FOREWORD

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

We live in challenging times and ease and comfort don't build the world we live in. It takes hard work, guts, persistence and character. And it takes people who are willing to face adversity and overcome the odds.

Members of our United States military have stepped forward, raised their hands and said, "I will serve, send me." These amazing men and women are true heroes.

As elected officials, business and community leaders, and every day citizens, we owe all of our men and women who serve or have served in the United States military more than just our words of support. We owe them our actions. We owe them our deeds. And we owe them our eternal gratitude.

Staff Sergeant John Kriesel is an example of one of these amazing individuals. Like so many of his fellow soldiers, he served our country with duty, honor, courage, and incredible sacrifice.

On December 2, 2006, a roadside bomb tore through Staff Sergeant Kriesel's Humvee outside of Fallujah, Iraq, killing two of his best friends, shredding his body, and taking both of his legs.

Not long after that horrible and tragic day, I had the honor of visiting Staff Sergeant Kriesel in his hospital room at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

As I walked into his room, I was hoping that I could provide some encouragement and comfort to a wounded warrior. Instead, I left the hospital being encouraged and comforted by John. This positive, inspiring, driven, and proud American was determined to fight and overcome everything that came across his path.

As a citizen soldier from the famed "Red Bulls" of the Minnesota Army National Guard's 1st Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, Staff Sergeant John Kriesel's story is one of patriotism, pride, service, tragedy, hope, perseverance, and ultimately, defeating the odds that were stacked against him.

Like so many of our veterans of foreign wars, Staff Sergeant John Kriesel has been to hell on earth and back. By the grace of God, he is "Still Standing."

—*Tim Pawlenty, Governor of Minnesota*

INTRODUCTION

UPDATE: January 2018

What began ten years ago with John Kriesel telling me stories and me chronicling those stories on paper has morphed into a full blown national speaking campaign spreading an inspiring message of triumph over even the most horrific tragedies.

Almost immediately I saw that John was no ordinary victim—he was the victor having slain his monsters. On the surface he was a rough-around-the edges kid who grew up in a working-class Minnesota family, drove his teachers crazy with constant pranks, worked briefly in an ink factory, and joined the Army at 17. Not someone you would expect to be a much-in-demand motivational leader. Or, is that exactly who has always stepped forward to take on difficult times in America?

Everyone reacts differently to tragedy. Some, like John Kriesel, grow and thrive. The guy who died three times on the operating table in Iraq, then was told that he probably would never walk again is standing tall today. Still Standing. Still Smiling.

As he overcame the recovery process, John unleashed a special talent that nobody knew was hidden behind his self-deprecating, smart-ass demeanor—he is a grand communicator. We quickly discovered that John has that unique ability to relate on a very

personal level with anyone from grade school students to top corporate executives. And, he shares a message of hope that never fails to inspire.

What follows is the story we told ten years ago with updates reflecting on what has changed for John Kriesel in those last ten years. John's life is something of a modern-day Horatio Alger story giving testimony to how hard work, determination, courage, and honesty can propel even the most unlikely person to the top of any mountain. John Kriesel is living testimony that the American dream is alive and well. His mission is to use his story to help others overcome their own challenges--hopefully, without the extreme level of physical and mental anguish that he endured.

—Jim Kosmo

LESSONS LEARNED TALKING TO SOLDIERS

I met John Kriesel in 2008 at a funeral home, a tad ironic for a guy who nearly died; but he was more than vital that frigid day in Minnesota, 6,000 miles and 150 degrees from the scorching desert sands of Fallujah, Iraq.

Jason and Justin, sons of my good friend, funeral director Jim Bradshaw, came up with a plan to create a "Center for Life" in place of the traditional funeral home at their new building in Stillwater, Minnesota. So, when Jim and I were raising money to support the Northern Star Council Boy Scouts of America we held a fund-raising breakfast at the new Bradshaw Center for Life. Another committee member, custom home builder Bill Derrick, said he had the perfect inspirational speaker for the event, SSG John Kriesel, a severely injured Iraq War veteran.

No one was prepared for this guy.

Staff Sergeant Kriesel stood tall on two prosthetic legs as he entered the reception area, using a single black cane to steady his balance—pretty good for a guy who only fifteen months earlier was not expected to live, let alone ever walk again. My eyes went immediately to the metallic limbs dropping down from his khaki shorts, but just as quickly I was drawn to his broad, infectious smile

and an outstretched hand that greeted every stranger with unbridled enthusiasm.

Do not extend pity, expect bitterness, or call John Kriesel a hero. He wears his bionic legs with extreme pride and delivers a message of hope for the world that he and the buddies he lost in Iraq firmly embraced. Heroes, he stiffens, are the guys who gave their lives and those who saved his life in Iraq, in Germany, and at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

The guests at this fund-raiser were mainly business leaders, folks with money, power, and brains. Successful people. Strong, motivated, highly confident, inspirational people. So, it was with jaw-dropping astonishment that I watched the youngest person in the room, a guy who had already endured more hardship than all of us combined, raise every boat in our little pond to a higher level. At that moment something reached inside my head and screamed, "This guy has a story that must be told and you are the guy who must do it."

After the meeting, John and I paused at our cars to talk, ignoring a cruel twenty-mile-per-hour Minnesota wind and below-zero temperature. We met again a few weeks later at a restaurant in Woodbury and launched the book project. He kept thanking me for doing this for him and offered to buy breakfast.

"Obviously, there are times when it really sucks not being able to melt into the crowd, but I'm just happy to be alive. I realize I'm not normal any longer and I have a mission—I have learned many lessons that I must pass on."

That's what this book is all about, passing on the lessons learned by an amazingly positive young man who was driven to act when he recognized a threat to the American Dream. He paid an incredible price for what he believes and certainly has earned the respect of every American. His story definitely deserves to be heard.

In the process of scouring piles of data and interviewing many of Minnesota's "Red Bulls" for John's story, I made a series of discoveries—most important of which is that some things never change.

I quickly learned that when you strip away the modern equipment, twenty-first century soldiers are no different than my brothers who fought in Vietnam; there is nothing particularly special about them other than how they performed under extreme circumstances. We're all brothers separated only by age.

These young soldiers are intelligent, caring people enriched with Midwestern values enabling them to withstand horrific challenges. In battle they understood and respected the Uniform Code of Military Justice; but more importantly, their strong family values guided their actions toward one another and the people they met, even the enemy. In war, compassion can be a dangerous companion, but it lives inside these soldiers. Bravo Company, a unit of nearly 150 soldiers, lost three and had five sent home with injuries. John was the unit's only VSI—very seriously injured.

These Minnesota National Guard troops clearly demonstrated what distinguishes the American warrior from insurgents. Their actions in combat proved what embedded journalist Karl Zinsmeister wrote for American Enterprise magazine, "The extreme care taken by U.S. forces to avoid civilian casualties in Iraq is in stark contrast to actions of the Fedayeen in Iraq who purposely involve innocent civilians in combat situations."

Living under the constant threat of death while isolated from friends, family, and every aspect of life as they had come to know it changed these soldiers. How these young people dealt with change is the important detail. Most of them came home and moved on to acquire college degrees and become valuable contributors to our nation as teachers, lawyers, bankers, police officers, medics, and more.

Some of these soldiers were damaged physically or mentally. Here again they benefitted greatly from strong programs, training, and experienced leadership in the military; but mostly, they recovered because of their solid foundation in American values and the deep, unwavering support of family.

One advantage of being in the National Guard as opposed to

the active Army is that these guys came home together where they found support that can be a call in the middle of the night or just getting together. Most of the guys from Bravo Company remain in a close brotherhood, talking frequently, socializing, and standing up anytime a brother needs help. Wives and children quickly recognize their family is a big one—encompassing everyone in Bravo Company.

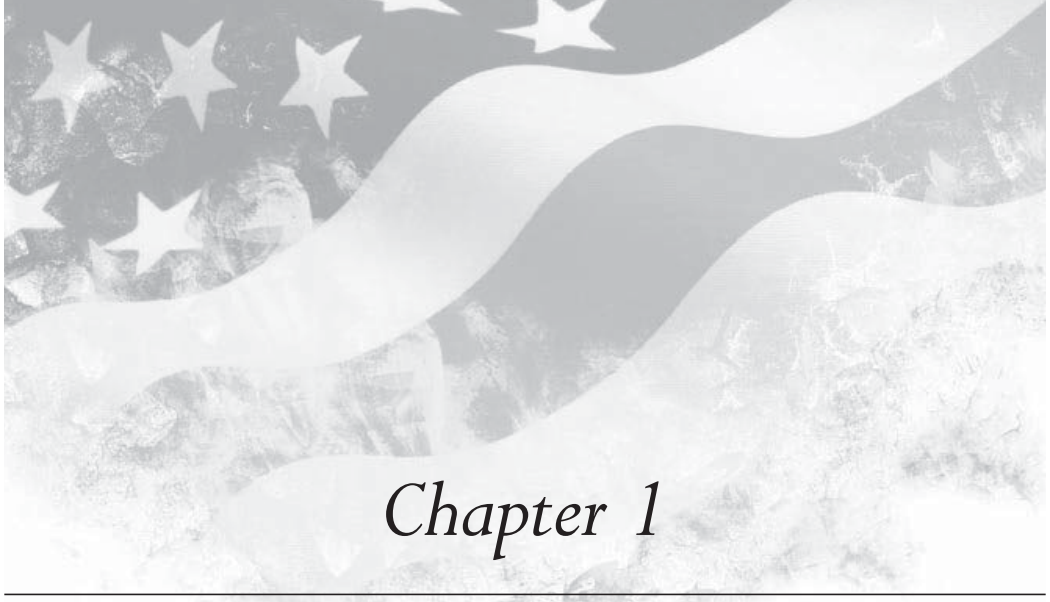
National Guard members are highly trained soldiers who tend to be slightly older and more mature than active duty Army members. They bring highly developed professional skills from their civilian occupations. A downside for Minnesota National Guard members when compared to other Guard units is that they are asked to shoulder a disproportionately heavy load in the war on terrorism. At first glance it appears unfair to ask so much of these young people, but the truth is that they are victims of their own success. Minnesota Guard members tend to score higher than average on skills and intelligence tests. Experience and superior skills make them prime candidates for recurring deployments. The reason is quite simple, when you want a job done right, who do you call? An experienced professional.

Healing a wounded soldier requires many hands on every shoulder. That is the true strength of America. Although we may not always agree on the issues, when it really matters, we stand up for what is right and we help those in need. From the moment SSG John Kriesel was injured in Iraq, he was never alone—throughout his miraculous survival and courageous recovery.

Love is the theme of this story, not hate or war. Love from John's family, friends, and people he didn't even know, shattered barriers. Hundreds of other people came forward, most of them total strangers, to put John back together—physically and mentally. In the rare moments when he found himself alone, John felt the comforting presence of his three fallen comrades, Bryan McDonough, Corey Rystad, and Jimmy Wosika, walking alongside him, boots on the ground.

SSG John Kriesel's story is written in the first person, present tense, so that you can walk with him on his journey—from his decision to join the military to the horrific catastrophe in Iraq and the challenging aftermath. You are invited to witness this soldier's service to his country, his enduring spirit and humor in the face of profound loss, and the deeply touching responses from hundreds of friends, family, and total strangers who stood up to pour life into this remarkable young man. You will join in cheering on his success, his recovery, and his new life.

—*Jim Kosmo*



Chapter 1

Surviving a 200-Pound Bomb

December 2, 2006

It's true, you really do relive your life as a high-speed video just before you die, and it's absolutely amazing how much you can remember in eleven minutes as you helplessly watch your blood stain the scorching sand in a growing pool of burgundy.

As my life pours into the desert in this God-forsaken Iraqi sand trap six thousand miles from home, I realize there isn't a damn thing I can do about it. Absolute paralysis grabs my body; hell, the lack of anything resembling legs and the sickening sight of my twisted, useless arm should toss me into shear panic, but it is the sudden fear that I am not going home, never going to see my family, my friends, my home again that is more painful than my massive wounds.

There's no such thing as a good day in Iraq, but today came as close to good as any day gets in this hell hole, until the left front wheel of our new, fully armored Humvee triggered a 200-pound IED (improvised explosive device). That damn bomb buried by some scumbag hajji wrecked a good day, igniting a hail storm of hot rocks.

It isn't panic, but a strange calmness that invades my senses, in all probability induced by a heavy dose of shock. I am awake, alert, and aware. That clarity of thought interrupts my life-story replay frequently with bursts of real-time action.

With great effort, I push up on my one slightly good arm and see that my left leg is severed just above the knee, attached only by a piece of skin with white, broken bone glaring back at me. I've never seen human bones before, especially not my own. The right leg looks more like fresh hamburger than a leg. God, my left arm is twisted into a pretzel; blood is running out of wounds around my mouth and, worst of all, my flack vest opened up during the blast, allowing my abdomen to take a serious hit. My right bicep is split open from shrapnel, and the bracelet I wore to honor a fallen soldier has sliced my wrist to the bone.

Pieces of the Humvee are scattered everywhere. All the doors are blown off; the right front door, a 400-pound piece of metal that takes three strong guys to lift, was tossed 400 feet like a Frisbee. This really happened to me, to us. I struggle to get out of the flak jacket, but it is impossible because my left arm obviously is broken in several places and the right one isn't much better.

Conscious of what is happening, I survey the pile of shredded metal that had been a sturdy battlewagon minutes ago; now it is difficult to recognize what it is. I stop, close my eyes, and pray. I know it's really bad, and I don't want to see any bodies that are ripped apart, that isn't going to be my last memory. I'm a trained EMT, and I can see as much as half of my blood already in the sand; that doesn't bode well for my chances.

Instantly, upon hearing the all too familiar, sickening sound of an IED blast SPC Adam Seed, driver of the lead vehicle—a heavily armed tank known as a M2A2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle—slams on the brakes. Turning back to look, Seed and the Bradley crew are engulfed in a sudden, blinding dust storm, but as the brown curtain settles, grim reality slowly emerges.

Cautiously, Seed rolls the Bradley back to the disaster scene,

constantly surveying the ground for a second bomb, while watching the horizon for insurgent snipers. SGT Todd Everson relays the initial alert to Camp Fallujah, and SGT Adam Gallant focuses on the horizon from the machine gun turret atop the Bradley, aided by a high-tech scanning device with optics capable of zooming up to fifteen times magnification and a thermal imaging unit that recognizes objects that emit even the slightest heat signature from as far away as over 500 meters. The only limiting factor is that neither device can see through walls, doors, or very thick shrubs; but in an open environment, the thermal scanner lights up the outline of anything foreign, often objects that would not be expected to generate or hold heat. These high-tech devices, when combined with the keen eyes of a couple of guys like Everson and Gallant, who are as good as it gets, uncover dozens of IEDs every day. But even the very best are bound to miss one.

As Seed maneuvers alongside the shattered Humvee, shielding the south side of the blast site, Gallant and Everson vault from the Bradley and race to help. Gallant moves directly to the scene as Everson relays instructions to Seed, who remains on the radio while constantly scanning the area with the 25mm main gun ready to prevent further casualties.

"Call it in, Seed. Get a medevac chopper in the air fast," Everson shouts over his shoulder, relaying Gallant's plea as he races among the stricken Humvee crew.

They find the wreckage blown off the dirt road, flipped up on its side and facing the wrong direction. First they encounter SSG Tim "Nelly" Nelson who crawls out of the vehicle and drops in the sand twelve feet from the Humvee; he's suffering a back injury and concussion. Nelson is conscious but pretty incoherent as he sits there repeatedly asking no one in particular, "What's going on? How are my guys?"

For some strange reason, I recall an incident a few months ago when Nelly and I talked about a guy who had lost a leg in an IED blast. I had told him, if that ever happened, to just let me die. Now

that it has happened I just want to live. I hope he doesn't remember what I said. Is this my punishment for that stupid comment?

Everson and Gallant realize they need to tip the Humvee back down on what appears to be the bottom to get at SPC Bryan McDonough and SPC Corey Rystad, but first they pull me away and apply tourniquets to both legs. I was tossed free of the Humvee and planted in the sand with the shattered vehicle looming over me.

"This is going to suck," Everson says with pain in his throat as he flips what is left of my left leg up on my chest.

"Ahhhh," is all I can manage. There isn't any pain in my leg but the site of that mangled leg flopping on my chest is a clear message even a half-dead guy can comprehend, and the sting of injuries in my back and arms is more than enough. Lying in the desert I suddenly feel more like I'm buried in snow in the middle of a Minnesota winter, and I'm alert enough to realize that shock is sinking its fangs into my body.

Gallant returns. "Kries, I'm not going to lie to you. Your legs are really bad, but you're gonna make it, buddy. Just don't move and keep talking." Moving around the Humvee he spots LCpl. Bruce Miller who was blown roughly fifty feet from the gunner's hatch. Shaking his head clear, Miller gets to his feet and walks back to the blast site. Gallant determines that Miller's injuries are minor except that he is disoriented and may have a head injury.

"Everson, I need tourniquets," I speak up. In reality I already have tourniquets on both legs, but I'm not thinking or talking coherently. The one on my right leg is so loose it's not stopping the blood, largely because there isn't much leg to tie off on and the surge of blood is making it even worse.

"You got 'em, Kries," he assures me as he tightens the tourniquets. There is no medic with us today, but every infantryman is trained in basic battlefield first aid and, thankfully, Gallant and Everson were paying attention in those classes.

With Miller, Nelson, and me moved clear of the wreckage, Gallant and Everson instruct Seed to bring the Bradley closer to

pull what's left of the Humvee back onto its base. Once the twisted steel drops back, they find SPC Bryan McDonough lying motionless, mortally injured. SPC Corey Rystad, who was partially under the vehicle is also severely injured but shows a glimmer of life. Gallant continues giving Rystad CPR while Everson re-wraps my legs with all the bandages he can find.

As we wait for the medics, Gallant and Everson move Miller and me further from the Humvee, claiming that they want us close to the helicopter when it lands, but I suspect they don't want us seeing McDonough and Rystad; and that's just fine with me. Everson stays with me and Miller while Gallant tends to Rystad and Nelson. Nelson tries to get up, but Gallant isn't going to let that happen. Rystad has stopped breathing, but Gallant continues to clear his airway and to force oxygen into his lungs. As long as there is any hope, Gallant is not going to give up.

Everson checks my tourniquets again and finds them falling off because of the bloody sheen cascading down both legs. Realizing the damage is so severe that legs are about to become irrelevant he cranks down on my tourniquets until blood loss stops and props what's left of my legs up on two MRE (meal ready to eat) boxes. Lunch definitely can wait.

"Tell my family that I love them," I implore Gallant.

"Don't worry, buddy; we got ya covered. You're gonna tell them yourself," he assures me with all the love and compassion every brother in combat has known since the beginning of time, bonded in the stark knowledge that "it could be me on the ground."

Everson orders Miller to sit beside me and keep talking. Miller goes on asking the same stupid questions and talking nonsense. Later I learn Everson just wanted to keep me conscious and alert, as alert as a guy with half his blood making mud in the sand can be. I guess he knew Miller needed the distraction, too.

Back at the Bradley, Seed is on the radio engaged in a shouting match with Bravo X-Ray, our tactical operations center. "Screw the ground ambulance, if you don't get a fucking medevac chopper here

damn fast these guys are dead."

We are only four miles from Camp Fallujah where an Army ambulance has already been dispatched, but after the heated debate Seed wins the argument and a bird lifts off heading our way, ETA (estimated time of arrival) two minutes.

Gallant grabs a star cluster and waits for the bird to slide across the desert before slamming the bottom into the baked sand, deploying the red smoke grenade to reveal wind direction and our exact location for the chopper pilots, although it's not like there is a whole lot else to see on the barren landscape. With the bird on the ground, Seed bolts to the Humvee, loads Nelson on a flat board, and helps carry him aboard. The ground ambulance arrives almost simultaneously with the chopper, about eleven minutes after the blast.

Gallant hands off Rystad and Miller to the medics and approaches SSG Chadwick Lunsten, the QRF (Quick Response Force) commander, to advise him of casualties. Medics from the chopper give each of us a quick assessment before Gallant and Lunsten load me, Rystad, and Miller onto that big, screaming bird. Finally, Everson and a medic put McDonough into the ambulance.

Everson approaches the medics, stares in their eyes, points my direction, and shouts over the chopper's intense, rapping roar, "HE'S GONNA MAKE IT!" It's not a plea, prayer, or question, it's a fierce command, fired with more force than a four-star general could muster, and the medics respond with an assuring "yes, sir" nod.

For the first time, I have just the slightest glimmer of hope that I might actually survive.

Eight days later I cautiously ease open my eyes. Amid the blurred realization of consciousness I quickly wonder, is this heaven or something else? My injuries, though massive, are immaterial at the moment. I am just ecstatic to be alive. Moments later I discover I am at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., beginning a totally new battle that will test my courage and energy far more than anything Kosovo or Iraq has thrown my way.