

A New Purpose

Former Marine embarks on a new path after ileostomy surgery

By Rolf Benirschke

Imagine being dropped by a helicopter into a military field operation training exercise on a remote island somewhere in the vast western Pacific Ocean. You are wearing your full combat gear, heavy camouflage uniform, brown bulky boots, a combat helmet with your M4 rifle and rocket launcher strapped across your back along with a backpack with food, water, sleeping gear and batteries. These field ops are intended to mimic real war time situations and designed to be as realistic as possible.

Lifelong Dream

You've been through boot camp where you were stressed beyond what you felt you could endure including rigorous obstacle courses and physical conditioning tests, along with psychological challenges to test your will and resolve. Like your father before you who entered the Marines when he was 18 years old, and like your brother who is also a Marine, this is exactly where you've wanted to be since you were nine years old. Your dream has always been to seek out the very worst kind of evil in the world and extinguish it.

Your goal is to dedicate your life to the service of others and to be the best, most fit and dedicated Marine you can be. Already at 19, you aren't simply a rank-and-file Marine anymore; you are a team leader, having earned the position and the respect of your superiors as well as your peers. You have completed combat training and become a combat engineer. You can handle a machine gun, are adept at using complex communication devices, have advanced navigation skills with specialized training to employ explosives and drive an assault breacher vehicle. Your whole life has been building to this point...and you are ready.

This is the story of my new friend, Conner Reese. I wish I could tell you that this strong, dedicated, and remarkable young man would fulfill his dream. Unfortunately, just one month into his deployment, the unthinkable happened. Conner recalls, "It started out

with just a little blood in my stool and increased urgency to go to the bathroom in mid-November of 2021, during a 14-day COVID quarantine in Japan. I figured that it was just a stomach bug and would go away." Unfortunately, things worsened and the stress of being quarantined and sharing a bathroom with three other guys with little privacy, was hard on Conner and increased his anxiety exponentially. It was difficult, but still manageable, so he kept his head down and continued to prepare for the field op that was coming up in January.

As the date for the field op approached, Conner was now in considerable pain, the bowel movements were coming more frequently, and he was on the edge of panic. He knew there was some-

thing serious going on and that he couldn't manage it on his own, so he made an appointment at a clinic in Japan. After a blood test and the usual poking and prodding, the physician told him that it was "likely just a hemorrhoid." Not believing all his pain could be "just a hemorrhoid," Conner recounted his worsening symptoms again and implored the doctor to look further, but it was to no avail. While Conner was angry and frustrated, he knew the only path forward was to try to control it and fight through as best he could. Wasn't that exactly what he was trained to do?

Dire Situation

Over the next few months, Conner led several strenuous field operations where he and his men were tasked with establishing a "base" and then given a "mission" — attacking an enemy's known position. All with a supervisor watching and reporting on his squad's performance. When asked how he was able to endure these physically and emotionally challenging ops with his symptoms worsening, Conner slowly shakes his head and says thoughtfully, "I honestly don't know, man. I would often try to distract myself by digging the butt of the rifle into my side or pinching my fingers with pliers, anything to take my mind off the urgency to go to the bathroom."

Conner recalls one particularly embarrassing

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Above: Conner Reese in the U.S. Marine Corps.
Top right: Rolf Benirschke with Conner Reese.

situation, "I absolutely had to go to the bathroom. So, I shouted to my platoon to cover me, and then ran down a little hill for some privacy. I was practically tearing my gear off as I went to get to my makeshift john and then had to use leaves to clean myself off." And as if that wasn't bad enough, when he returned to his platoon, he was reprimanded for the smell he had left behind.

As the days went by, Conner's symptoms continued to worsen but every time he tried to get help, he was rebuffed and sent back to his platoon. Conner's next assignment was to become a martial arts instructor. It was especially challenging because you were required to wear full combat gear, simulating what might happen in the field. By this time, Conner's symptoms were so bad that he was eating just a half a sandwich a day,

vomiting regularly and only able to sleep about 45 minutes at a time before he would have to get up and go to the bathroom. The urgency was so intense that if someone was in the bathroom, he would barge in to hurry up whoever was inside.

Then one day while Conner was in his bunk, he heard a commotion outside and someone started banging on his door. His first thought was concern, thinking one of the guys in his platoon may have been hurt. Instead, it was the commander telling him that he needed to go to the hospital immediately. Conner learned subsequently that the GI specialist he had seen back in December, over three months ago, had finally reviewed his lab results and was now aware of the severity of his illness. Finally, he was going to get some help. He described his mindset as being "completely drained" and relieved...

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but his troubles weren't over yet.

Upon arrival at the hospital, Conner was in so much pain he was doubled over and could hardly stand up. He was immediately hooked up to an IV with fluids and morphine and scheduled for a colonoscopy the next day. Even though Conner was physically exhausted, his emotions were on high alert. He had never been to a hospital, had no experience with a colonoscopy, and was being spoken to in medical terms he didn't understand! On top of that, he was far from his family and all alone. What was happening to him? After the exam, the doctor explained to Conner that he had ulcerative colitis and that it was "incurable."

Conner explains his confusion, "They told me I had ulcerative colitis, but I had no idea what that was and then they started talking about surgery — ostomy surgery — and I was completely lost." When the physician explained what an ostomy was, Conner's response was swift and definitive, "There is no way you are going to do that to me. You are going to have to figure something else out, doc."

Colon Collector

Conner was soon flown from Okinawa, Japan to Korea and then to Hawaii where his mother met him. "When she walked into the room," he recalled, "it was like an angel appeared, and in that moment our relationship changed, and we became closer than we had ever been before."

The colorectal surgeon who was on standby in Hawaii, (nicknamed the "colon collector" by Conner) was pushing to do surgery immediately. But Conner's response was calm and measured partly because he was feeling better due to the steroids and Remicade injections

he had been receiving, and partly because he was still trying to get his head around everything. "Whoa now," he told the doctor, "I think I'm starting to improve. Let's not rush into this."

Conner was soon moved to the Naval Hospital in San Diego and eventually discharged to return home where he was transferred to the Wounded Warrior battalion and assigned to desk duty as he transitioned from active duty. Unfortunately, as he began to taper off prednisone, he flared, spiked a fever of 103 and started bleeding again.

Specialized Care

He immediately returned to the Naval Hospital but was quickly transferred to the University of California of San Diego Medical Center where they had the resources Conner needed. There, he was diagnosed with Crohn's disease and Dr. Liu recommended a temporary ileostomy diversion that could be reversed in a few months. That made sense to Conner and surgery was scheduled for December 9, 2021. "It's temporary," he repeatedly told himself. "This isn't going to be for the rest of my life, so I just need to learn enough to get through the next couple of months."

Six months later, Conner's ileostomy was reversed, and he drove to Louisiana for a buddy's wedding, excited to get on with his life. Unfortunately, Conner's symptoms returned and he found himself back in the hospital, this time being treated with Cyclosporine and Prednisone. Conner was determined that with his strong will and a substantial financial investment in a special nutritional program he had discovered online, he could overcome the disease.

He became diligent about monitoring everything he consumed and only ate the same four meals every

day. He also read multiple nutritional books, meditated, and did hot yoga. But, again, as soon as he tapered off prednisone, his symptoms returned. That was nearly rock bottom for Conner. "I had tried everything to heal myself of my colitis and now felt like a complete failure. I hate failing. I was angry at everyone and everything, so I stayed in my room and depression began to take hold."

At the end of May, knowing that a permanent ostomy was imminent, Conner had all but given up. He started writing suicide letters to his family and friends and even gave his gun to his father, so afraid that he might actually use it.

Worst Nightmare

On July 1, 2022, Conner's worst nightmare came true. He had permanent ileostomy surgery. This time, however, his mindset was completely different, "My colon's gone for good and it's not going to get reversed," he recognized. "I need to learn everything I can about my ostomy so I can get back to doing something productive and become independent as quickly as possible." And with the help of a wonderful WOCN, strong support and encouragement from his family, Conner got the assistance he needed and his WOCN nurse reached out to me to share my experience of living with an ostomy. I will never forget the first of our many conversations when Conner and I both ended up in tears as he shared his journey. I could empathize with his feeling that his life and career were over because I had felt the very same way about my NFL career.

Connor received an honorable discharge from the Marine Corps. He is currently obtaining his emergency medical technician license and enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing program. His goal is to become a nurse practitioner and open his own clinic.

I had the privilege of introducing Conner to several other ostomates who have been very outspoken about their journeys and inspired thousands of other ostomy patients. I remember looking at him confidently with a smile and saying, "Conner, you are going to be the next one! It's going to be your story that inspires a whole generation of new ostomates and your life will take on a new purpose and a new way to embody the Marine creed of 'Semper Fidelis'— always faithful." 🐢

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