new clouds in his eyes from the guilt of being unable to fight beside his brothers.

So he suffered in silence. "I didn't care to help anyone while I was enlisted because I was too busy dealing with my own stuff. We all are."

Then one day he was ready to reach out and create a positive environment for veterans to reconnect with themselves--to find their way back home. He saw great need for veteran's health efforts in Hawaii because the funerals did not stop after his enlistment contract ended, the enemy just changed.

“The absolute truth is once I got out I noticed all my vet pals were not good. They were feeling stressed and stuck and isolated. And I would be too until I started doing something helpful.”

So began his quest to bring in-home and outdoor health and wellness to former service members. The strategy is two-fold: to remind his guys how good it feels to be healthy and to provide a social outlet besides bars and clubs. As he finishes up his bachelor's degree in nutrition from University of Hawaii at Manoa, Matt continues to grow Battle Tested Wellness into something where learning healthy coping skills and forming healthy relationships turn lives around.

His message to fellow vets: After putting in so much time and sacrifice, it's time for veterans to make themselves a priority, for a change. “Because when a guy is really on his game, exercising and eating right and really just showing love to himself, doors start opening and healing starts happening.”

You can find Matt at battletestedwellness.com or reach him directly at m.blasquez@sbcglobal.net